'I am not writing anything just now': A Letter from Walter Scott to Sarah Smith, February 13, 1814

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Among the recent additions to the G. Ross Roy Collection at the University of South Carolina is a letter from Walter Scott to the actress Sarah Smith, later Sarah Bartley, dated February 13, 1814. The letter has previously been published from a transcript, but it seems worth reproducing because of its third paragraph, where Scott tells Smith, only a few months ahead of the appearance of *Waverley*, that he is not writing anything “just now.” The letter also discusses Smith’s career and her contacts with royalty at Windsor, Scott’s recent improvements at Abbotsford, and his work on his edition of the writings of Jonathan Swift. In a postscript to the letter, Scott talks of putting Smith in touch with the dramatist Joanna Baillie, “a woman of the highest genius.”

Sarah Smith was an accomplished actress whom Scott had introduced in an earlier letter to Baillie as “the leading tragic actress after Mrs. Siddons.” During the previous seven years, Smith had been a regular correspondent and occasional houseguest of Scott’s. Born ca. 1783, Smith made her theatrical debut at the age of sixteen in Lancashire. She spent the next three years at the Edinburgh Theatre Royal before taking an early retirement. Prompted by the necessity of providing financial assistance to her mother’s household, Smith returned to the stage soon thereafter. Following successful stints in York, Birmingham, and Bath, Smith was engaged in 1805 by Thomas Harris of Covent Garden, where she shared the stage with the renowned Sarah Siddons. Unhappy with her secondary role, Smith left for Dublin when her contract expired in 1808.

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1 The original letter was copied in 1834, and the copy was included in the Abbotsford Collection materials donated to the NLS in 1932. Based on that copy, the letter was published in *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. H.J.C. Grierson and others, 12 vols. (London: Constable, 1932-37), III: 411-12 (hereafter abbreviated as *Letters*).
3 The Millgate Union Catalogue of Walter Scott Correspondence records thirty letters exchanged between the two from August 4, 1807 to July 9, 1814.
By 1811 she was back in London performing at Drury Lane. She married George Bartley, a fellow actor, on August 23, 1814. The couple toured America from 1818-20, before returning to Great Britain. As Mrs. Bartley, she performed in Edward Moore’s The Gamester in 1823 at Covent Garden, after which she performed infrequently, choosing instead to provide instruction to aspiring actresses.\(^4\) Scott had little contact with the Bartleys following their marriage in August of 1814. The Millgate Union Catalogue references two exchanges between Scott and George Bartley, in 1817 and 1829, both pertaining to theatrical productions involving George Bartley and John Kemble.

Scott’s correspondence shows that, before her marriage, he took an active interest in Smith’s career. In his first recorded letter to her, Scott references some “promised lines,” most likely a prologue, written expressly for one of Smith’s performances.\(^5\) Subsequent letters contain advice related to productions of The Lady of the Lake and The Lay of the Last Minstrel; Smith appeared in the latter during her time in Dublin.\(^6\) In the recently acquired letter, Scott congratulates “Miss Smith” on her professional success:

> Nothing can give me more pleasure than to hear of your increasing fame and prosperity -- & I know you will keep all the friends you make which is a more difficult art than acquiring them.\(^7\)

Scott also corresponded with Smith about her literary pursuits. In a letter dated March 4, 1808, he encouraged Smith to read Baillie’s tragedies in Plays on the Passions, a suggestion she happily complied with.\(^8\) In addition, he introduced Smith to members of his professional and social networks, including members of the nobility and gentry such as the Duchess of Buccleuch and Lady Alvanley, and literary figures such as Anna Seward, Charles Maturin and Joanna Baillie, as evidenced also in the postscript below.

In this letter, Scott writes to Smith about several different topics. He tells her about his efforts to improve his “little farm” at Abbotsford, inviting her to come and stay:

> My present employments are all of a very prosaic kind. The whole summer I spent digging levelling draining and planting trees at Abbotsford which is the name of my little farm about three miles above Selkirk lying along the banks of the Tweed. It

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\(^5\) *Letters*, I: 372.

\(^6\) *Letters*, II: 410 and II. 471.

\(^7\) Otherwise unattributed quotations are from the manuscript letter.

\(^8\) *Letters*, II: 29-30; II: 29 n. 1.
Walter Scott to Sarah Smith, February 13, 1814 (p. 1)
Courtesy of Irvin Department, University of South Carolina Libraries
I am not writing anything just now, and am too much occupied with the pressing business I have on hand to be able to write anything more at present. Nevertheless, I am sending you a letter to let you know that I am well and that I am writing to you. I have some thoughts of going where the country is open, and to see some of the ruins of the war. I am not sure if I shall be able to go, but if I can, I will try to visit some of the places of interest.

Since the last letter I have been busy with various projects. I have made some progress on the book I am working on, and I have been working on some other projects as well. I have received some letters from friends and acquaintances, and I hope to hear from you soon.

You may be interested to know that the weather here has been quite pleasant, with warm days and cool nights. The fields are blooming, and the air is fresh and invigorating. The countryside is beautiful, and I have taken some walks to enjoy the scenery.

I look forward to hearing from you soon and to meeting you soon.
I hope when you next go to London you will visit Mr. Peck, whom you know to be a kind and good man. I believe you know a person of that name who was very much your acquaintance, and a most virtuous and good man. I have heard much of you from him, and I must say I am much pleased with the kindness and civility with which you have treated me.

Walter Scott to Sarah Smith (p. 3)

Courtesy of Irvin Department, University of South Carolina Libraries
will be a pretty place one day who so may live to see it. Our house is the least that ever harboured decent folks since the traditionary couple who lived in the Vinegar bottle. But if you come here in Summer we will find a corner for you, and there are delightful walks and fine views in our neighbourhood.

Then he comments on his literary work:

I am not writing anything just now, and indeed have no thoughts of doing so for some time for I should tire of writing and what is worse though your politeness or let me rather say your partiality may contradict me people would unquestionably tire of reading.

As Peter Garside shows, plans for the publication of *Waverley* were well underway at the time; Scott seems to be enlisting Smith’s help in deflecting suspicion of his authorship ahead of the novel’s appearance. After a brief aside on the possibility (and potential problems) of travelling on the continent in the coming spring, Scott turns interest away towards another of his literary projects:

Since the winter set in I have been busy completing my edition of Swift for which I have made some curious collections particularly all the love letters which passed between him and Vanessa. They will disappoint the world however for Swift had no tenderness in his composition.

The remainder of the letter, discussing bad winter weather in the Borders (“the roads are blocked up in every direction”), recommending Smith to make a pilgrimage to visit the site of Hearne’s Oak at Windsor (“it made classic ground”), and reporting the health of his family, seems more humdrum, but nonetheless points to an ease and mutual confidence in the correspondence.

The postscript to the letter has its own interest, as including Scott’s comment about Joanna Baillie, both personally and as a writer:

I must not forget to say that I have a letter from Miss Baillie to whom you wished to be known and that she is very much disposed to embrace the opportunity of being acquainted which as she is a shy person as well as a woman of the highest genius is no small compliment

It is in the second paragraph of the letter, about (not) writing, that there occurs the only textual variant between the autograph letter and the copy at Abbotsford on which the Grierson text was based. Where the Grierson text reads “or rather let me say,” the manuscript has “or let me rather say.” In addition, the Grierson text differs in its paragraphing. The original letter consists of five body paragraphs plus a postscript whereas Grierson’s transcript has three body paragraphs and a postscript. The third paragraph in the autograph letter, beginning with “Since,” appears

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as part of the second paragraph in Grierson. The fifth paragraph here, beginning with “I hope,” appears as part of the third paragraph in Grierson.

Given their friendship and shared literary connections, it is interesting to speculate whether or not, when, and how much Sarah Smith may have known about the publication and authorship of Waverley. A letter from Scott to Matthew Weld Hartstonge, dated June 30, 1814, reveals that Smith was in Edinburgh during the time Scott claims to have completed the second and third volumes of the novel.\(^\text{10}\) It is possible that Smith may have seen one of the printed excerpts from the novel that were reportedly circulated among the Edinburgh literati.\(^\text{11}\)

More telling, perhaps, is the last extant exchange between the two, a letter from Smith to Scott dated July 9, 1814, just two days after the publication of Waverley. In her letter, Smith makes no mention of the novel or of Scott’s suspected authorship. However, she informs Scott of rumors circulating in London of his financial distress resulting from the Ballantynes’ mismanagement of their joint publishing concerns. Scott’s correspondence shows that he went to great lengths to suppress information about his dealings with the Ballantynes. Smith’s apparent comfort in broaching this subject with Scott suggests a level of confidentiality typically reserved by Scott for his closest friends and associates. Given how little is known about the nature and extent of their friendship, however, more research is needed to corroborate such claims.

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\(^\text{10}\) Letters III: 454. Scott claims in a letter to John B.S. Morritt dated July 9 1814 (two days after the novel’s official publication date) to have written the final two volumes of the novel between June 4 and July 1 of 1814. See Letters III: 479.