SIR WALTER SCOTT

Sir Walter Scott died at Abbotsford on September 21, 1832. To mark this date, we publish here the centenary talk broadcast by John Buchan—like Scott a Borderer and a romantic; the talk given to the Scottish Region by the Abbé Dimnet (well known in this country for his 'Art of Thinking' and 'What We Live By'), on Scott's immense popularity and influence in France; an estimate of Scott as 'a Scotsman first and a romantic afterwards', by Moray McLaren; and finally a review of the first volume of Scott's own letters by Miss Agnes Mure Mackenzie, herself one of the most considerable Scottish novelists of to-day

The Scott That Remains

By Lieut.-Col. JOHN BUCHAN, M.P.

A HUNDRED years ago to-day Sir Walter Scott died at the age of sixty-one in his house of Abbotsford. At the time he was the most famous writer in the world, for Goethe's long life had closed at Weimar in the previous spring. When such a centenary as his comes round it is our business to see how such a reputation has stood the passing of time. Every writer, even the greatest, has much that is contemporary and local in his work, much that must inevitably lose interest for his successors. We have to ask ourselves what remains that is essential and indestructible.

For someone like myself, an austere personal assessment of Walter Scott is impossible. Though he has been dead a century, he is still too close to me, and I am too much under his spell. His best work is as idiomatically Scottish as Chaucer's is English and Molière's French. And this means that to a Scotsman he makes all kinds of intimate appeals which the world in general can scarcely understand. I am a Borderer, and much of my life has been spent among the scenes which he has consecrated. I have myself engaged in a humble way in most of the activities which filled his life. I share nearly all his principles, and most of his prejudices. So for me to say what I feel about Sir Walter would be to make an elaborate confession of faith, which would, I fear, interest no one except myself.

Sir Walter Scott, from the drawing by Geddes
National Portrait Gallery of Scotland

But when I have done my best to exclude all these accidental appeals I find myself forced to a conclusion which I had better begin by stating frankly. I agree with what Byron told him in a famous letter, that there was no one among the living of whom he need be jealous, or, all things considered, among the dead. I think that he is one of the very few writers of our race who stand within the inner circle of the world's greatest imaginative creators—I say 'imaginative creators' rather than novelists; for he has done certain things which no other novelist has done. In the few words I am going to say to you here I want to induce you to go back to Scott, and to look in him for those treasures which you will assuredly find.

Is Scott Still Read?

Let us begin with a frank admission. There are critics of a certain type who, on the occasion of a centenary, come to bury Cæsar, not to praise him. They rejoice in pointing out how much of a man's work is dead. Their attitude is that of the first line of Browning's 'Grammarian's Funeral':

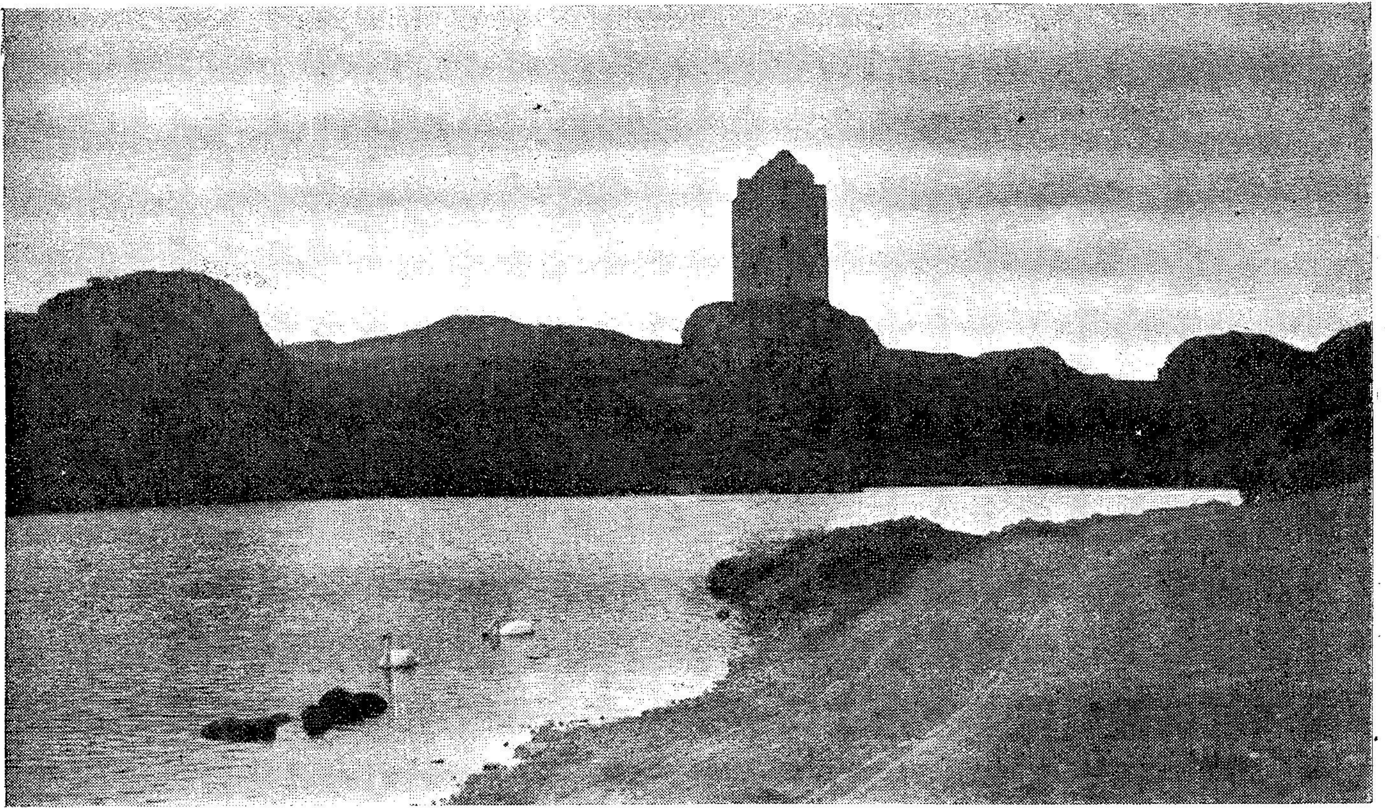
'Let us begin and carry up this corpse, singing together'.

What do such critics say? They tell us that Scott is no longer read. That statement I beg leave to doubt. As one who for many years was a publisher, I can testify that Scott is still widely read, more widely than any of our classical novelists except Dickens. But two facts are undoubted. Youth no longer reads him avidly as their grandfathers read him. This is partly because he has been spoilt for the younger generation by being made into a school book, and partly because, in the mere stuff of sensation and adventure, other writers have provided more exciting and more concentrated fare. Again, he has for the most part ceased to interest the critics. That was perhaps inevitable. The novel, since Scott's day, has enormously widened its province and elaborated its technique, and many legitimate and commendable modern experiments have no relation to Scott's methods. It is natural that a critic should be specially interested in what has a definite effect of attraction or repulsion on contemporary work. Scott, let us not forget, was in his own day an extreme modern, and highly sensitive to contemporary movements. For example, he began by being unduly susceptible to the fantastic Gothic romance which was imported from Germany. He was also a hardy innovator and a bold experimenter. He was the first to present character as a product of environment, and was thereby a forerunner of Balzac. And in some of his later work, such as *The Chronicles of the Canongate*, he seems to me to have curiously anticipated the technique of Tourgeniev. Much of his experimenting is now out of date, for while romance is undying, the costume part of it speedily goes out of fashion. The contemporaneous element in Scott must be largely discarded, just as the contemporaneous element in some of our moderns, which interests our critics so much, will be largely discarded by their successors. In the lumber-room of literature Scott's 'halidoms' and 'gramercys', his eighteenth-century fine writing, his stilted moralities, will in time be joined by many of what Mr. de la Mare has called 'our own little hot, cold, violent, effective, brand-new, exquisite, fresh little habits of mind'.

Scott and the Critics

Our business is with what remains. Granted that Scott is no longer everybody's writer as he once was, and granted that much which was once admired we may now regard with distaste, or at the best with a tepid approval, can he still appeal to the large class—I think a growing class—which loves the best things in literature for their own sake? Can he still give the serious critic a run for his money? Can he still perform the function of great art and charge the world for us with new and deeper values?

I believe myself whole-heartedly that he can. The truth is that we must revise our view of Scott, and regard him not merely as a brilliant entertainer, what Carlyle called the 'literary restaurateur of Europe', but as a profound critic of



Smailholm Tower, near Sandy Knowe, the home of Scott's grandfather, where he spent much of his childhood and first heard the stirring tales and ballads of the Borders

Photograph: R. Clapperton, Selkirk

life, a master of tragedy and not less of comedy—a disquieting power, but also a healing power. To be judged properly, he must be judged on the highest levels and by the austerest standards. You remember that in the hour of his financial downfall he described himself as 'like the Eildon Hills, firm, though a little cloudy'. That seems to me to describe his reputation to-day, and I want to see the clouds dispersed. I want to see good critics do for all his work what the late Dr. A. W. Verrall did for his prose style, and give him that patient imaginative analysis which we give to Aeschylus and Dante and Shakespeare.

But before we come to his work, we must pay a tribute to the man. The centenary of his death is an occasion not only for the assessment of his genius, but for a kind of commemoration of friendship. It is a great thing to have a writer in whom we can rejoice as a human being, for men of letters are not a very lovable race. We know Scott from his letters and *Journal*, from the pages of Lockhart, and from a hundred contemporary sources, more intimately than we know any great man of the past. Even more than Dr. Johnson, he draws us to an affectionate intimacy. He was no plaster saint, for he had many faults and endless foibles. Nothing would have annoyed him more than that we should regard him as a model of copybook perfections. He always spoke of himself a little mockingly, for though he had a stalwart pride he had no vanity. But few men had ever in a higher degree the humane and manly virtues. He faced without flinching the consequences of his folly, and made atonement. He was undismayed by misfortune and unspoilt by prosperity. He was a great gentleman in every relation of life. He had a tenderness for all humanity, and, as someone said, he treated everyone as a blood relation. I do not know any figure of the past who is so near to us, at once so vital and so endearing.

His Vigorous Objective Interests

There have been critics who have seen in this lack of egotism, this generous interest in the world beyond himself, a proof of failure. He seems to them to lack the profound absorption, the dedication of the great artist. He was not sufficiently serious in his craft. On this I would say two things. The first is that we can judge the results, but we cannot look into Scott's mind and study the process. He gives us the finished product and not the jottings from his laboratory. We do not know what took place during those sessions of silent thought on the hill or by the waterside, when he was cogitating his novels. I think we may well assume that the result was often not attained without strenuous intellectual and spiritual toil, of which he saw no reason to speak. The second is that his vigorous objective interests seem to me essential to a great novelist. A novel is life interpreted by means of a personality; the personality much be rich, but the experience of life must also be wide and rejoicing. Let me quote to you a sentence of John Milton's on history, which applies to the sister art: 'My opinion is that he who would describe actions and events in a way suited to their dignity and importance ought to write with a mind endued with a spirit, and enlarged by an experience as extensive as the actors in the scene'. A poet or a philosopher may work in a hermitage, but a novelist must be about the world, and the more he can share in the ordinary affections and interests of men, the better he will get inside their skins.

A writer lives by his books, and it is by them, of course, that Scott must be judged, and not by his qualities as a friend and a citizen. His faults are many and obvious, so obvious that I am not going to waste any of the short time at my disposal by pointing them out, since all can see them for themselves. I would rather direct you to his transcendent merits.

Romantic and Realist

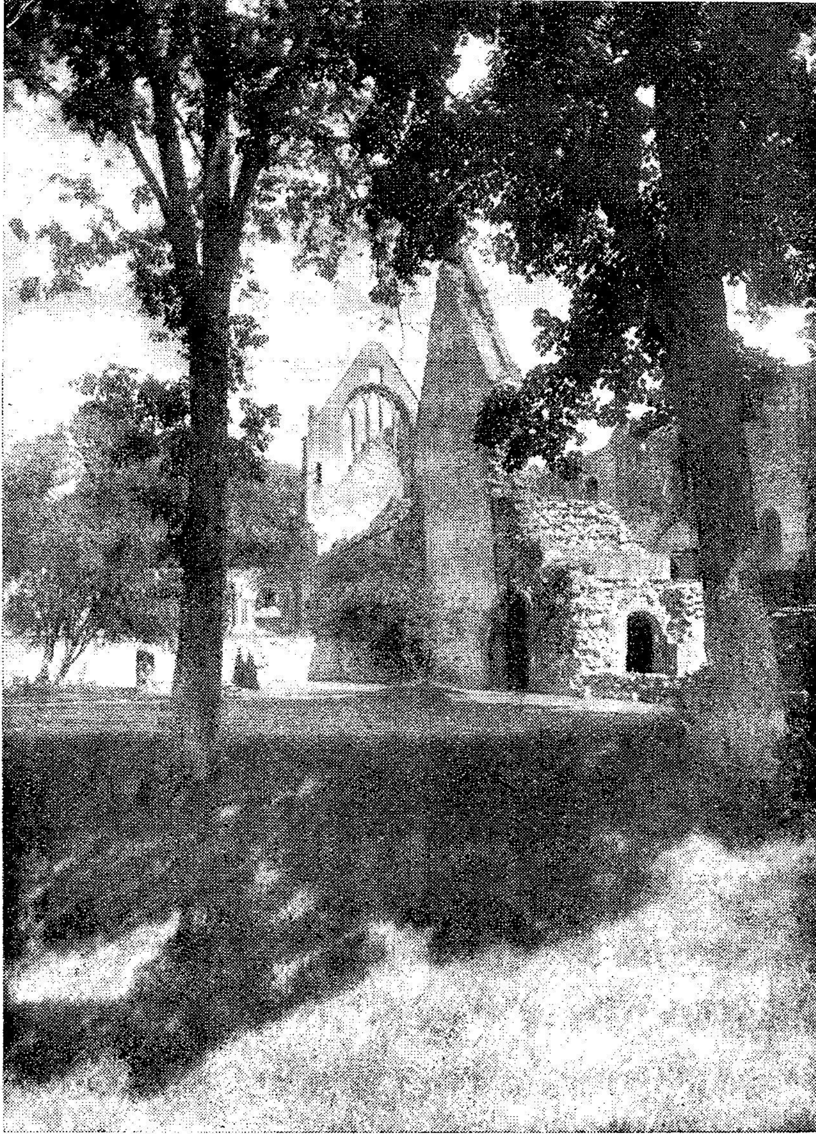
In the first place he takes a very large tract of life and moulds it to the purposes of art. The width of his range is like Shakespeare's; no other novelist except Tolstoi covers anything like the same extent of country. He is limited to no one social grade, to no one corner of space, to no one epoch of time. He is equally at home in the city and in the wilds. Certain aspects of life no doubt were shut to him—types, for example, of great spiritual or intellectual subtlety, and women of his own class, whom he preferred to treat as well mannered and somewhat insipid goddesses. But nearly the whole of his wide experience was, if I may borrow a happy phrase from Lord David Cecil, 'fertilised', and gave grist to the mill of his imagination. Most things in the present and in the past awoke his interest, and whenever his interest was awake his people live. As I have said, and as Balzac acknowledged, he was the first to draw his characters in relation to the traditions and circumstances, political, social and religious, in which they lived. The result is that they have a striking verisimilitude, for we recognise the world behind them. His great characters are the least 'literary' in fiction; compared with their vigorous idiomatic life, most of the people, even in admired novels, are bookish. They seem to march on to the stage independent of their creator, and sometimes, as Falstaff did with Shakespeare, they

take charge of him and go their own way. No imaginary creations were ever more fully realised, for though Scott was a great romantic he was even more a great realist. Everything they do, every word they speak, is a step in a consistent revelation.

Let me cite a few examples—and I fear they are chiefly Scottish, for he was most at home with his own countrymen. From *Guy Mannering* I would choose Dandie Dinmont, the Border farmer, and Pleydell, the Edinburgh advocate, and Meg Merrilies, the gipsy. From *The Antiquary*, Edie Ochiltree, the beggar, and Saunders Mucklebackit, the fisherman. From *Old Mortality*, Cuddie Headrigg, the Clydesdale ploughman. From *The Heart of Midlothian*, Jeanie Deans and her father. From *Rob Roy*, Andrew Fairservice, the mean and pragmatic Scot, and Bailie Nicol Jarvie, the generous and pragmatic Scot. From *Redgauntlet*, the elder Fairford, the Edinburgh lawyer, and Nanty Ewart, the smuggler. From *St. Ronan's Well*, Meg Dods, the innkeeper. That is a fairly wide range, and we can add people in utterly different walks of life—Mary of Scots in *The Abbot*, King James in *Nigel*, and King Louis in *Quentin Durward*. And there are scores of minor figures who are all alive because they are seen in the round, not dried specimens in a collection, but growths exhibited in the soil and atmosphere to which they belong.

The Poet's Interpretation

That is the first thing to observe. Scott is a great realist in presenting his people. The second is that he is also a poet and an artist, and proceeds to transform that very real world into the world of romance, and shape it into drama and beauty. That is his peculiar genius. He was not content to rest in the visible world. Knowing his people so completely, and the intricate complex of life behind and around them, he can evoke, with the strictest logic and relevance, strange moods and unexpected deeds. He is a master of comedy, since he is always conscious of the comic spirit and the element of farce that interpenetrates life. He never allows his greater figures to strut, and in the scenes of tensest drama—the death of Fergus McIvor, the madness of the Covenanters after Drumclog, the close of *The Bride of Lammermoor*—there is always some comedy, and ironic anti-climax to give the mind relief and link his dreams with earth. A critic for whom I have a profound respect, Miss Rebecca West, does not admit this; she finds his failure to lie in the forced pace of his novels, what she calls his 'bluster . . . without any remission of serenity'. I differ most respectfully but most confidently. It seems to me that it is in this cunning lowering of the note, these intermissions of sober common sense, this constant reminder of the prosaic world, that we have one of Scott's greatest endowments. I never feel, as I feel sometimes with Dostoievsky, an intolerable emotional strain which ends by dulling the mind.



Dryburgh Abbey, by the side of Tweed, where Scott is buried
Photograph: A. R. Edwards, Selkirk

He has the converse gift, too, in the highest degree. If he can see the farce in the splendid, he can see the splendour in the prosaic. That is the only meaning I have ever been able to find in the word romance—to discover the jewel in the pig's snout, the treasure in the dung-heap, some core of beauty in squalor, and of heroism in the unheroic. The Highland cateran in *Waverley* rises at the Carlisle trial to a supreme self-sacrifice; the prosaic Hanoverian general in *Redgauntlet* speaks classic words of reconciliation; the Glasgow Bailie, with his honest knees knocking together, becomes a Berserker; it is not the grandee who in the crisis is the hero, but Edie Ochiltree, the beggar; it is the peasant girl, Jeanie Deans, who shows the noblest fortitude. These homespun exponents of the heroic are true heroes and heroines, for in their great moments their speech can rise to the dignity of great poetry; but they remain solid, satisfying, recognisable people. We know them for what Scott meant them to be, not creations of romance, but plain folk, adequately interpreted.

Mystery and Tragedy

He is a master of comedy, but he is also in the direct line of the great tragedians, and in this respect no other English novelist, I think, approaches him. This cheerful romancer, whom some would have us regard as fit reading only for the callow adolescent, is in truth one of the most disquieting of writers. He prepares the ground artfully with his solid recognisable people, well knit, massive and apparently secure, full of homely humours, living in a world which is on the whole friendly and orderly, where things work out by the law of averages, and goodness is rewarded and vice punished. He lets comedy do its work and makes this world sunnier and more spacious than we had thought. And then suddenly he opens the door to something which we are not expecting, a breath from a very different sphere. He lets in tragedy, which is the failure of something not ignoble through inherent weakness, or through a change of circumstances to which it cannot adapt itself. He shows us loyalists like Fergus MacIvor and Redgauntlet and Ephraim MacBriar, broken on the wheel of fate. He shows us goodness, like Clara Mowbray's, tragically unrepaid. He shows us the bitter suffering at the back of a glittering social life—Saunders Mucklebackit mourning for his dead boy, and that wonderful scene in *St. Ronan's Well* where the woman of the cottage where Hannah Irwin is dying speaks her mind about the easy charity of the rich, and that other in *The Chronicles of Canongate* where Christie Steele has her masterful say on the same matter.

He can do more. He can do what Shakespeare does, and trouble the mind with whispers from that half-world which is neither of nature nor outside nature, but is beyond our understanding. When the dying Madge Wildfire sings 'Proud Maisie', when Meg Merrilies, like an ancient sibyl, expounds

her wild forebodings and regrets, when in *The Bride of Lammermoor* the witch-wives gossip in the churchyard, when Elspeth of the Craigburnfoot in *The Antiquary* croons by the fireside of a forgotten world of pride and pageantry, when Steenie Steenson in *Wandering Willie's Tale* sees the grim company about the tavern board in Hell—Scott does something which few novelists have attempted, something which ranks him with the great tragic poets.

I have just been on holiday in the very far North, and I have been re-reading some of the Sagas, and I find the same thing in them—a homely, recognisable life lit suddenly by broken lights which were never yet on sea or land. Scott makes the world for us more sunlit, but he also makes it more solemn. He provides us with a mirror in which we can read the transience of human glory and the futility of human hopes. Few men can make so real the shadow of mortality. Few can so cunningly darken the stage, and make the figures no longer men and women, but puppets moving under the hand of God and eternity.

But if he wounds, he also heals. His drama ends, as all true drama should, in peace, as when in *Redgauntlet* General Campbell speaks the chivalrous words on the beach which reconcile the warring loyalties of the antagonists. Scott knew what Miss Rebecca West has called the 'perilous magic' of the world and the tragic dualism of life, and his purpose, never avowed, not even perhaps consciously realised, is reconciliation. He has that profound sense of the 'army of unalterable law' which we find in the Sagas, a law to which wise mortals must submit, and in submission find peace. But it is a willing submission, for in this law there is a soul of kindness. He explores the tragedies and ironies of life and finds in them not only pity, but mirth and a divine charity. He has that quality which the Greeks valued above all others, *Sophrosyne*, which means the possession of saving thoughts.

With that word I conclude. I fear I have done what I promised not to do, and have given you principally a confession of faith. I have told you what I find in Walter Scott, but I have not had the time to attempt to prove my case. But I hope I have said enough to induce some of my hearers to go back to Scott and make a fair trial of him for themselves. I believe they will find that he can give them what few novelists can give them, and not many poets—a great heritage of both warmth and light.

Sir Walter Scott in France

By ABBÉ ERNEST DIMNET

WHY are you addressed to-day, through the air, by a Frenchman? Simply because many English-speaking people, even those who are not experts in comparative history, realise that Sir Walter Scott has exerted in France an influence which must be acknowledged by the French.

In the spring of the present year the Franco-Scottish Association asked Professor Grierson of Edinburgh to come over to Paris so that Sir Walter Scott could be duly celebrated by the most learned voice and before a highly sympathetic audience. The ceremony took place, as became its character, at the Sorbonne, and the Press gave it the importance to which it had a right. You may, as I state this, experience a slight mental recoil. There is something artificial in all that is official, and architecturally as well as officially the Sorbonne is cold. Even the sincerity and literary cordiality of such a warm-hearted man as Professor Legouis hardly succeeds in thawing it. This is what you feel, and what inclines you to question and inwardly minimise the significance of a Sorbonne celebration. Such psychology is largely accurate. In fact, the French newspaper readers who did not know personally the many friends of Scotland or admirers of Scott present at the Sorbonne that day felt exactly as you do. Official, a little artificial! But, please, observe this: the people who were conscious of this reaction disliked it, were made uncomfortable by it. What they felt was *not* that the Sorbonne celebration was amiss, but that it was inadequate. Now, what is this, if not an aspect of the sublime thing called glory? Mere fame can be done justice to in a Sorbonne ceremony: not so the warm radiance surrounding the name of a Walter Scott. What people desiderated was an intimate gathering of real lovers of the great Scotsman somehow managing to diffuse their own sympathy through the whole world. Now, such a combination of intimacy and publicity is, of course, a dream, but it is exactly the kind of dream which the Franco-Scottish Association was endeavouring to make reality. An impossible effort, no doubt, but such as is never made except when true greatness is being met by true love. Sir Walter Scott belongs to his admirers of whatever nationality in proportion to the quality of their admiration. In the same way, Molière is nearer to the Englishman who is delightfully conscious of the French playwright's kinship with Shakespeare than to the Frenchman who runs away from the Comédie-Française. A hard saying to the Nationalist, but a delicious one to the worshipper of beauty.

His Nearness to the French

But in the case of Sir Walter Scott there is something peculiar which the Sorbonne celebration was trying to express, and that is his nearness to the national soul of the French. When I was a schoolboy I had no definite impression that Walter Scott was *not* a French writer. He was never referred to as a foreign novelist, and we never thought of him as one. When our English teacher, from a sly desire to make us realise why 'sheep' should become 'mutton' when eaten, read out to us the first pages of *Ivanhoe*, they seemed entirely natural; we were infinitely less conscious of anything foreign in them than when the same teacher treated us to the Dotheboys Hall episode in *Nicholas Nickleby*, apparently so much more accessible to young minds. A little later, when I myself began to teach, at Douai, my headmaster, a stern old priest of a school now dead and gone, once said to me: 'Novels are useless, of course, but I read a novel of Walter Scott's every year'. I was surprised that the austere gentleman should read even one novel, but not that Walter Scott was the author chosen. On the contrary, the advisability of its being Scott saved the strangeness of its being a novel.

Ten or twelve years ago I was taken round the château at Loches by a custodian who knew fully as much about the castle as any professional antiquary, but was as enthusiastic as if he had learned it all yesterday. As we tarried in the Two Bishops' dungeon and the visit was drawing to an end, I innocently started to tell the guide about a book which, if he ever chanced upon it, would tell him this and make him feel the other, and which I knew he would thoroughly enjoy. The man, leaning back against the dungeon wall, was listening with an air of infinite patience and a sort of pity. Finally he bowed, and with crushing politeness, the memory of which still tingles, he said: '*Quentin Durward*, sir! Wasn't I given *Quentin Durward* as a prize-book when I was ten? And have I not read it over and over again till I know every word of it by heart? Scott! my dear sir, Walter Scott!' Surely the man never could have uttered the name of Victor Hugo with the same fervour.

Memories of the 'Auld Alliance'

How is it that the French feel such kinship with Sir Walter Scott? The fact that he is the most brilliant representative of a race which, during a succession of generations, was closely associated with their own might partly account for it. The French have not forgotten that many famous Scots were educated in France, chose to live there and attained to eminent positions, especially in the army or the clergy. It is perfectly natural to read that a Scottish officer, Ramsay, lived at Cambrai in the intimacy of Archbishop Fénelon. Even a hundred years before, young Montaigne did not regard his teacher, the great Buchanan, as an ordinary foreigner. Few Frenchmen visit Scotland without being conscious at their first contact with the people of something familiar in the faces, in the expression, and above all in the voice. The way in which people pronounce the letter R is like the Masonic sign, and a French R is a Scottish R. At his very first attempt to speak French a Scotsman may sound incorrect but he does not sound foreign. Surely the consciousness of all this survives in the French. But something similar ought to survive in them as well