

GEDDIE JOHN

THE SCOTT
COUNTRY

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John Geddie

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THE SCOTT COUNTRY

Where – and what – is the “Scott Country”? Edinburgh – his birthplace, the centre of his literary and legal activities, the scene of *The Heart of Midlothian* and of the *Chronicles of the Canongate*, his “own romantic town” – might surely claim to enclose, if not the kernel, an essential part of the interest that surrounds the fame and the name of Sir Walter. Around it, between the Pentlands and Lammermoors and the sea, is territory immortally associated with the life and the works of the “Master of Romance” – Lasswade and Roslin, Borthwick and Crichton, “Goblin Ha” and Prestonpans,

“Auchendinny’s hazel glade
And haunted Woodhouselee”,

Linlithgow Palace on the western and “Wolfs Crag” on the eastern boundary of Lothian. Fife, on the strength of its possessions of Dunfermline, Falkland, St. Andrews, and other storied sites, might put forward a title to be ranked as a province of the Scott Country. So might Perthshire, by virtue of the “Fair City” and its “Fair Maid”, and joint ownership, with Stirling and Dumbarton, of entrancing scenes on Loch Katrine, Loch Ard, and Loch Lomond. Forfarshire also, wherein is placed the best remembered of the passages in *The Antiquary*, and even the distant Orkneys and Shetlands, have felt the touch of the Wizard’s wand.

Nor, in the briefest survey of the lands of Scott Romance, can one overlook the crumbling castles and the rugged shores once ruled by the “Lord of the Isles”; or the banks of the Clyde and Douglas Water; or the opposing shores of the Solway; or Redesdale and Teesdale, Gilsland and Triermain. The Peak District, Sherwood Forest, and the Marches of Wales; Kenilworth, and Woodstock, and even London streets themselves might tender a case for inclusion; while, looking farther afield, one is reminded that the genius of Walter Scott has cast its spell over the Ardennes and Touraine, Switzerland, Constantinople, and the Palestine of the Crusades.

These are, for the most part, merely excursions of a spirit whose abiding home or favourite haunt was the Valley of the Tweed and its encircling hills. Edinburgh itself, where there are so many rival memories, does not recall the author of *Waverley* so instantly and intimately to our thoughts and affections as Abbotsford; and the triple Eildon, rather than Arthur’s Seat, is the “high place” of the Scott cult. If he brought a new glory to the Border Country, it was the Border Country that “made him”, as a man still more than as a writer; and he is the most typical, as he is the most honoured, of its many famous sons.

The greatest as well as

“The last of all the Bards was he
Who sung of Border chivalry”.

The pull of the blood has in this instance proved more potent than that of birth and early environment; although Walter Scott was from his childhood, at Sandyknowe and Kelso, familiar with Border scenes, as well as steeped in Border lore. At a later stage in his growth, lame as he was, with Shortreed and other congenial companions he tramped the glens and climbed the hills and hill-passes

of Tweedside, gathering and storing as he went its history and romance for the delight of future generations,

“Giving each rock its storied tale,
Pouring a lay for every dale,
Knitting, as with a moral band,
His native legends with his land,
To lend each scene the interest high
Which Genius beams from Beauty’s eye.”

But while he knew by heart the whole Borderland, and had explored its chief river from where

“Tweed, Annan, and Clyde
A’ rise in ae hill-side”,

to where it enters the sea, under the time- and war-battered walls of the ancient town of Berwick, there were parts of the Tweed and its tributaries that he knew better than others. There is, in the eyes of Scott devotees, an Inner Circle, a “Holy of Holies”, of the Scott Country, and, fortunately for the pilgrim to these shrines, its centre lies where the main lines of road and rail, like those of river-drainage, converge around the meeting-place of Ettrick, Gala, and Leader with Tweed – under the shadow of the Eildon Hills and beside those two “miraculous” products of the hand and brain of man – Melrose Abbey and Abbotsford House. The creative art, in prose and verse, of the Great Magician was not often exercised on the chief stream higher up than Neidpath and Manor, or, at farthest, “Merlin’s Grave”, beside Drummelzier and under Tinnis. Nor did his genius much frequent the lower courses of Tweed, below Kelso Bridge and Wark Castle, and the inflow of the “sullen Till”, although here also are many scenes of beauty and pages of story that might well have set his imagination afire. It seems more at home, also, in the valleys of the Teviot, the Ettrick, and the Yarrow than on the Leader, the Gala, and other northern affluents of the Tweed. Accident and propinquity may have helped to determine his choice of scene and theme; but old associations and affinities may have done still more. The nearer the Border line of the Cheviots, the thicker are footprints of the clan and national frays of old – of battles and skirmishes in which Scott’s own ancestry took more than their share; and the deeper and richer the soil of tradition in which he delighted to delve. To the Teviot, the Borthwick, and the Ettrick – to Branxholm and Harden, Rankleburn and Newark – he was drawn by the call of the blood of his father’s race; an equal tie bound him to the Jed, the old home of his mother’s kin, the “hot and hardy Rutherfords”; while Yarrow, the heart of his Forest Sherifffdom, is also the core of its ballad poetry. It has to be remembered, also, that the period of Scott’s greatest literary output was also the period of failing physical powers, and that journeys through his beloved Borderland had to be more and more circumscribed to beaten paths of easy access.

It was by Kelso Bridge, beside where the wand of the Wizard Michael Scott “bridled the Tweed with a curb of stone”, that, in the fresh morning of youth, the spell of the great Border river first fell on Walter Scott. His kinsfolk lived in the neighbourhood; and several of them are buried in the Abbey Aisle. His great-grandfather and namesake, the Jacobite “Beardie” who had fought at Killiecrankie, had occupied a house in the Coalmarket; his kindly Aunt Janet resided in what is now called Waverley Lodge; his uncle, Captain Robert Scott, a lover and collector of books, had his home at Rosebank, which he bequeathed to Sir Walter, who – “his poverty not his will consenting” – sold this house of many memories, along with “thirty acres of the most fertile land in Scotland”.

Only a few miles away, beside the stark and far-seen old keep of Smailholm, was the farm of Sandyknowe, leased from Scott of Harden by his grandfather Robert Scott, to which, between the ages of three and eleven, the little boy from Edinburgh came annually for holidays. Everyone

remembers the lines that record the impression made on his youthful mind by his “barren scene and wild” – by the tall, grey, weather-beaten tower looking down from its rock upon the lone lochan, and out and away over many scenes of Border romance to “the distant Cheviots blue”; and of the legends of foray and strife that were told in the boy’s wondering ears by the “aged hind”, and that took shape afterwards in “The Eve of St. John” and other tales of the Master.

What more natural than that young Walter, “become rather delicate from overgrowth” and threatened with permanent lameness, should be sent, while twelve or thirteen years of age, to his Kelso relatives for change, outdoor freedom, and recruitment? He went to the Grammar School as pupil, and even for a time as usher, under the Rector, Lancelot Whale, from whom are drawn some of the traits of “Dominie Sampson”. He delighted his master by his recitation of the “Speech of Galgacus”, and beguiled his school companions from their lessons by his tales of old romance. He read, in the arbour of his aunt’s old-fashioned garden, or under the ancient elm that still survives, Bishop Percy’s *Reliques*, the identical copy of which is in Kelso Library. Among his fellow-pupils were the Ballantynes, James and John, a fateful conjunction, for out of a hint dropped in a talk with the elder of these old schoolmates grew the *Scottish Border Minstrelsy*– the first two volumes of which were the earliest issued from the Kelso “Ballantyne Press”, in 1802 – and much else of note in Scott’s career and fortunes. A biographer may well say that it was “here he began to gather up his intellectual gains and make his friendly conquests”. Kelso gave bent and direction to his genius.

Like Smailholm, Kelso was “meet nurse for a poetic child”, for here join two “superb rivers” – Tweed and Teviot – each bringing down, from a hundred sources, its treasure of ancient story. As we have said, the beauty and romance of Tweedside do not begin in this neighbourhood. They are the endowment of the main stream from its tap-root to the sea. Berwick-upon-Tweed, for centuries a cause of contention between the Kingdoms, was at one time regarded as separate and apart from each – “England, Scotland, and the town of Berwick-upon-Tweed”. Since the fifteenth century, however, it has territorially belonged to England, although situated on the north bank of the river. Its Edwardian and Elizabethan walls – the former recently placed, along with the venerable Bell Tower, the symbol of Berwick Liberties, under the protection of the Board of Works as a national relic and for preservation against the attacks of vandalism – enfold a sheaf of history. Few places have been the scenes of more furious sieges and merciless captures. Its bridge of fifteen arches, built before the Civil Wars and upheld for centuries from State funds, connects the town with Tweedmouth and Spittal to the south, although it is of small account, as a bond of union and means of traffic, compared with its upstream neighbour, the Royal Border Bridge, which carries the railway lines between England and Scotland.

A mile or two higher up, but still into tide-water, flows in the Whitadder, which with its tributary, the Blackadder, comes out of the recesses of the Lammermoors to drain the fertile Merse, passing on its way many scenes that must have tempted Sir Walter to make its valley the stage of one of his romances. His fancy may have played with the idea. But beyond an occasional allusion, or the dispatch of one or two of his characters through it, in hot haste for some other arena of action, he never specifically annexed this heritage of the Humes and earlier Lords of Dunbar and Merse to the “Scott Country”, though some have attempted to identify Cranshaws Castle or Wedderlie with Ravenswood. Wedderburn recalls the “Seven Spears”. Polwarth and Marchmont, Ninewells and Nisbet, Kimmerghame and Langton, Edrington and Hutton, Chirnside and Bunkle, Duns and Greenlaw, are names steeped in the spirit of Border poetry as well as noted in local and national annals. The valleys in which lie Abbey St. Bathans, on the Whitadder, Priestlaw, on the Faseny, and Longformacus, on the Dye, seem to beckon for an interpreter of their almost forgotten stories; while that of the mysterious “Edinhall”, on Cockburn Law, the largest and most southerly of Scottish “brochs”, is wholly lost. At Ellemford, James IV was brought to a halt, in the futile “Raid of Ellem”; and his descendant Charles I came to a turning-point in his fortunes when he was faced by the Covenanting Host, encamped on Duns Law. From Haliburton, hard by the “Blackadder Rings”, Scott

derived one line of his descent. Yet this region of the Merse serves at most only as a background in his Border Romance.

Higher up the main stream, beyond Paxton, and Horncliffe, and Horndean, one comes to Ladykirk, whose fine old sixteenth-century church is said to have been founded and dedicated to the Virgin in gratitude for an escape from drowning in the Tweed. Behind it is Swinton, the home of an ancient and knightly family from which Sir Walter was descended, on his mother's side. Over against it are the "castled steep" and "flanking walls" of Norham, the guardian of England and of the heritage of the Prince-Bishops of Durham, to the siege of which "Mons Meg" has travelled in her day – the scene, too, of quarrels and of conferences, at one of which Edward I decided between the rival claims of the "Competitors" for the Crown of Scotland.

At Tillmouth and Twizell Castle, where the Till brings down waters – Glen and Bowmount, Breamish and College – drawn from both skirts of Cheviot, one is close to ground yet more closely bound to the tragedy of the Kingdoms and to the genius of Scott, for near here is Ford Castle, where the Scottish King is supposed to have dallied too long with Lady Heron; the bridge across which he allowed the English van to cross and attack him on flank; and the hill-slope of Flodden, down which, in 1513,

"From his mountain home
King James did rushing come" —

to meet disaster half-way, and to fall in the midst of the flower of his nobles and of his kingdom.

At Coldstream, Longshanks crossed the Tweed on the fatal enterprise of invading and subduing Scotland; Leslie, on his way to join Cromwell at Marston Moor, and Monk on the march to proclaim Charles II in London. Wark Castle, in which, according to tradition, the Order of the Garter was instituted – with Carham beside it, where, at a much more distant date, a generation before Macbeth, Malcolm II, King of Scots, won a victory that brought the boundary of his realm in permanence to the Tweed – stands within easy reach of Kelso. So also, on the opposite or Scottish bank, does Birgham, the soil on which William the Lion and the Scots prelates disowned the supremacy of the English Church, and where was signed the Treaty for that projected marriage of the heirs of the two Kingdoms – Prince Edward and the Maid of Norway – which, but for evil chance, might have united them without the intervention of three centuries of desolating war.

But it is at Kelso Bridge, below the meeting of Tweed and Teviot, that we come fully within the circle of the Magician's charm – where every stream and wood and glen seems to take light and colour from the imagination of Walter Scott. The scene has been admired and praised by a host of poets and travellers before and since his time. Burns looked down upon it from different points of view and owned himself "enchanted". It has been extolled by, among others, James Thomson, of the *Seasons*, who was born at Ednam Manse on the Eden Water, only two or three miles away, and by Thomas Pringle, Scott's fellow-pupil at Kelso and the first editor of *Blackwood*, who sang, from the South African veld, of "Bonnie Teviotdale and Teviot's mountains blue". The parent river makes a wide sweep, and, with its bold wooded banks, seems to embrace and protect the houses of the little market town, in the midst of which rise the ruined western towers and a fragment of the nave of the renowned Tyronesian Abbey. The place, standing so perilously near the English border, was guarded on the south and on the north by two great strongholds. Of Roxburgh or Marchmont Castle, on the narrow ridge between Tweed and Teviot, only a few walls, rising a few yards above the sod, remain. Its history would fill a volume. But one remembers chiefly that James II of Scots – he of the "Fiery Face" – was killed by the explosion of a cannon, while directing attack upon it from the farther bank of the Tweed, leaving the country, as was so often its fortune under the Stewart Dynasty, to the hazards of a long minority. On the town of Roxburgh – which once, as one of the "Four Burghs", was

a leader in the path of municipal and commercial progress – a more sweeping fate has descended; not a stone has been left above another on a site upon which for long was held “St. James’s Lammas Fair”.

Hume Castle, Kelso’s other bulwark – or, if it happened to be in the hands of an enemy, its thorn in the flesh – stands on high ground to the north, where its square-set form, now reduced to a shell, can be seen from all parts of the ground that lies between the Lammermoor and Cheviot. But the town had strength within itself in its great Norman Abbey Church, built for purposes of war as well as of prayer. It was founded by that zealous abbey- and cathedral-rearer, David I, the son of Canmore and of Saint Margaret; and its head, as a mitred abbot who acknowledged only the jurisdiction of the Holy See, held a position that gave him a precedence, much envied and much resented, over the superiors of the neighbouring religious houses of Jedburgh, Dryburgh, and Melrose. It was endowed with rich benefices and wide territories, but its wealth and glory all vanished in the storms of the Reformation, or, more ruthless still, of the English invasions and the Civil Wars.

A large part of the Abbey heritage has passed to the Kers, of the ducal house of Roxburgh, whose stately seat, Floors Castle, planned by Vanbrugh and completed by Playfair, commands from its terraces one of the widest and loveliest views upon Tweed. Of the Kers of Cessford, who had feuds with the rival branch of the Kerrs of Ferniehirst, as well as with the Scotts and other neighbours, it has been said that they had a genius for fighting on the winning side: “When the power of the Douglasses on the Border began to crumble, they became Crown vassals, and their fortunes mounted rapidly. They won new lands, and held, and still hold, the old. They kept a hawk’s eye on the wild tracts of moor and pasture and peat bog, where even in the old days of foray there was, as Dandie Dinmont said, ‘mair stabling for horses than change-houses for men’, and where now all is utterly abandoned to the curlew and the sheep. But they moved their household gods, and extended their bounds, from the Bowmont to the Kale, from the Kale to the Teviot, and finally from the Teviot to the Tweed.” Their ruined castle of Cessford stands in a lonely place, on a slope overhanging a little side-glen of the Kale Water, some eight miles from Floors. The roof is gone, and all about is bare and deserted. A few sapling ashes grow in the crannies of the stone, but time has riven the thick walls which Surrey, in 1523, found so hard to breach, and has thrown down the grand old Crow Tree that stood so long beside Habbie Ker’s stronghold. Long before this the family had flitted to a warmer nest, and had feathered it with the spoils of Old Roxburgh Castle and of Kelso Abbey.

Scarcely less than Melrose and Abbotsford are Kelso and Floors the centre of a sanctuary of Border romance; and over the scene the forms of Hume Castle and Smailholm Tower seem to keep sentry-watch and to “shift places mysteriously, like the triple heads of the weird Eildons, as if they were pacing guard upon the hilltops”. In the setting of the picture revealed from these vantage-grounds are – along with places already noted – the hanging woods of Stichell and Newtondon; Nenthorn, Hendersyde, Mellerstain, Makerstoun; beyond Teviot, the rich woodlands of Springwood, Woodendean, and Sunlaws; the darker pine trees around the hunting seat of Bowmont Forest; the folds in which lie the “Gypsy capital” of Kirk Yetholm, the ancient Kirk of Linton, Eckford of the Douglasses and Crailing of the Cranstons; the hills of Hounam and Morebattle; and, behind all, the soft blue line, rising high in Great Cheviot and sinking away towards the west, of the chain that divides the kingdoms, with peeps here and there of Haddon Rig, and Ruberslaw, and Dunion, and Minto Crags, and Penielheugh, crowned by its Waterloo monument, with other scarce less famous Border heights.

While, above the junction, the ascending valley of the Tweed holds its way westwards, so that the water-sheds of its northern tributaries are in common with those of streams flowing to the Forth and the Clyde, Teviotdale keeps throughout a line that is parallel with the Marches of the Kingdoms, from which its main channel is nowhere more than a dozen miles away as the crow flies. It follows that there is more of hazard, and with this more of romance, crowded into its annals than perhaps into those of any other area of like extent. It is sprinkled over with battlefields and with peel towers, most of them now in ruin; every dale has been the scene of a fray, and every burn has a song or ballad tacked to its name. These Middle and West Marches were a centre of power and action, first

of the House of Douglas, and then of the “Bauld Buccleuch”. The “Good Sir James of Douglas” kept the peace of this troubled frontier for the Bruce; his son, the “Knight of Liddesdale”, expelled the English from Teviotdale, and was killed while hunting in Ettrick Forest; his grandson, the first of the Douglas Earls, also chased out the invaders and brought back spoils from the English side; his great-grandson, the second Earl, captured Percy’s pennon at Newcastle, and was slain at Otterburn, while riding home by the road of Redesdale and the Carter Bar with his prey; while it is of a later descendant, “Earl Tineman”, captured at Shrewsbury by a later Hotspur, that the canny saying is quoted in *The Fortunes of Nigel*

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