

SCOTLAND

A LITERARY GUIDE

ALAN BOLD



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Alan Bold



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PREFACE

This guide examines, in alphabetical order, most of the significant literary locations in Scotland. Counties have been indicated more prominently than regions, which are given in parentheses. Distances are, generally, as the crow flies, and road numbers emphasise destinations rather than routes.

Although a small country in terms of size and population Scotland has produced many writers internationally acknowledged as truly great; for example, David Hume, Adam Smith, Burns, Scott, Carlyle, Stevenson, and MacDiarmid. I have, of course, covered all the obvious names as well as providing information on writers whose work may be unfamiliar to the reader. In an attempt to give the book character, I have made use of local colour and illustrative quotations. It should be noted that the amount of space given to an author may depend, to some degree, on the amount of information available. By any reckoning William Dunbar is a writer of genius yet little is known about his life. By contrast, the career of A. J. Cronin is well documented. Though there is more Cronin than Dunbar in this book it is by chance, therefore, rather than choice.

Instead of fixing an arbitrary shut-out date I have included modern writers who seem to me to have particular topographical relevance. The inclusion of a living author does not necessarily imply a value judgment on his or her work.

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ABBOTSFORD, Roxburghshire (Border) 2½m SE of Galashiels,
off A7

Sir Walter Scott

Abbotsford, the home of Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), is maintained by the author's descendants and open to the public (24 March–31 Oct. 10am–5pm, Sun. 2–5pm). Visitors are shown the study (containing Scott's writing desk and chair); the library (with some 9,000 books collected by Scott); the drawing room (hung with Chinese hand-painted paper given to Scott by his cousin, Hugh Scott of Draycott); the armoury (with Scott's blunderbuss, yeomanry sword and pistols); the entrance hall (with walls showing oak panelling from the Auld Kirk of Dunfermline); the dining room where Scott died on 21 September 1832.

Throughout his life Scott's literary success was accompanied by giant steps up the social ladder. In 1804 he inherited his late uncle's property of Rosebank in Kelso, sold it for £5,000 and took a seven-year lease on Ashestiel, a superbly situated farmhouse in Ettrick Forest, six miles from Selkirk. When in 1811, the lease on Ashestiel ran out Scott decided to buy – from Dr Robert Douglas, parish minister of Galashiels – Cartley Hole farmhouse and farm on the right bank of the Tweed. He knew he would have to 'have recourse to my pen to make the matter easy'. Half the 4,000-guinea purchase price (for around 110 acres) was raised by John Ballantyne & Co. on the promise of a new narrative poem. Scott completed the purchase of his property, moved into it on 28 May 1812, 'resumed the pen in my old Cossack manner', and, completed *Rokeby* (1813), a poem in six cantos. Since the land he had acquired had once belonged to the monks of Melrose who had used a ford below the house, Scott renamed his property Abbotsford.

When *Rokeby* was published it started well enough and then sales faltered and failed to live up to expectations. The reason was that a rival had entered the field: Lord Byron who 'awoke one morning and found

myself famous' after the publication of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in 1812. Scott acknowledged Byron's brilliance and realised he would never again have a monopoly of the market for narrative verse. It must be remembered that Scott did not overrate the artistic merit of his own poetry and when he was offered the Laureateship in 1813 he turned it down and suggested that Robert Southey was a more suitable man for the job.

As if the blow to his commercial viability as a poet was not enough to cope with, Scott's publisher, John Ballantyne & Co., was in serious difficulty (largely through its unwanted stock of Scott's antiquarian projects). With the generous help of a £4,000 loan from the fourth Duke of Buccleuch, Scott was able to avoid bankruptcy but he had to wind up John Ballantyne & Co. and put himself in the hands of Archibald Constable to whom he promised a new narrative poem by November. The poem planned was *The Lord of the Isles* and Scott had an opportunity to do some research on the geographical background. Will Erskine, Sheriff of Orkney and Shetland, invited Scott to tour the Scottish islands. Before Scott left, however, he arranged for Archibald Constable to publish, anonymously, his first novel.

Back in 1805, encouraged by the success of his verse, Scott had thought of attempting a prose narrative. Accordingly he 'threw together about one-third part of the first volume of *Waverley*' and had it advertised under the imprint of John Ballantyne. Somehow, a 'critical friend' discouraged Scott from issuing the novel and, rather than risk his prestige as a poet by an impetuous adventure into prose, he abandoned the idea and put the manuscript into an old writing-desk which was eventually stored in a lumber garret at Abbotsford.

Now, in 1813, while looking in the desk for fishing-tackle for a friend, he came across the lost manuscript and quickly completed it. Scott said that 'the tale of *Waverley* was put together with so little care that I cannot boast of having sketched any distinct plan of the work'. Because of this, and still sensitive about his poetic reputation, Scott decided against putting his name to a work which might well fail to impress a public already partly won over by Byron.

Waverley was published, in three volumes, on 7 July 1814 and so indifferent was Scott to his impact as a novelist that he, literally, left the book behind him. In the company of Will Erskine and the Northern Lighthouse Commissioners, Scott left Fraserburgh on 1 August 1814 for a two-month tour of the Scottish islands. In his absence *Waverley* took off on its own astonishing journey to international celebrity and by the end of the year 5,000 copies had been sold at a profit of more than £2,000. 'I have seldom,' said Scott, 'felt more satisfaction than when, returning from a pleasure voyage, I found *Waverley* in the zenith of popularity, and public curiosity in full cry after the name of the author.'

He had every reason to be satisfied. Here was a way in which he could finance his increasingly ambitious plans for Abbotsford – and this at a time when his fears about the selling power of his poetry were being justified. *The Lord of the Isles* was published in January 1815, his second novel *Guy Mannering* the month after. By his own standards the sales of *The Lord of the Isles* were disappointing and he told James Ballantyne: ‘Since one line has failed, we must just stick to something else.’ The ‘something else’ was novel-writing. *Guy Mannering*, written in six weeks, was an instant success. The first edition of 2,000 sold out in a day. Scott therefore decided to abandon poetry and stick to prose. The acquisition of Abbotsford coincides with Scott’s career as a novelist.

There can be little doubt that the creation of Abbotsford meant more to Scott than his reputation as a poet or novelist. We have it on Lockhart’s authority that ‘at the highest elevation of his literary renown – when princes bowed to his name, and nations thrilled at it – he would have considered losing all that at a change of the wind, as nothing, compared to parting with his place as the Cadet of Harden and Clansman of Buccleuch’. And it was at Abbotsford that he could play to perfection the part of well-connected landed gentleman. The novels he wrote at Abbotsford financed his social status as a laird though the mercenary motivation does not detract from the quality of Scott’s art.

Abbotsford, transformed from a farmhouse to a magnificent mansion, was completed in 1824. Scott took great joy in settling the estate on his son Walter in 1825 on the occasion of his marriage to Jane Jobson of Lochore, the heiress niece of Scott’s friend Sir Adam Ferguson. Scott’s words on settling Abbotsford on his son were: ‘I have now parted with my lands with more pleasure than I ever derived from the acquaintance or possession of them; and if I be spared for ten years I think I may promise to settle as much more again upon these young folks.’ He was, in fact, to be spared seven more years – but as a debtor, not a benefactor.

What happened in 1826 was that the chain of credit that Scott (as a partner in James Ballantyne & Co.) and Archibald Constable depended on broke loose. The secure anchor which the chain clung to, Constable’s London agent Hurst, Robinson & Co., was suddenly exposed as a thing of speculative sand, not solid cash. The London firm had gambled their assets and collapsed. This in turn ruined Constable, whose numerous bills and promises were now rendered worthless. And the ruin of Constable inevitably meant the ruin of James Ballantyne & Co., which Scott had established. He knew he was faced with ‘the prospect of absolute ruin’. However he turned down offers of financial help from the Duke of Buccleuch and other friends and said defiantly: ‘No! this right hand shall work it all off!’ Indeed it did, but at a terrible cost to his health.

To settle his debts of almost £117,000 (including private debts of around £20,000) Scott agreed to pay the money made from his writing into a trust.

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He was allowed to remain in Abbotsford but had to sell 39 North Castle Street, his Edinburgh home of twenty-five years standing. Yet he himself remained a valuable property. With Constable no longer in business there was a rush of publishers anxious to secure the services of Scott. Longman paid over £8,000 for *Woodstock* (1826) and Scott, delighted at this 'matchless sale for less than three months work', increased his efforts. However, human tragedy followed hard on the heels of his earlier financial catastrophe. On 16 May 1826 Charlotte, Lady Scott, died at Abbotsford. Scott, already shaken by the collapse of his commercial affairs, wrote in his *Journal*:

I think my heart will break. Lonely, aged, deprived of my family . . . an impoverished and embarrassed man, deprived of the sharer of my thoughts and counsels, who could always talk down my sense of the calamitous apprehensions which must break the heart which must bear them alone. Even her foibles were of service to me, by giving me things to think of beyond my weary self-reflections.

However, typical of his strength of character was his determination not 'to blaze cambric and crape in the public eye like a disconsolate widower, that most affected of all characters'.

Scott continued to make money and by the end of 1828, according to his son-in-law, had earned around £40,000 for his creditors since his financial crash. 'No literary biographer,' wrote Lockhart, 'in all likelihood, will ever have such another fact to record.' The wand of the Wizard of the North was still intact. By 1831 he had cleared all his debts and admitted that 'I could never have slept straight in my coffin till I had satisfied every claim against me'. After a Mediterranean cruise, Scott came back to Abbotsford to observe, 'I have seen much but nothing like my ain house'. In this house he died, in the presence of his children.

ABERDEEN, Aberdeenshire (Grampian)

John Barbour

Aberdeen, on the Don and Dee, was a royal burgh under David I; King's College was founded in 1495, Marischal College in 1593. John Barbour (c. 1320–95) was born in Aberdeen a few years after Robert the Bruce's great victory over the English at Bannockburn (1314). By 1357 he was Archdeacon of Aberdeen, a position he retained for the rest of his life. He was made a member of the Scottish royal household by Robert II, founder of the Stewart dynasty. Robert II commissioned Barbour to write *The Bruce*, a narrative poem in octosyllabic couplets comprising twenty books and 13,550 lines. Part of it was printed in 1571, the full text in 1616.

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In celebrating a Scottish hero Barbour expressed, in powerful vernacular verse, the notion of independence, as in the celebrated lines on freedom:

A! Freedom is a noble thing!
Freedom makis man to have liking; *choice*
Freedom all solace to man givis:
He livis at ease that freely livis!
A noble hart may have nane ease,
Na ellis nocht that may him please, *nor*
Gif freedom failye; for free liking
Is yarnit owre all othir thing. *yearned for*

Lord Byron

Captain John 'Mad Jack' Byron took, as his second wife, Catherine Gordon of Gight (in the parish of Fyvie). As she was the last laird of Gight, Mad Jack probably made the match for her money – which he quickly squandered. George Gordon Noel Byron (1788–1824) was born in London on 22 January 1788 and some two years later his father, pursued by creditors, took the family to Aberdeen. Mad Jack died in 1791 and Byron lived with his mother in Broad Street. According to an article by Dr Gordon Blaikie in *Harper's Magazine* (August 1891), Byron was sent at the age of five to the school of 'Bodsy' Bower in Longacre. His mother withdrew him from this school and after being taught by two private tutors (subsequently ministers of the Church of Scotland) Byron attended Aberdeen Grammar School, then situated in Schoolhill. The school registers show his name entered quarterly from 29 January 1796 to 18 June 1798 – the month after he succeeded his grand uncle as Lord Byron. As the school registers before 1796 do not exist, it is probable that Byron entered the school in November 1794. There is a Byron statue in Skene Street, in the gardens of the grammar school. When the novelist Eric Linklater (1899–1974) attended Aberdeen Grammar School from 1913 to 1916 he felt that the statue of 'Byron, through the window, undid the schoolroom teaching that literature must be a solemn thing' (*The Man on My Back*, 1941).

On inheriting the family title in 1798, Byron and his mother moved to England but the poet never forgot the formative years he spent in Scotland. *Hours of Idleness* (1807) contains 'Lachin Y Gair' and 'When I Roved a Young Highlander' but, more significantly, Byron's masterpiece *Don Juan* (1819–24) affirms his Scottish origins (X, 17–18):

But I am half a Scot by birth, and bred
A whole one, and my heart flies to my head. . . .
As 'Auld Lang Syne' brings Scotland, one and all,
Scotch plaids, Scotch snoods, the blue hills, and clear streams,

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The Dee, the Don, Balgounie's brig's *black wall*,
All my boy feelings, all my gentler dreams
Of what I *then dreamt*, clothed in their own pall,
Like Banquo's offspring; – floating past me seems
My childhood in this childishness of mine:
I care not – 'tis a glimpse of '*Auld Lang Syne*'.

Alexander Scott

Alexander Scott, poet and critic, was born on 28 November 1920 at 13 Western Road, a two-room cottage in Woodside on the northern outskirts of Aberdeen. He moved, in 1922, to top flat in tenement at 22 Jamaica Street, near Kittybrewster Railway Station and attended Kittybrewster primary school from 1926 to 1932. In 1929 Scott settled in his grandfather's newly built bungalow at 55 Cattofield Place on the edge of the then developing Hilton estate; he was at Hilton Intermediate School (Jan- June 1933), Central Secondary School, Schoolhill (Sept. 1933–June 1939) and a student at Aberdeen University from 1939 to 1941 and 1945 to 1947. While he was absent on war service – from 1941 to 1945 during which time he was awarded the Military Cross for leading a company attack on a German regimental headquarters at the battle of the Reichswald (1945) – the house in Cattofield Place was destroyed in Aberdeen's worst bombing raid (spring 1943). On demobilisation Scott lived (1945–6) in his mother-in-law's hotel, Woodside House Hotel, on the south bank of the River Don at Woodside and then in his parents' flat at 64 Hilton Terrace, on a corporation housing estate.

After teaching (from October 1947 to September 1948) at Edinburgh University, Scott became the lecturer in Scottish literature (the first appointment of its kind in Scotland) at Glasgow University. In 1971 he was appointed Head of Department of Scottish Literature (again, the first appointment of its kind in Scotland) at Glasgow University. His books include a biography of William Soutar, *Still Life* (1958) and *Selected Poems 1943–74* (1975). His most sustained poem on Aberdeen, 'Heart of Stone', was written for television and collected in *Cantrips* (1968). It evokes, in Scots verse, the essential character of Aberdeen:

The sea-gray toun, the stane-gray sea,
The cushat's croudle mells wi the sea-maw's skirl *pigeon's coo, mingles*
Whaur bath gae skaichan fish-guts down the quays *scavenging*
Or scrannan crumbs in cracks o the thrang causeys, *scraping, busy*
A lichthous plays the lamp-post owre a close,
The traffic clappers through a fisher's clachan *village*
Whaur aa the vennels spulyie names frae the sea, *alleys, plunder*
And kirks and crans clamjamfrie, *crowd*

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Heaven and haven mixer-maxtered heave *confused*
To the sweel o the same saut tide.

David Toulmin

David Toulmin (born John Reid in 1913) settled in a flat at 7 Pittodrie Place in 1971, a year before the publication of his first book *Hard Shining Corn* (1972). After a lifetime working as a 'fee'd loon' on various farms, Toulmin was suddenly acclaimed as a literary celebrity and an authentic voice of Buchan. Toulmin's highly regarded novel *Blown Seed* (1976) was written at 7 Pittodrie Place.

ABERFELDY, Perthshire (Tayside) 10m SW of Pitlochry on A826

Robert Burns

A signposted footpath leads to the Falls of Moness (one mile south-west) where Robert Burns (1759–96) is said to have written 'The Birks of Aberfeldie' which begins:

Now simmer blinks on flow'ry braes, *shines, slopes*
And o'er the crystal streamlets plays.
Come, let us spend the lightsome days
In the birks of Aberfeldie! *birches*

*Bonie lassie, will ye go,
Will ye go, will ye go?
Bonie lassie, will ye go
To the birks of Aberfeldie?*

From 25 August to 16 September 1787, Burns toured the Scottish Highlands with his irascible friend William Nicol. According to James Barke's *The Wonder of All the Gay World* (1949, the fourth novel in his sequence on the life of the poet) Burns and Nicol:

crossed the River Tay to see for themselves the famous birch-trees of Aberfeldy.

They clambered up to the Falls of Moness and there and then the Bard took pencil and paper and wrote his first draft of 'The Birks of Aberfeldy'.

Here even the prosaic Nicol was somewhat moved.

ABERUTHVEN

ABERLADY, East Lothian (Lothian) 5m NW of Haddington

Nigel Tranter

At the mouth of the Peffer Burn on the coast, Aberlady has been the home of the novelist Nigel Tranter (born in Glasgow on 23 November 1909) since 1938. After training as an accountant, Tranter became a full-time writer and settled in Aberlady. Initially he rented Cross Cottage, an eighteenth-century cottage beside the ancient market-cross and lived there while writing the novels *Mammon's Daughter* (1939), *Harsh Heritage* (1940), *Eagles' Feathers* (1941), and *Watershed* (1941). From 1941 to 1946, while a serving soldier, Tranter wrote five novels, and on his return to Aberlady wrote a series of eighteen novels beginning with *Island Twilight* (1947).

In 1950 Tranter moved from the village to Quarry House, an eighteenth-century house on Luffness estate, on the shore of Aberlady Bay. His novel *Ducks and Drakes* (1953) was prompted by the controversy over the setting up of a Nature Reserve at Aberlady Bay. Tranter, who was much involved in this dispute (even to the extent of appearing in court), eventually became a member of the Committee of Management. Tranter is a prolific novelist perhaps best known for his trilogy on the life of Robert the Bruce: *The Steps to the Empty Throne* (1969), *The Path of the Hero King* (1970), and *The Price of the King's Peace* (1971).

ABERUTHVEN, Perthshire (Tayside) 11m SW of Perth on A9

Robin Bell

The village of Aberuthven becomes the fictional village of *Strathinver* (1984) in the book of that name by Robin Bell (born 4 January 1945 in Dundee). Bell's father was a minister of the parishes of Aberuthven and Gask, and Bell grew up in the Manse of Aberuthven in the years after the Second World War. *Strathinver* is a sequence of sixty poems covering the period 1945–53 and introducing a fictionalised cast of local characters. Bell himself appears in the book as 'a slim, shy youth,/a fourth person singular to the town'.

ALEXANDRIA

AILSA CRAIG

Robert Burns

This islet, off the coast of Ayrshire, informs a simile Robert Burns (1759–96) used in his song ‘Duncan Gray’:

Duncan fleech’d, and Duncan pray’d *wheedled*
(Ha, ha, the wooing o’t!)
Meg was deaf as Ailsa Craig
(Ha, ha, the wooing o’t!)

The granite rock from Ailsa Craig is used in the manufacture of curling stones.

ALEXANDRIA, Dunbartonshire (Strathclyde) Vale of Leven 3m
N of Dumbarton

Tobias Smollett

A Smollett Museum (open Easter–September, daily 11am–6pm) is housed in Castle Cameron, near Cameron House, at the south end of Loch Lomond. It contains the papers of Lewis M. Knapp, author of *Tobias Smollett* (1949) as well as portraits of Smollett (1721–71) and first editions of his works. There is also a photograph of the plane tree at Dalquhurn House under which Smollett was supposedly born; and a painting of the first design of the Smollett Monument at Renton. Castle Cameron is still in the possession of the Smollett family who sold Cameron House in 1983. Formerly the Smollett Museum comprised a room in Cameron House.

In *Humphry Clinker* (1771) Smollett mentions Cameron House, for Jerry Melford explains:

We have fixed our headquarters at Cameron, a very neat country-house belonging to commissary Smollett, where we found every sort of accommodation we could desire. . . . It is situated like a Druid’s temple, in a grove of oak, close by the side of Lough-Lomond, which is a surprising body of pure transparent water, unfathomably deep in many places, six or seven miles broad, four and twenty miles in length, displaying above twenty green islands, covered with wood; some of them cultivated for corn, and many of them stocked with red deer.

Cameron House was the family home of the Smolletts from 1763. The present house (a baronial mansion of the Victorian period) is built on the house Smollett knew (and which was destroyed by fire).