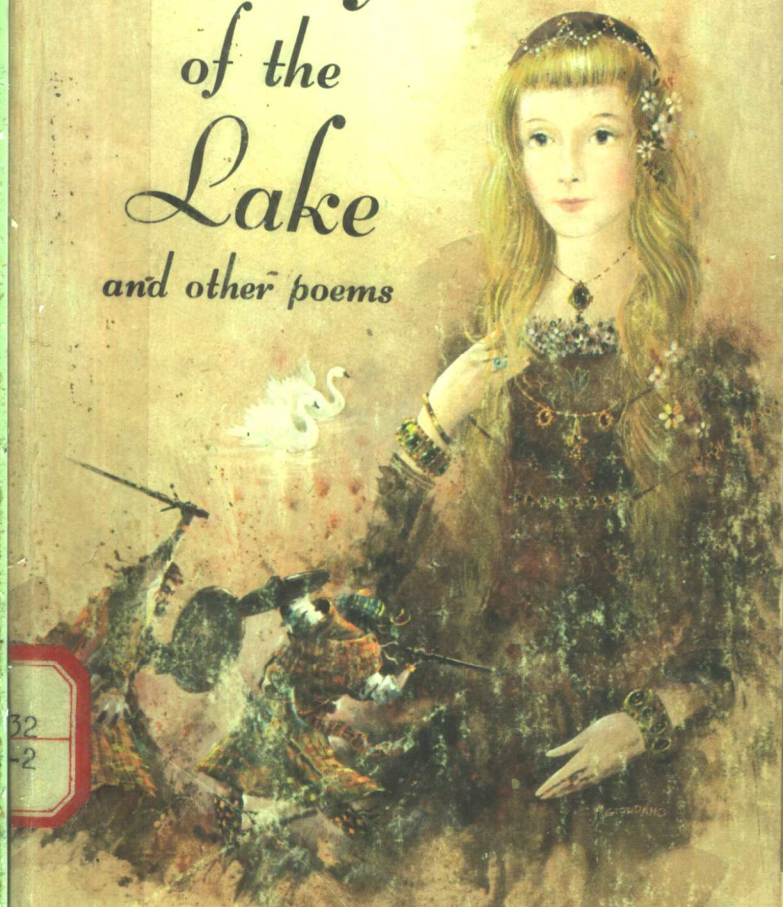


SIR WALTER SCOTT

Lady
of the
Lake
and other poems



Introduction by C. L. Fennet

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

THE
LADY
OF THE
LAKE

and Other Poems

SIR WALTER SCOTT

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THE LADY OF THE LAKE

and Other Poems



SIR WALTER SCOTT

Introduction

Walter Scott was born in Edinburgh, of a good Scottish family, on August 15, 1771, and was trained to follow his father's profession of the Law. But although he was admitted to the Bar at the age of twenty-one, and became a Clerk of the Court and Sheriff of Selkirkshire, his dominating interest from childhood was the study of romantic history and legend and the reading and telling of stirring tales of chivalry and romance.

At the age of twelve, following the influential example of Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, he began his own manuscript collection of early ballads. While still at school he exercised the photographic memory that made possible his omnivorously retentive reading and his rapid and copious writing in both verse and prose. The two writers that influenced him most were perfectly suited to his inborn interests and aptitudes—Macpherson's wildly romantic "translations" from the Gaelic of "Ossian" and Spenser's magnificent tapestry of *The Faerie Queene*—and he committed to memory "whole duans of the one and cantos of the other."

The collecting of old ballads was followed by translations

from German romantic poetry and drama, but it was not until 1805 that he published his first original work, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*. This was followed, in similar subject form and style, and with increasing acclaim, by *Marmion* in 1808 and in 1810 by *The Lady of the Lake*, which he never surpassed and which brought the climax of his reputation as a writer of verse. Scott's seven verse tales and the "Waverley" novels that followed were all distinguished by rapid narrative, crowded and sometimes impeded or interrupted by detail. Against a background of history and legend, fictitious characters and plot provided a more or less important thread for the narrative and a central interest for its development. Its basic theatrical appeal was supported by romantic scenery and innumerable museum pieces of stage property; by the manners and customs of bygone days; by their sports and pastimes, rituals and observances, superstitions, witchcraft and demonology; by maidens in distress and champions—as often as not in disguise—who rescued them from unwanted suitors and won their undying gratitude if not their hand in marriage. The greatest poetry was to come from the greater Romantic poets, but the art and craft of Scott, whether in verse or in prose, was not that of the poet, the prose stylist, or the historian, but that of the teller of stirring tales of action.

To mark the climax of Scott's achievement in verse-narrative, *The Lady of the Lake* has first of all a perfect setting. It brought the attention of artists, tourists, of the reading and the "view-hunting" public to the Trossachs (the modern spelling), the wild and rugged glen or defile between Loch Katrine and Loch Achray, and under the shadow of Ben A'an. The region is now a Mecca for sight-seers rivaled in Scotland for convenience and popularity only by Loch Lomond, and for seekers after literary shrines surpassed nowhere in Scotland, and in Britain only by the Lake District and by Stratford-on-Avon. Today a motor road passes beside Loch Lomond, goes through Glengyle and over the

Brig of Turk, and skirts the three "mighty" lakes—Katrine, Achray, and Vennachar—with a stopover and a launch trip on Loch Katrine. Every turn of the lake and every mile of the highway reveals the accuracy of Scott's eye for topography and terrain, and the six cantos—one for each day of the action—can be followed on a map from Ellen's Isle through Callander to Stirling. Both the details and the main events of the story show equally, in addition, Scott's knowledge of Scottish history, modified only by reasonable license for poet and storyteller. As in the similarly placed novel, *Rob Roy*, the principal families of the locality, their claims and quarrels, their feuds and fealties, are authentic. The portrait of James V is fairly based on the record. It was in fact his custom to go among his people unattended and in disguise, and his liking for humorous deception is attested by two songs, "We'll go no more a-roving" and "The Gaberlunzie Man." Besides its plot, its central characters and their famous duel, and such well-known bravura pieces as the stag-hunt, the story has all the details that Scott knew best how to string like multicolored beads along a storyline of proved and unfailing interest: movement, variety, suspense, danger, adventure, the chase, keen but peaceful rivalry in sports and pastimes, a faithful minstrel, and, to conclude, the hand of a fair damsel from an enchanting if not enchanted isle relinquished by a royal suitor in disguise and won by a faithful and wholly eligible suitor. The facile octosyllabic couplets are relieved from monotony by the Spenserian stanzas that open each canto and close the work, and by interspersed lyrics, ballads, and lays, by a drinking song, and a hymn, and episodes and descriptive passages lend their variety to the narrative.

Scott's history is criticized, ironically, because he was too much a historian to have full rein as a creative writer, and it is forgotten that factual history, as told by his own Dr. Dryasdust, provided the clay rather than the bricks and tile, let alone the walls and battlements and turrets, of

which the framework and structure of his tales were composed. His aim was to lead his readers to history by the fascination of his stories. In verse as in prose, he was primarily neither a historian nor a poet, but always a storyteller. In his earlier tales he made use, as did his bards and minstrels of old, of the devices of meter, rhyme, and figurative and generally heightened language, to carry his readers and his stories along the rapid road of adventure and suspense. It is tempting, but misleading, to attribute Scott's decline as a writer of verse merely to his own superiority as a writer of fiction, to his inferiority to Byron in Byron's newer and, in its own way, better kind of popular verse, and to the poetry of the great Romantics, for whom he did so much to prepare the way but whom he never professed to emulate. All these played their part, as did also his sense of his own real destiny, and the success of his moral determination to balance the books of his disastrous adventure into the business of printing and publishing. Byron and the Waverley novels have suffered their own undeserved decline, but they first withdrew Scott's verse from public favor, and the loss of this, regardless of merit, is seldom easy to make good.

That Scott cannot compete with Byron in Byron's own inimitable kind of narrative verse is beside the point. So also is his inability to match and equal the best, each according to his own genius, of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats. More relevant, but only by comparison, to his undeserved denigration or neglect, are the looseness, the haste, the diffuseness, and all-too-frequent second-hand "poetic diction" borrowed from the poetasters of the previous age and the jingling meters and easy rhymes of minor "romantics" in his own. The rhetoric admittedly is often contrived and false, and its trimmings and trappings seem borrowed for stage effect from the museum or even from the wax-works. Popular taste is now no more impressed than critical

judgment by such descriptions as that of Ellen's reception at Stirling:

For her use a menial train
A rich collation spread in vain.

Nor, probably, were readers in Scott's own first blaze of popularity much impressed by so flat a couplet as

Awhile the maid the stranger eyed
And, reassured, at length replied . . .

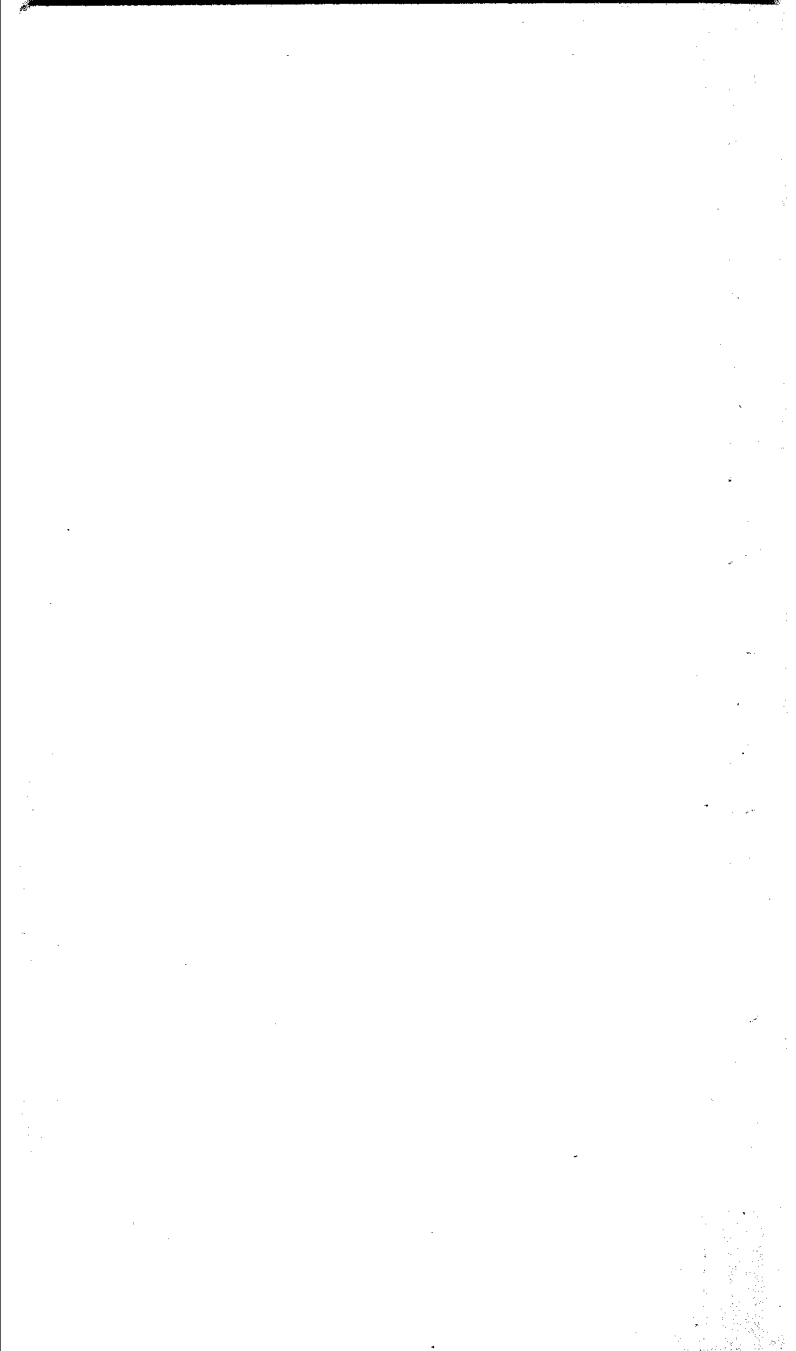
Incidental blemishes, resulting from a hasty facility, must be measured, not by the perfection of an ode or a sonnet, but by Scott's own purpose and achievement, and his own success in his own way. His virtues were more apparent and his shortcomings less noticeable to his first readers than they are to us, and their judgment may have been better than ours. Scott usually comes nearest to poetry in the songs that are interspersed in both his verse and his novels, but even these, as often as not, are ballads or soldiers' songs—such as we find in *The Lady of the Lake*—and as such are not to be condemned for their failure as lyrics but judged by their success in being what they are and in doing what they were intended to do. By this criterion, the tourists who speed through the Trossachs because of the influence of a writer of whom they have never read a line might well at least begin, if they do not end, their introduction to poetry with the stirring verse of this man whose excesses and shortcomings are as easy to disregard as they are to recognize. His virtues, if not sufficient in themselves, are at least a resting place for those who like most of us cannot remain always on the heights. For those who are for the first time on the way to the understanding and enjoyment of greater poetry, he offers a starting point more suitable for beginners. For its own beginnings, poetry can be traced back to the retentive memories, the rapid composition, and the stir-

ring recitations of the ballad makers, the minstrels, and the gleemen. They have lost neither their popular nor their literary appeal, and it is in their company that Scott's rapid and picturesque metrical tales of history and legend are deserving of a place.

Dalhousie University

C. L. BENNET

THE
LADY
OF THE
LAKE



The Lady of the Lake and Other Poems

INTRODUCTION TO THE EDITION OF 1830

After the success of *Marmion*, I felt inclined to exclaim with Ulysses in the *Odyssey*—

Οὗτος μὲν δὴ ἀεθλος ἀάατος ἐκτετέλεσται
Nûn αὐτε σκοπὸν ἄλλον. *Odys. x. 1. 5.*

"One venturous game my hand has won to-day—
Another, gallants, yet remains to play."

The ancient manners, the habits and customs of the aboriginal race by whom the Highlands of Scotland were inhabited, had always appeared to me peculiarly adapted to poetry. The change in their manners, too, had taken place almost within my own time, or at least I had learned many particulars concerning the ancient state of the Highlands from the old men of the last generation. I had always thought the old Scottish Gael highly adapted for poetical composition. The feuds, and political dissensions, which, half a century earlier, would have rendered the richer and wealthier part of the kingdom indisposed to countenance a poem, the scene of which was laid in the Highlands, were now sunk in the generous compassion which the English, more than any other nation, feel for the misfortunes of an honourable foe. The Poems of Ossian had, by their popularity, sufficiently shown that if writings on Highland subjects were qualified to interest the reader, mere national prejudices were, in the present day, very unlikely to interfere with their success.

I had also read a great deal, seen much, and heard more, of that romantic country, where I was in the habit of spending some time every autumn; and the scenery of Loch Katrine was connected with the recollection of many a dear friend and merry expedition of former days. This poem, the action of which lay among scenes so beautiful, and so deeply imprinted on my recollection, was a labour of love; and it was no less so to recall the manners and incidents introduced. The frequent custom of James IV, and particularly of James V, to walk through their kingdom in disguise, afforded me the hint of an incident,

which never fails to be interesting, if managed with the slightest address or dexterity.

I may now confess, however, that the employment, though attended with great pleasure, was not without its doubts and anxieties. A lady, to whom I was nearly related, and with whom I lived, during her whole life, on the most brotherly terms of affection, was residing with me at the time when the work was in progress, and used to ask me what I could possibly do to rise so early in the morning (that happening to be the most convenient time to me for composition). At last I told her the subject of my meditations; and I can never forget the anxiety and affection expressed in her reply. "Do not be so rash," she said, "my dearest cousin. You are already popular—more so, perhaps, than you yourself will believe, or than even I, or other partial friends, can fairly allow to your merit. You stand high—do not rashly attempt to climb higher, and incur the risk of a fall; for, depend upon it, a favourite will not be permitted even to stumble with impunity." I replied to this affectionate expostulation in the words of Montrose—

"He either fears his fate too much,
Or his deserts are small,
Who dares not put it to the touch
To gain or lose it all."

"If I fail," I said, for the dialogue is strong in my recollection, "it is a sign that I ought never to have succeeded, and I will write prose for life; you shall see no change in my temper, nor will I eat a single meal the worse. But if I succeed,

"Up with the bonnie blue bonnet,
The dirk, and the feather, and a'!"

Afterwards, I showed my affectionate and anxious critic the first canto of the poem, which reconciled her to my imprudence. Nevertheless, although I answered thus confidently, with the obstinacy often said to be proper to those who bear my surname, I acknowledge that my confidence was considerably shaken by the warning of her excellent taste and unbiassed friendship. Nor was I much comforted by her retraction of the unfavourable judgment, when I recollected how likely a natural partiality was to effect that change of opinion. In such cases, affection rises like a light on the canvas, improves any favourable tints which it formerly exhibited, and throws its defects into the shade.

I remember that about the same time a friend started in to

"heeze up my hope," like the "sportsman with his cutty gun" in the old song. He was bred a farmer, but a man of powerful understanding, natural good taste, and warm poetical feeling, perfectly competent to supply the wants of an imperfect or irregular education. He was a passionate admirer of field-sports, which we often pursued together.

As this friend happened to dine with me at Ashestiel one day, I took the opportunity of reading to him the first canto of *The Lady of the Lake*, in order to ascertain the effect the poem was likely to produce upon a person who was but too favourable a representative of readers at large. It is, of course, to be supposed that I determined rather to guide my opinion by what my friend might appear to feel, than by what he might think it to say. His reception of my recitation, or prelection, was rather singular. He placed his hand across his brow, and listened with great attention through the whole account of the stag-hunt, till the dogs threw themselves into the lake to follow their master, who embarks with Ellen Douglas. He then started up with a sudden exclamation, struck his hand on the table, and declared, in a voice of censure calculated for the occasion, that the dogs must have been totally ruined by being permitted to take the water after such a severe chase. I own I was much encouraged by the species of reverie which had possessed so zealous a follower of the sports of the ancient Nimrod, who had been completely surprised out of all doubts of the reality of the tale. Another of his remarks gave me less pleasure. He detected the identity of the King with the wandering knight, Fitz-James, when he winds his bugle to summon his attendants. He was probably thinking of the lively, but somewhat licentious, old ballad, in which the denouement of a royal intrigue takes place as follows:

"He took a bugle frae his side,
He blew both loud and shrill,
And four-and-twenty belted knights
Came skipping ower the hill;
Then he took out a little knife,
Let a' his duddies fa',
And he was the bravest gentleman
That was amang them a'.
And we'll go no more a-roving," &c. *

This discovery, as Mr. Pepys says of the rent in his camlet cloak, was but a trifle, yet it troubled me; and I was at a good

* "The Jolly Beggar," attributed to King James V. Herd's *Collection*, 1776.

deal of pains to efface any marks by which I thought my secret could be traced before the conclusion, when I relied on it with the same hope of producing effect, with which the Irish post-boy is said to reserve a "trot for the avenue."

I took uncommon pains to verify the accuracy of the local circumstances of this story. I recollect, in particular, that to ascertain whether I was telling a probable tale, I went into Perthshire, to see whether King James could actually have ridden from the banks of Loch Vennachar to Stirling Castle within the time supposed in the Poem, and had the pleasure to satisfy myself that it was quite practicable.

After a considerable delay, *The Lady of the Lake* appeared in May 1810; and its success was certainly so extraordinary as to induce me for the moment to conclude that I had at last fixed a nail in the proverbially inconstant wheel of Fortune, whose stability in behalf of an individual who had so boldly courted her favours for three successive times, had not as yet been shaken. I had attained, perhaps, that degree of public reputation at which prudence, or certainly timidity, would have made a halt, and discontinued efforts by which I was far more likely to diminish my fame than to increase it. But, as the celebrated John Wilkes is said to have explained to his late Majesty, that he himself, amid his full tide of popularity, was never a Wilkite, so I can, with honest truth, exculpate myself from having been at any time a partisan of my own poetry, even when it was in the highest fashion with the million. It must not be supposed that I was either so ungrateful, or so superabundantly candid, as to despise or scorn the value of those whose voice had elevated me so much higher than my own opinion told me I deserved. I felt, on the contrary, the more grateful to the public, as receiving that from partiality to me, which I could not have claimed from merit; and I endeavoured to deserve the partiality, by continuing such exertions as I was capable of for their amusement.

It may be that I did not, in this continued course of scribbling, consult either the interest of the public or my own. But the former had effectual means of defending themselves, and could, by their coldness, sufficiently check any approach to intrusion; and for myself, I had now for several years dedicated my hours so much to literary labour, that I should have felt difficulty in employing myself otherwise; and so, like Dogberry, I generously bestowed all my tediousness on the public, comforting myself with the reflection, that if posterity should think me undeserving of the favour with which I was regarded by my contemporaries, "they could not but say I *had* the crown," and