



Scott for Schools: Background information for Teachers

Why is Walter Scott important?

When someone thinks about Scotland's most influential writers, they are likely to think of someone like Robert Burns or Jackie Kay. However, 200 years ago, Walter Scott was a cultural and literary powerhouse whose writings about Scotland impacted the world. His influence was not just outside of Scotland, though: the Scott monument in Edinburgh, and Waverley railway station (named after his novels), are testament to his popularity within Scotland.

Scott's main legacy, however, was literary: he was instrumental in the development of poems and novels over the nineteenth century and beyond. His long narrative poems were international bestsellers and were an important part of the Romantic movement. His move to novel-writing heralded an innovative change in how fictional history was written. Scott often chose an ordinary person as his hero or heroine, placing them in the middle of historical struggles. He could thus present different sides of a conflict through the eyes of someone stuck in the middle who readers could relate to. I am sure you can think of many examples of novels or films today that use this same technique – they all owe their existence to Scott's trailblazing approach.

Scott fell out of favour in the twentieth century. His style was unpalatable to the Modernists and his previous popularity made him seem old fashioned to a new generation. But his relevance remains – his image of Scotland is still popular, his innovations in literature are still influential, and his presence can be seen in place names and monuments across the country and around the world. Recently, readers have begun to read his work afresh, and there is a subsequent growing appreciation of his work. The themes he deals with such as the way in which ordinary people suffer as a consequence of conflict, the marginalisation of certain groups from society, and the positioning of conflict between individual and collective identity are still very relevant today.



Who was Walter Scott?

Scott was born in 1771 and died in 1832 – a turbulent and significant historical period. It was during Scott's life that industrialisation and urbanisation began to take hold in the UK. There were significant developments (Scott's house, Abbotsford, was one of the first to have gas lighting, for example), but also troubles and uncertainty. He lived through the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars – Scott was a young man when Marie Antoinette lost her head. He also lived during the Regency period and was part of the Romantic movement in literature; this means his contemporaries included some of Britain's greatest writers such as Jane Austen and William Wordsworth. Overseas, Britain was engaged in colonialisation, and at home, many people struggled with the vast social changes that were occurring. The Peterloo Massacre, for example, when government soldiers killed and injured protestors, happened during Scott's life. Many of the concerns that plague us were also of great concern to Scott and his contemporaries – whereas we might be worried about artificial intelligence taking creative jobs, for example, Scott jokingly wrote about novels being written by steam power.

During this turbulent period, Scott lived an interesting life.



Walter Scott's Life

Scott was born in Edinburgh in 1771. His grandfather was a sheep farmer and his father was a lawyer. When still an infant, Scott contracted polio which left him with one leg shorter than the other. In addition to causing this physical disability, Scott's brush with polio had another profound impact on his life: he was sent to live with relatives in Sandyknowe, near Smailholm Tower, in the Scottish Borders. At this time, he heard ballads and stories from his grandmother and aunt, which left him with a love for literature and the fantastic.

His education was also influenced by the Enlightenment – a movement that promoted logic and evidence-based research. He attended school in Edinburgh and Kelso, then matriculated at Edinburgh University. He studied for the Bar exam and began a career in law, being admitted to the Faculty of Advocates in 1792. In 1799 he was appointed the Sheriff-Depute of Selkirkshire. Walter Scott's courtroom in Selkirk is now a museum about him. He was appointed one of the Principal Clerks to the Court Session in 1806. He was secretary to the Parliamentary Commission to Inquire into the Administration of Justice in Scotland between 1808 and 1810. He remained active in his legal career throughout his life.

Scott's fame, however, is due to his literary achievements. His literary career started in 1796 when he anonymously published translations of German texts. In 1802, he published a collection of ballads that he had collected on trips to the Scottish Border. This was called *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. He also began working as a reviewer and an editor.

He won fame after the publication of a long narrative poem, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805). He quickly followed this up with other poems, including *Marmion* (1808) and *The Lady of the Lake* (1810). These were incredibly popular, and Scott became well-known around the world. He also began corresponding with other members of the literati, including Byron. In 1814, he changed direction when he anonymously published his first novel, *Waverley*. This novel followed the adventures of a young Englishman who travelled first to the Lowlands and then to the Highlands during the time of the Jacobite uprising. For many of Scott's readers, this was their first insight into the pre-Act-of-Proscription Highlands. He followed this up with many other novels, sometimes even publishing more than one novel in a year! Most of his novels were set in the past, and The Author of *Waverley* (as he was known) was soon recognised as innovating a new way to write about history.



Scott continued writing other types of literature, however, even as his novels brought him fame and fortune. His other writings included non-fiction, such as his book of Scottish history for children, *Tales of a Grandfather*, and his biographical *The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte*. He also kept a journal and wrote letters to lots of people. His journal and his letters can still be read today.

Scott's personal life had a number of ups and downs. Although he made a huge fortune from his writing, he also struggled with money, finding himself at the wrong end of more than one financial crash. The most significant of these happened near the end of his life. In 1826, a recession bankrupted Scott's publishers and printers. He took on the debts of both companies, which, when combined with his personal debts, left him owing over £126,000 – a huge sum of money for that time. He strove to write faster so as to get enough money to repay these debts; his work completed this mission after his death. His personal life was more than just financial, though. After an early disappointment in love, he married Charlotte Carpenter in 1797, and the couple had four children who survived to adulthood: Walter, Charlotte Sophia, Anne, and Charles. He built Abbotsford, a grand house for himself in the Borders, where he lived with his family and entertained many guests. He also had adventures in his life. He was part of a group that found the missing Scottish crown jewels, he campaigned to save the Scottish banking system, and he arranged the visit of George IV to Edinburgh – the first time a monarch had visited Scotland in well over a hundred years. By making all the men wear kilts for a key event during this visit, Scott popularised a fashion that has become synonymous with Scotland ever since. At the end of his life, Scott suffered from a series of strokes.

Most of Scott's books degraded over time, as his editors and copyists introduced errors, and mistakes crept in at the printing stage. At the end of his life, Scott released a new edition of all his poetry and novels. This is called the *Magnum Opus*. Scott added paratextual material but did not edit the mistakes that had accumulated over the years. For almost two centuries, all subsequent editions were based on this error-riddled edition, which may have contributed to Scott's declining popularity. The recent Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels restored the novels to Scott's original intention – a process that took multiple years. Professor Lumsden of the University of Aberdeen's Walter Scott Research Centre was recently awarded funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council to produce scholarly editions of Walter Scott's poetry. In addition to producing these editions, the Centre works closely with Abbotsford, Scott's home in the Borders, to connect the public with Walter Scott and his work.

Scott was an interesting human who lived a complicated and full life. But his value for pupils lies in his influence on Scottish culture and his contributions to literature. This resource uses his poems as a springboard to help pupils develop the skills outlined in the Curriculum for Excellence.