

Knowing the 'Great Unknown'



During the Christmas period of 1824–25 Hall described Sir Walter Scott in his new home at Abbotsford in intimate detail. R. Westall, ARA, engr. E. Findon.

By the autumn of 1824 the grand mansion of Abbotsford near Melrose – Sir Walter Scott’s countryseat – was now finally finished. Here he lived in the style of a laird, ‘visited by the old nobility whom he loved, by statesmen, squires, judges, diplomats, antiquaries, authors and celebrities from Britain, Europe, and America.’¹ It is difficult now, perhaps when his works have become somewhat unfashionable, to appreciate the international fame of this outstanding and hospitable Scottish author. The largest party ever accommodated at his splendid new home was held at Christmas of that year. Referring to Hall’s journal for that time, J.G. Lockhart (Scott’s future son-in-law and his first biographer), declares of Scott that he ‘was never subject to sharper observation than that of his ingenious friend Captain Basil Hall’, whose writing provides one of the most important and intimate pictures of the ‘Great Unknown’ – a popular reference to the ‘mystery’ surrounding the authorship of the hugely successful Waverley novels.



The study at Abbotsford where Scott's famous Waverley novels were written. Edinburgh City Libraries.

Hall kept a very detailed journal of his time over the festive season at Abbotsford in the course of two separate visits. From this Scott's biographer J.G. Lockhart extracted copiously in his *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott*.

Abbotsford, December 29, 1824

This morning my brother James and I set out from Edinburgh in the Blucher coach at eight o'clock, and although we heard of snowstorms in the hills, we bowled along without the smallest impediment ... we arrived in good time – and found several other guests at dinner ... The public rooms are lighted with oil-gas in a style of extraordinary splendour. The passages, also, and the bedrooms, are lighted in a similar manner. The whole establishment is on the same footing – I mean the attendance and entertainment – all is in good order, and an air of punctuality and method, without any waste or ostentation, pervades everything. Every one seems at his ease; and although I have been in some big houses in my time, amongst good folks who studied these sort of points not a little, I don't remember to have anywhere met with things better managed in all respects.

Had I a hundred pens, each of which at the same time could write separately down an anecdote, I could not hope to record one half of those which our host, to use Spenser's expression, 'welled out always'. To write down one or two, or one or two dozen, would serve no purpose, as they were all appropriate to the moment, and were told with a tone,

gesture, and look, suited exactly to the circumstances, but which is of course impossible in the least degree to describe.

December 30

This morning Major Stisted, my brother, and I accompanied Sir Walter Scott on a walk over his grounds, a distance of five or six miles. He led us through his plantations, which are in all stages of advancement, and entertained us all the way with an endless string of anecdotes, more or less characteristic of the scenes we were passing through. Occasionally he repeated snatches of song, sometimes a whole ballad, and at other times he planted his staff in the ground and related some tale to us, which, though not in verse, came like a stream of poetry from his lips. Thus, about the middle of our walk, we had first to cross, and then to wind down the banks of the Huntly-burn, the scene of old Thomas the Rhymer's interview with the Queen of the Fairies. Before entering this little glen, he detained us on the heath above till he had related the whole of that romantic story, so that by the time we descended the path, our imaginations were so worked upon by the wild nature of the fiction, and still more by the animation of the narrator, that we felt ourselves treading on classical ground; and though the day was cold, the path muddy and scarcely passable, owing to the late floods, and the trees all bare, yet I do not remember ever to have seen any place so interesting as the skill of this mighty magician had rendered the narrow ravine, which in any other company would have seemed insignificant.

Hall noted the contrast between Scott's well-pruned groves with hardwood trees shooting up under the shelter of firs and the choked and ragged stand, all scraggy stems and stunted growth, belonging to an indolent neighbour. He then remarked that it must be interesting to be engaged in planting. 'Interesting!' Scott cried, 'You have no idea of the exquisite delight of a planter – he is like a painter laying on his colours ... I look back to the time when there was not a tree here, only bare heath.' Scott elaborates the pleasures of forestry, comparing it very favourably with farming, which involved wrangling 'with farmers about prices, and to be constantly at the mercy of the seasons'.

Anywhere which Hall mentioned on this inspirational walk, Scott had an anecdote or story concerning it. One related to the finding of the etymology of a particular *cleuch* (ravine) and 'enchanted with the discovery he once woke his wife from sleep – to her considerable displeasure – to inform her of this new literary find, which she could not care less about'. He turned to Hall: 'Now, don't you understand this? Have you not sometimes on board your ship hit upon something which delighted you, so that you could not rest till you had got hold of some one down whose throat you might cram it – some stupid dolt of a lieutenant, or some gaping midshipman, on whom in point of fact it was totally thrown away?'²² It was hardly a flattering reflection on his – though far from intellectual – not unintelligent wife.

Hall continues:

Over all, too, there was breathed an air of benignity and good will to all men, which was no less striking than the eloquence and point of his narrations. The manner in which he spoke of his neighbours, and of distant persons of whose conduct he disapproved, was all in the same spirit. He did not cloak their faults – he spoke out manfully in contempt

of what was wrong; but this was always accompanied by some kindly observation, some reservation in favour of the good they possessed.

Nowhere was this more evident than when in a walk early in the New Year, he confided to Hall his views about Lord Byron, with whom he had spent ‘Many, many a pleasant hour’, but whom he described as ‘being a man of real goodness of heart, and the kindest and best feelings, miserably thrown away by his foolish contempt of public opinion ... he has had no justice done him.’³

Later Hall was to remark that he did not want to give a false impression of Scott as having nothing but goodness and forbearance, as Sir Walter describes to him a conniving father in a court case against his daughter, that he would have gladly have kicked the villain through a window and into the Tweed, were it not for the fact that the river would be polluted as a result.⁴

Hall says, ‘In the evening we had a great feast indeed’ and then goes on to describe Scott holding forth with a rendering of the narrative poem *Christabel* and again Thomas the Rhymer’s adventures with the Queen of the Fairies, interspersed with many other stories and anecdote and the company later joining in the singing of many old Border ballads, accompanied by the harp and piano. This would have been the lowland – and somewhat upmarket – equivalent of the Highland *ceilidh* but with the important difference that Scott acted indisputably as a Master of Ceremonies – something unknown north of the Highland Line.

31 December 1824 – On the last day of the year, Hall muses on how ‘keeping up old holidays by bonfires and merriment’ appears to be decreasing, while suggesting that this may have to do as much with older folks having less relish for these than the younger generation actually changing the habits of their elders: ‘I confess, for my part, that your Christmas and New-year’s parties seem generally dull’, claiming that this may be because they are ritualistic or that the company may be ill-assorted. However, Hall entered into the spirit of the occasion: ‘As my heart was light and unloaded with any care, I exerted myself to carry through the ponderous evening – ponderous only because it was set apart to be light and gay.’ Hall admitted, ‘I danced reels like a madman, snapped my fingers, and halloed with the best of them, flirted with the young ladies ... and with the elder ones ... talked and laughed finely’.

But Hall objected to being obliged to join in dancing, singing or playing games when he would have preferred to have been left alone. Supper ended just at midnight, ‘and as the clock was striking twelve, we all stood up, after drinking a hearty bumper to the old year’ and with linked hands ‘joined chorus’ in a song led by Sir Adam Ferguson – ‘a worthy knight, possessed of infinite drollery. Then followed other toasts of a loyal description, and then a song, a good red-hot Jacobite song to the King – a ditty which, a century ago, might have cost the company their heads, or at least their hands.’⁵ But Hall notes how even Sir Walter could not prevent the party becoming dull and soporific, confirming in Hall’s mind the pointlessness of such enforced jollity on set occasions.

1 January 1825 – Hall describes how on the previous day being Hogmany ‘there was a constant procession of *Guisards* – i.e. boys dressed up in fantastic caps, with their shirts over their jackets, and with wooden swords’ to perform an old mummer play. Scott liked to encourage these old ceremonies and gave out the obligatory penny (amounting to 70

pennies) and an oatcake to each. Hall then goes into some detail about the benefits of Scott's careful silviculture, which in thinnings alone now provided a handsome profit for him. This detail is symptomatic of Hall's perceptive observation of matters which are not necessarily within his own field.⁶

2 January 1825 – 'At breakfast today we had, as usual, some 150 stories – God knows how they came in, but he is, in the matter of anecdote, what Hudibras was in figures of speech ... his mouth he cannot open without something worth hearing – and all so simply, good-naturedly, and naturally!' To counteract the impression that Scott might be inclined to dominate a company with his endless stories, Hall reveals later that 'no one takes more delight in the stories of others than he does, or who seems less desirous of occupying the ears of the company ... or any wish to excel the last speaker.' Scott also let the company know that he had been reluctantly forced to put a stop to the crowds of casual tourists who descended on Abbotsford – up to 16 parties a day, some of whom forced their way in, touching objects and generally making a nuisance of themselves.⁷

3 January 1825 – 'As my brother James was obliged to return to Edinburgh, and I thought that I had stayed long enough, we set out from Abbotsford after luncheon, very reluctantly, for the party had grown upon our esteem very much, and had lately been augmented by the arrival from England of Mr. Lockhart, whom I wished to get acquainted with, and of Captain Scott, the poet's eldest son ... The family urged me very much to stay, and I could only get away by making a promise to return for their little dance on Friday evening.' Hall was to get very much better acquainted with Lockhart (who became famous largely as a result of his subsequent biography of Scott) as a contributor to the influential *Quarterly Review* of which Lockhart was the editor for a number of years, and as Scott's future son-in-law.⁸

7 January 1825 – the following weekend Hall returned to Abbotsford with his sister Fanny. 'In the evening there was a dance in honour of Sir Walter Scott's eldest son, who had recently come from Sandhurst College, after having passed through some military examinations with great credit. We had a great clan of Scotts. There were no less than nine Scotts of Harden and ten of other families. There were others besides from the neighbourhood – at least half a dozen Fergusons, with the jolly Sir Adam at their head – Lady Ferguson, her niece Miss Jobson, the pretty heiress of Lochore – etc. etc. etc. The evening passed very merrily, with much spirited dancing; and the supper was extremely cheerful, and quite superior to that of Hogmany.' What seems to have escaped Hall – somewhat surprisingly – is that an important reason for the party was the engagement of Scott's soldier son, Walter, to the 'pretty heiress' (as the guest of honour) which suggests that although Hall was an honoured guest and a friend, he was not part of Scott's most intimate family circle.⁹ In February, Scott was to write to his sister-in-law, Mrs Thomas Scott: 'Our young folks are wedded on the 3rd ... my kindest love to Anne and Eliza. As she has lost Captain Basil [on the latter's engagement to Margaret Hunter] I intend to send her a gingerbread captain with a fine gilt sword, if he should cost me sixpence; I don't mind expense. He should be a Captain of the Navy, too.'¹⁰

8 January 1825 – Hall and Fanny went for a walk with Scott, when the latter told him how his estate manager, Tom Purdie, had come to appreciate the beauties of landscape. The fact that Hall was able to retell Purdie's comments in broad Scots indicates that, notwithstanding his world-wide travels, he had lost none of his familiarity with his

native tongue. Again Hall was impressed by how Scott could fit his stories to the location and landscape as much by tone of voice and wording. He also told Hall about his attitude towards locals crossing his land: ‘Nothing on earth would induce me to put up boards threatening prosecution’ or telling them to ‘beware of man-traps and spring-guns ... and I will venture to say that not one of my young trees has ever been cut, nor a fence trodden down.’¹¹

The branches thinned from his woods he had collected in piles to be sold cheaply for firewood to his poor neighbours. ‘I am perfectly certain,’ he told Hall, ‘they are more grateful to me ... than if I were to give them ten times the quantity for nothing. Every shilling collected in this and other similar manners, goes to a fund which pays the doctor for his attendance on them when they are sick; and this is my notion of charity.’¹² But Hall notes that Scott has no time for what he calls ‘meddling charity’, which undermines self respect and independence: ‘let them enjoy in their quiet way their dish of porridge, and their potatoes and herrings, or whatever it may be.’

He also revealed, having ascertained that Hall ‘did not find shooting in particular at all amusing’, that he now preferred to observe birds than to shoot them, and was never ‘reconciled to the cruelty of the affair’ – a very modern attitude. The exchange prompted both men to reminisce about boyhood cruelties which they had unwittingly inflicted on animals and which had greatly affected them ever since – another indication of the intimacy between the two friends.

In a way which no other writer on Scott had done, Hall reveals much of the man’s character by intimate family detail, for example of how Scott took his place at table wherever one was available – and not necessarily at the head or foot, as might be expected of the head of his family – in a perfectly natural way. Hall heard how he achieved his objects with regard to enhancement of land outside his boundaries (to the aesthetic benefit of his own) by keeping good relations with his neighbours and being prepared to compromise and to allow time to take its course, without forcing issues.¹³

Fanny in a letter to her sister Katherine was ecstatic about her visit:

This has been a heavenly day. I mean the weather, and a walk under any circumstances would have been delightful but immediately after leaving town it was truly delicious ... Miss Scott thought nothing of offering up her room for me for one night. Sir Walter gave me a very pleasant welcome to his house. I have always been fancying it a dream, it seems so strange and unlikely that I should really be under the roof of his house [referring to a complement of 41 – of whom 23 slept in the house – she said they continued to dance until three o’clock]. In the course of our walk, yesterday, & in the evening I often saw symptoms of the good nature & kind disposition of our host, very frequently he brings in lines of poetry, which is so much in character, and so well done that it would satisfy you.¹⁴

10 January 1825 – Hall describes Scott as a most convivial man, despite his official duties at court, and the business of his house and estate and many wondered how he could possibly have time to write so prolifically. However, this did not puzzle Hall when he observed the author’s habits. Scott apparently never appeared before ten in the morning, and throughout the day he would absent himself for the occasional hour. His

thought came spontaneously and 'he composes his works just as fast as he can write. He never corrects the press, or if he does so at all, it is very slightly – and in general his works come before the public just as they are written.'¹⁵ Hall then goes on to make a calculation, based on the number of pages and letters in one of Scott's novels compared to his own rate of writing his journal while at Abbotsford, and incidentally reveals his own method:

I was in company all day and all evening till a late hour – apparently the least occupied of the party; and I will venture to say, not absent from the drawing room one quarter of the time that the Unknown was. I was always down to breakfast before anyone else ... always among the very last to go to bed – in short, I would have set the acutest observer at defiance to have discovered when I wrote this Journal – and yet it is written, honestly and fairly, day by day ... No mortal in Abbotsford-house ever learned that I kept a Journal.

In this he was quite wrong, for Lockhart states, 'Sir Walter was surprised, and a little annoyed on observing that the Captain kept a note-book on his knee, while at table, but made no remark? Surely Hall would have been mortified if he had known, but one suspects he had quite a thick skin in these matters.'¹⁶

Hall then suggests that even without the incentive of the financial return which Scott would receive for one of his novels, his own journal has cost as much time as for example, Scott's *Kenilworth* (approximately the same length). His calculation of Scott's progress was verified subsequently in the time it took him to write his novel *The Betrothed*, with which he had been struggling.¹⁷ He raises the question of the real authorship of the Waverley Novels, which was much debated at the time. Hall is in no doubt about this, but in answer to the question therefore of why Scott made a mystery of this, says:

This is easily answered – it saves him completely from a world of flattery and trouble, which he sincerely detests. He never reads the criticisms of his books ... Praise gives him no pleasure – and censure annoys him. He is fully satisfied to accept the intense avidity with which his novels are read – the enormous and continued sale of his works, as a sufficient commendation of them (Note 25) ... he enjoys all the profits – and he escapes all worry about the matter.¹⁸

It would appear that Hall had at an early stage penetrated the 'mystery' surrounding the authorship of the Waverley Novels, for in a letter to Scott of 25 July 1824, Lady Abercorn (Note 26) writes: 'Basil Hall, whom I like much and [who] has published a book which of course you have read on South America, dined here a few days ago and

Notes

- 25 Thomas Carlyle was far less generous in his estimate of Scott in this respect when he remarks acidly: 'he has none of the weariness of royalty, yet all the praise, and the satisfaction of hearing it with his own ears ... to the general imagination the 'Author of Waverley' was like some living mythological personage, and ranked among the chief wonders of the world.'²⁷
- 26 Anne Jean, the Marchioness of Abercorn, was the daughter of the second Earl of Arran and was a frequent correspondent and supporter of Scott.

he told me he knew you wrote these Novels to a certainty, as he had it from one or two people to whom you had told it'¹⁹ Scott wrote on 1 August: 'I can easily conceive your Ladyship must have been amused with Basil Hall, and struck with the very direct and almost abrupt mode in which he always prosecuted his object of enquiry. He has written an excellent book full of practical good sense and sound views, and I admire how as a traveller he has said so much about the manners of the people, yet avoided any breach of the confidence of private society, upon which travellers think themselves entitled to trample merely because they are travellers.'²⁰

Hall then occupies several pages of his journal in a paean of praise for Scott – both as an author and as a person – and more particularly his ability to be natural and simple, while simultaneously being generous in his attitudes towards others.²¹ He was apparently also very philosophical about his later financial ruin, as recorded by Hall:

"It occurs to me," I [Hall] observed, "that people are apt to make too much fuss about the loss of fortune, which is one of the smallest of the great evils of life, and ought to be among the most tolerable."

"Do you call it a small misfortune to be ruined in money-matters" he [Scott] asked.

"It is not so painful, at all events, as the loss of friends"

"I grant that," he said.

"As the loss of character?"

"True again."

"As the loss of health?"

"Aye, there you have me," he muttered to himself, in a tone so melancholy that I wished I had not spoken.

"What is the loss of fortune to the loss of peace of mind?" I continued.

"In short," said he playfully, "you will make it out that there is no harm in a man's being plunged over-head-and-ears in a debt he cannot remove."

"Much depends, I think, on how it was incurred, and what efforts are made to redeem it – at least, if the sufferer be a rightminded man."

"I hope it does," he said, cheerfully and firmly.²²

This exchange on such a profound issue is another indication of the closeness between the two friends. Hall was not a fair-weather friend and recorded a visit to Scott when he was in much-reduced circumstances:

A hundred and fifty years hence, when his works have become old classical authorities, it may interest some fervent lover of his writings to know what this great genius was about on Saturday the 10th of June 1826 – five months after the total ruin of his pecuniary fortunes, and twenty-six days after the death of his wife. In the days of his good luck he used to live at No. 39 North Castle Street, in a house befitting a rich baronet; but on reaching the door, I found the plate on it covered with rust (so soon is glory obscured), the window shuttered up, dusty and comfortless; and from the side of one projected a board, with this inscription, 'To Sell'; the stairs were unwashed, and not a footmark told of the ancient hospitality which reigned within ... I turned my head ... and enquiring at the clubs in Prince's Street, learned that he now resided in St. David's Street, No. 6. I was rather glad to recognise my old friend the Abbotsford butler, who answered the

door ... at the top of the stair we saw a small tray, with a single plate and glasses for one solitary person's dinner. Some months ago Sir Walter was surrounded by his family, and wherever he moved, his headquarters were the focus of fashion. Travellers from all nations crowded round ... Lady and Miss Scott were his constant companions; the Lockharts were his neighbours both in town and in Roxburghshire; his eldest son was his frequent guest ... there was not any man so attended.

Thus Hall, very economically and poignantly, describes the descent of one of 'the mighty who had fallen' but without in any way seeming to moralise and goes on to predict his resurrection:

The distinction between man and the rest of the living creation, certainly, is in nothing more remarkable than in the power which possesses over them, of turning to varied account the means with which the world is stocked ... I venture to predict that our Crusoe will cultivate his own island, and build himself a bark in which, in the process of time, he will sail back to his friends and fortune in greater triumph than if he had never been driven among the breakers.

Hall, with his brother James, then relates his meeting with Scott in intimate terms, describing the author as not being unduly bowed down under his troubles, and after a time 'he began conversing in his usual style ... after sitting a quarter of an hour, we came away, well pleased to see our friend quite unbroken in spirit'.²³ This is one of the best examples of Hall's writing – rarely matched by others, simply and sympathetically, of this critical time in Scott's life.

Hall himself was genuinely flattered that Lockhart had devoted a whole chapter of his *Memoirs* to Hall's Journal (which the latter described as his 'scribble-scrabbles') of his time at Abbotsford over this Christmas and New Year period. Hall is surprisingly honest about this inclusion when he says:

For one minute or so – not more – I felt sorry to have lost hold of a chapter essentially of more value, from its topic, than all of the 150 volumes of ms in my strong box put together – but before the third minute had elapsed, I saw that, considered as a mere matter of profit and puff, the said chapter was a thousand times better placed than it could have been in any work of my own. To be associated with the Great Unknown in familiar intercourse and to be thought by you worthy of being enlisted in describing him, are circumstances which I consider fully worth of all the distinction of all my other productions put together – no great things perhaps – but 'these little things are great, you know, to little men'.²⁴

Lockhart undoubtedly included much of Hall's Journal because he recognised the value of the intimacy of the picture Hall painted of both Scott and of Abbotsford which is not contained anywhere else – and Hall was a very percipient observer.

Early in 1825 the publisher Archibald Constable had mooted to Scott his innovative and hugely ambitious project to publish a cheap monthly magazine which he reckoned would have sales perhaps in the millions. This was to be called *Constable's Miscellany*

with the intention of bringing out Basil Hall's *Voyage to Loo-Choo* as the first number on January 1826. He asked Scott if it would be possible to obtain permission to dedicate the entire new publication to King George IV. The King consented on Scott's recommendation.²⁵ In his letter of 1 October to Scott commenting on Constable's wish to put his books on Loo Choo and South America at the forefront of the *Miscellany*, Hall says:

Constable, the great Leviathan of Book swallowers, has set my pen going again – and I wish very much I could converse with you for five minutes on the subject of this said *Miscellany*, which like a steam engine, is to carry all before it. I am delighted indeed to be in such company – but sometimes a little nervous, too. I shall be most happy to do all I can to assist your part of it.²⁶

References

1. Sultana, 3
2. Lockhart, 1914, Vol IV, 192–5
3. *Ibid.*, 219
4. *Ibid.*, 220–1
5. *Ibid.*, 198–199
6. *Ibid.*, 201
7. *Ibid.*, 204
8. *Ibid.*, 209
9. Lockhart, 1898, Vol 2, 560
10. Douglas, Vol 2, 242
11. Lockhart, 1914, Vol IV, 214–5
12. Johnson, Vol. II, 893
13. Lockhart, 1914, Vol. IV, 217–223
14. Fanny Hall to Katherine Hall, 8th January 1825, Private Collection
15. Lockhart, 1914, Vol. IV, 227
16. Lockhart, 1898, Vol 2, 558
17. Johnson, Vol II, 895
18. Lockhart, 1898, Vol. 2, 229
19. Grierson, Vol. 8, 337n.
20. Douglas, Vol 2, 212 (Note 1)
21. Lockhart, 1914, Vol IV, 227
22. Hall, 1833, 308–9
23. Lockhart, 1898, Vol 8, 331–335
24. Basil Hall to J.G. Lockhart, Vol. X, Dunglass, 20 September 1837, NLS MSS 932
25. Johnson, 942, quoting Grierson (1932–7), Vol IX, 320–7
26. Constable, T. Vol. III, 487–489 & Constable Letter-Book 1829–36, NLS MS. 792