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Sylvia Townsend Warner*

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*(1893–1978)

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Abstract

An essay in which Warner speculates on the character and circumstances of William Hazlitt's wife Sarah (née Stoddart) during the stay in Scotland from April to June 1822 which was necessary for their divorce to be concluded. Warner draws on Sarah's Journal of her travels in Scotland.

Keywords Sylvia Townsend Warner; Sarah Stoddart; William Hazlitt; travel writing; Scotland; divorce.

Editor's note: 'I was happy and amused all day writing at a study of Mrs Hazlitt as she emerges from the critical edition of Liber Amoris,' Warner wrote in her diary on 1 December 1937. Three days later she had completed it: 'Finished Mrs Hazlitt's Divorce and sent it to Cornhill. And I wait to see if my red has dyed through to that respectable consciousness' (Diaries, p. 102). Whether because of its redness, presumably political, or for other reasons, Cornhill Magazine rejected the piece and it has not until now been published.

When Sarah Hazlitt arrived in Scotland on 21 April 1822 she had been married to the essayist William Hazlitt for 14 years but living apart for two. They came to Edinburgh because Scottish law would enable them to finalise their divorce arrangements. William was intensely involved in a passionate, unhappy relationship with Sarah Walker, daughter of his London landlord; he had taken to drink and for a time lost his ability to write. Warner's study, though, is mainly concerned not with William but Sarah Hazlitt, and gives much of its attention to her 'Journal of my Tour to Scotland', her only known writing. This was first published in 1894 in a limited edition of William

Hazlitt's *Liber Amoris* and later discussed in the notes to volume 7 of the centenary edition of Hazlitt's works edited by P.P. Howe (the 'critical edition' to which Warner alludes). The 'Tour' was published again in 1959 as part of *The Journals of Sarah and William Hazlitt*, edited by Willard H. Bonner for the University of Buffalo.

Warner's lively and fair-minded study revisits a moment of cultural history from the point of view of its little-known female protagonist. Bonner's scholarly investigation thoroughly endorses the fresh revisionary conclusions of Warner's occasional study. He points out that history had done less than justice to Sarah – 'It has been convenient to throw Sarah into the shadow, to pass on old assumptions, to retell old denigrating anecdotes' (p. 175) – and argues that we see her in 1822 'threading her way with unusual composure and good sense through the fevered emotional tangle in which she was caught' (p. 172). Like Warner, he finds much to admire in the *Journal* where she recorded her time in Scotland: 'Nearly every page reveals a healthy curiosity and a rather extraordinary zest for her surroundings: physical, artistic, historical, social, and personal' (p. 181).

In the year 1822 a Scots spring was playing its usual tricks, and on May 3rd Mrs Hazlitt wrote in her diary: 'A very cold raw day, and my stomach is still poorly.' On May 9th the diary resumes the tale of bad weather. 'A fast-day. Went to the West Kirk, and heard Mr Gibson preach a sacrament sermon. A tremendously cold and stormy day, and a very rough night. Friday 10th. Cold and stormy, like January; could not go out at all. Saturday 11th. Wind, rain, hail, snow, sleet, and intolerably cold.'

It was melancholy weather for a solitary married lady, in lodgings at 6, South Union Place, Edinburgh, and waiting for the law of Scotland to grant her a divorce.

Readers of the *Liber Amoris* will remember the conversation in which Hazlitt discusses travelling in Italy with Sarah Walker the maidservant.

- Sarah. I have a wish sometimes for travelling abroad...
- Hazlitt. My sweet girl! I will give you the best account I can – unless you would rather go and judge for yourself.
- Sarah. I cannot.
- Hazlitt. Yes, you shall go with me, and you shall go *with honour* – you know what I mean.
- Sarah. You know it is not in your power to take me so.
- Hazlitt. But it soon may be.

In other words, before he could carry one Sarah 'with honour' to Italy Hazlitt would need to visit Scotland with the Sarah he had married thirteen years earlier, in order that she might divorce him there.

In England at this date one could not procure a divorce unless one were rich enough and resolute enough to support the expense and pother of a *crim. con.* plea. Scotland, with its own legal system, offered divorce on easier terms. If the Hazlitts would cross the Tweed; if Mr Hazlitt would then commit an act of adultery; if Mrs Hazlitt would take the Oath *de Calomnia* (recently introduced as a deterrent to collusion), and produce witnesses and a certificate or two, a divorce could be theirs, at the very moderate price of a few months residence and £50.

Sarah Walker was the motive for the Hazlitt divorce; but she was scarcely its first cause. The Hazlitts had agreed to live apart a twelve-month before Sarah, waiting on Hazlitt in his lodgings, paused at the door of his room and gave him that broadside of a glance: *as much as to say, Is he caught?* – and with that glance caught him. Husband and wife, who agreed over so little else, agreed in valuing independence. A divorce would assure it to them, and with a queer business-like amity they laid their plans. Hazlitt went to Scotland at the turn of the year, and when his wife reached Edinburgh in April, 1822, travelling economically by the Leith packet, *Superb*, he had already established the preliminaries.

'And in that during one or all of the days or nights of one or all of the months of January, February, March and the bypast days of the month of April current 1822, the said William Hazlitt, Defender, did cohabit and keep fellowship and company, and had carnal and adulterous intercourse and dealings with a woman of the name of Mary Walker, in a house in James Street, Edinburgh, and also with other women one or more whose names the Private Complainer has not yet learned; and that in the foresaid house in James Street, and in other houses and places in the City of Edinburgh and suburbs thereof, and in other cities, towns, villages, and places yet to the Complainant unknown. In one or all of which, or neighbourhood of the same, the said William Hazlitt visited and cohabited with women one or more known not to be the Complainer, and was seen or known to be in bed with such women one or more, and to be shut up with them privately in a room or room, or other apartments, and to have carnal and adulterous dealings with them. From all which, and from what will be more particularly proved in the course of the action to follow hereon, it will be evident

that the said William Hazlitt, Defender, has been guilty of the crime of Adultery.'

Hazlitt had also found that essential thing, a go-between, by means of whom, and without too much appearance of collusion, the Complainer and the Defender might communicate with each other on any point which might need to be settled between them. *'This Bell,'* he wrote to Sarah Hazlitt, still in London, *'is the very man to negotiate the business between us.'* And when Sarah Hazlitt arrived in Edinburgh Mr Bell was there to welcome her, and take her to Mr Cranstoun the barrister.

At Mr Cranstoun's Mrs Hazlitt's mind was set at rest about that Oath *de Calomnia*. *'Pursuer, being solemnly sworn, kneeling with her right hand on the Holy Evangel, and examined de Calomnia'* could, in the case of Mrs Hazlitt, swear without any risk of perjury and perjury's possible consequences of prosecution and transportation, *'that there had been no concert of collusion between her and the said Defender;'* because, so Mr Cranstoun explained, the adulteries in Scotland were not the first adulteries of which Mrs Hazlitt had to complain. Her scruples, or shall we say, her caution, thus appeased, Mrs Hazlitt went off to find lodgings, and found them in South Union Street.

The winds blew sharp, hail-storms rattled down the grey streets. It might have been expected that Mrs Hazlitt, that injured wife (and a cold May is unsurpassed for quickening a sense of injury), would stay indoors, to meditate her wrongs and to endure the law's delays. But Sarah Hazlitt had a mind that rose above her situation. Hazlitt had spoken to his other Sarah of a tour to Italy. But Scotland too was a country celebrated for being picturesque, and Sarah the First saw no reason why she should not mix business with pleasure and get what entertainment she could out of the trip.

Hazlitt too, for all his turbulent misery, his this-and-that-way starts of passion, had not been above a little sight-seeing. Their separate accounts, hers in her diary, his in letters, of separate sight-seeings during the negotiation of their divorce do something to make clear why both of them sought that divorce with such goodwill.

Here is Sarah.

'I walked to Roslyn Castle. The access to the castle is by a narrow bridge, over a deep natural ravine, the sides of which are solid rock; the ruins are very sequestered, and surrounded by glens and hills, there are many huge fragments, and a range of six low arches, which I take to

have been wine-cellars. A stunted fir-tree grows out of one of the fallen pieces of rock or ruin. The ruins themselves are by no means equal to many others I have seen.'

Here is William.

'I was at Roslin Castle yesterday. It lies low in a rude but sheltered valley, hid from the vulgar gaze, and powerfully reminds one of the old song. The straggling fragments of the russet ruins, suspended smiling and graceful in the air as if they would linger out another century to please the curious beholder, the green larch-trees trembling between with the blue sky and silver clouds, the wild mountain plants starting out here and there, the date of the year on an old low door-way, but still more, the beds of flowers in orderly decay, that seem to have no hand to tend them, but keep up a sort of traditional remembrance of civilisation in former ages, present altogether a delightful and amiable subject for contemplation.'

This is Sarah.

'Arrived at Stirling at half-past six. Walked up to the Castle. It commands an extensive view of the country, and windings of the river, but nothing in my opinion at all to equal the view of itself with the surrounding hills and shores, and the town, from the water, as you approach Stirling. There is a very delightful terrace with seats, round the back of the Castle... the side is steep and woody, and the bottom chiefly occupied with gardeners' gardens, kept still neater than those in the neighbourhood of London.'

This is William.

'I was at Stirling Castle not long ago. It gave me no pleasure. The declivity seemed to me abrupt, not sublime; for in truth I did not shrink back from it with terror. The weather-beaten towers were stiff and formal; the air damp and chill; the river winded its dull, slimy way like a snake along the marshy grounds: and the dim misty tops of Ben Leddi, and the lovely Highlands (woven fantastically of thin air) mocked my embraces and tempted my longing eyes like her, the sole queen and mistress of my thoughts.'

Hazlitt writes as one of the masters of English Flamboyant prose; and Mrs Hazlitt writes like Mrs Hazlitt. Hazlitt sees with the eyes of a lover – that is to say, he sees very little, a shining or shadowy Turner-esque landscape of the emotions; and Mrs Hazlitt sees with the eyes of a house-agent; the six low arches which she takes to have been the wine-cellars, the neatness of nursery gardens, the convenience of seats, the solid rockiness of ravines. But this difference of temperament need not call for divorce. William and Sarah, the Contemplative and the Active, might have toured Scotland in amity if this had been all that was at odds between them. The real disharmony which these parallel passages reveal is, that what William had by nature Sarah must needs try to have by industry. By hook or crook she would be a connoisseur of ruins too, a *feinschmecker* of the picturesque and the poetical. Not a stunted fir-tree should escape her. Romantic parks, crags, cascades – with a trudging attentive appreciation she would be their match, and able to criticise them. *‘The ruins themselves are by no means equal to many others I have seen.’*

But though the pursuit of the Sublime and the Picturesque may be exasperating in its expression that does not mean that the pursuer is to be condemned. And Sarah, if one is not Hazlitt, and married to her, shows herself in her Scottish Diary as an estimable, even an admirable character. Few women of her day, or of any other day, would have beguiled the tedium of waiting about for a divorce in a country where she had no friends, and no acquaintances save those whom the business of the divorce had imposed on her, with so much courage and enterprise. At first she contented herself with excursions around Edinburgh, paying her shilling at Holyrood House, climbing Arthur’s Seat, walking on the Links, and to Leith and Portobello. Then, on May 13th, she set out for a longer exploit. And summed it up, a week later, thus:

<i>Number of miles each day.</i>	
<i>Monday, May 13th</i>	4
<i>Tuesday, May 14th</i>	20
<i>Wednesday, May 15th</i>	32
<i>Thursday, May 16th</i>	27
<i>Friday, May 17th</i>	21
<i>Saturday, May 18th</i>	21
<i>Sunday, May 19th</i>	28
<i>Monday, May 20th</i>	17
	170

As a piece of resolute walking this is notable. Seventeen years earlier in the Campaign of Ulm, the *Grande Armée* made a surprise march from Boulogne to the Upper Rhine. On this march Marmont's detachment did 300 miles in twenty consecutive days. The march of the Campaign of Ulm must be considered to surpass the march of Mrs Hazlitt, though at first sight the figures would seem to be on her side. But militarists will know that it is much harder to move large numbers of men than it is to move a solitary woman. Three hundred consecutive miles is very much more than 130 miles more than 170; fighting men carry a heavier load than Mrs Hazlitt carried, for though she mentions a wise provision of '*rolls, beef, and brandy*' she seems to have carried no change of clothing and certainly carried no arms; and finally, an army marches encumbered by its transport, and a solitary woman does not. Altogether, history is right to remember the march of the *Grande Armée* in 1805 and to ignore the march of Mrs Hazlitt. But let it be said that hers was worthy to be compared with the greater achievement.

She went from Stirling through the Trossachs to Glasgow, and back from Glasgow by Hamilton and Lanark, diversifying her march by clambering into caves, picking up pebbles from '*Ellen's beach,*' and mounting the 272 steps of Dumbarton Castle. Her thoroughness persisted over other obstacles than slippery rocks and steep climbs. At Hamilton, where her intentions on the Palace were thwarted by the fact it was closed for repairs: '*I walked up the old back staircase of the house and wandered about the park.*' The weather gave her scant kindness. '*Immediately on quitting Lanark, I entered on a wide, black, boggy moor, which lasted seventeen miles, with a broiling sun, and not a tree, or the least shade, all the way. I sat down several times on the ground from mere inability to proceed, but was afraid to rest many minutes at a time, as I was so stiff I could scarcely move afterwards.*' And again '*The road proceeded by the side of some inferior lochs and terraced woods, very stony and rough, till you arrive at the mountain, 3262 feet in height; and in crossing the most dreary, swampy, and pathless part of it, a heavy storm came on. There was not the least shelter and the heat in climbing such an ascent, together with the fear of losing myself in such a lonely place, almost overcame me; but I guided myself by the direction of the loch as well as I could, and at last, to my great joy, regained a track.*' No wonder that after this she had '*such a violent cold in my head that I could hardly breathe or look up, and my limbs ached dreadfully, particularly about my right knee, which I had wrenched in getting out of the boat at Inversnaid Ferry.*'

But back in Edinburgh she enjoyed a good wash, changed her clothes, and sat down to filling in her diary. She had returned for the Oath *de Calomnia*; but its taking had been put off, and after a week of visiting lawyers and sauntering about Edinburgh (with a curious detachment and yet with something of a child's thrill at touching pitch, she notes: *'Passed James Street; saw Mrs Knight at the window; a woman of colour, with a white turban cap on'*) Mrs Hazlitt was off again. The wind was so high, the dust so choking, that she thought herself travelling in the desert; and she sprained her ankle, and realised that miles are longer in Scotland than in England; but for all that she went by Kinross, Perth, and Dunkeld *'till I was completely in the heart of the Highlands... a most appalling and dreary eminence, and accorded much more with my previous idea of the Highlands than anything I had before met with, being an interminable labyrinth of bare and desolate hills of an immense height, of various shades of green, but with neither tree nor shrub. I should have been utterly exhausted with fatigue and heat had I not found some mountain springs in my way, and lay down and bathed my face, and drank, and was thankful that God had provided water in the stony rock. These walks always make me more religious and more happy, more sensibly alive to the benevolence of the Creator than any books or church. Nothing here seems contradictory.'*

By Glenalmond and Crieff she reached Stirling, having in five days put one hundred and twelve miles behind her. In Edinburgh once more there was much that seemed contradictory: in particular, Mr Bell.

Till now Mr Bell, that 'very man to negotiate the business', had done tolerably. But to be a go-between is always a taxing trade, and recently Mr Bell's good offices had been strained into administering a dispute about money. The law's delays had exhausted Mrs Hazlitt's purse. *'So here I am, lonely, in a strange place, my quarter's money all gone, and obliged to borrow; instead of having my £37. 10s repaid me, and money in my pocket for present expenses, as Mr Hazlitt repeatedly promised me.'*

Hazlitt, upon application, sent ten pounds. But it seems that Mr Bell revolted against being mixed up with these base financial straits; or possibly, being a prudent man, and a family man, he was disgruntled to discover how poor the Hazlitts were, so poor, and Hazlitt in his obsession with Sarah Walker so inattentive to the importance of being solvent, that the go-between might even become responsible for the litigant's bills. In any case, on June 10th (*'an east wind and cutting cold'*) Mr Bell, being in liquor, fell out with Mrs Hazlitt.

'He told me he believed I meant to get all the money I could from Mr Hazlitt, and cheat him at last; that I was a pitiful, squeezing, paltry creature,

who wanted to oppress and grind a man into the earth, who had not the money to give me, and that he had been advising him to take the steamboat, and leave the law-bills and everything unpaid, and take Sally Walker if he liked her, and go to another country; that if his wife were starving and had but one farthing in the world to buy bread, she would give it him if he wanted it, even away from her children; that she had behaved affectionately and kindly to him, who had treated her much worse than I had been used; and that it was my own fault that Mr Hazlitt could not be happy with me; that he wondered what could ever have attracted him in me; that he thought my face very ugly, with a particularly bad expression.'

Meanwhile Mrs Bell, that model wife, sat by; and it seems that she was quite as devoted as Mr Bell averred, since her only contribution to this scene was to insist that as Mr Bell was bent on seeing Mrs Hazlitt home to her lodgings (*'insulting me all the way'*) her son should go with them, to guide his drunken father back. Edinburgh is a well-ghosted city; but there should be room among the spectres that jostle in its streets for this queer trio, Mr Bell so drunken and furious and Mrs Hazlitt so shocked and sober, and the child trotting beside them, conscientious, responsible, and probably well-versed in experiences of seeing father safe home.

It was not till July 18th that the Hazlitts were unyoked. To the last Sarah kept on walking, though flagging spirits and lack of means hampered her indomitable will to keep herself diverted and to make the most of Scotland. *'I think this walk was about fifteen miles, which I enjoyed much, although I wore a pair of tight shoes which almost crippled me; but I have worn out all the rest, and do not like to buy more here.'*

Her diary for July 18th records her last interview with Mr Bell. Mr Bell had boxed the compass, and was now in a furious temper against Hazlitt. *'Mr Bell set at me as soon as I got in, that Mr Hazlitt had gone off that morning by the steamboat, without even calling or sending a note to him after all the friendship he had shown him, and the service he had done him by taking that infernal Oath; and that now he had got off by the steamboat to avoid his debts, and owing the lawyers £40, and he looked on him as a scamp. He said I was a great fool to have conceded to his wish for a divorce, but that now it was done, and he thought I had better get some rich Scots lord, and marry here. He said I must needs marry, and I told him I saw no such necessity.'*

But though fickle to Hazlitt Mr Bell was still constant to Mrs Bell. *'She came out of the kitchen from pie-making, and said she was ashamed to appear; upon which Bell remarked that she was a virtuous good woman, and an honour to her husband and her sex; that he would not eat a pie that his*

wife did not make. It is quite disgusting' (continues Mrs Hazlitt in one of her rare departures from pure narrative) *'to hear such blarney, hypocrisy, lies and impudence; and I set off, though a heavy thunderstorm was coming on, which soon burst in a most tremendous manner.'*

Did this self-controlled and weatherbeaten woman give a glance of envy towards that thunderstorm which could *'burst in a most tremendous manner'*? Her Diary, so candid, so austere verbatim, records actions, not sentiments. *'I took shelter in the panorama of the Bay of Naples, till it abated.'*

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