his habits of mind and work. We learn from himself the secret—as much at least as could be ascribed to definite ex­traneous accident—of the “ extempore speed ” in romantic composition against which Carlyle protested in his famous review of Lockhart’s *Life of Scott. @@1* The indignant critic assumed that Scott wrote “ without preparation ” ; Scott himself, as if he had foreseen this cavil, is at pains to show that the preparation began with his boyhood, almost with his infancy. The current legend when Carlyle wrote his essay was that as a boy Scott had been a dunce and an idler. With a characteristically conscientious desire not to set a bad example, the autobiographer solemnly declares that he was neither a dunce nor an idler, and explains how the misunderstanding arose. His health in boyhood was uncertain ; @@2 he was consequently irregular in his attend­ance at school, never became exact in his knowledge of Latin syntax, and was so belated in beginning Greek that out of bravado he resolved not to learn it at all.

Left very much to himself throughout his boyhood in the matter of reading, so quick, lively, excitable, and un­certain in health that it was considered dangerous to press him and prudent rather to keep him back, Scott began at a very early age to accumulate the romantic lore of which he afterwards made such splendid use. As a child he seems to have been an eager and interested listener and a great favourite with his elders, apparently having even then the same engaging charm that made him so much beloved as a man. Chance threw him in the way of many who were willing to indulge his delight in stories and ballads. Not only his own relatives—the old women at his grandfather’s farm at Sandyknowe, his aunt, under whose charge he was sent to Bath for a year, his mother—took an interest in the precocious boy’s ques­tions, told him tales of Jacobites and Border worthies of his own and other clans, but casual friends of the family —such as the military veteran at Prestonpans, old Dr Blacklock the blind poet, Home the author of *Douglas,* Adam Ferguson the martial historian of the Roman republic—helped forward his education in the direction in which the bent of his genius lay. At the age of six

he was able to define himself as “a virtuoso,” “one who wishes to and will know everything.” At ten his collec­tion of chap-books and ballads had reached several volumes, and he was a connoisseur in various readings. Thus he took to the High School, Edinburgh, when he was strong enough to be put in regular attendance, an unusual store of miscellaneous knowledge and an unusually quickened intelligence, so that his master “ pronounced that, though many of his schoolfellows understood the Latin better, *Gualterus Scott* was behind few in following and enjoying the author’s meaning.”

Throughout his school days and afterwards when he was apprenticed to his father, attended university classes, read for the bar, took part in academical and professional debating societies, Scott steadily and ardently pursued his own favourite studies. His reading in romance and history was really study, and not merely the indulgence of an ordinary schoolboy’s promiscuous appetite for excit­ing literature. In fact, even as a schoolboy he special­ized. He followed the line of overpowering inclination ; and even then, as he frankly tells us, “fame was the spur.” He acquired a reputation among his schoolfellows for out-of-the-way knowledge, and also for story-telling, and he worked hard to maintain this character, which compensated to his ambitious spirit his indifferent distinc­tion in ordinary school-work. The youthful “virtuoso,” though he read ten times the usual allowance of novels from the circulating library, was carried by his enthusiasm into fields much less generally attractive. He was still a schoolboy when he mastered French sufficiently well to read through collections of old French romances, and not more than fifteen when, attracted by translations to Italian romantic literature, he learnt the language in order to read Dante and Ariosto in the original. This willingness to face dry work in the pursuit of romantic reading affords a measure of the strength of Scott’s passion. In one of the literary parties brought together to lionize Burns, when the peasant poet visited Edinburgh, the boy of fifteen was the only member of the company who could tell the source of some lines affixed to a picture that had attracted the poet’s attention,—a slight but significant evidence both of the width of his reading and of the tenacity of his memory. The same thoroughness appears in another little circumstance. He took an interest in Scottish family history and genealogy, but, not content with the ordinary sources, he ransacked the MSS. preserved in the Advocates’ Library. By the time he was one and twenty he had acquired such a reputation for his skill in deciphering old manuscripts that his assistance was sought by professional antiquaries.

This early, assiduous, unintermittent study was the main secret, over and above his natural gifts, of Scott’s extempore speed and fertility when at last he found forms into which to pour his vast accumulation of historical and romantic lore. He was, as he said himself, “like an ignorant gamester who keeps up a good hand till he knows how to play it.” That he had vague thoughts from a much earlier period than is commonly supposed of playing the hand some day is extremely probable, if, as he tells us, the idea of writing romances first occurred to him when he read Cervantes in the original. This was long before he was out of his teens ; and, if we add that his leading idea in his first novel was to depict a Jacobitic Don Quixote, we can see that there was probably a long interval between the first conception of *Waverley* and the ultimate completion.

Scott’s preparation for painting the life of past times was probably much less unconsciously such than his equally thorough preparation for acting as the painter of Scottish manners and character in all grades of society. With all

@@@1 Latest edition in 10 vols. fcap. 8vo, Edinburgh, 1847-48.

@@@2 Dr Charles Creighton supplies us with the following medical note

on Scott’s early illness :—“ Scott’s lameness was owing to an arrest of growth in the right leg in infancy. When he was eighteen months old he had a feverish attack lasting three days, at the end of which time it was found that he ‘had lost the power of his right leg,’—*i.e.,* the child instinctively declined to move the ailing member. The malady was a swelling at the ankle, and either consisted in or gave rise to arrest of the bone-forming function along the growing line of cartilage which connects the lower epiphysis of each of the two leg-bones with its shaft. In his fourth year, when he had otherwise recovered, the leg remained ‘much shrunk and contracted.’ The limb would have been blighted very much more if the arrest of growth had taken place at the upper epiphysis of the tibia or the lower epiphysis of the femur. The narrowness and peculiar depth of Scott’s head point to some more general congenital error of bone-making allied to rickets but certainly not the same as that malady. The vault of the skull is the typical ‘ scaphoid ’ or boat-shaped formation, due to premature union of the two parietal bones along the sagittal suture. When the bones of the cranium are universally affected with that arrest of growth along their formative edges, the sutures become prematurely fixed and effaced, so that the brain-case cannot expand in any direction to accommodate the growing brain. This universal synostosis of the cranial bones is what occurs in the case of microcephalous idiots. It happened to me to show to an eminent French anthropologist a specimen of a miniature or micro- cephalic skull preserved in the Cambridge museum of anatomy ; the French *savant,* holding up the skull and pointing to the ‘ scaphoid ’ vault of the crown and the effaced sagittal suture, exclaimed ‘ Voilà Walter Scott ! ’ Scott had fortunately escaped the early closure or arrest of growth at other cranial sutures than the sagittal, so that the growing brain could make room for itself by forcing up the vault of the skull bodily. When his head was opened after death, it was observed that ‘ the brain was not large, and the cranium thinner than it is usually found to be.’ In favour of the theory of congenital liability it has to be said that he was the ninth of a family of whom the first six died in ‘ very early youth. ’ ”