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Travel Writing in Scotland

When I was a wee boy, Hogmanay was the most important night of the year, when every member of the family would make every effort to get to my grandparents' home in the village of Calderbank, near Airdrie in Lanarkshire, for the bells at midnight. They rang out loud enough, since my grandparents lived next door to the village church. As the poet Peter McCarey put it, at that moment, 'Trembling bell metal means something.' So, thinking of that sense of family connection, coming together and then going our separate ways in the year ahead, it seems appropriate to take a look at how Scotland has been seen by travellers moving through the country over time. And next week, we'll take a look at Scots writers travelling from the country through the world – the Scottish diaspora.

Alan Riach

Travel writing by visitors to Scotland, either Scots themselves visiting unfamiliar parts of the country or visitors from outwith the country forms a rich tradition crossing centuries. Its fascination is various: the expectations, prejudices and forms of analysis of the writers; the people, social conditions and ways of life encountered; the literary styles of travellers of different periods, quest-narratives, writers in search of something, sometimes finding it, sometimes left with hopes and questions, disappointments and affirmations. Then there are the modes of transport available, and what they meant for ways of seeing and understanding. "Better to travel hopefully than to arrive," Robert Louis Stevenson is proverbially misquoted as saying – but it depends where you're going, and the territories and climates you have to travel through.

Some writers have their own political priorities and persuasive intentions. Defoe was an English spy, Johnson an English superiorist. Wordsworth's sympathies were more open, characterised by the pathos of his own loneliness, and his sister Dorothy's descriptions of what she sees are brilliantly precise. These visitors mainly walk; sometimes they're on horseback or in a carriage. The opening of Scotland through public transport and the private motor-car marks a transitional moment from the 1920s to the 1930s. George Eyre-Todd sets off walking with staff and knapsack, but AA Thomson puttlers around the Lowlands in a car. This is a shift from experiencing the country and the people in physical proximity to seeing them through moving windows, as spectacle, without a sense of smell or hearing the sounds of birds, rivers, wind in the grass. This is the moment when Scotland starts to be screened.

Robert Macfarlane, in *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (2013) and other works returns to walking as the essential mode of travel for thinking and writing. Or sailing. As Nick Thorpe says in *Adrift in Caledonia: Boat-hitching for the Unenlightened* (2006), “Growing up in England, school history had taught me that the sea was a defensive barrier, policed by the navy to ensure that Britannia continued to rule the waves. To the explorers and traders in Scotland, however, it was predominantly a connection to the world – and crucially one which didn’t involve kowtowing to Big Brother over the land border. Water was freedom and possibility.”

Some of the earliest accounts are of new territory, experience of places unknown to readers, and first-time encounters for their authors. These have the virtue not only of delineating conditions of social life but also the curiosity and wonder of the pioneers: Donald Munro’s *Description of the Occidental i.e. Western Islands of Scotland* (1549) and Martin Martin’s *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (c. 1695) and *A Voyage to St Kilda* (1698) are accounts of this kind.

In the eighteenth century, the purpose of visitors arriving from England is often directly political, to give an estimation of the resources, potential compliances and threats of a component part of what was now the United Kingdom. Thus, Daniel Defoe, in *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1722) highlights the virtues of Glasgow in the era prior to the Jacobite rising of 1745. In “Letter 11” he comments that Scotland, by virtue of the Union with England, surrendered its parliament but has not lost the privilege of self-governing burghs making their own by-laws, which “is now in many ways more advantageous to them than it was before, as their trade is like to be, in time, more considerable than before.” As a pro-Union spy, Defoe was satisfied that Scotland, which “was before considered as a nation”, now “appears no more but as a province, or at best, a dominion.”

Thirty years after the Jacobite rising, Samuel Johnson, in *A Journey to the Western Islands* and James Boswell, in *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, having travelled together in 1773, record their suffering discomfort and Johnson expressed his disdain for people still unable to speak English, but both are silent about the battlefield of Culloden. They pass within six miles of it and could not but have been sensitive to what had happened there. Similarly, they register something of the aura of Iona, which they visited eagerly. Written before, but published after, *Culloden, Letters from a Gentleman in the North of*

Scotland, c.1726 (1754) by Edward Burt, bridges the cataclysm, and Thomas Pennant, in *Tour in Scotland*, 1769 (published 1771) and Thomas Thornton, in *Tour in the Highlands* c.1786 (published 1804), begin to see the country, and those parts of the country most remote from the cities, not only arising from the troubles of their history, but as valuable future destinations for the exercise of visual refreshment. War crimes and spiritual meaning became merely items on the itinerary for a wide readership, until the fiction of Walter Scott and James Hogg that the meaning of Culloden began to confront and explore them more deeply.

Something intuitively keen, of course, is going on with Robert Burns. In his *Tour of the Borders* 1787 and *Tour of the Highlands and Stirlingshire* 1787, there's certainly prejudice against the Highlanders, but there's also an innate curiosity and sense of kinship with people of all sorts and landscapes of very different character from that of his native Ayrshire. And Alexander Campbell, in *A Journey from Edinburgh through parts of North Britain* (1802) brings together different kinds of writing, as if exploring Scotland for the first time. James Hogg, in *Highland Tours: Travels in the Scottish Highlands and Western Isles* in 1802, 1803 and 1804, is characteristically robust and often funny, as he meets people of all sorts and visits parts of Scotland that were new to him. Dorothy Wordsworth, in her *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland A.D. 1803*, and William, in his poems prompted by his tours in Scotland, are enlightened witnesses, whose observations and questions might be turned towards themselves as much as to what they meet north of the Border. Walter Scott exemplifies the same paradigm in *Northern Lights* or *a Voyage in the Lighthouse Yacht to Nova Zembla and the Lord Knows Where in the Summer of 1814*, where, as a native Scot, he is encompassing the furthest reaches of the archipelagic identity from which the nation is constructed.

Later in the 19th century, visitors from England and France have very different experiences. John Keats, in his poems and letters from Scotland of 1818, has much to say about the way in which the memory of Robert Burns is already being commercialised and the value of his poetry and character demeaned by exploitation. The Poet Laureate Robert Southey, in *Journal of a Tour in Scotland* in 1819, offers a refined account of his meeting the natives, while Queen Victoria, in her *Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in the Highlands* (1848-61) is superlative in praise of the territory now firmly in her domain. Her sense of the scenic attractiveness of Scotland is that of an amateur painter, but her awareness of the cultural distinctiveness of Scotland, not least its Gaelic component, prompts not repulsion but a maternal benevolence. Her journal shows both proprietorial authority and an awareness of

something beyond her, something she knows she might wish to look after. By contrast, Jules Verne, in his *Voyage a reculons en Angleterre et en Ecosse* (1859-60, translated as *Backwards to Britain*, 1992), tours Scotland with the curiosity of a fantasist unchained: everything is wondrous, and about to be turned in his fiction into something even more wondrous. And wonder of wonders – the coaches, ferries, all the public transport systems, run on time and connect with each other.

A darker view typifies Robert Buchanan, whose *The Hebrid Isles: Wanderings in the Land of Lorne and the Outer Hebrides* (1883), recognises and describes the beauties of austerity and wilderness, and gives a sense of desolation that seems both man-made and godless. This is present too in his poems, especially the sonnet sequence depicting Loch Coruisk, in Skye. Something similar applies to the most famous of all “travel books” of Scotland, *Kidnapped* (1886) by Robert Louis Stevenson. Here is an adventure which begins in the Lowlands, takes us east towards Edinburgh, then voyages around the coast of Scotland, up the east coast and round into the western seas, where shipwreck sends the heroes ashore near Mull and they journey on foot across Scotland, back to the capital. Geography (you can follow the maps) and post-Culloden history (understanding the full significance of that event) are woven deeply into the text. The Scotland travelled over here is unsettled, divided, everywhere uncomfortable, discomfoting, questioning, interrogating assumptions of security and meaning at every level.

More conventional travel narratives of the period include Edward Topham, *Edinburgh Life 100 Years Ago: With An Account Of The Fashions And Amusements Of Society* (1886) and Daniel Turner Homes, *Literary Tours in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (1909) and with George Eyre-Todd, *Scotland Picturesque and Traditional: A Pilgrimage with Staff and Knapsack* (1921), we come to the end of the era in which pedestrian travel, or travel by horse or coach or boat, was primary. After HV Morton, whose *In Search of Scotland* (1929) was followed by *In Scotland Again* (1933), we have AA Thomson, *Let's See the Lowlands* (1930), where the tour is taken by that relatively new invention, the motor car. Seeing, here, is done through the glass. Screen media begins at this point.

Yet the deeper enquiries continued, with the poets Edwin Muir, in *Scottish Journey* (1935), Louis MacNeice, in *I Crossed the Minch* (1938) and Hugh MacDiarmid, in *The Islands of Scotland* (1939). These three books should be read together, for they complement and counterpoint each other in revealing ways. Muir is disillusioned with a Scotland

characterised by poverty, ignorance and pessimism, almost in defiance of its awe-inspiring, purple landscapes. MacNeice is even more pessimistic as he encounters the Outer Hebrides, the oppressiveness of religious austerity, the ethos of rejection and abstinence from the pleasures and experience of the arts. MacDiarmid sees clearly everything there is to deplore in social conditions and low expectations, but he delivers a new sense of what the islands of Scotland signify, an archipelagic identity of plural meanings, characterised by place and condition, weather, seasons, and forms of habitation and economy. Some things can be changed, but some arise from the deepest of human meanings, without romanticising or fabricating their value. The closest work I can think of to this is *The Shoshoneans* (1967) by Edward Dorn, an account of a journey among native people in 1960s America that delivers a similar core sense of human dignity and cultural authority.

That sense of family connection – human connectedness, what’s welcome and what should be resisted – has specific bearing in Scotland, across continents and centuries. Alistair MacLeod defines it in his novel, *No Great Mischief* (1990): “‘You are from here,’ said the woman. ‘No,’ said my sister, ‘I’m from Canada.’ ‘That may be,’ said the woman. ‘But you are really from here. You have just been away for a while.’”

Happy new year.

[Boxed off:]

Robert Buchanan (1841-1901), two “Curuisken Sonnets” from *The Book of Orm* (1870)

WE ARE FATHERLESS

(Sonnet 2)

I found Thee not by the starved widow’s bed,
Nor in the sick-rooms where my dear ones died;
In Cities vast I hearken’d for Thy tread,
And heard a thousand call Thee, wretched-eyed,
Worn out, and bitter. But the Heavens denied
Their melancholy Maker. From the Dead
Assurance came, nor answer. Then I fled
Into these wastes, and raised my hands, and cried:

“The seasons pass—the sky is as a pall—
Thin wasted hands on withering hearts we press—
There is no God—in vain we plead and call,
In vain with weary eyes we search and guess—
Like children in an empty house sit all,
Cast-away children, lorn and fatherless.”

DESOLATE!

(Sonnet 6)

Desolate! How the Peaks of ashen grey,
The smoky Mists that drift from hill to hill,
The Waters dark, anticipate this day
That sullen desolation. O how still
The shadows come and vanish, with no will!
How still the melancholy Waters lie
How still the vapours of the under-sky
Mirror'd below, drift onward, and fulfil
Thy mandate as they mingle!—Not a sound,
Save that deep murmur of a torrent near,
Deepening silence. Hush! the dark profound
Groans, as some grey crag loosens and falls sheer
To the abyss. Wildly I look around.
O Spirit of the Human, art Thou *here*?