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T. K. MEIER

Pattern in Johnson's
A Journey to the Western Islands

Samuel Johnson's *A Journey to the Western Islands* has for too long been thought merely a travel book about Scotland; it is certainly this, but it is also a unified work of art which presents various aspects of Scotland in terms of an overlying general impression. This general impression is developed throughout, and it has its basis in the individual facts, events, and opinions Johnson reports as well as in the occasional generalizations he makes, but of all Johnson's literary works, the *Journey* is one of the most particular, for although his penchant for generalization is at times apparent, it does not reach the proportions here that it does in *Rasselas* or in the literary criticism. His tendency to stick to the subject at hand and the fact that the *Journey* is in a well-known though slightly shabby tradition may perhaps account for its comparative neglect by scholars and their lack of comment on its basic cohesiveness.

With steadily improving travel conditions in England as well as on the Continent came the widespread popularity of travel literature in the Eighteenth Century; Johnson was working in accepted genre. There were, in fact, several other accounts of Scotland, and to some of these Johnson makes additions and corrections in the *Journey*, but the *Journey* is obviously much more than a travel account; it is a work of art at once transcending and yet within the genre of the travel narrative. There are numerous unifying elements and themes within the book, and these may be said to converge and give it a central meaning. The work should not be thought of as many descriptions of Scotland but as *a* description of Scotland; it is not merely a series of impressions but *an* impression of Scotland. This impression is one of bleakness interspersed with occasional glimmers of light and hope; it dominates the *Journey*, and Johnson's moral outlook and moral comments may be considered an integral part of, or at the very least, a reinforcement of this overall view of bleakness.

At the very outset of the *Journey*, Johnson sets the tone by describing the island of Inch Keith, a barren, desolate spot, where he found

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only "shattered crags" and "the ruins of a small fort."¹ Back on the mainland, he records passing through three "places not unlike the small or straggling market-towns in those parts of England where commerce and manufactures have not yet produced opulence" (p. 4). This he follows with: "Though we were yet in the most populous part of Scotland, and at so small a distance from the capital, we met few passengers" (p. 4). He then comments favorably on the lack of toll gates and the good condition of the local roads, adding that because of the rocky bottom, "a smooth way is made indeed with great labor, but it never wants repairs" (pp. 4-5); he ends the first section with the remark, "A man seems to derive some degree of dignity from the reputation of possessing a two-horse cart" (p. 5). This is the way Johnson chooses to introduce his readers to Scotland; he presents a picture of barrenness, ruin, sparseness of population, and poverty. The roads are good, yet "great labor" was necessary to wrest them from the rocky terrain.

Johnson repeatedly refers to the barrenness of the terrain: "An eye accustomed to flowery pastures and waving harvests is astonished and repelled by this wide extent of hopeless sterility" (p. 34). He places part of the blame for the treeless state of Scotland on the inhabitants: ". . . the present nakedness of the Hebrides is not wholly the fault of nature" (p. 44), and he often describes the barrenness of particular places: "Col is not properly rocky, it is rather one continued rock" (p. 112). Nevertheless, he occasionally records seeing more pleasant country such as the "narrow valley not very flowery, but sufficiently verdant," where he "first conceived the thought of this narration" (p. 35), and he finds spots "remarkable for pleasantness and fertility" (p. 129). Such references remain, however, quite infrequent and stand out in marked contrast to most of Johnson's topographical description.

Johnson describes the climate as being essentially complementary to the topography:

Their weather is not pleasing. Half the year is deluged with rain. From the autumnal to the vernal equinox, a dry day is hardly known, except when the showers are suspended by a tempest. Under such skies can be expected no great exuberance of vegetation. Their winter overtakes their summer, and their harvest lies upon the ground drenched with rain. The autumn struggles hard to produce some of our early fruits. (p. 70)

¹ Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, ed. R. W. Chapman (London, 1961), p. 4. All subsequent references are to this edition.

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He mentions that winter seldom brings ice or snow, and adds:

This is not the description of a cruel climate, yet the dark months are here a time of great distress; because the summer can do little more than feed itself, and winter comes with its cold and its scarcity upon families very slenderly provided. (pp. 46-47)

Despite the lack of snow and ice, however, he states that "at New-Years eve there is no great pleasure to be had out of doors in the Hebrides" (p. 120).

The Highland weather, besides working hardships upon the Highlanders and making them and the travellers uncomfortable, often delayed their progress, but Johnson sometimes found compensations for such inconveniences: "The storms did not permit us to launch a boat, and we were condemned to listen in idleness to the wind, except when better engaged by listening to the ladies" (p. 62). The hospitality with which they were entertained at various places certainly accounts for the happiest parts of the *Journey*, but these hospitable seats were only tiny spots of light sprinkled throughout a wilderness. Their travels, when not actually uncomfortable, were often tedious: "It will readily occur, that this uniformity of barrenness can afford very little amusement to the traveller" (p. 35), and both travellers were affected by this barrenness: "Our afternoon journey was through a country of such gloomy desolation that Mr. *Boswell* thought no part of the Highlands equally terrifick" (p. 139). Johnson asks, "Is it natural, in traversing this gloom of desolation, to inquire, whether something may not be done to give nature a more cheerful face . . . ?" (p. 126). Still other difficulties, such as the poor condition of the roads (once they got into the Highlands), the inaccurate representations of distances, the smallness of their horses, and their own fatigue besieged them. Johnson recorded these difficulties, and they seem to underline the bleakness of the climate and the barrenness of the terrain.

Another factor contributing to the tediousness of travel was Scotland's relatively small population: "The roads of Scotland afford little diversion to the traveller, who seldom sees himself either encountered or overtaken. . . ." (p. 8-9). However, Johnson does see in this a certain advantage: "The day and the night are equally solitary and equally safe; for where there are so few travellers, why should there be robbers" (p. 12). Nevertheless, by discussing Scotland's sparse population earnestly and frequently in the *Journey*, Johnson demonstrates that he considers this to be a great problem. He often speaks of Scotland as being "little frequented," "thinly inhabited," "thinly peopled," or

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an "untraveller wilderness" (pp. 30, 48, 88, 36). He ranks the small population with other disadvantages:

Of these Islands it must be confessed, that they have not many allurements, but to the mere lover of naked nature. The inhabitants are thin, provisions are scarce, and desolation and penury give little pleasure. (p. 142)

Strikingly set against this dark background are those places where Johnson records being entertained well, for instance at "the residence of Mr. Mackinnon, we were treated with very liberal hospitality, among a more numerous company than it could have been supposed easy to collect" (p. 48). Similarly, at Sir Allen Maclean's seat on Inch Kenneth Johnson writes:

Romance does not often exhibit a scene that strikes the imagination more than this little desert in these depths of Western obscurity, occupied not by a gross herdsman, or amphibious fisherman, but by a gentleman and two ladies, of high birth, polished manners, and elegant conversation, who, in a habitation raised not very far above the ground, but furnished with unexpected neatness and convenience, practiced all the kindness of hospitality, and refinement of courtesy. (p. 129-30)

Johnson gives this compliment to Raasay:

Raasay has little that can detain a traveller, except the Laird and his family; but their power wants no auxiliaries. Such a seat of hospitality, amidst the winds and waters, fills the imagination with a delightful contrariety of images. Without is the rough ocean and the rocky land, the beating billows and the howling storm: within is plenty and elegance, beauty and gaiety, the song and the dance. In *Raasay*, if I could have found an Ulysses, I had fancied a *Phoeacia*. (p. 59)

In this manner, Johnson frequently contrasts the bleakness of the countryside and weather with the warmth of his and Boswell's reception at various homes.

This hospitality comes into even sharper contrast against the background of personal and commercial difficulties of the economically depressed Highlanders. Johnson considered emigration as perhaps the greatest and most immediate of Scotland's problems. He mentions emigration frequently and discusses it at some length, imputing it to three causes: Scotland's native barrenness, the harsh measures enforced on Scotland by England, and the rather unfeeling treatment of the people by their landlords, occasioned by the breakdown of the patriarchal system. It is not our purpose here to study Johnson's proposals for remedying this bad situation but rather to note that he did deplore

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"this epidemical fury of emigration" (p. 53) as a process that would render Scotland even more bleak and barren. He points out other economic difficulties such as the low standard of living (which is not alleviated too greatly by the low cost of living) and the problems of a country not wholly on a money economy. Although Johnson reports that "their poverty is gradually abated" (p. 51), he points out that "In pastoral countries the condition of the lowest rank of people is sufficiently wretched" (p. 92), that they "... live in miserable cabins, which afford them little more than shelter from the storms" (p. 92), and that "their food is not better than their lodging" (p. 92), but he adds that "Conveniences are not missed where they never were enjoyed" (p. 93). Perhaps his most chilling remark on the subject of Highland poverty is his matter-of-fact statement that "In regions of barrenness and scarcity, the human race is hindered in its growth by the same causes as other animals" (p. 75).

Despite their poverty and hardships, Johnson reports himself quite pleased with the Highlanders themselves; "Civility seems part of the national character of Highlanders" (p. 25), he says. He pays tribute to the Highland women, "We knew that the girls of the Highlands were all gentlewomen" (p. 32), and he adds a comment on their beauty:

The ladies have as much beauty here as in other places, but bloom and softness are not to be expected among the lower classes, whose faces are exposed to the rudeness of the climate, and whose features are sometimes contracted by want, and sometimes hardened by the blasts. (p. 75)

In general, Johnson found the people of the Highlands as pleasing as he found their situation depressing, although he did take note of their ferocity, which, however, was waning, and he praised individuals, such as Col and Sir Allan Maclean, quite highly.

Another contributing factor to the mood of depression and sense of bleakness which pervade the *Journey* is Johnson's series of historical relations and observations. Most of the incidents he relates pertain to wars, feuds, and piracy; the force of this is dimmed somewhat by Johnson's repeated reminders that this sort of thing is entirely in the past, though, to be sure, the very recent past, and by his giving credence to the assertion that the Highlanders are at present unable even to defend themselves. Despite the diminution of the Highlander's ferocity, they still have rich and gory tradition of attacks, retaliations, plots, and

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histories of enemies annihilated by fire or the sword, much of which Johnson relates in some detail, as he did this incident:

As the bagpiper was playing, an elderly gentleman informed us, that in some remote time, the *Macdonalds* of Glengary having been injured, or offended by the inhabitants of *Culloden*, and resolving to have justice or vengeance, came up to *Culloden* on a Sunday, where finding their enemies at worship, they shut them up in the church, which they set on fire; and this, said he, is the tune the piper played while they were burning. (p. 44)

Johnson also discusses the military significance of various caves, rocky coasts, mountains, and other terrain features as well as the tactical importance of certain forts and other fortifications, many of which are in ruins and which contribute to the general look of desolation of the countryside.

There is another species of ruins which also contribute to the desolate look of the country but to which Johnson attaches more importance than ruined fortresses; these are "the monuments of papal piety" (p. 58). This theme, which Johnson develops at some length and which Jeffrey Hart calls "the destruction of pre-Reformation Christian culture,"² gives particular emphasis to the hypothesis that Johnson is presenting an impression of Scotland in terms of bleakness, for here was a means by which the Scots had at one time dignified their country with architectural beauty and scholarly eminence both of which they themselves destroyed, both overtly and through neglect. Johnson is very hard on "the ruffians of reformation" (p. 6), and he deplores "the waste of reformation" (p. 20). He reports that the cathedral at Elgin "was at last not destroyed by the tumultuous violence of Knox but more shamefully suffered to dilapidate by deliberate robbery and frigid indifference" (p. 20-21). Johnson intensifies the theme up to its tragic climax on Iona:³

But the fruitfulness of *Iona* is now its whole prosperity. The inhabitants are remarkably gross, and remarkably neglected: I know not if they are visited by any Minister. The Island, which was once the metropolis of learning and piety, has now no school for education, nor temple for worship, only two inhabitants that can speak *English*, and not one that can write or read. (p. 138)

² Jeffrey Hart, "Johnson's *A Journey to the Western Islands: History as Art*," *Essays in Criticism*, X (1960), 45.

³ See Mary Lascelles, "Some Reflections on Johnson's Hebridean Journey," *The New Rambler* (June, 1961), 10.

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Johnson often describes the calamity in terms of its effect on present religious life:

Of the destruction of churches, the decay of religion must in time be the consequence; for while the publick acts of the ministry are now performed in houses, a very small number can be present; and as the greater part of the Islanders make no use of books, all must necessarily live in total ignorance who want the opportunity of vocal instruction. (p. 58)

He adds that "The want of churches is not the only impediment to piety: there is likewise a want of Ministers" (p. 110) and that many of the existing kirks are quite mean. However, he does find the ministers quite capable, and this provides a gleam of light into an otherwise bleak religious situation.

Johnson finds Scotland culturally backward; he approves of the Scotch universities' terms of study but not of their product. He does find learned men, notably among the Highland ministers who "had attained such knowledge as may justly be admired in men, who have no motive to study, but generous curiosity, or, what is still better, desire of usefulness" (p. 95). These individuals stand out in marked contrast to the country as a whole which he puts into the category of the "illiterate nation" (p. 65) or that of "nations, where there is hardly the use of letters" (p. 58). These generalizations, plus Johnson's acknowledgments of the doubtful authority of Highland legend and the uncertain bases of Highland tradition and the paucity of historical writings, coupled with his unsympathetic estimate of the Erse language ("It is the rude speech of a barbarous people, who had few thoughts to express, and were content, as they conceived grossly, to be grossly understood" [p. 104]) and his denial of the authenticity of *Fingal*, all of which is continually reinforced by his skepticism and unwillingness to accept doubtful relations at face value, combine to produce a rather depressing view of a country culturally backward yet self-consciously trying to dissemble historical glory.

Johnson recognized and maintained an ambivalent attitude toward the forces of change at work in the Highlands. The partriarchal economy and way of life was crumbling and commerce was on the rise.⁴

⁴ See Hart, *passim*, and Lascelles, *passim*. See also Arthur Sherbo, who in "Johnson's Intent in the *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*," *EIC*, XVI (1966), 383-97, launches a vigorous though somewhat unconsidered attack upon Hart's position. Sherbo concludes that "Nothing in the remarks of either man [Johnson or Boswell], both during the journey and after, bespeaks an experience clouded by a tragic vision of fallen cultures and cultures in the process of collapse" (p. 396). He bases this contention on his beliefs (1)

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Another change, that of religion, has been discussed above and need not be considered here because it lacked currency; as Johnson says:

We read with as little emotion the violence of Knox and his followers, as the irruptions of Alaric and the Goths. Had the university been destroyed two centuries ago, we should not have regretted it; but to see it pining in decay and struggling for life, fills the mind with mournful images and ineffectual wishes. (p. 8)

Johnson is resentful of the decline and neglect of the university at St. Andrews in view of the increasing opulence:

It is surely not without just reproach, that a nation, of which the commerce is hourly extending, and the wealth increasing, denies any participation of its prosperity to its literary societies; and while its merchants or its nobles are raising palaces, suffers its universities to moulder into dust. (pp. 6-7)

However, he sees the positive side of the rise of commerce:

That their poverty is gradually abated, cannot be mentioned among the unpleasing consequences of subjection. They are now acquainted with money, and the possibility of gain will by degrees make them industrious. (p. 51)

He approves the reduction of poverty and the extinction of feuds, but he laments the loss of the Highlanders' courage and their loyalty to their chiefs as well as the lessening of the chiefs' concern for their tenants; he approves the better features of the new system and laments the loss of the better features of the old. The attitude he takes provides another example of Johnson's giving a bleak view yet with some glimmer of hope; he describes a bleak economic situation, notes that the system is changing and having the effect of doing away with many of the bad as well as with some of the good features of the older system,

that the *Journey* is a travel book and nothing more (because it resembles in form other travel books); (2) that other travellers had described the gloomy aspects of Scotland, occasionally at greater length even than Johnson; and (3) that Johnson's attitude toward the jaunt as revealed in Boswell's eyewitness account in the *Tour*, and in Johnson's later recollections of it as described in the *Life*, are uniformly pleasant. But Sherbo's attempt falls short of persuasion because (1) while he shows similarities between Johnson's *Journey* and other travel books, he does not establish that it is not also a work of art; (2) while Johnson may be less fulsome than his predecessors in his description of cultural decline, a single phrase such as "the ruffians of reformation" (*Journey*, p. 6) from Johnson is often more effective in describing decay than whole paragraphs from Pennant or other travellers; and (3) while Boswell's *Tour* and *Life* show Johnson having a very enjoyable jaunt, his own account in his *Journey* gives scant attention to his pleasures, which provide only intermittent relief from the encompassing bleakness Johnson describes. Sherbo attempts to refute Hart's examination of Johnson's book by reference to Boswell's account of Johnson's state of mind while writing the book.

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but he also notes that the new system, although it will not replace the lost merits, will at least remedy some of the old evils.

In the *Journey*, Johnson produced a travel account which is also a work of art. It presents a general impression of Scotland as a bleak area punctuated by glimmers of light and hope. Virtually all of the themes that run through the book, the barren countryside dotted with ruins, the sparse population, the economic difficulties, the military heritage, the contracted religious life, the cultural backwardness, and the decay of the patriarchal system, contribute to this impression, and Johnson's moral purpose, his harsh judgments on Scotland, his scepticism, and the recorded difficulties of the journey tend to reinforce it, as does the sense of danger which Johnson infused in the book. A certain sense of danger seems always lurking beneath the surface of the *Journey* and is continually emphasized by Johnson's mention of various imaginary terrors, by his relation of Highland narratives filled with violence, by his assertion that the islanders are now practically defenseless and almost at the mercy of "a gang of robbers, such as has been lately confederating themselves in the Highlands" (p. 82), by his tribute to Col, who later drowned in traversing the same water route over which he had piloted Johnson and Boswell, and by such casual remarks as "We never left the shore, and came without any disaster to the cavern" (p. 67). There is humor in the *Journey*, but it is a grim humor which well suits an account of such a dismal area. Johnson uses it to add flavor to the Highland tales (as in the bagpipe example above) by heightening the horror of the situation; he also uses it to touch on a vanity of human wishes theme, as he did in recording that they "entered upon the road, on which *Macbeth* heard the fatal prediction; but we travelled on not interrupted by promises of kingdoms" (p. 22).

Johnson establishes this bleak view of Scotland at the very beginning of the book, continues it throughout, punctuating it with bright or hopeful spots and ends on a note of hope: "Whatever enlarges hope will exalt courage; after having seen the deaf taught arithmetic, who would be afraid to cultivate the Hebrides?" (p. 148). Considered as travel literature the *Journey* is undoubtedly imperfect, but the fact remains that Johnson gave us not only a travel account but a general impression of Scotland, and it is on the effect of the latter that his book must be judged as a work of art.

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