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**WRITING THE HIGHLAND TOUR:
A STORY OF A DEEPLY TROUBLING KIND¹**

Andrew Hook

Nigel Leask, *Stepping Westward: Writing the Highland Tour c.1720-1830*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 368. Hardback, £65.00/\$85.00. ISBN: 9780198850021. Also available through Oxford Scholarship Online.

This remarkable book is timely to a degree far beyond anything the author could have imagined when he was writing it. As the title indicates, its focus is on the extraordinary rise of touring in the Scottish Highlands from its beginnings in the early 18th century to its explosion in the early 19th century. But it turns out to be about a great deal more than tourists and tourism. Its seven chapters throw fascinating light on key aspects of Highland history in the given period, and what it reveals is a story of a deeply troubling kind. This summer, as the Black Lives Matter movement brought much wider attention to Scottish involvement in slavery and the slave-trade, it made it harder to ignore other exclusions or silences in the mainstream historical narrative. I finished reading this book feeling that for almost a century and a half the United Kingdom utterly failed to recognise just how much the lives of ordinary Highlanders mattered.

Today, we are all too aware of the problems caused by tourists in the Highlands. We regularly see vivid pictures on our screens of the bonny banks of Loch Lomond littered with the left-behind rubbish of travellers, and the narrow roads of Skye jam-packed with tourists' cars. Things were different in the 18th century. That is why the key word in Leask's title is "writing." The written and published accounts by travellers were long the

¹ This review originally appeared in *Scottish Review*, August 5 2020: <https://www.scottishreview.net/>; we are grateful to Professor Hook and Islay McLeod, Editor of *Scottish Review*, for permission to reprint it for SSL readers.

sole source of information available to those seeking to learn something of the nature of the Highlands.

Books are what mattered. And not only travellers' books. As time passed, several creative writers began to explore the Highlands in poetry and fiction: most importantly James Macpherson of *Ossian* fame, and Sir Walter Scott. And perhaps I should mention here Samuel Johnson's hugely controversial *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, published in 1775. There is of course, as Leask's footnotes and bibliography make clear, a substantial historical literature on 18th century and 19th Highland history, including the Clearances, and there is significant specialist literary criticism, including theoretically-informed rereadings centred on Highland and Gaelic sources. Leask handles with aplomb the different forms of writing in question, without losing readers or his central story in abstract theoretical discussion.

The first book that Leask addresses is called *Letters from a Gentleman in the North of Scotland to his Friend in London*. Published anonymously in 1754, its author is almost certainly one Edmund Burt, a Londoner and a government agent who lived in Inverness in the 1720s and 30s working as a collector of taxes from Jacobite estates forfeited to the Crown after the failure of the 1715 Jacobite rebellion. Leask sees the book as "the first modern travel account of the Highlands" and "one crucial for understanding the subsequent genesis of tour writing." However, the account this Englishman provides is far from a favourable one.

The Highlands are consistently described as dirty, insanitary and desperately poverty-stricken. The huts or black houses in which the people live are like "Heaps of Dirt" and their inhabitants "black as Chimney-Sweepers," as well as shoeless. The Gaelic language is dismissed as "but a corruption of the Irish tongue," but most surprising of all, given what is to come later in the century, is Burt's reaction to the Highland landscape. He finds the Highland topography utterly alien. Like Dr Johnson, and if I may be allowed a momentary personal note, like my late wife who used to annoy the rest of us by talking of the spectacular Highlands "miles and miles of nothing," he regarded the "trackless wilderness mounting towards the skies" as a source of gloom and horror, and even danger, as these mountains provide protection for future Jacobite ambushes.

Burt's one enthusiasm is for the new roads and bridges being built across the Highlands by General Wade and his soldiers. The "old ways" were no more than tracks for the driving of cattle for sale in the Lowlands or on into England. Burt recognised the transformation Wade's roads would bring about—but inevitably he mentions Highlanders who preferred the grass of the old ways.

Burt did acknowledge that the economic promise of the Union of 1707 had not been realised as far as the Highlands were concerned. But it is true

that Wade's roads did open up the possibility of a different Highlands. Travel no longer had to be on foot or horseback. At first, the earliest travellers to take advantage were those with specialist interests in such areas as Scottish antiquities or geology or military history. Leask writes fascinatingly about how often Wade's achievement was compared to that of Agricola in Roman Britain. Wade's success in entering and transforming the Highlands was identified as paralleling Agricola's campaign beyond the Antonine wall, and his defeat of the Caledonians under Calgacus at the battle of Mons Graupius. But the transformation of tourism in the Highlands was brought about, not by an English general, but by a Welshman.

Thomas Pennant, the author of two travel books about Scotland—*Tour in Scotland; 1769*, published in 1771, and *Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides; 1772*, published in 1774—is the Welshman in question. Pennant emerges as probably the key figure in Leask's book. Aware of the depth of English hostility towards Scotland, which had reached a new peak in the 1760s, Pennant's status as a Celtic outsider clearly played a part in his approach to Scotland and the Scots. Providing what he called the first "national description" of Scotland, Leask sees him as successfully transforming "both the practice and the representation of the Scottish tour." Already an experienced traveller in a wide range of countries across both Europe and the United Kingdom, a scholar in an equally wide range of subjects, Leask describes him as "a typical enlightenment savant."

It is difficult here to do justice to what might be called the thoroughness of Pennant's two tours. On foot, on horseback, by sea, he went everywhere—even as far as Duncansby Head, the northernmost point of Britain's mainland—and diligently recorded every aspect of his experience—the people, the society, their manners and customs, the natural world, the environment, the state of agriculture, and, importantly, what he saw as the improvements—fisheries and commerce and manufacturing—struggling to develop in the changing Highlands. Always he tried to provide an accurate, fair and balanced account—what he called "the true knowledge of your country, hitherto misrepresented"—while as a Whiggish supporter of the Union of 1707, he looked always for signs that the promise of that union was indeed being realised in the Highlands.

On his 1769 journey, he established what he called the "petit tour," and in the decades to come, this soon became the route followed by the great majority of Highland visitors: it ran from Edinburgh to Perth, across to Stirling, down through what became the Trossachs and Loch Katrine, on to Loch Lomond, down to Dumbarton, and up the Clyde to Glasgow. The route could be equally well followed in the opposite direction starting off from Glasgow and ending in Edinburgh. In 1769, Pennant wrote positively about what he saw. In the longer 1772 tour, he was more critical. Nonetheless, Pennant's books successfully pleased both English and Scottish readers.

Samuel Johnson's *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, published in 1775, succeeded by doing more or less exactly the opposite. It may have pleased some English readers, but it aroused a storm of criticism in Scotland. Professor Leask tells and explores this story in what is probably the liveliest chapter of his book. Johnson found little to please him in what he found to be the wasteland that was barren and treeless Scotland. But I mean to focus here on the one area in which Johnson and Pennant shared common ground.

First, however, let me point to what is best in the book's closing chapters. William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy toured Scotland for six weeks in 1803. Dorothy's book, *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland*, was one result. A group of poems by William, including one called "Stepping Westward," was another. Dorothy's account is important because it moved travel writing in a new direction. As her title makes clear, Dorothy's approach had nothing in common with Pennant's account of "every step of the way." Rather in the style of her brother's poetic "emotion recollected in tranquillity," her focus was on the enduring emotional impact of her Scottish experience.

Of almost equal interest is Leask's account of the 22-year-old John Keats's pedestrian tour in the summer of 1818, which had to be cut short in Mull because of the poet's illness. Nonetheless, he reckoned he had covered 600 miles on foot and 400 on horseback. Striking is the way in which Keats, like the Wordsworths, tried hard to avoid the route and reactions of the mainstream "cockney" tourist.

The darker side of *Stepping Westward*, hinted at above, involves its underlying focus on the condition of the average Highlander throughout the period the book covers. Crucial here are the changes resulting from the crushing at Culloden of the 1745 Jacobite rebellion. A deliberate attempt was then made to wipe out the existing Highland way of life: the wearing of tartan was forbidden, Highlanders could no longer carry arms, the Gaelic language was discouraged, and most important of all, the clan system itself was dismembered. The former chiefs lost their traditional feudal powers over their clans, meaning that responsibility for the well-being of their clansmen also leaked away. Landlordism took over. Estate owners, old and new, could raise rents and change the use of their lands, at will.

As we have noted, Pennant and others praised the attempts at "improvement" of this new Highland world. Commerce and new industries were established, but they often involved the removal of Highlanders from their traditional homes. When sheep-farming became profitable, the so-called "clearances" began, which would continue into the 19th century. Given an acre or two of land on the coast, and expected to become fishermen, many Highlanders preferred to step much further westward and emigrate to the American colonies.

An extraordinary passage at the end of Pennant's *Voyage to the Hebrides* indicates that he was all too aware of the scale of these problems—as well as their source. A strange Ossianic figure appears to him in a dream and launches a vitriolic attack on the new Highland landlords: the brave chieftains of old have been replaced by “rapacious landlords—determined to compensate the loss of power, with the increase of revenue; to exchange the warm affections of their people for sordid trash.”

A high Tory, unlike the whiggish Pennant, Samuel Johnson was equally appalled by the behaviour of many Highland clan chiefs after they lost their former authority with the abolition of their hereditary jurisdictions. On Skye, he noted that chiefs have “degenerated from patriarchal to rapacious landlords”—thus echoing Pennant's remark in his book about “mighty CHIEFTAINS ... sunk into rapacious landlords.” It was Johnson's moral outrage at such behaviour that made him, a Jacobite sympathiser, denounce the kind of peace imposed upon the Highlands post-Culloden:

To hinder insurrection, by driving away the people, and to govern peaceably by having no subjects is an expedient that argues no great profundity of politicks.... it affords a legislator little self-applause to consider, that where was formerly an insurrection, there is now a wilderness.²

Johnson has in mind the rise and rise of Highland emigration, but Leask tells us that Johnson is alluding to Tacitus's life of Agricola, to Calgacus's speech to the Caledonian army before the battle of Mons Graupius (A.D. 83). But unlike Pennant and the others who shared Agricola's take on that event, Johnson's sympathies are with the defeated Caledonians: the Romans “create desolation, and call it peace.”

In the longer term, none of the so-called “improvements” in the Scottish Highlands did permanent good. In fact, in the first half of the 19th century, things got worse. Queen Victoria's Balmorality encouraged their continuing romantic sentimentalising, and far worse notions of what amounted to ethnic cleansing at the expense of the “Celts” gained surprising currency. Nothing then would have been more appropriate than a popular campaign highlighting the ongoing threat to the lives of ordinary Highlanders. Professor Leask's book—a major contribution to Scottish historical and cultural studies—could not have been more timely.

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² Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (London: Strahan and Cadell, 1775), 224-225.