Dr. Johnson in the *Gaeltacht*, 1773

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Pursuing Samuel Johnson in Scotland in 1773, for a native of that country, is tantamount to entering a minefield. The good Doctor had pronounced and mixed views, though not always well supported ones, about the Scots and their homeland, so the blasts of his prejudices are frequently felt and the aftershocks of controversies not easily avoided. However, an inquiry into Johnson’s encounters with people in the Gaeltacht, that is the Gaelic-speaking part, provides keen insights into his strengths and limitations as a man and a thinker, also into a distinctive culture, including literature, caught in a critical phase. As well, this inquiry explains in part the direction, from 1773 on, of interest in the people of the Highlands and Hebrides, also their language, and their beautiful land, so much of which became derelict, as a result of wrongs done to these people and the ensuing historical upheaval. Hence arises the focus maintained here on Johnson’s *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*,¹ with side glances at James Boswell’s indispensable adjunct, the *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*.²

¹Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, ed. with an Intro. and Notes by J. D. Fleeman (Oxford, 1985)—henceforth Fleeman. Dr. Fleeman’s work on the route followed by Johnson has been particularly helpful for this essay, also the information about Gaelic culture provided by Mrs. Isabel Macaskill Fleeman.

²Two editions of Boswell are cited: *Boswell’s Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D. 1773*, ed. from the original MS by F. A. Pottle and C. H. Bennett
In addition, the amazing enterprise of this elderly English man of letters, with all his physical deficits and psychological ailments, but surprisingly sportive nature, and his note-taking acolyte, the somewhat manic, youngish Scottish lawyer, Boswell, striding, riding, and sailing in one of the wildest parts of the Britain of his time, often buffeted by strong winds, heavy rains, and lively seas, sometimes sheltered in inns of dubious quality, but most often obliged to accept the hospitality of whatever castle, big or modest house, or poor cottage, even hovel, in pursuit of the essence of Gaeldom, deserves celebration as one of the richer episodes of the human comedy, as entertaining as anything flowing from the pen of Cervantes.

One characteristic example of Johnson's sportive behavior took place on Sunday 29 August 1773, at supper in Mrs. Mackenzie's "dirty and ill-furnished" inn at Inverness, unofficial capital of the Highlands:

on this occasion Johnson was in high spirits. In the course of the conversation he mentioned that Mr Banks (afterwards Sir Joseph) had, in his travels in New South Wales, discovered an extraordinary animal called the kangaroo. The appearance, conformation, and habits of this quadruped were of the most singular kind; and in order to render his description vivid and graphic, Johnson rose from his chair and volunteered an imitation of the animal. The company stared; and...nothing could be more ludicrous than the appearance of a tall, heavy, grave-looking man, like Dr Johnson, standing up to mimic the shape and motions of a kangaroo. He stood erect, put out his hands like feelers, and gathering up the tails of his huge brown coat so as to resemble the pouch of the animal made two or three bounds across the room!

(Journal, ed. Hill, p. 511)

Some aspects of the route followed in Scotland by Johnson and Boswell, on which there were more such diversions, seem to have been neglected. The loop from Edinburgh up the East coast to Aberdeen, and on to Inverness, was one familiar to Boswell because he had traveled it with his father, Lord Auchinleck, on the Northern Circuit of the Justiciary Court, Scotland's highest criminal tribunal. Boswell had friends along this route who could provide hospitality and information. Also, he hoped to exhibit Johnson to the Scottish literati in the university cities of St Andrews and Aberdeen, and to the legal profession in the person of Lord Monboddo, at his family home near Laurencekirk in the Mearns. Boswell was highly anxious about the skeptical drive of the Scottish Enlightenment. He hoped that Johnson would batter down those who followed the leadership of Hume and Adam Smith in promoting a modern, secular understanding of the world, which involved to some extent discrediting organized religion. The aim of this intellectual movement was to turn away attention from future salvation, and advance present human welfare through

promoting economic growth and applying science to eradicating the evils of famine, pestilence, and poverty.

Boswell wished to involve Johnson in celebrating the virtues of the ancient Caledonians, and such of their descendants as were worthy of them, to counter irreligious modernity with a vision of the benefits of Christian orthodoxy, allegiance to hereditary authority, social and ecclesiastical hierarchy, stability of property ownership exercised by a gentry class, loyal subordination of others in traditional occupations, and economic amelioration through paternalism. Boswell had a love-hate relationship with Lowland Scots generally, and his father in particular, for espousing Presbyterianism in religion and Revolution Whiggery in politics, and he thought he would find in the Hebrides a bastion of devotion to indefeasible right, also the ancient loyalties and social observances of kindred groups sustained by the clan system. Very likely he believed Johnson, his own choice of a father figure, would be a stout champion of these values, and be willing to appear as such in print. Johnson seemed to accept this role.

The journey north was a rite of passage for the champion, taking him across the Highland Line, which ran from Dumbarton on the Clyde, in the West, then Northeast to the glens of Angus, and thereafter North past Deeside and Donside to Nairn, on the Moray Firth, where Johnson first heard Gaelic spoken. In the Gaeltacht to the West and North, Johnson’s principal difficulty in understanding and analyzing what he found there was that he could not speak the native language, and was dependent on informers who did, but seemingly could not always catch the drift of what he wanted to know, and perhaps resented his bow-wow way (as Lord Pembroke put it) of questioning them (Journal, ed. Pottle, p. 8).

Symbolically, as well, one part of the route, from near Aberdeen to Inverness and down the Great Glen by Loch Ness towards the Western Isles, represented the line of advance to, and retreat from, the limit of Gaelic power in Scotland. The most powerful Gaelic army ever assembled had marched this way, following Donald MacDonald, second Lord of the Isles, to an indecisive battle in 1411 with Lowland forces at Harlaw, near Aberdeen. Thereafter the power of the Lords of the Isles declined, and in 1493 the Lordship was forfeited and annexed to the Scottish Crown. In their heyday, however, the Lords of the Isles and their adherents had been great patrons of classical Gaelic poetry and music, also art in the form of stone carvings, and scholarship in medicine and other fields. In following the route of the survivors of Harlaw through the Western Highlands to Skye, Raasay, Mull, Iona, and adjacent islands, Johnson and Boswell were seeking the legacy of that golden age of the Gaels upholding the clan system, but, unfortunately, on the whole these travel-

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ers did not have the linguistic background, or familiarity with the customs of Gaelic-speakers, to succeed completely in this quest.

It is surely significant that Johnson’s main professional task before going to Scotland to join Boswell was revising his Dictionary for the fourth edition (1773). The Johnson scholar Allan Reddick has found that the revisions at this time represented an attempt to make the text more significantly “part of the religious understanding of life and language,” marked, for example, by providing many more quotations from the Bible and Paradise Lost. In addition, it seems that Johnson was preoccupied with ensuring that “embattled” defenders of Anglicanism were extensively represented in additional words. Because of concern for this issue, rather than maintaining a focus on linguistic features of English, he deliberately avoided the opportunity to draw on Lowland Scots dialect words provided by one or other of his assistants, four of whom were Scottish. Johnson arranged that printed sheets from the first edition (1755) were marked up by an amanuensis with changes that needed to be made for the new edition, and these frequently included notes on usage, particularly Scottish ones, but in the event they were ignored. 4

Johnson made it clear in the Journey that he had no relish for “Scotch,” and trumpeted its degradation:

The conversation of the Scots grows every day less unpleasing to the English; their peculiarities wear fast away; their dialect is likely to become in half a century provincial and rustick, even to themselves. The great, the learned, the ambitious, and the vain, all cultivate the English phrase, and the English pronunciation, and in splendid companies Scotch is not much heard, except now and then from an old lady (Fleeman, p. 135).

He seems not have known, or not to have cared, that in his day there was a strong revival of literary use of the Scottish vernacular, reflected in the poetry of Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson. Boswell was well aware of this efflorescence. On 1 November, he took Johnson to Auchans Castle, Ayrshire, near his family’s home at Auchinleck, to meet Susanna, Countess of Eglinton,

4Allen Reddick, The Making of Johnson’s Dictionary 1746–1773, revised edn. (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 62–5, 98; Johnson’s helpers, to whom he was actively compassionate, were V. J. Peyton, an English linguist; and four Scots—Francis Stewart, son of a bookseller, and a journalist, who perhaps left the Dictionary project in 1752; Robert Shielis (d. 1753), a poet and the real author of Theophilus Cibber’s Lives of the Poets to the Time of Dean Swift (1753); the elder Macbean, Alexander (d. 1784), who knew many languages, including German, had been librarian to the 3rd Duke of Argyll, and published two lexicons: A Dictionary of Ancient Geography (1773), for which Johnson provided a preface, and A Dictionary of the Bible (1779); and Alexander’s brother, William, who declared after Johnson’s death he intended to publish a supplement to the Dictionary, to supply it “deficiencies,” but this never appeared. Either of the Macbeans might have supplied Scottish dialect usages.
the beauty to whom Ramsay had dedicated *The Gentle Shepherd* (1725). She gave Boswell the MS of this famous pastoral play in 1777, and it is now in the National Library of Scotland [NLS] (Fleeman, pp. 70, 201-2 n. 4). At Ostaig on Skye, on 29 September, Boswell read to Johnson the satirical poem Ferguson wrote about a reception given to him at St Andrews. This made fun of the dainty fare provided by the professors, and recommended homely native dishes such as haggis and sheep’s head. The poem is making a point in a witty fashion about maintaining Scottish values. Johnson laughed when Boswell explained the poem to him, but made no comment (*Journal*, ed. Pottle, p. 233).

Two years after Johnson’s death, Burns began publishing the poems and songs “Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect,” which brought him world fame enduring to this day, because they are celebrations of humanity. Also, a generation later, Walter Scott began demonstrating in *Waverley* (1814), and his other historical novels, the power and range of Scots prose, which caught the imagination of his readers then and since. The issue here is that since Johnson displayed a negative attitude to native Lowland Scottish speech, and there is no evidence he was anything other than indifferent to the literature springing from it, we have to ask was he seriously interested in Gaelic and its literature, or was all that for him just part of the frolic of visiting the Gaeltacht?

As far as ongoing changes there are concerned, Johnson reported with indignation that the native language was “attacked on every side” through official policies:

> schools are erected, in which *English* only is taught, and there were some lately who thought it reasonable to refuse [the Gaels] a version of the holy scripture, that they might have no monument of their mother-tongue (Fleeman, p. 46).

Opposition to Gaelic proficiency was manifested at one time by leaders in the Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (founded 1709), who sought to eradicate that language, believing knowledge of it was encouraged by Catholics, and exploited by their priests.

At the Reformation, the Kirk had not favored traditional Gaelic literature and opposed its transmission. John Carswell, Superintendent of Argyll and the Isles, published a translation of *The Book of Common Order* (1560) in classical Gaelic common to Ireland and Scotland: *Foirm na n-Urniridheadh agus freasdal na sacramuinteadh* (1567). His preamble stated that the printing of books in Gaelic was to be for religious edification, and not for the “framing of vain, hurtful, lying earthly stories about the Tuatha De Danaan and about the sons of Milesius and about the heroes and Finn MacCoul with his giants.”

The emergence of Gaelic in print in the eighteenth century, finally for a secular

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purpose, came through the efforts of perhaps the language’s greatest poet of the era: Alexander MacDonald (Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair). He published in Edinburgh, first, the earliest printed dictionary: *Leabhar a theagasc ainminnin*. A Gallick and English vocabulary (1741), and, second, a book of his poems: *Ais-eiridh na sean chánoin Albannaich; no*, An nuadh oranaiche Gaidhealach [Resurrection of the ancient Scottish tongue, or, The new Gaelic song-book] (1751). The common hangman of Edinburgh was apparently ordered to burn copies of this book because of the emphatic Jacobite flavor of many of the poems.6

Because of his religious concerns, Johnson took an interest in the translation of the New Testament completed by a Presbyterian minister, the Revd James Stuart of Killin, and published at Edinburgh in 1767, and he presented a copy to the Bodleian in June 1775 (Fleeman, pp. 46, 181 n. 7, 100, 221 n. 7). Yet, Johnson showed no interest in, or his informants in Scotland neglected to mention to him, the accomplishment of James Stuart’s son, John, minister of Luss, a parish which Johnson visited on 27 October 1773 on his return from the Hebrides. John Stuart wrote down from dictation the poems of the major, though illiterate Gaelic poet of the era: Duncan Bàn Macintyre, for publication as *Orain Ghaidhealach, le Donchadh Mac-an-t-Saoir* (Edinburgh, 1768). This collection included the striking composition, “In Praise of Ben Dorain,” which reflects the deep feeling of Gaels for nature: “no hill has been so meticulously, so scrupulously, so lovingly described.”7

As for other Celtic languages, Johnson declared that Welsh and Irish were “cultivated tongues,” while he believed the “Earse [Gaelic] merely floated in the breath of the people, and could therefore receive little improvement” (Fleeman, p. 96). This was one of his rash pronouncements. To be sure, he took an interest in Welsh etymologies, and encouraged contemporary Welshmen to reprint Siôn Dafydd Rhys’s detailed account of bardic prosody, *Cambrobrytannicae Cymraecae linguae institutiones* (London, 1592) to help preserve the language. Also, he subscribed to an edition of *Gorchestion Beirdd Cymru*, edited by Rhys Jones (Shrewsbury, 1773) (Celtica, Nos. 220, 224), which is the earliest printed edition of medieval bardic poetry, mostly of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. As well, he owned a copy of a Welsh New Testament, *Testament Newydd ain Arglwydd Jesu Christ* (London, 1567), and presented it to Dr. William Worthington, Vicar of Llanrhaiadr, 8–9 September,

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Further, there is reason to believe he had some knowledge of Irish, at least from 1757, when he was in correspondence with Charles O'Connor of Belangare, whose *Dissertations on the Antient History of Ireland*, (2nd edn 1766) mentioned Johnson's interest and support. On the other side, there is no indication that Johnson was familiar with, or sought out, comparative linguistic information about Gaelic, available in the *Archaeologia Britannica* (1707) compiled by Edward Lhuyd, Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum. This work, only a first volume of which appeared, reflected Lhuyd's extensive travels in 1697–1701, through Wales, Cornwall, Brittany, Ireland, and the Scottish Highlands and Islands, which allowed him to work out the relationship between the modern Celtic languages, and establish links with the last custodians of the traditional Celtic learning, including bardic poetry. Yet this was exactly the subject area which Johnson professed to have an interest in exploring, when his suspicions were aroused by versions of ancient Caledonian poetry issued early in the 1760s by a newcomer to the literary scene in Britain, the Gaelic-speaker, James Macpherson, from Ruthven on Speyside, who had developed an interest in Ossianic ballads. It is worth


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remarking, however, that his sense of Gaelic culture and history had been affected by the defeat of the Jacobites in the '45 Rising – the ruins of Ruthven Barracks near his birthplace were a stark reminder of this, and his awareness of nature was formed by the lowering skies, towering mountains, and rushing torrents of Badenoch in Inverness, which resulted in the melancholy effects and feelings projected into his compositions (Thomson, p. 84). Further, there were definite limitations to what he could make of the traditional material he discovered or was given. Macpherson’s dialect differed from that of the Western Highlands and Islands, and he was not educated in the classical Gaelic tongue or literature in earlier times common to Ireland and Scotland. Also, he was not conversant with old handwriting. He had acquired a good classical education at Aberdeen University and tried teaching, then sought to escape from this by writing poetry, but his original poetry was not well received, so he had turned to exploiting an emerging market for “translations” of Gaelic poetry, regarded by advanced opinion in the 1750s to be primitive and sublime, thus notably in contrast to the Augustan type of poetry Johnson admired and wrote.

This newer taste was perhaps first displayed in print by Jeremy Stone, a St Andrews graduate teaching in Dunkeld, Perthshire, gateway to the Highlands, where he had been collecting Gaelic ballads. In the Scots Magazine for January 1756, he published a free, rhyming version of a ballad on the death of the hero Fraoch (Bàs Fraoich), arising from the cycle of tales relating the astonishing adventures of the giant warrior, Cú Chulainn. There is evidence that Macpherson at one time had in his possession the MS of Stone’s collection of ballads, or one like it, some of them related to another cycle of tales, connected with the hero Fionn mac Cumhal, and his warband, whose deeds and final defeat were remembered by Fionn’s son, the aged poet, Oisin dall (“blind Ossian”—see Thomson, pp. 6, 80). Macpherson realized the imaginative possibilities of exploiting the type of material Stone had collected, to reconstruct Gaelic heroic poetry and present it in “translations.” It is also possible

11R. Crawford, The Modern Poet: Poetry, Academia, and Knowledge since the 1750s (Oxford, 2004), Ch. 1. Stone’s collection of Gaelic ballads was published by Professor Donald MacKinnon in Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness, XIV (1887–8), 314–69. He was preceded as a collector in the field by a) Revd. Alexander Pope of Reay, c. 1739 (NLS Gaelic MS CXVIII); b) Archibald Fletcher of Achalader, c. 1750–60: his informants were the MacNicols of Glenorchy (NLS Gaelic MS CXIX); c) Revd. James Maclagan of Amulree, then Blair Atholl, c. 1750 on, who provided a number of ballads for Macpherson in 1760 (Glasgow University Library MS Gen. 1042/84); in addition to Gaelic ballads, Maclagan’s collection contains MS transcriptions of poems by the bards: Ian Lòm (John MacDonald of Keppoch), Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair (Alexander MacDonald), John MacCodrum; Duncan Bàn Macintyre, and Rob Donn Mackay; and d) Revd Donald MacNicol of Lismore, from 1755 (NLS MSS MS Acc. 2152), his collection provided material for his attack on Johnson’s negative views on Ossian in Remarks on Dr Samuel Johnson’s Journey to the Hebrides (London, 1779).
that Thomas Gray's poem, "The Bard" (published 1757), set in Wales, presenting an old blind, suicidal Welsh bard, who curses Edward I of England for conquering his people, and prophesizes ruin for his race, provided an analogue for Macpherson's persona, Ossian, featured reminiscing about the overthrow of his race in the third century A.D. Also, Macpherson was not above suggesting his Ossian was a Scottish version of blind Homer, and, pursuing such thoughts, he first allowed to be circulated, and then published as Fragments of Ancient Poetry (1760), which he announced as "Collected in the Highlands of Scotland and Translated from the Galic or Erse Language."

Boswell's friend, Dr. Hugh Blair, minister of the High Kirk of St Giles, and Professor of Rhetoric at Edinburgh University from 1760, was one of the most enthusiastic promoters of Macpherson's "ancient poetry." Anxious to establish its authenticity, he raised a fund from Scottish men of letters, including Boswell and the already skeptical David Hume, to send Macpherson on two missions in 1760-61, to collect proven Ossianic materials, preferably MSS, but failing that, oral reports. He was accompanied at different times by two Highlanders who were far more proficient in Gaelic, and could take down poetry from recitation, also transcribe it from ancient handwriting. The area investigated was extensive, ranging from the Central Highlands to the Hebrides, and Macpherson encountered not just collectors of Ossianic ballads, but traditional bards. Thus, on North Uist, Macpherson met John MacCodrum (lain mhic Fearchair), an unlettered bard capable of composing new poems, but also skilled in reciting poetry about the Fingalians. Macpherson asked for material about these heroes, but in such poor Gaelic that the poet made fun of it, so he went off in high dudgeon. On Benbecula, Macpherson met Neil Mac-Mhuirich, seventeenth bard in descent to the Chiefs of Clanranald. Much later,

12 The Highlanders who accompanied Macpherson on his collecting missions in 1760 were, first, Lachlan MacPherson, a good scholar, who was well known in the Gaeltacht, and, second, Ewan MacPherson, a young schoolmaster from Badenoch, with a much better grasp of Gaelic orthography than the poet. In due course, these men and a number of others provided information, some of it in affidavits, for the official inquiry, launched after Macpherson's death in 1796, into the sources of his "Ossian" poems, which was eventually published as A Report of the committee of the Highland Society, Appointed to Inquire into the Nature and Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian (henceforth Report). Drawn up, according to the directions of the committee, by Henry Mackenzie, its convener, or chairman. With a copious appendix, containing some of the principal documents on which the report is founded (Edinburgh, 1805). The appendix is an indispensable source on the Ossianic ballads circulating in the Highlands, which Macpherson and others collected, as well as information about his methods as a collector. The committee concluded, of course, that the "translations" were only loosely based on the sources. Henceforth Report.

Neil’s son, Lachlan, provided testimony for the Report of the Highland Society of Scotland that his father had custody of parchment Ossianic materials, including the Leabhar Dearg (Red Book) of Clanranald, which contained much of the history of the Highland clans, and part of the works of Ossian (Thomson, pp. 75–7).14 Lachlan deposed that Clanranald made his father give this MS book to James Macpherson. Lachlan also recorded that his family no longer possessed such MSS because they had been cut up for tailors’ measures.

Though he undervalued and was careless about material given to him, or recited for him, Macpherson was responsible for the recovery of important sources of Gaelic literature, collecting in all nineteen Gaelic MSS, and more were discovered after his visits to the Hebrides. One very important source in his hands at this time was the Book of the Dean of Lismore (NLS Gaelic MS XXXVII: compiled 1512-32), which contains over 11,000 lines of Gaelic poetry, including thirty Ossianic ballads, three of which bear a resemblance to Macpherson’s “Ossianic” compilations (Thomson, pp. 5-6, 74-5, 83; Celtica, No. 112, p. 29).15 There is reason to think he believed it contained the disjecta membra of a Gaelic epic, which he aimed at reconstructing. Thomas Becket, Macpherson’s bookseller (publisher), probably referred to the Dean’s Book, when he stated in an advertisement in the London newspapers, on 21 January 1775, that originals of Macpherson’s Ossianic poems had been available for inspection in his shop in 1762, but nobody tried to see them (Fleeman, p. 217, n. 9).

Though Macpherson had recovered, and in some case mislaid, unmistakable evidence of the “ancient poetry” of the Scottish Gaels, the “epics” he foisted on the reading public (Fingal, 1762, followed by Temora, 1763) were hybrid compilations, made of elements from traditional ballads, arising from both the Cú Chulainn and Fionn (Ossianic) cycles, about battles and death, plus ballads dealing with the later Viking invasions, also his own inventions and literary borrowings from classical epic poetry, English poets such as Milton and Gray, and writers of the contemporary sentimental school. Johnson had been burned in the 1750s by trusting one Scottish impostor, William

14The folio Red Book of Clanranald containing Ossianic poems appears to be missing, and efforts to find it in Australia, where there was a report it had surfaced in 1937, have proved unavailing—see Ronald I. Black, “In Search of the Red Book of Clanranald,” Clan Donald Magazine, 8 (1979), Online.

15The Ossianic material in Heroic Poetry from the Book of the Dean of Lismore, ed. Neil Ross, Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 3 (1939) has a counterpart in the Duanaire Finn, compiled in 1627 in Ostend, Belgium, by Aodh O’Dochtairgh for Captain Somairle MacDomhaill, then passed on for preservation to the Irish Franciscans in Louvain, whose house from 1606 on became a centre of Irish scholarship and publication; the Duanaire thereafter moved many times in Europe before being deposited in University College, Dublin—Duanaire Finn: Reassessments, ed. John Carey, Irish Texts Society, Subsidiary Series, 13 (2003).
Lauder, and accepting fabricated charges of plagiarism against Milton. Possibly he was impelled here by his animus against Milton as a republican, self-directed religious poet to accept the charges of plagiarism. Faced with another Scotsman making claims about literary documents, it is understandable that Johnson would seize the high moral ground, and denounce Macpherson for his inability to produce MSS.

However, Johnson on his part misled the readers of his *Journey* grossly by repeating, without a very careful check, that the “Earse [Gaelic] was never a written language; [and] that there is not in the world an Earse manuscript a hundred years old” (Fleeman, p. 95). In his surviving MS “Remarks” on Johnson’s *Journey*, Boswell clearly rejected Johnson’s insinuations that no ballads could be found as sources for Macpherson’s *Ossian*, and that informants could not recite “six lines” (Fleeman, pp. 97; 98, 215-7, n. 9). Johnson had no conception of the oral transmission of extensive and complex compositions handed down among many generations of professional poets, the bards of Ireland and Celtic Scotland, or of the collections of Ossianic ballads currently available, and traceable back to the fifteenth century, arising from the cycles of heroic tales (Thomson, p. 4). In addition, it is quite unlikely that Johnson could have read the handwriting of the Dean of Lismore’s Book had he come to Becket’s bookshop to inspect it.

As for his personal inquiries about bardic traditions and ancient poetry, Johnson was aware that he should have visited the islands which were predominantly Catholic: “we therefore who came to hear old traditions, and see antiquated manners, should probably have found them among the Papists” (Fleeman, pp. 105-106). On South Uist, he could have met Lachlan MacMuirich and heard from him an account of the hereditary bards. Also, either in South Uist or North Uist, he could have met John MacCodrum, who had clashed with Macpherson. Boswell’s friend, Sir James MacDonald of Sleat (1741-66), Chief of his clan, and direct descendant of the Lords of the Isles, chose MacCodrum as his bard in 1763, seeking to learn from him about ancient Gaelic literature, including the Ossianic material. Sir James also wrote to Blair that same year he would arrange to have a certain “John Ossian” examined about his knowledge of the ancient poetry. This was John M’Leod, well known on Harris for his store of Ossianic songs (MacCodrum, pp. xxv-xxvi).

Taking up a suggestion made by David Hume to Blair, when skepticism increased about claims for the antiquity of Macpherson’s productions, ministers in the Hebrides were asked to examine Gaelic reciters of Ossianic poems. One such examiner was the Revd Donald Macqueen of Kilmuir in Skye, who reported to Blair on 17 April 1764 that he had spent twenty days with MacCodrum, whom he described as a “rehearser of ancient songs,” remembering material of “high antiquity” (Report, Appendix, pp. 3-5, 20, 32). Through confining his journey to the Inner Hebrides, Johnson did not meet the bards that were examined, and in any case it is doubtful if he would have had the
diplomatic skill to get these men to recite the poetry they knew, or the drive to get an adequate interpreter. Johnson spent a good deal of time in Macqueen’s company at Ulinish on Skye and on Raasay, and spoke highly of him, but professed to be dissatisfied by the minister’s answers to his queries about the authenticity of Ossian, as did Boswell (Fleeman, pp. 98, 210 n. 1, 219 n. 10; Journal, ed. Pottle, pp. 204-7). It would seem that Johnson’s peremptory method of inquiry put Macqueen off, and he did not choose to meet the demands made of him. Macqueen wrote a history of Gaelic literature to refute Johnson’s views on the Ossian question, and the MS is in the Hyde Dr Johnson Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University (Fleeman, p. xxxv, n. 4).

In the opening sentence of his Journey, Johnson intrigues us with this claim: “I had desired to visit the Hebrides, or Western Islands of Scotland, so long, that I scarcely remember how the wish was originally made” (Fleeman, p. 1). Boswell recorded Johnson’s wish in his published Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides, stating, “[Johnson] told me…that his father put Martin’s Account of those islands into his hands when he was very young, and that he was much pleased with it” (Journal, ed. Hill, pp. v, 13). The book mentioned was Martin Martin’s Description of the Western Islands of Scotland, which had appeared in a first edition in 1703 and a second in 1716. Boswell borrowed a copy of the 1703 edition from the Advocates’ Library in Edinburgh before setting out for the Hebrides with Johnson, and he returned it with an inscription, dated 16 April 1774, noting that he had kept it with him during his travels with Johnson.

Johnson laments in the Journey that he and Boswell “came too late to see what we expected, a people of peculiar appearance, and a system of antiquated life” (Fleeman, p. 46), and he is hard on Martin for not being more active in seeking evidence about that “system.” However, Martin (c.1660–1719; MA, Edinburgh University, 1681; MD, Leyden, c.1712) was a native Gaelic-speaker from Skye, who was in a good position to collect information about the culture of the Highlands and Islands. In 1686–92, he served in turn as tutor (educator and guardian) of the principal Skye clan chieftains of his time: Donald Macdonald of Sleat (4th Bt.), and Roderick Macleod of Macleod (Dunvegan), whose descendants Johnson and Boswell were later to visit.
In the section of his book entitled, “The Ancient and Modern Customs of the Inhabitants of the Western Islands” (Martin, pp. 95-115), Martin presents much useful material about Chiefs as leaders in war and magistrates, also about their hereditary officers such as historians and physicians, also their bards. The latter were the Aos-dana (folk of songs), who composed praise and dispraise poetry, but who had lost status in the Hebrides (as in Ireland), for indulging too much in satire, and demanding too much in the way of rewards. Regarding traditions about ancient heroes in the Western Islands, Martin wrote that the “Natives have many stories” about the “general” and giant, Fin Mack Coul, and the Fainty (Macpherson’s Fingal and the Fingalians), and their association with sites on Arran and elsewhere (Martin, pp. 152-3, 217, 219, 220), but he declined to trouble his readers with them, probably because he did not think this material would interest enlightened readers. Of course, had he applied himself, Johnson could have followed up the clues in Martin about the survival of heroic tales in the Gaeltacht, and the information about the composition of learned oral poems of great complexity and length. As for hereditary jurisdiction described by Martin, it was Johnson’s opinion that the “final conquest” of the Jacobites in 1746 had provided an opportunity to crush “all the local courts,” so as to bring the benefits of equal law to all social classes, and he was certainly not going to lament the passing of the old violent ways of the clans (Fleeman, pp. 36-7).

Johnson and Boswell, with the latter’s Bohemian servant, Joseph Ritter, attending them, left Inverness on horseback on 30 August. They were accompanied on foot by two Gaelic-speaking Highlanders, John Hay and Lachlan Vass, who acted as guides and interpreters until the horses were sent back on 2 September from Glenelg, on the mainland opposite the isle of Skye. Johnson praised the guides as “civil and ready-handed,” and allowed that “civility seems part of the national characters of the Highlanders” (Fleeman, p. 22). This was a point made by Edward Lhuyd in 1700:

we found a great deal of Civility and kindness as well in the highlands as in the Lowlands[.] And tho the highlanders be represented both in England & Ireland as Barbarous and Inhospitable, we found em quite otherwise, the Gentlemen, men of good sense and breeding and the Com[m]ons a subtil inquisitive people and more civil to Strangers in directing them the way...than in most other Count[ries]...

preparation of an Atlas and Description of Scotland. This was an Enlightenment era project, meant to provide an extensive survey of the topography, natural resources, and social structure of Scotland, with a view to the economic development and improvement of the country. Sibbald circulated queries about this project and Martin, after extensive travels through the Macleod lands, organized his Tour somewhat in terms of answers to them: see Roger L. Emerson, “Sir Robert Sibbald, Kt., the Royal Society of Scotland and the Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment,” Annals of Science, 45 (1988), 41-72.
Lhuyd believed the reputation for being "Barbarous" was caused by the roughness of the country consisting "very much of barren mountains and Loughs and their retaining their antient habits Customs and Language" (Campbell and Thomson, p.6).

Be that as it may, the route followed by our travelers took them along General Wade's road along Loch Ness to Fort Augustus, and on 31 August, they reached the inn at Anoch in Glen Moriston, a stopping point for drovers from Skye taking their cattle to Crieff and Falkirk. The innkeeper, Lachlan Macqueen, was communicative, and described the present "general dissatisfaction" among the Highlanders, which was driving them to emigrate, for example, the 500 or so in the *Pearl*, which left Fort William about this time, under Macdonell leadership, bound for New York, to take up land grants in Albany. The principal cause of emigration was the raising of rents which tenants were unable to pay. Reflecting on what he had observed in some parts of Skye, Johnson identified one principal cause of the rack-renting of this period: the "Chiefs being now deprived of their jurisdictions...gradually degenerate from patriarchal rulers into rapacious landlords" (Fleeman, p. 74).

On 1 September, the innkeeper accompanied the travelers part of the way through Gen Moriston, and Boswell reports being great moved by his account of serving as a soldier in the '45 Rising:

He had joined Prince Charles at Fort Augustus, and continued in the Highland army till after the battle of Culloden. As he narrated the particulars of that unlucky but brave and generous attempt, I several times burst into tears. There is a certain association of ideas in my mind upon that subject, by which I am strongly affected. The very Highland names, or the sound of a bagpipe, will stir my blood and fill me with a mixture of melancholy, and respect for courage; and pity for the unfortunate, superstitious regard for antiquity; and inclination for war without thought; and, in short, with a crowd of sensations (*Journal*, ed. Pottle, pp. 106--7).

Boswell identified with Charles Edward Stuart, thinking of himself as something of an exiled wanderer, and this led him in Skye to collect material about the Prince's escape from Hanoverian pursuit. Also, it seems that Boswell was among the first Lowlanders to record enthusiasm for bagpipe music, and connect it sentimental Jacobitism (*Journal*, ed. Hill, V, 140, 187-205).

After Macqueen left them, they paused at the "narrow valley" (formerly holding Loch Lundie, now only an inlet of Loch Cluanie), where Johnson "sat down on a bank, such as a writer of Romance might have delighted to feign," and amid "rudeness, silence, and solitude," thought of writing a book about his travels. It can be surmised from the passage preceding this revelation that Johnson intended his narration to deal with Highland antiquities, and the kind of information the innkeeper Macqueen provided about the state of the Highlands and emigration. With a sensibility attuned to the older notion of "mountain gloom" rather than the "mountain glory," already found in the contempo-
rary shift in aesthetics, Johnson had no eye or feeling for the mountains of Kintail, including its awesomely beautiful Five Sisters. He described the region as a "wide expanse of hopeless sterility." He continued, "the appearance is that of matter incapable of form or usefulness, dismissed by nature from her care and disinherit ed of her favours, left in its original elemental state, or quickened only with one sullen power of useless vegetation" (Fleeman, pp. 31, 298).

Passing over the head of Glen Shiel, the travelers descended down rocky gorges to its floor, and arrived at the clachan of Achadh nan Seileach ("willowy level"), rendered by Johnson as "Auknasheals." He related it was inhabited by Gaelic-speaking Macraes, "an indigent and subordinate clan," who had a "very savage wildness of aspect and manner," and thinking of them as "needy and pitiable," he distributed copper coins among the children (Fleeman, p. 33). Boswell identified the people who crowded round them as the "brave M'Craas," who had been of "considerable estimation" in the 1715 Rising. He added a note at this point in his Journal (Journal, ed. Hill, V, 142 n. 2; 516), about an episode in their further martial history, which illustrates the increasing exploitation of Highland militarism after the collapse of Jacobite insur­gence in 1746. This was an answer, on the one hand, to the need, as the British Empire expanded, for hardy and reliable troops, and, on the other, to the economic problems of the Gaeltacht, where subsistence pressures grew for a surplus population with a warrior tradition, rather than one of involvement in commerce and industry. As well, the clan leadership could retain prestige and power, also some wealth, through providing an officer class benefiting from imperial spoils and opportunities. The associated risks, however, were high. Many Macraes joined the 78th Foot, recruited for the British army by their clan Chief, Kenneth Mackenzie, 6th Earl of Seaforth, in 1778. Soldiers of this regiment mutinied in Edinburgh in September of that year, when they were ordered abroad, because they believed a promise had been broken that they were to be kept at home, and further they believed they were to be sent to India, where there was a fearsome death rate from sickness. Boswell took a great interest in the ending of the mutiny through a truce made with national leaders. The Highlanders involved returned to duty, and were sent to Jersey, in the Channel Islands, where they distinguished themselves in driving off a French incursion. What Boswell does not mention is that three years later they were shipped out to India, and on the voyage suffered a fearful death-toll of 247 from scurvy and fever, including the loss of their commander, Lord Seaforth.20

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Johnson did not favor empire-building, thinking that it led to the oppression of native people, and he was not one to celebrate too readily the deeds of Highland soldiers abroad warring for the British Empire. He remarked grimly that “those who went to the American war, went to destruction,” noting that of 1,200 men of the Black Watch sent out, “only seventy-six survived to see their country again.” Johnson favored allowing the Highland regiments to wear their national dress, not to maintain *esprit de corps*, the usual reason given, but to keep them distinct from the people of Pennsylvania and Connecticut, and thus disincline them to coalesce politically (Fleeman, pp. 80–81). He feared that Highland people going to America would come to love liberty there, and sever their ties with the Old Country. As matters fell out, Highlanders more often than not proved to be Loyalists in the American War of Independence, ready to support King George III, rather than join Patriots fighting under George Washington.

Leaving *Achadh nan Seileach*, probably about 6 pm on 1 September, Johnson and Boswell set out for Glenelg, and had difficulties at the pass of *Mam Ratagan* (1072 feet in 3 miles), near Loch Duich. The guides were worried about their horses carrying Johnson’s great weight, and he grew tired and fractious. As darkness fell, he became silent, and in the belief he was meditating, Boswell spurred on, seeking accommodation for the night. Johnson thought he was being abandoned, and roared for Boswell to come back, then quarreled bitterly with him. It is to be feared that matters did not improve at the Glenelg inn, which proved to be a Highland horror, with a dirty, smelly room, and food on offer that was uneatable. Boswell slept badly, but in the morning Johnson owned that he had spoken in passion, and added: “Let’s think no more on’t,” so the famous Journey went ahead (*Journal*, ed. Pottle, pp. 109–12).

On reaching the shore at Armidale in Skye about 1 pm on 2 September, Johnson and Boswell were met by Sir Alexander Macdonald of Sleat, 16th Chief of his clan (younger brother of Boswell’s friend, Sir James), and his wife, Elizabeth Diana Bosvile of Gunthwaite in Yorkshire. Sir Alexander was dressed in tartan and his lady was making little jumps, so perhaps our travelers had high hopes of a hearty welcome and hospitality befitting the home of a Hebridean Chief. In the event, both Johnson and Boswell were displeased with their reception, and thought they were treated meanly in a mean house (*Journal*, ed. Pottle, pp. 117, 192). Boswell quarreled with the Chief, and was on the point of threatening to have a duel with him. Behind all this was that the fact that Lord Macdonald (recently made a baron in the Irish peerage) was totally Anglicized, and acted as a proprietor rather than a Chief, racking up the rents of some of his tenants, and evicting others. He had forgotten (or was ignorant of) the traditional duties and obligations of a Chief, who was supposed, accord-
ing to the concept of *duthchas*, formerly endorsed in the clan territories,\(^2\) to be a steward for his people, managing the clan’s resources prudently to see his followers through hard times, which were being experienced on Skye. This Macdonald Chief was also guilty of breaking written promises to recruits enlisted in 1778 for service in the 76th Regiment in America (Devine, 2003, p. 345).

The one feature of traditional life maintained in the Macdonald Chief’s household was that he had a piper who played every day, though “below the stairs.” This resulted in Dr. Johnson hearing a *piobaireachd*, and learning how it came to be composed (Fleeman, pp. 39, 177 nn. 1, 3). The tune, which is from the repertoire of *ceòl mòr* (the great music), is believed to have been “The Battle of Strome,” also known as “Cille Chriosd” (Christ’s Cell) or “Glen­garry’s March.” The story behind it, of which Johnson gives a garbled version, is that c. 1602 the Macdonells of Glengarry considered themselves injured by the Mackenzies, who had captured and destroyed Strome Castle, killing Glen­garry in a battle fought from boats on Loch Carron. Vowing revenge, a party of Macdonells marched on a Sunday to Kilchrist, at Urray, near Muir of Ord. Finding their enemies at worship, the Macdonells are said to have shut them up in Cille Chriosd church, which they set on fire. This latter part, however, is disputed. Johnson and Boswell also heard in the Hebrides *ceòl beag* (the lesser music), performed as marches, also for dancing jigs, reels, and strathspeys, in which Boswell seems to have taken a lively part, though he said at one point that he did not like dancing. On a hike on Raasay, Boswell danced to *puirt a beul*, mouth music, that is, a singer imitating the sound of the pipes with more or less nonsense rhymes (*Journal*, ed. Pottle, p. 137).

Johnson thought that in the aftermath of the ’45 Rising, the use of the bag­pipe “begins to be forgotten,” but he and Boswell provided information about the MacCrimmons and Rankins, hereditary pipers to the Macleods and Mac­leans, respectively, who maintained colleges on Skye and Mull (Fleeman, pp. 85, 208 nn. 3, 4). The master pipers transmitted *ceòl mòr* by insisting their pupils had to learn rigorously *canntaireachd*, tunes rendered note by note as sung vocables, before they were played on the pipes. The colleges declined, but piping was supported in the Highland regiments, also in many communities in Scotland, and though many pipers emigrated, their art has continued to “exhilarate” auditors (Johnson’s word) wherever they settled.

Riding their shelties on from Armadale, Johnson and Boswell fared better in their quest to see a “people of peculiar appearance, and system of antiquated life,” at least on the point of meeting men wearing the kilt and plaid, also in experiencing warm Hebridean hospitality and enjoying traditional singing and dancing. Their next stop was at Coirechatachan, near the Broadford burn, and

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Dr. Johnson in the Gaeltacht, 1773

below Beinn na Caillich, one of the highest and most striking mountains in Skye. The host was Lachlan Mackinnon, a tenant of Lord Macdonald's who shared the travelers' opinion of his landlord. Mackinnon had been a Captain in the Jacobite army in the '45, and there was discussion of the Rising at his table, also of the phenomenon of the Second Sight. One evening a minister's wife in the company sang Gaelic songs, but as on other occasions Johnson could not get anyone to translate them for him. When the travelers were on Mull, however, Mary Maclean, who lived for some time in Glasgow, sang and translated songs collected by her father, Dr. Hector Maclean, MD, of Gruine (Fleeman, pp. 114, 230-31 n. 4). Johnson and Boswell also heard in the Hebrides work songs, sung by rowers, reapers, and women fulling cloth—a process known in the Highlands as waulking, which was demonstrated by Lady Raasay (Journal, ed. Pottle, p. 152).

On 8 September they were met at the little bay of Sgianadan by the Revd Donald Macqueen of Kilmuir, whose contribution to Ossian scholarship has already been noticed above. He accompanied the travelers in an open boat, which was rowed about 8 ½ miles to Raasay, under the direction of one of the great characters Johnson and Boswell encountered on the Hebridean isles. This was Calum Ruadh MacIlan Viclain Viclain VicAlasdair MacLeod of Brae, another ardent Jacobite who wore Highland dress in defiance of the law. He was notable for being Prince Charles's highly resourceful guide when he was in hiding on Skye. Calum Ruadh took an oar himself on the way to Raasay, and led the singing of a Jacobite rowing song with a bawdy double meaning. The song *Tha tigh 'nn fodham éiridh* was composed as a compliment to Allan MacDonald of Clanranald, who was "out" in the time of the '15 Rising. It slyly encourages him and his followers to "rise" in the "rightful cause," but of love rather than war. On Raasay, John, 11th Chief of the Macleods there, provided traditional hospitality of the kind the travelers had longed to experience, and Johnson exclaimed: "this is truly the patriarchal life. This is what we came to find" (Journal, ed. Pottle, p.135)

Depicting the unsettled state of the Highlands and Islands in his time, Johnson believed that the overthrow of traditional Gaelic society was due to the repression of the Gaels that followed the defeat of the Jacobites in the '45, but what he saw was the acceleration of a long drawn out process of change in the Gaeltacht that seems to have followed the collapse of the Lordship of the Isles. To be sure, Johnson was noting the passing of laws in the Parliament of Westminster that not only terminated the heritable jurisdictions in Scotland (Acts of 1746 and 1747), but also denied the people their weapons, and their customary dress: Act for the more effectual Disarming of the Highlands of

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22Information supplied by Calum Ruadh's descendant, Mr. J. R. Macleod, Surrey, BC, Canada.
Scotland...and for restraining the use of the Highland Dress, 1746, enlarged in 1747.

In truth, however, there was variation in enforcement of the dress restrictions. For instance, on 12 September 1773, after being rowed from Raasay back to Skye, Johnson and Boswell met Allan MacDonald of Kingsburgh:

he had his Tartan plaid thrown about him, a large blue bonnet with a knot of black ribband like a cockade [the white cockade, of course, was the symbol of Jacobite allegiance], a brown short coat of a kind of duffil, a Tartan waistcoat with gold buttons and gold button-holes, a bluish philabeg [the little kilt], and Tartan hose. He had jet black hair tied behind, and was a large stately man, with a steady sensible countenance (Journal, ed. Hill, V, 184).

Boswell displayed great enthusiasm about the wearing of the traditional dress of the Gaels, and prevailed on Johnson to share this. He claimed that Johnson showed through the whole of their tour the “spirit of a Highlander,” and he recorded a droll episode of this from their time on the island of Coll:

One night...[Johnson] strutted about the room with a broadsword and target, and made a formidable appearance; and another night I took the liberty to put a large blue bonnet on his head. His age, his size, and his bushy grey wig with this covering on it, presented the image of a venerable sennachie; and, however, unfavourable to the Lowland Scots, he seemed much pleased to assume the appearance of an ancient Caledonian. We only regretted that he could not be prevailed on to partake of the social glass (Journal, ed. Pottle, p. 314).

Kingsburgh was the kinsman of Lady Margaret MacDonald, who supplied Bonnie Prince Charlie with clothing and funds when he was on the run in Skye. Also, he was later the husband of Flora MacDonald, who had helped the Prince escape by cross-dressing him as her Irish maid, Betty Bourke, and taking him with her to Skye from Benbecula, where he was in grave danger of detection by Captain Caroline Scott, RN, one of the cruelest oppressors of the Jacobites (Journal, ed. Hill, V, 188). Johnson wrote of her as a heroine whose “name...will be mentioned in history, and if courage and fidelity be virtues, mentioned with honour” (Fleeman, p. 54).

From 13 to 21 September, Johnson and Boswell stayed at Dunvegan Castle, as guests of Norman Macleod, 23rd Chief, a young man who went on to serve the East India Company as a General, and help amass a fortune of about £100,000, very little of which was invested in Skye (Devine, 2003, p. 343). Passing on to Ulanish and Talisker, also seats of hospitable gentlemen, they met in the latter place the likeable Donald Maclean, known as young Coll, who had set out to improve his father’s estate by applying scientific agriculture learned in Herefordshire and Hampshire. He agreed to conduct them via Coll to his chief, Sir Allen Maclean, who lived on the island of Inch Kenneth, and prevail on him to arrange a visit to Iona, undertaken on 19/20 October. Think-
ing of the missionary work of St. Columba and his successors, Johnson wrote of “treading that illustrious Island, which was once the luminary of the Caledonian regions, whence savage clans and roving barbarians derived the benefits of knowledge and the blessings of religion,” and in an elegiac mood he added the memorable sentence: “That man is little to be envied, whose patriotism would not gain force upon the plain of Marathon, or whose piety would not grow warmer among the ruins of Iona” (Fleeman, pp. 123-4).

Earlier, on 1–3 October, the travelers revisited Armadale, which Sir Alexander and Lady MacDonald vacated. On the evening of the 2nd, there was a “great dance,” including a brisk reel named “America,” which Boswell thought was occasioned by emigration from Skye. It was a progressive dance, in which the couples start off setting to each other, until all are involved, setting and wheeling round each other, while each couple, in turn, is making the tour of all in the dance. The hostess, Mrs. Anne Mackinnon, told Boswell that in 1772 when an emigrant ship sailed from Portree, the people on shore grieved to distraction, lying on the ground, tumbling about, and tearing the grass with their teeth. In 1773, not a tear was shed, as the people on shore seemed to think they would follow soon. Johnson found among the Gaels what he called an “epidemical fury of emigration” (Fleeman, p. 48), and he thought the British Government should restrain landlords, “for a time,” from raising rents so high that tenants were driven to go to America (Fleeman, p. 80). Boswell also took a dire view of emigration, offering his opinion of the dance called “America,” “this is a mortal sign” (Journal, ed. Pottle, p. 242-3). In truth, however, this was the time of the “People’s Clearance,” when clansmen of some means left in disgust with their treatment on the clan lands, and they made good settlers under their natural leaders, the tacksmen, who had formerly officered the clan regiments, and had been marginalized by the post-’45 upheavals. To his credit, Johnson realized that loss of their leadership was a serious blow in the fight for economic survival in the Gaeltacht (Fleeman, pp. 71-2).

Johnson’s exit route from the Gaeltacht took him from Mull to Oban on 22 October, and next day on the road to Inveraray, the Doctor for once enjoyed the boisterousness of the elements:

the wind was loud, the rain was heavy, and the whistling of the blast, the fall of the shower, the rush of the cataracts, and the roar of the torrent, made a nobler chorus of the rough musick of nature than it had ever been my chance to hear before (Fleeman, p. 132).

At Inveraray Castle, entertainment was provided by the 5th Duke in his Castle, whose predecessor, John, 2nd Duke (1678–1743), had led the way in the High-

lands in transforming himself from a Chief into a landed proprietor. One
morning, either on 24 or 25 October, Johnson was informed by Boswell at their
inn that the Aberdeen philosopher, James Beattie, had been given a royal pen­sion of £20 pounds a year for supposedly refuting, in his abusive Essay on
Truth (1770), the arguments Hume had directed against accepting miracles.
According to Boswell, Johnson “sat up in his bed, clapped his hands, and cried,
‘O brave we!’ Boswell notes this was a “peculiar exclamation of his when he
rejoices” (Journal, ed. Hill, V, p. 360). How astonishing that Johnson would
show such bad judgment as to think that Hume had been refuted by that “bigot­
ted silly...Fellow, Beattie”!

On 26 October, the travelers arrived at Rossdhu, a promontory on Loch
Lomond, to stay in a house owned by Sir James Colquhoun of Luss. Next day,
they were at Cameron House owned by the Smollett family, where Johnson
contributed improvements for a Latin inscription on a monument to the novel­
ist, Tobias. Lord Kames, one of the leaders of the Scottish Enlightenment, had
recommended an English inscription, because it would be “generally under­
stood.” Johnson treated this idea “with great contempt,” saying “an English
inscription would be a disgrace to Dr Smollett.” Boswell snobbishly went
along with this, stating the inscription was “not meant for the Highland drovers,
or other such people, who pass and repass that way” (Journal, ed. Hill, V, 366).
Drovers, of course, would likely be Gaelic-speakers, maybe unable to read.
They would have known their Highland history, however, and would have
shared with Smollett a feeling of outrage at the sadistic cruelty shown by the
“Butcher” Duke of Cumberland to Jacobites, after their defeat at Culloden,
which Smollett expressed in “The Tears of Scotland” (1746). Johnson called
Cumberland a “vindictive conqueror,” and referred in passing to his “sever­
ities” (Fleeman, p. 74), but this glosses over the pillaging, wanton destruction,
raping, and killing he sanctioned. On 28 October, the travelers reached
Dumbarton, where Johnson climbed the rock “with alacrity” to examine the
old fort, which marked an endpoint of the Highland Line.

Johnson thus spent 64 days in the Gaeliclands, the longest exposure up to
that point of an English man of letters to Gaelic culture. He returned to Lon­
don on 26 November 1773, and the first edition of his Journey to the Western
Islands of Scotland was announced as published on 18 January 1775 (2nd edn.
later in 1775; 3rd in 1785). According to a contemporary, it was believed to
have been written in twenty days (Fleeman, p. xvii). Mapherson learned of
Johnson’s condemnation of him as an impostor in advance of the publication,
and sent him a threatening letter, whereupon Johnson replied in a famously
truculent manner: “I received your foolish and impudent letter.... I hope I
shall never be deterred from detecting what I think is a cheat by the menaces of
a ruffian” (letter of 20 January 1775, quoted in Buchan, p. 170). Johnson had

won the immediate battle about the authenticity of Macpherson’s Ossian poems, but a frenzy aroused by them swept German, France, Italy, and many other European countries, and this became a major force in the development of romanticism. Even in America, the twenty-year-old Walt Whitman was associated with an edition published in Philadelphia by Thomas, Cowperthwait & Co.: 1839; conceivably he found inspiration in Ossian for his own effusions.

Johnson’s Journey received some favorable attention in Scotland for the sympathy expressed over the economic distress of the poor in the Gaeltacht, and the insights offered about the changing role of chiefs, marginalizing of the tacksmen, and causes of emigration. To be sure, Scots did not appreciate being told their patriotism necessarily made them liars, especially by someone so careless about the truth concerning the ancient literature of their country. It is the case that many Scottish responses were unfavorable, if not downright hostile and abusive, with Johnson attacked for “prejudice, discourtesy, and ingratitude” (Fleeman, p. xxxi). The weightiest of the replies to Johnson was a book entitled, Remarks on Dr Samuel Johnson’s Journey to the Hebrides (1779), by the Revd Donald MacNicol: a graduate of St Andrews University, minister of Lismore, Argyll, from 1766 on, and a learned Gaelic scholar (see note 11). He provided for the Highland Society of Scotland perhaps the best collection available for determining the nature and extent of Macpherson’s sources, and his use of them. It was not difficult for him to refute Johnson’s contention that there were no written sources of Gaelic literature above a hundred years old. Also, like the Revd John Stuart of Luss, he had taken down from the dictation of Duncan Bàn Macintyre some 6,000 lines of the bard’s poetry, which proved conclusively that oral transmission was the primary method of the transmission of texts in traditional Gaelic society. As well, he was able to pinpoint Johnson’s many errors of detail concerning Gaelic antiquities, perhaps obsessively so. His book is said to have made Johnson “growl hideously,” when he was made aware of its contents (Thomson, p. 7).

The Ossian controversy, stirred up in large part, by Johnson’s condemnation of Macpherson’s writings, and his misuse of Irish history (Thomson, Ch. VII) aroused scholars in Ireland, such as Charles O’Conor, mentioned above as Johnson’s correspondent in the 1750s. His Dissertations on the Antient History of Ireland (1766) include one on the Irish origin of the Scots, meant to refute Macpherson’s unhistorical claims that Ossian’s poetry was solely Scottish. This drew attention to the antiquity, comprehensiveness, and high quality of native Irish literature. Also, Evan Evans, the greatest Welsh scholar of his time, responded to the Ossian controversy with Specimens of the Poetry of the Antient Welsh Bards, Translated into English (London, 1764). Evans notes that the publicity bestowed on Macpherson’s productions had driven him to produce his book, which offered dependable original texts of medieval poems as well as translations. Thus, in large part as a result of the contestation between Macpherson and Johnson, there was immense stimulation in the British Isles and Ireland for the recovery and appreciation of Celtic literatures.
Finally, when the Wizard of the North, Walter Scott, had featured the Highlands and the Hebrides in his long poems, *The Lady of the Lake* (1810) and *Lord of the Isles* (1815), also in the novels, *Waverley* (1814) and *Rob Roy* (1818), and drew his wand over the landscapes and seascapes Johnson and Boswell had observed in their travels a generation or so before, tourists in increasing numbers wished to succumb to their spell. By 1818, David Napier’s sixty-foot paddle steamer, *Marion*, took them on trips round Loch Lomond. In the 1820s and 30s, they were venturing into the Trossachs, and out to Skye, Mull, and Iona. Mendelssohn visited Scott briefly in the Summer of 1829, then went on a storm-beset cruise of the Inner Hebrides, calling at Fingal’s Cave on Staffa, and in a letter of 7 August he sketched the first twenty bars of what became the *Hebrides Overture*, the quintessential evocation of romantic feeling about the Gaeltacht.  

Johnson had been scornful of the idea that Fin­gal had ever lived, or that Ossian ever sang, but willy-nilly he prepared the way for the transformation of the *Gaeltacht* into a land of romance, where her­oes had once lived and bards had celebrated their deeds. At the same time, Gaelic-speakers in their thousands emigrated to the industrial cities of the South, and the New Worlds they settled, while the ruins of their dwellings and derelict enterprises were left to speak mutely of their last struggles to survive in their homeland.

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