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## MORE IN NOTIONS THAN FACTS": SAMUEL

### JOHNSON'S *JOURNEY TO THE WESTERN ISLANDS*

WHEN SAMUEL JOHNSON'S *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* first appeared, in January, 1775, the *Gentleman's Magazine* quickly drew attention to its predominantly philosophical quality. The "life and blood", the "flesh and spirit" of the work—the magazine insisted—lay in its reflections.<sup>1</sup> R. W. Chapman, in a definitive modern edition of the *Journey*, agrees with Boswell that much of the book is "made up . . . of general disquisitions", a characteristic not surprising because Johnson "wrote as a philosopher".<sup>2</sup> And John Hawkins thought the *Journey* might "properly be called a dissertation", because it consists "chiefly in propositions which [Johnson] hunts down, and enlivens with amusing disquisitions." Johnson would concur with Hawkins' implication that the major concern of the *Journey* is with reflection on Highland society. After all, although Boswell's inability to read proof would leave certain errors undetected, Johnson dismissed the matter as "not great", because he was dealing "more in notions than facts".<sup>3</sup> As Hawkins perceptively observes: "If any particular subject may be said to have engaged [Johnson's] attention, it must have been the manners of a people of whom he knew little but by report, the knowledge whereof might furnish him with new topics for reflection and disquisition, an exercise of his mental powers, which, of all others, he most delighted in."<sup>4</sup>

But in twentieth-century criticism the *Journey* is now "social history", or a "very serious and admirable sociological study of the Highlands", or the work of a "social anthropologist".<sup>5</sup> This much more accessible terminology affords very helpful and penetrating insights into Johnson's viewpoint, but perhaps an examination of the older terminology may likewise enhance an understanding of the *Journey* by singling out those characteristics which earned for it such tributes as philosophical, moral, and reflective. How does the reflective emphasis of the *Journey* influence the selection and arrangement of Johnson's material? How extensively and specifically philosophical is his study? And how does his treatment of the highly controverted questions about

Highland society reveal the vigorous exercising of his philosophically inquiring mind? In the answers to these questions, Johnson's contemporaries justified their claim that he wrote as a philosophical traveller.

The three available records of Johnson's Highland tour in the autumn of 1773 are the *Journey*, Johnson's long letters to Mrs. Thrale from the Hebrides, and James Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*.<sup>6</sup> Contrasting Johnson's published account with his own letters and with Boswell establishes that the *Journey* is not a chronological or anecdotal account of Johnson's travels or a haphazard combination of narration, description, and reflection. The chronological and anecdotal record of that journey is primarily and comprehensively Boswell's. His subject and delight is Johnson amid the Highlands, in the longest uninterrupted time that the two men ever spent together. But Johnson's subject is the Highlands. Hence the *Journey* is not only shorter, but also marked by the extensive and significant omission of the personal and anecdotal material which makes Boswell's record the entertaining journal that Johnson's clearly is not. Boswell's never-abandoned chronological arrangement guarantees a measure of proportion between the length of a stay and the length of his account. Johnson, however, so appreciably shortens that half of his travels which was spent in the Lowlands that these experiences constitute less than a quarter of his published account. When he had already been in Scotland for a fortnight and amid the mountains for at least a week, when he was but one day from crossing over to Skye, the first island he visited, then it was that he "first conceived the thought of this narration", whose title succinctly announces its principal concern: the Western Islands of Scotland.<sup>7</sup>

Johnson had travelled north to see the semi-barbaric, feudal, and patriarchal society about which he had read as a boy, and about which he and Boswell had conversed as early as the summer of their first meeting, ten years earlier. Here, in a society bound by blood, all men of a clan swore allegiance to their chief or laird, who exercised over them absolute juridical authority, and whose frown or smile afforded the old Highlander his chief concern or delight. The laird's collateral relations, the tacksmen, administered the domains and formed a small, hopefully civilizing, middle class. The laird was bound to protect and defend his clan, and all engaged in the daily struggle for subsistence and survival amid a terrain which, even in 1773, proved unbelievably barren and unpromising. In these wild regions, furthermore, the legendary Gaelic hero and poet Ossian had supposedly flourished, and in the 1760s an imaginative divinity student, James Macpherson, had claimed the

possession of original Gaelic manuscripts from which he was translating Ossian's poetry. And since the 1760s Johnson had challenged Macpherson's curious refusal to produce these so-called manuscripts for public scholarly examination.

Johnson would overcome Ossian with an unequivocal, unrelenting denunciation of Macpherson's imposture. But Johnson could not overcome the effect of the penal laws which were breaking down the semi-autonomous and distinctive quality the Highlands had maintained even after the Act of Union in 1707. With the decisive defeat of the second Stuart uprising at Culloden in 1746, an uprising in which many Highlanders had prominently figured, the British government decided on a series of strictly enforced penal laws designed to destroy the distinctive character of Highland society and incorporate it more effectively into Great Britain. These laws abolished the absolute heritable jurisdiction of the lairds; they banned the wearing of the plaid, the peculiar Highland garb; they forbade even those Highlanders loyal to George II to bear arms. On occasion, Johnson might experience what he thought to be the "patriarchal life", as he did for four days on Raasay; he may successfully recreate in the *Journey* much of the Highland past. But the book is marked by his abiding awareness that he had come too late to see the old Highland order: "A longer journey than to the Highlands must be taken by him whose curiosity pants for savage virtue and barbarous grandeur" (51).

Although Johnson omits, alters, or de-emphasizes some of the personal and anecdotal material that appears in Boswell's account as well as in his letters to Mrs. Thrale, he does incorporate into the *Journey* every item that serves to illustrate the older or the emerging Highland society. These details serve as the basis for his observations, the longest series of which, on the island of Skye, drew the specific attention of the *Gentleman's* reviewer, who noted that they "occupy 100 pages" (in the first edition) of the work.<sup>8</sup>

If his four-day visit to the neighbouring island of Raasay is included, Johnson's stay on Skye lasted more than a month. Within three more weeks he would again set foot on the mainland, after having briefly visited six more islands. In the chronology of his visit as in the structure of his account, the end of Johnson's stay on Skye marks a central point in his travels. His direct experiences had been varied and illustrative. In the penny-pinching and absenteeism of Alexander Macdonald, Johnson saw the laird himself contributing to the breakdown of the filial tie which had once effectively bound this society together. In Johnson's judgment, this bond provided a more durable

basis of social cohesion than the laird's new interest in increased rents. Gracious hospitality elsewhere on the island offset this impression with one later to be enhanced by the visit to the domains of the young, experimenting, but ill-fated laird of Col, who lost his life as Johnson was readying his praises for the *Journey*. At Kingsburgh, Johnson listened "with placid attention" as Flora Macdonald recounted her courageous part in Prince Charles Edward's escape from the British during the '45. The news that this brave woman would soon emigrate to the wilds of America brought home for Johnson the extent of the emigrating rage among the Highlanders. Such departures and suggested remedies for them provided a frequent subject of conversation as he toured the island. Throughout this time, his experiences had been complemented by the gracious and intelligent conversation of the Reverend Donald Macqueen, "whose knowledge and politeness", the *Journey* observes, "give him a title equally to kindness and respect . . ." (52). Johnson had seen and heard enough to gather his impressions of Skye into some general and ordered account at this point in the *Journey*.

They follow a definable logic (70-108). An introductory examination of agriculture and economy on the island provides the background for Johnson's discussion of the Highland social structure: the laird, the tacksmen, and the tenant, new terms which, here as elsewhere, Johnson carefully defines. The old order, however, is changing; as Johnson had earlier observed, the Highlanders are "now losing their distinction, and hastening to mingle with the general community" (42). His subsequent discussion of the penal laws and of emigration philosophically analyzes two major causes of the breakdown of this previously semi-autonomous society. The consideration of Highland domestic life quickly leads into a discussion of education and religion. And with religion comes superstition and especially the "second sight", the power of supposedly seeing into the future. What remains is Highland tradition and literature, its primitive and almost totally oral nature most forcefully impressed on Johnson's mind by the Ossianic hoax. The *Journey* also provides comparable although briefer generalizations about other islands that Johnson visited. Those about Col, for example, are much concerned with the economy of the island, perhaps because the young laird's experiments in improving the land had much to do, in Johnson's opinion, with the content of his people. Unlike other places ravaged by emigration, Col's islanders had "not yet learned to be weary of their heath and rocks . . ." (119). Johnson's visit to Mull concludes with some speculations about Highland life in the past derived from his examination of several castles on the islands (139-141).

Such reflective discussions share a generalized presentation of an entire society, an analysis of the principles underlying it, and an examination of the basic questions associated with it in the public mind. When expressing what proved to be the frustrated object of his desire, Johnson says he had travelled to see "a people of peculiar appearance, a *system* of antiquated life (51—emphasis supplied). The word suggests an entire social order operating, in this instance, on principles unlike anything that Johnson has previously experienced. His emphasis rests not on this or that peculiarity, but on the totality of what the Highlands were and had been. So at key places in the *Journey*, he sets aside topography for a structural principle more important and more in keeping with the primarily philosophical emphasis of the work: the description and analysis of a whole society and of its major problems. Because Johnson, in addition, recommends certain courses of action to the Highlanders—planting trees, for example, to improve their land—and to the government—imposing ceilings on rents, if necessary, to stem emigration, the *Journey* deserves to be called a moral work. For *moral*, in an elementary sense that Johnson's *Dictionary* admits, denotes a concern with action, with what is to be done and what is to be avoided. Like that of a modern social scientist, influenced by his own attitudes and values, Johnson's analysis of a problem includes recommendations for its solution. The *Journey* by no means provides an exhaustive or definitive study of the Scottish Highlands. But any discriminating reader knows that the five or six hours' attention it demands affords a remarkably comprehensive and penetrating insight into that society and into its particular concerns.

The Rebellions of 1715 and 1745 brought the Highlands into the British consciousness as did, perhaps, no other events in Johnson's lifetime. With the strict enforcement of the penal laws, however, the Highlands posed new problems whose dimensions became progressively more alarming as the century went on. Deprived of, but indemnified for, the loss of their heritable jurisdiction, the lairds turned to money as the one means of influence and power left open to them. Rents were increased to a degree unthought of in the earlier years of the century. Sheep farming became more common, and with it came the even greater displacement of people and the even higher value of land. By the 1770s, emigration had reached serious proportions. At least 5000 Highlanders, out of a total population of perhaps 250,000, had emigrated in the decade preceding the appearance of Johnson's *Journey*. Many emigrants were well-to-do and carried away with them the money urgently needed in the inchoate commercial life of the Highlands. Lairds, nonetheless, still looking to increased rents, looked askance at the hitherto privileged and secure position of

the tacksmen. As he travelled, Johnson learned that many Highlanders now regarded the tacksmen as useless drones, as middlemen who did no work but whose presence increased the rents which the tenants were hard pressed to pay. Some of the lairds turned the management of their lands into the hands of stewards, or factors as some called them, whose principal function was to insure the economic value of the land. This new arrangement obviously threatened the older feudal and patriarchal order by opening the door to one whose filial tie with the clan was now deemed irrelevant to the new order of things. Unless men were willing to accept the cash nexus as the only principle of cohesion in the emerging Highlands, urgent remedies were required to preserve the sense of kinship which had united this society in the past. Perhaps a ceiling on rents was needed to curb the avarice of the lairds. The penal laws might be less rigidly enforced to permit the wearing of the plaid and the bearing of arms in legitimate self-defence. If justice were impeded by the difficulty of access to the courts, the lairds might be allowed to exercise something of their former jurisdiction. To the consideration of such inter-related political, social, and economic issues, Johnson adds his evaluation of the Ossianic manuscripts and the possibility of second sight. With such an analysis, the Highlands come alive in the *Journey* in a way impossible from a mere guidebook approach. Hawkins perceptively suggests how tame and undistinguished the *Journey* would have been had Johnson "for any reason withheld so entertaining a series of reflections" (Hawkins, p. 214).

The generality of Johnson's account, however, does not imply an absence of detail. It means only that the *Journey* abandons a tedious succession of uninterpreted details to draw attention to those particularities which will render this society more intelligible. These details are often placed in a context of brief, generalized discussion of how this society operates. Johnson's notions are grounded in and illustrated by fact. The anecdote of how the Macdonalds of Glengarry burned their enemies to death as they worshipped at church illustrates well the ferocity of old Highland feuds; a brief mention of the difficulty of access to Raasay, even in 1773, is related at once to the Highlanders' former fear of incursion (44-52). Innumerable details of a like kind illustrate the generalized picture of Highland life. Imlac notwithstanding, Johnson numbers enough streaks of the tulip to provide a clear picture of the entire flower.

The headings in the *Journey* suggest, of course, only a topographical arrangement of Johnson's material. Except for the section entitled "The Highlands", Johnson does not set off by separate headings the reflections about

Skye, Col, Raasay, and the other islands. In their entirety, however, they make up almost one-half of the *Journey*. That these impressions, furthermore, conclude each of his separate accounts suggests that the preceding combination of narration and description serves as a basis, in each instance, for Johnson's speculations about men and manners.

The section entitled "The Highlands" brings out well the analytical quality of the *Journey*. These several pages of commentary effectively and succinctly introduce Johnson's subject (38-42). But these remarks also impart to the *Journey* another of its specifically philosophical qualities: they are a cause-and-effect analysis of the distinctive features of Highland society. Johnson introduces these remarks in exactly such terms: "As we continued our journey, we were at leisure to extend our speculations, and to investigate the reason of those peculiarities by which such rugged regions as these before us are generally distinguished." Johnson singles out isolation as the root of these peculiarities. Directly or indirectly, it is at the heart of everything he here predicates of the Highlanders. A modern sociologist might find such an analysis very rudimentary, but Johnson's concern with causes and effects nevertheless indicates how his material is governed by the philosophical emphasis of the *Journey*. As this section concludes, Johnson briefly notes that isolation is yielding to a greater intermingling. The new principle is working new effects: no longer "an unaltered and discriminated race", the Highlanders are "losing their distinction, and hastening to mingle with the general community."

In what he has selected and excluded, in his careful definition of the terms and background of Highland society, in the length, prominence, and nature of his generalized observations, and in the analytical character of much that he says, Johnson has revealed the philosophical quality of the *Journey to the Western Islands*. Much to the delight and consternation of his contemporaries, he exercised his mind vigorously on the debated questions they associated with the Highlands. The *Journey* does not conceal Johnson's opinion on these matters. The *Gentleman's Magazine* knew, for example, that the Scots might find much to complain of in the book: "The attack upon Ossian and the Erse [i.e., Scots Gaelic] will offend some, and the imputation of credulity, vanity, and deception, will displease others, and the 'mediocrity of knowledge', which alone is allowed them, will exasperate the numerous and irascible swarms of pedagogues and tutors." The magazine thought that English readers would find the Rebellion of 1745 too sympathetically treated: Why has Johnson avoided the word *rebellion*? Why has he so generously

praised Flora Macdonald, who, after all, was assisting a potential usurper of the throne? Why has Johnson avoided the mention of the field of Culloden, across which he may actually have passed? The review concluded with this accurate summary of the positions Johnson advances:

To disincline [the Highlanders] from coalescing with the Americans, he recommends the indulging them in their national dress; to reconcile them to their country, he would restore their arms; and to prevent their flying from the increase of rent, he would restrain the landlords in their demands. The wise and equal distribution of right, and the total cessation of rapine and robbery, he, however, allows to be the consequence of regular itinerant judges. In regard to the *second sight*, which all the islanders, except the ministers, still admit, tho' rather more is said for it than against it, our author "came away, at last, only willing to believe", and never could advance his curiosity to conviction.

Despite obvious disagreement with some of these opinions, the *Gentleman's Magazine* regarded their presence as an integral part "of this masterly performance".<sup>9</sup>

In no other series of remarks does Johnson so brilliantly demonstrate the discriminating powers of his mind as in the expression of his attitudes to the old and to the emerging Highland order. Johnson endorses neither, for he insists on the weaknesses of both. At first glance, the Highlands seem to excite in him a pastorally romantic vision of the days when Highlanders were Highlanders:

It affords a generous and manly pleasure to conceive a little nation gathering its fruits and tending its herds with fearless confidence, though it lies open on every side to invasion, where, in contempt of walls and trenches, every man sleeps securely with his sword beside him; where all on the first approach of hostility come together at the call to battle, as at a summons to a festal show; and committing their cattle to the care of those whom age or nature has disabled, engage the enemy with that competition for hazard and for glory, which operate in men that fight under the eye of those, whose dislike or kindness they have always considered as the greatest evil or the greatest good.

"To lose this spirit", this concern with the national honour, "is to lose what no small advantage will compensate" (82-83). The subsequent lines of his argument, however, make clear that Johnson is not arguing for a return to the past nor attacking the wealth and luxury which he knew provided the conveniences and advantages of civilized life. Although sympathetic to the advantages



possible in the new Highlands, Johnson sees that the cash nexus is supplying its only principle of unity, and that few are bothering to consider whether or not such a bond can be long lasting. Thus he asks "whether a great nation ought to be totally commercial". He has elsewhere expressed his dissatisfaction with and suspicion of a union grounded solely in monetary interest: "No mercantile man, or mercantile nation, has any friendship but for money, and alliance between them will last no longer, than their common safety, or common profit is endangered; no longer than they have an enemy, who threatens to take from each more than either can steal from the other."<sup>10</sup> But if this weakness appears in the emerging Highlands, Johnson destroys any facile romanticism about the past with his reminder of the savagery of life in that "little nation":

It must however be confessed, that a man who places honour only in successful violence, is a very troublesome and pernicious animal in time of peace; and that the martial character cannot prevail in a whole people, but by the diminution of all other virtues. He that is accustomed to resolve all right into conquest, will have very little tenderness or equity. All the friendship in such a life can only be a confederacy of invasion, or alliance of defence. The strong must flourish by force, and the weak subsist by stratagem (83).

Whatever the shortcomings of the new system, they are, in Johnson's judgment, an improvement on the "immature" political expedients of bygone times. Some amelioration of the penal laws may be in order, not to resurrect the past but to encourage the Highlanders to remain in their hills. Whatever pleasure he may derive from the strict and successful enforcement of his laws, "it affords a legislator little self-applause to consider, that where there was formerly an insurrection, there is now a wilderness" (88).

About the second sight, Johnson cannot advance his mind to conviction (97-100). As in his statement of attitudes on Highland society, he sifts his evidence carefully, but he approaches this issue in a much more rigidly scholastic manner. He begins with a definition of this alleged power which is "an impression made either by the mind upon the eye, or by the eye upon the mind, by which things distant or future are perceived, and seen as if they were present." After citing several examples, Johnson presents the reasons that best suggest incredulity: "This faculty of seeing things out of sight is local, and commonly useless. It is a breach of the common order of things, without any visible reason or perceptible benefit. It is ascribed only to a people very little enlightened; and among them, for the most part, to the mean and ignor-

ant." The next paragraph brings out the weaknesses of these objections: they imply a knowledge of the universal fitness of things; they cast aside a tradition held by different peoples in different places; they reject the evidence brought forth to attest specific instances of this power; they fail to consider that comparable power has been claimed in other localities; they do not recognize, in fine, that no valid *a priori* basis exists for denying its possibility. On this question, however, Johnson leaves his judgment suspended: "I never could advance my curiosity to conviction; but came away at last only willing to believe."

Faced with a complex issue, Johnson introduces careful qualifications into his arguments. Even the eventually notorious wonder at the absence of trees is often qualified by his reminder of the extenuations demanded by the very unpromising soil and climate. On other issues, however, Johnson clearly takes sides and presents his arguments unequivocally. Ossian, for example, is a fraud; and the tacksmen ought not to be banished.

James Macpherson understood what Johnson had written. Having read proofs of the *Journey*, he insisted that Johnson cancel his remarks about Ossian and perhaps threatened a duel if Johnson did not. Unimpressed by his "foolish and impudent note", Johnson replied: "I will not desist from detecting what I think a cheat, from any fear of the menaces of a Ruffian."<sup>11</sup> Johnson armed himself with a large stick, dared Macpherson to refute his allegations, and printed his decisive attack upon this imposture. The *Journey* attacks these alleged translations as a hodgepodge of oral folk tradition with no artistic value. It censures the Scots for a national credulity that has led them to overlook the easiest means of settling the dispute about the authenticity of these manuscripts. And it avers that these manuscripts do not, in fact, exist. Macpherson had to refuse the insuperable challenge: produce the manuscripts (107-108). The banners of Ossian have flown at half-mast ever since.

The *Journey* no less emphatically presents its stand on the tacksman (78-80). Against those who argued that the Highlands could not afford this allegedly useless "drone who lives upon the product of an estate", Johnson directs an argument economic, social, and cultural. He begins with a general defence of the middleman in an economy, without whom both the manufacturer and the consumer are placed at the mercy of immediate need or immediate abundance. Banishing the tacksman, furthermore, only adds to the already growing number of emigrants: "That abundance, which there is nobody to enjoy, contributes little to human happiness." These economic arguments rise to a cultural level: in "every society the man of intelligence must direct the man of labour." The tacksman can help the tenants to overcome their gross-

ness, ignorance, and lack of skill. The laird has not the time or the desire to perform such tasks. Johnson's final question brings out well the social and cultural ramifications of this issue. Although he does not explicitly mention that he was very often the guest of the island tacksmen, he welcomed their gracious hospitality and their intelligent conversation. Without them, the Highlands would be a vacuity. Their contribution to what little civility, elegance, and intelligence the islands possessed underlies his thrust: "If the tacksmen be banished, who will be left to impart civility?" And who would be left? the absentee laird? the money-minded steward? the ignorant tenant? In the *Journey* Johnson argues with the qualification and conviction of a philosopher.

Perhaps such words as "sociological" or "anthropological" more comfortably and more clearly define for us what an earlier generation called the philosophical, moral, and reflective quality of Johnson's *Journey*. But if philosophy as traditionally defined denotes a study of causes and effects, a generality of presentation, a particular method of argument, a willingness to hypothesize, and, as moral philosophy, a concern with what should be done and what should be avoided, then no one can gainsay R. W. Chapman's succinct statement of Johnson's point of view: in the *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* the Rambler, characteristically, "wrote as a philosopher."

## NOTES

1. *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 45 (1775), 37-38.
2. R. W. Chapman, "Johnson in Scotland", *TLS*, October 3, 1918, p. 461.
3. *Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford, 1952), I, 409.
4. John Hawkins, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, ed. and abr. Bertram H. Davis (New York, 1961), p. 214.
5. John Hetherington, "The Tour to the Hebrides: Its Value to the Social Historian", *Johnson Society Addresses*, No. 26 (Lichfield, 1947), p. 1; Donald J. Greene, "Johnsonian Critics", *Essays in Criticism*, 10 (1960), 479; R. K. Kaul, "A Journey to the Western Isles Reconsidered", *Essays in Criticism*, 13 (1963), 343.
6. R. W. Chapman points out (*Letters*, I, 342, n.) that these letters along with a now lost "Book of remarks" formed the nucleus of the *Journey*.
7. Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, and James Boswell, *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, ed.

- R. W. Chapman (Oxford, 1924), p. 35. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.
8. *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 45 (1775), 37.
  9. *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 45 (1775), 85-86.
  10. Samuel Johnson, *Works* (Oxford, 1825), VI, 136.
  11. *Letters*, II, 3.

## SHELL IN A CITY ROOM

*Sara Van Alstyne Allen*

Here on the polished wood  
 The shell has come to rest.  
 Tossed by strange tides and worried by deep winds  
 It comes at last to the quiet harbour of this room.  
 It is not a flower, yet it holds as does the rose  
 Colour of sunrise and it keeps  
 The delicate tint of that unending hour.

What was the nature of the creature  
 Once concealed within this fluted space  
 Will never be revealed.  
 The emptiness now speaks aloud  
 Surrounding and rejecting the curious face  
 Bent like an old sun over this entity  
 Whose substance and whose essence is the sea.