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THE BARREN YEARS: A FURTHER CONSIDERATION OF JOHNSON'S PREJUDICE AGAINST SCOTLAND

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All books used as background for this paper are from the Rutgers University Library, including a first edition of Johnson's Dictionary (2 vols.) in Special Collections.

IN 1783, ten years after the tour of Scotland which had already been made famous by Dr. Samuel Johnson and was to be presented in book form later by James Boswell, the two travelers had this conversation:

After musing for sometime, [Johnson] said, 'I wonder how I should have any enemies, for I do harm to nobody.' Boswell. 'In the first place, Sir, you will be pleased to recollect, that you set out with attacking the Scotch; so you got a whole nation for your enemies.' Johnson. 'Why, I own, that by my definition of oats I meant to vex them.' Boswell. 'Pray, Sir, can you trace the cause of your antipathy to the Scotch?' Johnson. 'I cannot, Sir.' Boswell. 'Old Mr. Sheridan says, it was because they sold Charles the First.' Johnson. 'Then, Sir, old Mr. Sheridan has found out a very good reason' (L1197).¹

Like "old Mr. Sheridan," many others, during Johnson's lifetime and in the centuries succeeding, have advanced "a very good reason"

¹ Numerical references preceded by the letter "L" refer to pages in *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, R. W. Chapman, ed. (Oxford, 1953).



JOHNSON in his travelling Dress as described in BOSWELL'S TOUR.

From an Engraving by Thomas Trotter, 18 January 1786

for this antipathy to the Scotch. While Mrs. Thrale accepts "Mr. Johnson's hatred of the Scotch" as so well known that it is scarcely worthwhile to repeat the tale,² Sir Joshua Reynolds offers the oppressive clannishness of the Scots who came to London as the basis for Johnson's prejudice.³ Hesketh Pearson elaborates this view:

. . . natives of [Scotland] who settled in England formed a sort of clique, employing Scotch servants, patronizing Scotch tradesmen, applauding Scotch plays and books without regard to merit, while the chief minister of the time, Bute, was a Scot who favored his race in the bestowal of jobs; and Johnson felt that this exclusive spirit of nationalism should be opposed.⁴

John Bailey supplements this view by relating it to Dr. Johnson's well-known esteem for subordination. The English, Bailey says, did not consider the Scotsman as an equal but as a sort of "poor relation." Consequently, Englishmen "commonly saw in the newly arrived Scot a pauper and an upstart come to live among his betters and they re-venge themselves in the manner natural to rich relations."⁵ Boswell seems to substantiate this attitude when he says that Johnson "was to some degree of excess a *true-born Englishman*, so as to have ever entertained an undue prejudice against both the country and the people of Scotland" (L581).

Bishop Percy, however, considers that "Johnson's invective against Scotland was more in pleasantry and sport than real and malignant,"⁶ and Boswell frequently confirms this impression. In reporting a session with Johnson and John Wilkes, where the two joined verbal forces against Scotland, Boswell comments, "All these quick and lively sallies were said sportively and in jest, and with a smile, which showed that [they] meant only wit." Both men, he continues, had visited Scotland and knew that it was not actually a land of famine, "but they amused themselves with persevering in the old jokes" (L774).

Boswell also professes to believe that this prejudice against his native country is "a prejudice of the head and not of the heart" (L581). "Johnson treated Scotland no worse than he ever did his

² Hesther Lynch Piozzi, *Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson*, S. C. Roberts, ed. (Cambridge, 1932), p. 112.

³ Quoted by Sir Walter Raleigh, *Six Essays on Johnson* (Oxford, 1910), p. 61.

⁴ *Johnson and Boswell* (New York, 1958), p. 99.

⁵ *Dr. Johnson and His Circle* (New York, n.d.), p. 147.

⁶ Raleigh, p. 60.

best friends, whose characters he used to give as they appeared to him, both in light and shade" (L585). Indeed, Boswell is proud of not suppressing all these sallies at the expense of his country. "Vanity and self-conceit . . . may sometimes suffer," but the satire proceeds "from a warmth and quickness of imagination, not from any malevolence of heart," and he trusts "that they who are the subject of them have good sense and good temper enough not to be displeased" (H402-403).⁷

Boswell's docility and good temper under this satire (he not only submits to it but oftentimes actually instigates it) is evident throughout the *Life* and the *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*. Certainly Boswell delivered himself up to Johnson as a lamb led to the satiric slaughter in his first "somewhat unlucky speech" (as he calls it): "Mr. Johnson . . . I do indeed come from Scotland, but I cannot help it" (L277). Once he had annexed this willing lamb, Johnson could scarcely have failed to make full use of the fertile and seemingly inexhaustible subject of Scotland for his witticisms and cherished *bon mots*. Boswell's opening speech, as Raleigh says, put him at Johnson's mercy for the rest of his life:

From that time forward, Johnson delighted to indulge his humor, playful rather than hostile, on the sensitive nationality of his friend. . . . The Rev. Dr. Thomas Campbell notes in his *Diary* how Johnson seems 'fond of Boswell, and yet is always abusing the Scots before him, by way of a joke.'⁸

Bailey also comments on this aspect of the matter:

To Johnson's tongue, too, the Scots offered the important additional temptations of being often Whigs, oftener still Presbyterians, and always the countrymen of Boswell. This last was probably the one which he found it most impossible to resist.⁹

But Bailey here introduces, and then ignores, two points of prejudice which seem far more valid than any of the previously offered causes. Dr. Johnson's views on both Whiggery and Presbyterianism were so well known that it seems peculiar that these two great reasons for his dislike of Scotland have been so largely unstressed. Both

⁷ Numerical references preceded by the letter "H" refer to pages in the Yale edition of *Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D., 1773*, F. A. Pottle & C. H. Bennett, eds. (New York, 1961).

⁸ Raleigh, p. 60.

⁹ Bailey, p. 148.

violate his deep-rooted belief in the value of hierarchy and subordination. Often he speaks of them together, as if they were inseparable destructive elements warring against his accepted cosmic scheme. When Bennet Langton protests Johnson's suggestion that Langton's niece is a Jacobite, Johnson replies:

Why, Sir . . . I meant no offense to your niece, I meant her a great compliment. A Jacobite, Sir, believes in the divine right of Kings. He that believes in the divine right of Kings believes in a Divinity. A Jacobite believes in the divine right of Bishops. He that believes in the divine right of Bishops believes in the divine authority of the Christian religion. Therefore, Sir, a Jacobite is neither an Atheist nor a Deist. That cannot be said of a Whig; for *Whiggism is a negation of all principle* (L305). (Boswell's italics)

The Rev. Dr. Maxwell, a good friend of Johnson's, told Boswell that Johnson believed that "Whiggism, at the time of the Revolution . . . was accompanied with certain principles, but latterly, as a mere party distinction under Walpole and the Pelhams, was not better than the politicks of stock-jobbers, and *the religion of infidels*" (L436). (My italics)

In the *Life* Boswell cites many references Johnson makes to the absence of ritual and hierarchy in Presbyterianism. He even notes on one occasion that Johnson would prefer Popery to Presbyterianism, because (Johnson says),

. . . the Presbyterians have no church, no apostolic succession . . . I think it is dangerous to be without it. And, Sir, Presbyterians have no public worship: they have no form of prayer in which they know they have to join. They go to hear a man pray, and are to judge whether they are to join with him (L424).

Again, Johnson says to him, "Sir, the holidays observed by our church are of great use in religion" (L703). Boswell comments:

I am sorry to have it to say, that Scotland is the only Christian country, Catholic or Protestant, where the great events of our religion are not solemnly commemorated by its ecclesiastical establishment, on days set apart for the purpose (L704).

In the *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* he notes on several occasions Johnson's unwillingness to participate in a Presbyterian service: Johnson will not join Boswell and his father in their worship at the Auchinleck parish church, nor will he hear Robertson preach. "I will hear him, (said he,) if he will get up into a tree and preach; but

I will not give a sanction, by my presence, to a Presbyterian assembly" (H377, n.1). Boswell speaks openly of Johnson's detestation of the excesses of the Protestant reformation:

Dr. Johnson's veneration for the hierarchy is well-known. There is no wonder, then, that he was affected with a strong indignation while he beheld the ruins of religious magnificence. I happened to ask where John Knox was buried. Dr. Johnson burst out, "I hope in the highway. I have been looking at his reformations" (H41).

Yet nowhere does Boswell state explicitly that these deviations from hierarchy in the Scottish people are a prime cause for Johnson's dislike of their nation.

Johnson himself is somewhat more outspoken in his *Journey to the Western Islands*:

It is not only in Raasay that the chapel is unroofed and useless; through the few islands which we visited, we neither saw nor heard of any house of prayer, except in *Sky*, that was not in ruins. The malignant influence of *Calvinism* has blasted ceremony and decency together; and if the remembrance of papal superstitions is obliterated, the monuments of papal piety are likewise effaced (J58).¹⁰

It is worthy of note, moreover, that while in this book he speaks with a certain moderation, in his private correspondence he is much more vehement. Of Inch Kenneth, for instance, he says only, "It was not without some mournful emotion that we contemplated the ruins of religious structures" (J131). But in writing to Mrs. Thrale of the same ruins:

We walked uncovered into the chapel, and saw in the reverend ruin, the effects of precipitate reformation. [The altar still stands and] on the other side stands a hand bell, which though it has no clapper neither presbyterian bigotry, nor barbarian wantonness has taken away (I, 379).¹¹

A corollary to the breakdown in the religious hierarchy which also distresses Johnson is the ignorance of the Scottish clergy. Reflecting on this subject back in England, "There is (said he,) a diffusion of learning, a certain portion of it widely and thinly spread. A merchant there has as much learning as one of their clergy" (L627).

¹⁰ Numerical references preceded by the letter "J" refer to pages in *Johnson's Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, R. W. Chapman, ed. (Oxford, 1924).

¹¹ References to letters indicating volume and page refer to *The Letters of Samuel Johnson* (3 vols.), R. W. Chapman, ed. (Oxford, 1952).

Two explanations suggest themselves for the failure of contemporaries and later critics to stress these likely sources of Johnson's antipathy toward Scotland. First, Johnson's political and religious principles were so well known as to need little amplification in his day: perhaps further emphasis on these areas of his disapprobation of Scotland would merely tend to make him seem arrogant and offensive. In the second place, the bulk of the witticisms and *bon mots* at the expense of Boswell and his countrymen eschew religious and political matters in favor of many others which seem to have far less deep significance. Johnson seizes upon simple domestic issues such as window sashes, untended gardens, lack of trees, vermin-infested inns, barley and the famous oats, dearth of gaiety, and the supposed theft of his own walking stick. All these might be considered as random subjects chosen merely to bait Boswell, were it not that the constant theme underlying and unifying them all is the barrenness of poverty and primitivism—a subject only a little less vital to Johnson than his politics and his piety.

To search diligently, not among commentators and friends, but in the writings and sayings of Dr. Johnson himself, is to arrive at certain theories, if not conclusions, regarding the source of this "well known prejudice" which he entertained against the nation of Scotland. For it *is* a dislike of the whole people, rather than of specific individuals: Johnson entertained and befriended individuals while he continued his diatribes against their native country. Despite the famous definition of *oats*, five of the six amanuenses who worked on the *Dictionary* were Scotsmen; nor was Boswell the only Scottish gentleman he called friend, as is well evidenced throughout the tour of the Hebrides and in subsequent letters.

Before we can understand the man in relation to the nation he criticizes, we must, of course, know something of Dr. Johnson's nature beyond the bare statement of his religious and political beliefs. He is certainly one of the most learned and philosophical and religious men of his century, but he is also an intensely practical person. He takes a great deal of interest in the affairs of business going on around him, and his capacity to absorb details of various operations is dramatically called into use in the long evenings in the Hebrides. Witness a typical episode Boswell relates:

Last night Dr. Johnson gave us an account of the whole process of tanning, and of the nature of milk, and the various operations upon it, as making whey, etc. His variety of knowledge is quite amazing; and it gives one much satisfaction to find such a man bestowing his attention on the useful arts (H208).

In the *Life* Boswell says, "I often had occasion to remark, Johnson loved business, loved to have his wisdom actually operate on real life" (L691). Later he comments on Johnson's interest in the farm Boswell has purchased: "he made several calculations of the expence and profit: for he delighted in exercising his mind on the science of numbers" (L880).

Such information lends additional insight to our consideration of the subjects Dr. Johnson chooses for comment and criticism during his tour of Scotland. As we follow his travels we find him commenting on many practical, and always easily remedied, deficiencies. At Inch Keith, where there is a small fort, there is no provision for water within the walls, "though the spring is so near, that it might have been easily enclosed" (J4). "In traveling this watery flat [near Dunvegan] I perceived that it had a visible declivity, and might without much expense or difficulty be drained" (J60). The Scottish method of parching grain is wasteful (J72); and he thinks there may be marble in the Hebrides, but no one is bothering to investigate the possibility (J73). And at Raasay he observes:

. . . with how little people will do, though they may easily obtain what would be very convenient; for that the family [of Raasay] had possessed this island 400 years and never made a landing place, when men with pickaxes might cut a stair out of the rock in a week's time (H141).

Yet in stressing this practical side of Johnson's nature, we would err if we saw in it merely evidence of his being a cold, level-headed man of business. Quite to the contrary, all these criticisms, as well as many others regarding the daily lives and performances of the Scottish Highlanders, are securely based in one of the most firmly held of Johnson's philosophical concepts: life is a contest, and victory is obtainable only through the fullest use of one's God-given faculties. This idea, implicit in much of his writing, and particularly in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, which is full of military metaphors, is especially explicit in his letters. On several occasions he advises Boswell

on this duty to use one's faculties *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*. In a letter of November, 1774, he says:

Fancy is a faculty bestowed by our Creator, and it is reasonable that all His gifts should be used to His glory, that all our faculties should co-operate in His worship; but they are to co-operate according to the will of Him that gave them, according to the order which that wisdom has established (I, 352).

To Mrs. Thrale, in November, 1773, he writes:

As life, and vigour of mind, and sprightliness of imagination, and flexibility of attention, are given us for valuable and useful purposes, we must not think ourselves at liberty to squander life, to enervate intellectual strength, to cloud our thoughts, or fix our attention, when by all this expence we know that no good can be produced (I, 389).

In a charming, grandfatherly letter to "dearest Miss Susy" Thrale, he writes in 1783:

Our general course of life must denominate us wise or foolish; happy or miserable: if it be well regulated we pass on prosperously and smoothly; as it is neglected we live in embarrassment, perplexity, and uneasiness (III, 49).

Boswell relates that when he once hazarded the opinion that refinement of taste is a disadvantage, Johnson firmly replied, "Nay, Sir; that is a paltry notion. Endeavour to be as perfect as you can in every respect" (L1326). A letter to Boswell which Johnson wrote just five months before his death includes the pathetic sentence, "My dear friend, life is very short and very uncertain; let us spend it as well as we can" (L1361). For Samuel Johnson there was never any question of giving up, painful though the battle and uncertain though the victory might be.

Thus Johnson's criticisms of the dearth of learning and of the barren, almost primitive, conditions of Scotland gain a new emphasis when seen in the light of his belief that man is put into this world to serve God to the utmost of his abilities. Through ignorance and lack of practical and cultural advantages, the Scottish people are being prevented from carrying out their part in this never-ending conflict against external and internal forces of evil. Johnson therefore protests at the decline of both religious and classical learning. At the College of St. Leonard he says:

The kindness of the professors did not contribute to abate the uneasy remembrance of an university declining, a college alienated, and a church profaned and hastening to the ground (J8).

From the destruction of churches, he predicts,

the decay of religion must in time be the consequences; for while the publick acts of the ministry are now performed in houses, a very small number can be present; and as the greater part of the Islanders make no use of books, all must necessarily live in total ignorance who want the opportunity of vocal instruction (J58).

He objects to the dying out of the traditional tacksman (the intermediary between the laird and his tenants), for

as the mind must govern the hands, so in every society the man of intelligence must direct the man of labour. . . . If the Tacksman be banished, who will be left to impart knowledge, or impress civility? (J80).

The famed island of Iona depresses him:

The inhabitants are remarkably gross, and remarkably neglected: I know not if they are visited by any Minister. The Island, which was once the metropolis of learning and piety, has now no school for education, nor temple for worship, only two inhabitants that can speak *English*, and not one that can write or read (J138).

The Scots are, in fact, virtually a primitive people, as he describes them in a long letter to Mrs. Thrale:

They are a nation just rising from barbarity, long contented with necessaries, now somewhat studious of conveniences, but not yet arrived at delicate discriminations (I, 372).

These "delicate discriminations" are important to Dr. Johnson. He has no truck with the romantic conception of "the happy savage." Upon hearing of an officer in America who rhapsodized about his idyllic life with only an Indian woman to provide companionship and his gun to procure food, Johnson burst forth:

Do not allow yourself, Sir, to be imposed upon by such gross absurdity. It is sad stuff; it is brutish. If a bull could speak, he might as well exclaim,—Here I am with this cow and this grass; what being can enjoy greater felicity? (L521).

When General Oglethorpe once declaimed to him against luxury and quoted a passage from Addison's *Cato* about the happy Indian in his state of nature, Johnson replied firmly,

But hold, Sir; to be merely satisfied is not enough. It is in refinement and elegance that the civilized man differs from the savage (L940).

For how much religion can one hope to learn from savages? (And with Johnson, all criteria ultimately have religious implications.) "Only consider, Sir," he says to Boswell, "our own state":

our religion is in a book; we have an order of men whose duty it is to teach it; we have one day in the week set apart for it, and this is in general pretty well observed: yet ask the first ten gross men you meet, and hear what they can tell of their religion (L751).

If this be true, how much worse is the state of Scotland?

. . . an illiterate people, whose whole time is a series of distress; where every morning is labouring with expedients for the evening; and where all mental pains or pleasure arose from the dread of winter, the expectation of spring, the caprices of their Chiefs, and the motions of the neighbouring clans; where there was neither shame from ignorance, nor pride in knowledge; neither curiosity to inquire, nor vanity to communicate (J100-101).

In Scotland's condition of barbarism, rather than in the "epidemical enthusiasm" which accompanied the reformation, lies perhaps the source both of Scotland's greatest danger and of Johnson's greatest distress. This enthusiasm of reformation

. . . is visibly abating, and giving away too fast to that laxity of practice and indifference of opinion, in which men, not sufficiently instructed to find the middle point, too easily shelter themselves from rigour and constraint (J6).

To survive, Christianity must be practised actively. It is not only the ruins of cathedrals (Johnson has seen such ruins in many places, including his native Lichfield), nor just the departure of the Scottish nation from the Anglican faith, but the indifference of the people to *all* religious ceremony and instruction, that leads Johnson to fear that the Scots are undermining Christianity. There is a want of ministers; they go to the islands by turn; they come to Raasay only every third Sunday, where the service consists of just a prayer and a sermon in a private home; they are at the mercy of the weather; "and in those Islands where the Minister does not reside, it is impossible to tell how many weeks and months may pass without any publick exercise of religion" (J110). Small wonder Johnson says that if any Roman Catholic missionaries "are busy in the Highlands, their

zeal entitles them to respect, even from those who cannot think favourably of their doctrine" (J96).

Underneath all this critical comment on the deficiencies of Scottish learning, piety, and practicability lies a reiteration of a basic cause for them, which Johnson may well have found most distasteful of all. Why are the religious services so few? the universities not rebuilt? the landscapes bare of trees? the window sashes not working? the grains winnowed wastefully? Not, alas, just because of ignorance, but more frequently because of that dread disease, sloth, which Dr. Johnson so readily recognizes. Over and over again, he comments openly upon the part negligence plays in the poverty and primitivism of the Highlands. Raasay is, he says,

like the other islands, I think, generally naked of shade, but it is naked by neglect; for the laird has an orchard, and very large forest trees grow about his house (J54).

Armidel, he notes, has a walled orchard and is well shaded by tall ash trees:

This plantation . . . deserves attention; because it proves that the present nakedness of the *Hebrides* is not wholly the fault of Nature (J44).

Even Young Col, who has "a very laudable desire of improving his patrimony,"

. . . has many lochs, some of which have trouts and eels, and others have never yet been stocked; another proof of the negligence of the Islanders, who might take fish in the inland waters, when they cannot go to sea (J113).

In a general statement on the lack of trees, Johnson says:

It is natural, in traversing this gloom of desolation, to inquire, whether something may not be done to give nature a more cheerful face, and whether these hills and moors that can afford heath cannot with a little care and labour bear something better? The first thought that occurs is to cover them with trees, for that in many of these naked regions trees will grow, is evident, because stumps and roots are yet remaining; and the speculatist hastily proceeds to ensure that negligence and laziness that has omitted for so long a time so easy an improvement (J126).

Johnson's account of the whole tour is full of evidence building up to an indictment of idleness and sloth in the Highlanders. All the small, practical details he criticizes could, as he often points out, be remedied with minimal effort.

One who knows Johnson through his own *Prayers and Meditations* will not need to ask why this trait of indolence in the Scottish people distresses him. In his own battle of life, sloth has been his greatest, and in his own mind, his most successful opponent. He has been fighting since his young manhood a weakness in himself which, he believes, has impaired his usefulness and has rendered him faithless to his God's great charge. As he expressed it in a letter to Langton in 1785, five months before his death:

That voluntary debility, which modern language is content to term indolence, will, if it not counteracted by resolution, render in time the strongest faculties lifeless, and turn the flame to the smoke of virtue (L1337).

Rambler #155, "On Self-Indulgence," written when he was 52, contains these comments on what he considers his besetting sin:

Indolence is therefore one of the vices from which those whom it once infects are seldom reformed. . . . To do nothing is in every man's power: we can never want an opportunity for omitting duties. . . . Many things necessary are omitted, and what cannot be done without pain will be left forever delayed if the time of doing it be left unsettled.¹²

The Latin motto Johnson chose from Statius for that particular *Rambler* might well serve as the hopeful expression of his desire and intent for his own personal life in each succeeding year.

. *Steriles transmisimus annos,*
Haec aevi mihi prima dies, haec limina vitae.

. Our barren years are past;
Be this of life the first, of sloth the last. (Elphinston)

It was an expression of intent year after year, for never did Johnson consider that he had conquered the dread opponent; the barren years, in his opinion, went on and on: Life, and perhaps (most horrible to contemplate) Eternal Life, fell victim to the great conqueror, Sloth.

His friend, George Strahan, who edited the *Prayers and Meditations*, says in the introduction:

¹² B. H. Bronson, ed., *Samuel Johnson: Rasselas, Poems, and Selected Prose* (New York, 1958), pp. 111-115.

. . . he seems to have lived with a perpetual conviction that his conduct was defective, lamenting past neglects, forming purposes of future diligence, and constantly acknowledging their failure in the event.¹³

Boswell comments thus at the close of the *Life*:

The solemn text 'of him to whom much is given, much will be required,' seems to have been ever present in his mind, in a rigorous sense, and to have made him dissatisfied with his labours and acts of goodness, however comparatively great (L1400).

The work and influence of Samuel Johnson, whether regarded by his contemporaries or by the twentieth century, have certainly qualified unreservedly to be called "great"; yet reading his own self-flagellating words throughout the last 46 years of his life, one may well ask: Has ever a man in all the history of literature more grossly underestimated or more wantonly maligned his own accomplishments?

The flagellations start in September, 1738, on his twenty-ninth birthday, the annual occasion when he customarily makes resolutions for the new year ahead. "And O, Lord, enable me," he writes, "by thy Grace, to use all diligence in redeeming the time which I have spent in Sloth, Vanity, and wickedness; to make use of thy Gifts in the honour of thy Name" (P38).¹⁴ During the next twenty years, when his writings, culminating in the *Dictionary* in 1755, were making him a public figure, the self-criticisms continue; and on the occasion of his forty-ninth birthday he writes:

Impress upon my soul such repentance of the days misspent in idleness and folly, that I may henceforward, diligently attend to the business of my station in this world, and to all the duties which thou hast commanded (P65).

And in a footnote, he says, "This year I hope to learn diligence." But the prayer is not answered, and as the years go inexorably by, the hope, according to his own high standards, is not realized. Year after year his private meditations sound the same note. At sixty-one: "Let not pleasure seduce me, Idleness lull me, or misery depress me. . . . Let me perform to thy glory . . . the work which thou shalt yet appoint me" (P125). On his sixty-second birthday:

¹³ Oxford English Classics edition of *Dr. Johnson's Works* (London, 1825), IX, 195.

¹⁴ Numerical references preceded by the letter "P" refer to pages in *Samuel Johnson: Diaries, Prayers, and Annals*, E. L. McAdam, Jr., ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958).

Some advances, I hope, have been made toward regularity. . . . But Indolence and indifference have been neither conquered nor opposed. . . . But what is most to be considered, I have neither attempted nor formed any scheme of Life by which I may do good, and please God (P142-143).

At Easter in 1772: "On this day little has been done and this is now the last hour. In life little has been done, and life is very far advanced. Lord have mercy upon me" (P152).

Knowing the stature of this man and the importance of his achievements in the eyes of his contemporaries and in the judgment of this century, it is almost unbearably poignant to continue on through the *Prayers and Meditations*, and to hear him say at 66:

When I look back upon resolutions of improvement and amendment, which have year after year been made and broken, either by negligence, forgetfulness, vicious idleness, casual interruption, or morbid infirmity, when I find that so much of my life has stolen unprofitably away, and that I can descry by retrospection scarcely a few days properly and vigorously employed, why do I yet try to resolve again? I try, because Reformation is necessary and despair is criminal. I try in humble hope of the help of God (P225).

One of the most heart-rending of all the entries comes on his seventy-first birthday, September 18, 1780:

I have forgotten or neglected my resolution or purposes, [which] I now humbly and timorously renew. Surely I shall not spend my whole life with my own total disapprobation. Perhaps God may grant me now to begin a wiser and a better life (P301-302).

It was in the previous March that Johnson had finished *The Lives of the Poets!*

Dr. Johnson's sixty-fourth birthday was spent in Dunvegan in Skye on the Hebrides tour. Three days later he writes a long letter of travel description to Mrs. Thrale, interrupting it with a passage comparable to his private meditations:

The return of my Birthday, if I remember it, fills me with thots which it seems to be the general care of humanity to escape. I can now look back upon three-score and four years, in which little has been done, and little has been enjoyed, a life diversified by misery, spent part in the sluggishness of penury, and part under the violence of pain, in gloomy discontent, or importunate distress (I, 356-357).

It is almost as if he is describing the woes and sorrows of the wild and somber land through which he is traveling. Compare, from his

Journey, a passage which follows the quietly beautiful paragraph relating his moment of decision to write of his travels:

We were in this place at ease and by choice, and had no evils to suffer or to fear; yet the imaginations excited by the view of an unknown and untravelled wilderness are not such as arise in the artificial solitude of parks and gardens, a flattering notion of self-sufficiency, a placid indulgence of voluntary delusions, a secure expansion of the fancy, or a cool concentration of the mental powers. The phantoms which haunt a desert are want, and misery, and danger; the evils of dereliction rush upon the thoughts; *man is made unwillingly acquainted with his own weakness, and meditation shows him only how little he can sustain, and how little he can perform* (J35-36). (My italics)

May it not be that this identification, conscious or unconscious, of his own life with the barrenness of Scotland is the determining factor in Johnson's "prejudice" against the nation?

Johnson's *Journey to the Western Isles* is a far different book from Boswell's account of the same tour. In it there is none of Boswell's breezy anecdote and humor, nor is the personality of Johnson the core of his book. Rather, Johnson's *Journey* is a sort of philosophical travelogue, its measured prose pervaded with a melancholic piety which is strongly reminiscent of some of his personal meditations. In his discourses on the problems of Scotland we find none of the hatred or bitterness he felt for the Reformation's "epidemic enthusiasm." Instead, he makes the same sort of candid and ruthless appraisal of the country to which he frequently subjects himself; and he offers Scotland the same hope of improvement which periodically comforts and sustains him in his never-ending fight to lead the life of achievement he believes he owes to God. The *Journey* might very well be called a sermon to the Scottish nation on the text, "Fight the good fight." With all the earnestness of St. Paul, Johnson points out their failings to his congregation, indicates the way to eternal life, and offers hope for its attainment, not in a tone of hatred but in one of sorrowing love, not in a mood of despair but in the affirmation of confident belief.

The letter to Mrs. Thrale concerning his sixty-fourth birthday continues with an equally typical note of affirmation:

I am hoping and I am praying that I may live better in the time to come, whether long or short, than I have yet lived, and in the solace of that hope endeavour to repose (I, 357).

So, too, Johnson sees hope for Scotland and some evidence that progress is being made. He is particularly happy about the efforts of Donald Maclean, "young Col,"

. . . heir to a very great extent of land, and so desirous of improving his inheritance, that he spent a considerable time among the farmers of *Hertfordshire*, and *Hampshire*, to learn their practice. He worked with his own hands at the principal operations of agriculture, that he might not deceive himself by a false opinion of skill, which, if he should find it deficient at home, he had no means of completing (J68).

Col has introduced the culture of turnips and proposes to plant an orchard. Cultivation is likely to be improved by his skill and encouragement, "and the inhabitants of these obscure vallies will partake of the general progress of life" (J123).

By such acquisitions as these, the *Hebrides* may in time rise above their annual distress. Wherever heath will grow, there is reason to think something better may draw nourishment; and by trying the productions of other places, plants will be found suitable to every soil (J113).

"Why does any nation want what it may have?" Johnson asks, and answers himself by saying that "life improves but by slow degrees" (J54). The Scottish people, he believes, are gradually improving: "What remains to be done they will quickly do, and then wonder, like me, why that which was so necessary and so easy was so long delayed" (J24).

The peroration of Johnson's "sermon" to Scotland is based on a particularly happy experience in Edinburgh at the close of his tour, where he visited a school for the deaf and dumb and was delighted with the success of its methods.

It was pleasing to see one of the most desperate of human calamities capable of so much help: whatever enlarges hope, will exalt courage; after having seen the deaf taught arithmetick, who would be afraid to cultivate the *Hebrides*? (J161).

Here, I believe, Johnson uses the word "cultivate" not with any twentieth-century denotation but as he defines it in his *Dictionary*: "to improve, to meliorate." This meaning he illustrates by a passage from *Cato*, which seems fittingly to sum up his hopes for Scotland:

To make man mild and sociable to man,
To *cultivate* the wild licentious savage

With wisdom, discipline, and liberal arts,
Th'embellishments of life.

So his final word to Scotland is "Courage, press on. All is not yet lost." The battle is never-ending, the foe often overwhelming, but "resolution and diligence will supply all that is wanting" (I, 389).

Arthur Murphy, the editor of the 1825 Oxford edition of Johnson's works, in his introduction to the *Journey*, comments that Johnson's business in the Highlands, like his own *Rasselas*, "was with man; he travelled not to measure fragments of temples, or trace choked aqueducts, but to look upon the various scenes of the present world."¹⁵ Praising the many beautiful and philosophical passages in the *Journey*, the editor concludes:

Their taste is poor indeed who can peruse the passages to which we have referred, and have their minds so little enthralled thereby, as to have leisure to search whether the writer hated a Scotchman. We dismiss the unworthy inquiry.¹⁶

Far from being unworthy, the inquiry, it seems to me, is very illuminating. Indeed, Johnson himself answered Murphy's specific question at the conclusion of the tour when one of the gentlemen of the Auchinleck neighborhood asked him how he liked the Highlands:

The question seemed to irritate him, for he answered, "How, sir, can you ask me what obliges me to speak unfavourably of a country where I have been hospitably entertained? Who *can* like the Highlands? I like the inhabitants very well" (H371).

How, in fact, *could* Samuel Johnson like the Highlands? A country that had departed from hierarchy in both politics and religion, that had debased learning, that was content to continue in a near-primitive state from sheer sloth and indolence, yet persisted in the stubborn pride of nationality so evident in its London representatives—surely one could not *invent* a more nearly perfect combination of faults and deficiencies to call forth distaste in Samuel Johnson. When we consider, also, that the failings of Scotland must inevitably remind him of his own greatest weakness, we can more deeply admire the moral stature of the man who can rise above his "prejudice" to pro-

¹⁵ *Works*, IX, vi.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

duce the calm, beautiful, and judicious study of the Scottish Highlands and its people that is the *Journey to the Western Islands*.

Ironically enough, the book, and the influence of his journey and his exhortations upon such practical improvements as plantation in Scotland, are only two more in the long chain of achievements which belie Dr. Johnson's pathetic persistence in the belief that his had been "barren years."

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Definitions from
A Dictionary of the English Language,
by Samuel Johnson, M.A., 1755.

Among the fifty thousand words defined in his Dictionary, Dr. Johnson found some items that irresistibly demanded his personal definition. Following are some sample entries:

OATS . . . A grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people.

WHIG . . . 1. Whey. 2. The name of a faction.

TORY . . . [A cant term, derived, I suppose, from an Irish word signifying a savage.] One who adheres to the antient constitution of the state, and the apostolical hierarchy of the church of England, opposed to a whig.

PATRON . . . One who countenances, supports or protects. Commonly a wretch who supports with insolence, and is paid with flattery.

GRUBSTREET . . . Originally the name of a street in Moorfields in London, much inhabited by writers of small histories, dictionaries, and temporary poems; whence any mean production is called grubstreet.