

Tour to the Hebrides

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On August 14, 1773, Samuel Johnson, age 63, and James Boswell, age 33, met in Edinburgh to begin their tour to the Hebrides. Boswell had been hoping for and planning such a trip for almost a decade, although Johnson had enjoyed scorning Scotland and its natives whenever conversation so led. Less than twenty years before this date Bonnie Prince Charlie, Catholic grandson of James II, had swept the Highlanders into a glamorous and futile crusade for Scotland and the English crown, ending in disaster at Culloden in 1745. Why would emphatic Johnson with all his grandiloquence have agreed to travel in rude, remote Scotland far from urban comforts? Clearly he wanted to go, and that was enough for the Scot. Boswell in his journal described Johnson as zealous in High Church and monarchical principles, hard to please, easily offended, but humane and benevolent. Vastly learned, his logic and imagination led to extraordinary advantage in arguing. He knew his superiority, but was too proud to seek praise. His loud and deliberate voice carried every conversation. Large, even gigantic, clad in ill kept brown, he loved to eat. He was a true born John Bull.

Boswell by contrast was a short, lithe romantic who idolized Johnson. The veneration had begun in Boswell's youth when he was mesmerized by the "Rambler" essays and became actual with their first meeting as adults in 1763. Boswell, the oldest son of Lord Auchinleck of Ayrshire, was emotionally a feudal, landed Scot but socially a citizen of the world and a devoted Londoner. An inveterate writer of personal journals, he recorded his emotional ups and downs in vibrant detail, especially his fits of depression. Men and women alike, including Johnson, acclaimed Boswell's extraordinary charm and attentiveness in conversation. He suggests in his journal that Johnson agreed to the Tour because of an innate respect and partiality for feudal customs still viable in the Highlands, where he looked forward to being treated as an honored guest of certain eminent gentry and scholars. The notion of being lionized in remote, untarnished countryside appealed to Johnson's appetite for classical purity.

At the time of their tour Boswell was already an acknowledged essayist and author of a travel book. Firmly fixed in the habit of writing daily accounts of his activities and thoughts, he relied on his extraordinary memory to record his experience of events, people, and talk to fill his journal. This was his greatest pleasure. Did he plan to turn these observations into a commercial book? In his journal there is no answer to this question, but he did not write and publish the "Tour to the Hebrides" until 1785, a year after Johnson's death and twelve years after their journey. The liveliness and exquisite detail of the trip from August 14 to November 22, 1773 radiated the freshness of daily happenings in 400 pages of Pottle's modern edition. Johnson had read and recognized the remarkable style of his friend's composition but because of its unrestrained frankness and accuracy of personal detail Johnson would not sanction its release to the public. The contents were a too intimately revealing mirror of the great and proud hero. This reluctance of Johnson did not bother Boswell, who was only too grateful to have been

given the chance for close contact with his idol for every moment of three months.

The modern reader will need patience to absorb the stately eloquence of this 18th century travel journal, which depicts in vivid detail the daily conversations of travelers and hosts, their meals, the books in each household, and the dress of the owners. The result was a living vital reproduction of each day, as vivid as modern television. Without Boswell's advance planning and skein of friends Johnson could never have navigated in such alien territory. They met and talked with several hundred men and women of note. Boswell's lively, intimate pen keeps the reader's attention and offers partly autobiography as well as overt admiration for his hero companion.

They traveled by coach from Edinburgh to Inverness along the coast, stopping for visits with scholars at the universities of St. Andrews and Aberdeen and with eminent and learned persons along the way. They stayed with a cultured clergyman in the Macbeth region of Nairn. The rough country beyond Inverness called for horseback travel and the incongruous sight of immense Johnson astride small Highland beasts. They slept in forts and in simple huts, usually with lice and without beds. They crossed the sea to Skye and the modest home of Sir Alexander MacDonald, whom both Boswell and Johnson described as wanting in hospitality. The travelers made scant allowance for the widespread poverty in the Highlands as a result of the rebellion. They were in one sense like Northerners visiting the devastated South shortly after the Civil War and expecting unstinted hospitality. They moved by horseback from one friendly household to the next, often detained by bad weather. Their welcoming stay with Chief MacLeod of the Isle of Raasay captivated both visitors.

Perhaps the high point of the Tour for Johnson and Boswell came at the house of Flora MacDonald, then Mrs. Kingsburgh, the same Flora who in 1745 led Bonnie Prince Charlie, disguised as her maid, from Harris in the Outer Hebrides to the safety of her home in Skye, escaping the searching British soldiers on the trail of the Prince. Johnson actually slept in the same bed that had warmed the Prince.

The travelers found their next haven at Castle Dunvegan, perched on a northern coastal cliff, and ancestral home of The MacLeod, largest proprietor on Skye. When Lady MacLeod expressed a longing for a cozy house at meadow's edge, both visitors eulogized the medieval bulk and symbolic might of the dreary castle. After a relaxing stay in the relative luxury of the ancient stronghold, they returned to southern Skye by horseback, always the welcome guests of learned, impoverished Scots. Cash was so scarce on Skye that hardly enough could be found to continue their journey. An harrowing ship ride from Skye during a furious storm, which almost sank their vessel, landed Johnson and Boswell on the bucolic Isle of Coil. Another ship took them to Mull and on to Iona, the birthplace of Christianity in Scotland, where Boswell was distressed by the state of the ruins. After another sea trip to Oban and Argyle and always welcomed by the local laird, they found a reception at the Ducal Castle at Inveraray, despite the venom of the Duchess toward Boswell, who had opposed the award of the Dukedom to her husband. Then overland along Loch Lomond to Glasgow University and professors. At last they reached Auchinleck, the paternal home of the Boswells on 20,000 acres of

lovely Ayrshire. Here Johnson engaged Lord Auchinleck in hot argument about Cromwell and Whiggism. The final leg to Edinburgh ended the Tour on November 22, 1773.

In 1775 Johnson published his "Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland." It recounted in flowing Johnsonian prose their trip together with florid description of landscapes and events but without personal conversation and quite different in taste from Boswell's book ten years later. It sold well.

After Johnson's death in 1784 Boswell with the incalculable encouragement and editorial help of Edmund Malone pulled himself together and from the Journal of 1773 and notes and from memory wrote his version of the Tour. It was an instant book selling success.

Fortunately for us today Yale University's rich treasure of Boswell's original journals have allowed Professor Pottle to edit a modern unabridged version of the "Tour" never before available. As an example, Boswell's journal for September 26 records that after drinking till 5 a.m. he was still abed at 1 p.m. when he was offered a welcome dram of brandy. Johnson then said, "Aye, fill him drunk again. Do it in the morning that we may laugh at him all day. It is a poor thing for a fellow to get drunk at night and stalk to bed and let his friends have no sport."

During the three months of constant companionship Johnson, despite his age, never complained and remained in good health except for sea sickness. The great man drank only tea and lemon juice and never spirits, unlike Boswell the toper. The pleasure of their daily companionship without conflict attests to the sensibility and vitality of both.

And so to savor the rich flavor of Boswell's fare you yourself will have to dine at his table. But don't be in a hurry.

Ironically the true measure of Boswell's literary greatness did not appear until the 1930's when Col. Isham donated to Yale University truck loads of Boswell's original journals, letters and manuscripts, which had been miraculously preserved at Malahide Castle by an heir. Professor Pottle of Yale has edited these papers, and others, which have come to light since then, have added to the uncensored fame of Boswell as an author of amazing genius.

In 1800 he was regarded as a decadent scribbler, while today he is known as a master writer and a brilliant word painter of people and events in Great Britain in the second half of the 18th Century.
