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978-0-521-89514-9 - Scotland and the Fictions of Geography: North Britain, 1760-1830

Penny Fielding

Excerpt

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Introduction

Arriving in Aberdeen in 1773, Samuel Johnson addresses his readers, the inhabitants of ‘our own island’:

To write of the cities of our own island with the solemnity of geographical description, as if we had been cast upon a newly discovered coast, has the appearance of very frivolous ostentation; yet as Scotland is little known to the greater part of those who may read these observations, it is not superfluous to relate that under the name of Aberdeen are comprised two towns standing about a mile distant from each other, but governed, I think, by the same magistrates.¹

For Johnson, the phrase ‘our own island’ does not denote equality of national belonging among a modern, educated readership. Scotland may as well be ‘a newly discovered coast’ for the majority of his readers, but it can be rescued from its state of primitive obscurity by ‘the solemnity of geographical description.’ The work of geography, then, will reveal not only Scotland’s place in the Union but also its emergence, or discovery, as part of the modern, civilised world, here represented by the reassuring information that Aberdeen is legally regulated. It is through geography, in Johnson’s mind, that Scotland can be understood as part of a national narrative and given form and function within British history.

A second example makes this recourse to the epistemological security of geography more explicit. The English topographer and antiquarian Richard Gough, complaining that he knows little about Scotland, and for good reason, speculates: ‘Whether it be for want of materials or application, the nationality of our northern neighbours suffers the natural and artificial fate of their country to lie as undescribed as their poverty once left it unimproved and unadorned.’² Gough’s coupling of geographical knowledge and economic progress is instructive, as Scotland’s geography was bound up both in its own sense of political and historical character and in a cultural identity which became general currency in Enlightenment Britain. Geography was both the tool that would deliver economic

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improvement across the nation, and the means by which the nature of historical progress itself could be understood.

Scots participated enthusiastically in rendering their nation legible through geography and making it visible to the economic, scientific and historical eye. The impetus to construct a complete survey of the nation, proposed by David Erskine, Lord Buchan, in 1781, was to gather together statistics of population and agricultural production from all the parishes of Scotland in order to ‘exhibit a noble and complete survey of this part of the united kingdoms, and enable any remote or collateral heir to an estate, who could not reap any advantage from his predecessor’s experience and observation, to have access at once to every necessary elucidation towards the improvement of his property’, while ‘at the same time, this collection would be a most interesting and useful national attainment.’³

If geographical knowledge could provide the means to economic improvement, it was also the way for Scotland to be understood not only in terms of its own history but also as a model for history itself. Scottish Enlightenment stadial history was deeply imbricated in geography. The internal divisions of Scotland into mountainous Highlands, fertile Lowlands, and newly thriving central cities was a very broad and schematic simplification of the complex spatial and temporal relations of Scottish localities. Increasingly, a cartographic representation of Scotland came to subsume smaller divisions and to offer a geographic canvas upon which the broadest strokes of human development could be painted. Scotland seemed to offer in miniature the key to a complete global understanding that would make time and space simultaneously available as a subject of inquiry, made famous by Edmund Burke’s remark in 1777 about global identities:

But now the Great Map of Mankind is unroll’d at once; and there is no state or Gradation of barbarism, and no more of refinement which we have not at the same instant under our View. The very different Civility of Europe and of China; The barbarism of Persia and Abyssinia. The errattick manners of Tartary, and of Arabia.⁴

The first thing we notice is Burke’s aerial position, giving a place to stand from which he can view the globe while remaining himself outside it, a position that was to come under persistent pressure in the Romantic period. But more importantly for my subject here, Burke’s ‘Map of Mankind’ perfectly enfolds history into geography. Global difference is to be imagined as something that happens in time as well as space; it is a matter of ‘gradation’ and ‘refinement’.

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Though not invented by Scottish thinkers, the historical relations of barbarism and civility became the constant theme of the Scottish Enlightenment. Scotland not only developed stadial history – the movement of peoples from tribal hunting, through agriculture, to commercial modernity – the very geography of the nation demonstrated it. The bleak landscape and clan society of the Highlands, the agricultural improvements of the Lowlands and the flourishing cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, bourgeois centres of commerce and the professions, could be read as a kind of living museum in which all stages of society could be exhibited to the historical observer. Scotland's geography was already inscribed with broad historical and social meanings in ways that could be seen to determine its inhabitants: fierce, barbaric Highlanders and industrious, commercially sophisticated Lowlanders. Not surprisingly, Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* was influential on Scottish philosophy and historiography, grounding the very possibility of regional variation and the consequent differentiation of societies by means of social and legal organisation on a spatial framework. Put bluntly, Highlanders were tribal and feudal and their mountainous territory chiefly suited for hunting, while Lowlanders were civilised and democratic, their societies produced by the leisure afforded by agriculture and commerce.⁵

It was not, of course, that England lacked a complex and varied geography that could exemplify historical patterns. As Franco Moretti's *Atlas of the European Novel* shows, the geography of all parts of the nation-state can be mapped in ways that demonstrate 'its peculiar geometry, its boundaries, its spatial taboos and favorite routes.'⁶ But Scotland, in the Romantic period, was *already* seen to be exemplary in terms of its geography. Its internal divisions between Highlands and Lowlands, and its remote islands, seemed to offer a paradigm of the relations between history, geography and social organisation. Again, this is not to say that England did not have exemplary regions, but there was no routine comparison of the statesman farmers of mountainous Westmorland to tribes of North American Indians, as was the very common case with Scottish Highlanders who were thus made to stand for entire stages of human development. In order to understand the specific cultural work of the Scottish geographical imagination that is the subject of this book, we can, for heuristic and introductory purposes, continue to contrast it with what was available for English writers of the period. Needless to say, there is a considerable area of overlap between England and Scotland, not least in the ways – which we are now coming to understand – that Scottish models of bardic verse or minstrelsy can illuminate the cultural work of English Romantic

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poetry.⁷ I do not propose an absolute separation between ‘English Romanticism’ and ‘Scottish Romanticism’, but a comparison between some English and Scottish approaches to space will highlight different availabilities of spatial models. We still need to account for the fact that most Scottish writers do not turn as readily to certain forms of affective, individual or phenomenological relation to space as can their English contemporaries but, rather, assume the already-historicised character of geography.

For Wordsworth, paradigmatically, attachment to place is a form of self-determination. Even his *Guide to the Lakes*, although giving travel directions to the Lake District, is not primarily interested in wider forms of location. The appeal of the landscape, he argues, is that a ‘concentration of interest gives to the country a decided superiority over the most attractive districts of Scotland and Wales.’⁸ The visitor to the Lakes is invited to consider the landscape in terms of its special qualities, focused on singular points and expressed as an intensification, or ‘concentration’, of affect, rather than on its geographical position. The inhabitants have an enviable autonomy that demonstrates the unique qualities of the place rather than its representative ones. English Romantic poetry, to generalise for a moment, allows a sense of the local as affective, a humanist notion that presupposes the centrality of the subject and assumes his or her experiences as an organising principle. Histories are generated by these localities not in the sense of geographical determinism, in which social organisation is a result of climate and terrain, but as an expression of the experiences of the local population. Narratives describe a locality generated and maintained by the stories told about it. William Wordsworth’s ‘Michael’ or ‘The Brothers’ and Dorothy Wordsworth’s ‘Narrative of George and Sarah Green’ construct place from the relationships and memories of its inhabitants.

It is not surprising that Wordsworth should have been the focus of Heideggerian approaches to the idea of dwelling in a particular place. John Kerrigan has written of Wordsworth’s ‘need to find a dwelling-place which would not fade.’⁹ Jonathan Bate claims that, for Wordsworth, ‘poetry is something that happens at a particular time and in a particular place.’¹⁰ John Lucas identifies in Wordsworth’s landscape a property which ‘has to do with endeavour, work, and all that is contained in the key terms “occupation,” “abode,” “dwelling.”’¹¹ In addition, John Barrell has described Clare’s sense of place as ‘increasingly preoccupied with the being “local,” and [...] concerned with one place, Helpston, not as it is typical of other places, but as it is individual; and individual not because

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it is different, but because it was the only place he knew.’¹² English Romantic poets, then, pursue the singularity of place as an experiential quality. It is possible for Coleridge, sitting beside his baby in his cottage, to record the impressions of his locality as pure phenomena:

Sea, hill, and wood,
This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood. (ll. 10–11)¹³

Of course, if we know the social history of Nether Stowey, or the fact that Coleridge was suspected of radical activity there, or we wonder about the potential political meanings of the frost’s ‘secret ministry’, we can produce many compelling, historically situated readings. And it goes without saying that the historicisation of Romantic-period studies has done much to reinsert the social or industrial objects that find themselves written out of Romantic landscapes. Indeed, Michael Wiley has demonstrated the many ways in which we can read Wordsworth’s landscapes in terms of their social geography.¹⁴ But my point is that it was possible for Coleridge to list his surroundings in this purely experiential way, moment by moment, in a manner that was not at all as readily available to Scottish writers of the Romantic period. For Coleridge, the term ‘populous’ is not *primarily* a comment on the statistical growth of the village and its place in a national economy in the way it was for Scott, describing Edward Waverley’s feelings of pleasure at the reconciliation of a divided Scotland after the 1745 rebellion: ‘He then, for the first time since leaving Edinburgh, began to experience that pleasure which almost all feel who return to a verdant, populous, and highly-cultivated country, from scenes of waste desolation, or of solitary and melancholy grandeur.’¹⁵ Although both Wordsworth and Scott lived in areas that could be described as the north of Britain, Wordsworth infrequently uses the term ‘north’ outside a standard poetic register of epithets like ‘north wind’ or ‘frozen north’. For Scott, on the other hand, the north of Britain has an already inscribed political identity as North Britain, a subject I shall discuss in the next chapter.

It was not, of course, that Scottish writers were uninterested in the description or representation of individual places. On the contrary, the local is of primary importance in Scottish Romanticism as it develops the idea of regionality in the tradition of the National Tale, drawing a distinction between ‘peripheral’ places and metropolitan centres and dramatising the journey between them. Or we might point to the importance of local beliefs in the ballad and the Gothic short story, or the listing for a wider British readership of hitherto unheard-of villages

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in Scott's *Lay of the Last Minstrel* and the tales of James Hogg. But, even for locally designated writers such as Burns and Hogg, the Ayrshire Ploughman and the Ettrick Shepherd, as I shall argue in Chapters 2 and 6 of this book, the problematic relation of the singular to larger structures always disrupts the idea of the singularity of place. Even the most phenomenological of Scottish writers, the Shetland poet Margaret Chalmers, whom I discuss in Chapter 5, is equally interested in space as a national and global structure as she is in describing her sense of dwelling in it.

For Scottish writers, then, to experience a familiar landscape is to read the ways in which it is historically inscribed. The travel writer William Thomson imagines the modern citizen of Edinburgh's New Town surveying in panoramic mode the Firth of Forth and the Grampian mountains: 'The objects seen from hence are not only fitted to please and soothe the imagination, by their natural sublimity and beauty, but such as associate in the mind of a Scotchman, the most important passages in the history of his country, and are, on that account, doubly interesting.'¹⁶ The Scot, in Thomson's mind, cannot experience the sublime in its pure, empirical form but is always one step removed, caught up by questions of national history. Wordsworth and Scott offer another exemplary difference here. Although it starts off with two reivers discussing a border raid, Wordsworth's play *The Borderers* is more interested in the abstraction of borders as an internal condition than in the external history or topography of the region. Wordsworth was later to comment:

As to the scene & period of action little more was required for my purpose than the absence of established Law & Government—so that the Agents might be at liberty to act on their own impulses. [. . .] I read Redpath's history of the Borders but found there nothing to my purpose. I once made an observation to Sir Walter Scott in which he concurred that it was difficult to conceive how so dull a book could be written on such a subject [. . .].¹⁷

Perhaps Scott (never one to be deterred by wearisome reading matter) was just being polite on this occasion, for he had made use not only of George Ridpath's *Border-History of England and Scotland* but also of a host of even drier titles, including William Nicolson's 1705 collection of treaties, *Leges Marchiarum, or Border-Laws*, for the extensive legal information in the notes to his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, his *Essay on Border Antiquities*, and his Borders-set novels *The Black Dwarf*, *The Monastery* and *The Abbot*. Unlike Wordsworth, who seeks to clear a space for 'impulse' amid the constraints of law, Scott, not short of impulsive Borders characters in his own work, was fascinated by the Border laws in themselves

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(as I discuss in Chapter 3) and the ways in which they interacted with Borders society.

We can develop this sense of the already-written quality of Scottish places if we take as an example the figure of people returning to land to which they have an attachment. When Leonard Ewbank returns to Ennerdale in 'The Brothers', it is to find that he can no longer be a part of a community based on shared, unwritten understandings between the villagers. Place is affective and interpersonal – Leonard returns to sea at the end of the poem not because of any great historical shift that has alienated him from the social or economic function of the village, but because his attachment is severed with the confirmation of the death of his brother James. In 'Michael', Michael's relation to place is similarly grounded in the individual. The site of his relationship with his son does not change – in fact it becomes infused with a tragic stasis as Michael repeatedly returns to the unfinished sheepfold – but his emotional investment in it does. We might compare these examples with Scott's first two novels. In *Waverley*, the hero visits and then returns three times to the place that will become his home – the estate of Tully-veolan, seat of the Jacobite sympathiser Baron Bradwardine. On his first return, ill and confused, he fails even to recognise the place. On his second, the house has been sacked by the Hanoverian Army in their pursuit of the Jacobites and the 'accessaries of ancient distinction' of which Baron Bradwardine had been so proud to have been 'treated with peculiar contumely'.¹⁸ Finally returning to marry Rose Bradwardine in the newly restored house, Edward is able to recognise himself as part of a new political order in the similarly restored and renewed Union of England and Scotland. It is as if the redirection of Scottish history after 1745, the novel's declared subject, brings the meanings of the house into view, or, put more simply, it is history that makes place legible.¹⁹

In Scott's second novel, *Guy Mannering*, the lost heir Harry Bertram returns to his ancestral estate of Ellangowan without remembering the circumstances in which he had originally gone missing, or indeed without being aware that he is lost. At first, the key to awakening his past seems to lie in personal memory. He recognises a folk tune sung by one of the servants, and, in what seems like a purely affective relation to place, is guided through the location of his kidnapping by the Gypsy Meg Merilies. But these romance figures are in the service of a larger historical development. The restoration of personal memories becomes part of the greater historical fantasy of a conservative myth of restoration following the displacement of the revolutionary and Napoleonic years. And the

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need for this wider political restoration is made explicit in the text through the interventions of the lawyer Pleydell, without whom the restoration of Harry to the Ellangowan estates would not be possible.²⁰

For Scott, the personal relation to any individual place is always part of a historical dialectic, and one way of thinking both about the special qualities and the doublings and fissures of the sense of location in Scottish writing is to identify Scotland's complex relation to the local. Cairns Craig argued that Scottish culture is dogged by a perception that '[its] achievement is necessarily local' and, worse, is threatened by 'the infection of the parochial'.²¹ This may have been the case in the later years of the nineteenth century, but in the years covered by this book, ideas of the local – and even the parochial – emerged that gave to the local a position of great importance and one that speaks to ways in which Scots thought of themselves as instrumental in the understanding of Britain, Europe and the globe. The local is, in fact, a useful way of understanding how Scottish geography works at a cultural level and the complex position that it occupies.

Given Scottish geography's interest in the structural, it was not surprising that Scotland should form the subject of Britain's first great modern work of statistical analysis, John Sinclair's *Statistical Account of Scotland*, published in twenty-one volumes between 1791 and 1799, which took up where Lord Buchan's proposal had left off. Sinclair's aim was to break down the social and economic geography of Scotland into manageable units and to present the information as a resource for central government to improve the economy of the country and the welfare of its people. Sinclair himself was to call his method a branch of 'the philosophy of modern times', which consisted in 'analysing the real state of mankind, and examining, with anatomical accuracy and minuteness, *the internal structure of society*.' The local – the individual parishes which were all different from each other – functioned as a point on a network that demonstrated larger patterns of similarities as well as differences. But Sinclair's bold claim for structural objectivity and accuracy sits alongside his method of inquiry and his insistence that it should be empirical, 'the sure basis of investigation and experiment.'²² Although it was to end in the abstraction and uniformity of the structural mapping of Scotland, the *Statistical Account* had its roots in the conterminous growth of interest in local knowledge. William Thomson points out the variable nature of such information, depending as it did upon the observations and opinions of individual informants, and that no individual is unbiased. Even to select ministers as the least partial informants, as Sinclair had just done, was not

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objective enough for Thomson, who advocates that all statistical information should be regulated by ‘a Council chosen annually by deputies, representing the most respectable part of society in that kingdom.’²³

Generically, we can see two modes of inquiry, with different geneses and forms, interwoven in the later decades of the eighteenth century as the impulse to map space mathematically interacts with the experiences of the individual traveller. Thomas Pennant’s two *Tours* of Scotland are what their titles suggest, but they are founded on the same method as Sinclair’s *Statistical Enquiry*. In 1772, Pennant advertised in the *Scots Magazine* his intention to take a second tour in Scotland, asking the magazine’s readers to direct him to interesting objects. His expected informants were typically ministers, who contributed their ideas on local topography, natural history and political economy. Pennant had a pre-determined set of points to be addressed:

QUERIES, Addressed to the Gentlemen and Clergy of *North-Britain*, respecting the Antiquities and Natural History of their respective Parishes, with a View of exciting them to favor the World with a fuller and more satisfactory Account of their Country, than it is the Power of a Stranger and transient Visitant to give.²⁴

Pennant’s work is inductive, moving away from the deductive work of environmental determinism, but it is designed to co-opt the local into a larger picture. Pennant was himself part of the flourishing of natural history in the period as it sought to put together taxonomies of the national and global natural world. He at once privileges the local as a source of authentic knowledge communicated by individual subjects and subsumes it into a larger structure. The local – here specifically the parochial – becomes identified by its difference from other localities in a given national whole, rather than by its singular quality derived from the observing subject.

Conversely, Robert Jameson’s first major geological work (following his study of the Shetlands and Arran), the *Mineralogy of the Scottish Isles* of 1800, is a confident attempt to give a history of Scotland in rock, showing underlying continuities not only between different parts of that country but also between European and global formations. What appear to be local phenomena are revealed as a part of a much larger underlying structure. Mineralogy, he claims, is ‘a ground-work, without which the observations of the geologist, and the labours of the miner, will be ever uncertain, and of little utility.’²⁵ Yet, for all its scientific assurance, Jameson’s work is anxious about its reception. He is concerned to distinguish himself, a proper geologist, from mere travellers who ‘satisfy themselves, in their geological observations, by following a very superficial and absurd mode

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of investigation' as they 'sit in their carriage and view the rocks as they pass along.'²⁶ Given his attitude to the tourist, it is perhaps then surprising that Jameson should decide himself to record his observations in the literary form most usual for the late-eighteenth-century *Tour*: the diary:

It is a fitter task for me to record faithfully what I have myself examined, and to give a fair report of the materials which were collected, than to expose myself, by the form or arrangement of the work, to the danger of having the facts twisted and perverted by hypothesis, the rage for which is as remarkable in this as in the other sciences.²⁷

There is thus a third position between the informants of the *Statistical Account* and the scenes of Wordsworth's childhood that acknowledges – in fact grows from – a tension between the first two. If the local depends upon its singularity – the unique set of associations that the subject experiences – then it cannot take its place in a larger structure of historical geography. Rather than working as a reproducible point in a nexus, it is continually recreated through the experiences and representations of its inhabitants and altered through the accretions of memory. But if, on the other hand, the local can be predicted by virtue of its situation in a national topography, then what makes it specifically local? What is the connection between a named place and the unique space that it inhabits? In this book, I try to untangle some of the complex representations of place in Scotland and as Scotland in the Romantic period. We can read this as an expression of a more general problem: that of Scotland's relation to Britain. Scotland is deemed to stand in a secondary relation to England, added on in 1707, but it is also what completes Britain's wholeness.²⁸ The local is necessary to understand where one is in the nation, but it is not always easy to assimilate it into the nation. In various contexts and forms of writing, we can see how this problem was tackled in different ways: attempts to level out the awkwardness of the local through the centralisation of power, to assimilate it into a larger network or to posit it as a place so dependent on subjective associations that it cannot be physically located at all. For Scotland, the very impulse to know the nation in geographical terms results in an instability in how it is measured, and it is these tensions and instabilities in Scotland's cultural spatiality that I will explore in this study.

The structure of supplementarity that configures national spatiality will inform my next chapter as I discuss the ways in which Scotland becomes representative of Britain. Britain emerges as a northern nation in a general turn from the Classical south to a growing interest in the origins of