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Catherine Macdonald Maclean
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A TOUR MADE IN SCOTLAND IN 1803

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“Scotland is the country above all others that I have seen, in which a man of imagination may carve out his own pleasures.”

DOROTHY WORDSWORTH

On August 22nd, 1803, a very tired horse drew through the outskirts of Glasgow a shabby Irish car, in which were seated two young men, somewhat dusty and travel-stained, and a slight, tanned, eager-faced girl, of a boyishness of appearance then most unfashionable. The quaintness of the “Hibernian vehicle” attracted more attention than quite suited the mood of the travellers, tired as they were after a day’s journeying from Hamilton to Glasgow, and the children ceased their play to send a hooting after the strange equipage, so that the girl, who was looking round in a quick startled way, was glad when at length they reached the Saracen’s Head. She writes: “I shall never forget how glad I was to be landed in a little quiet back-parlour, for my head was beating with the noise of carts which we had left, and the wearisomeness of the disagreeable objects near the highway; . . .”

It was not like these wayfarers, however, to be long fatigued or out of spirits. The following morning found them out of doors, and doing the sights of the city, although, confesses the girl, a renowned walker in her day, “I am less eager to walk in a large town than anywhere else; . . .” At 3 o’clock they left Glasgow, the

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girl being now well muffled up in a serviceable grey cloak to protect her from the heavy rain. It is she, who, in giving an account of their departure, refutes for ever the charge of lack of humour sometimes brought against the citizens of Glasgow. “We were obliged to ride through the streets to keep our feet dry,” says she, “and, in spite of the rain, every person as we went along stayed his steps to look at us; indeed, we had the pleasure of spreading smiles from one end of Glasgow to the other—for we travelled the whole length of the town.”

The travellers, setting out light-heartedly for a frugal jaunt through Scotland, were Dorothy and William Wordsworth, who had left their cottage at Grasmere on August 14th, and Coleridge, who had joined them at Keswick on the 15th. Already they had passed through Carlisle, and across the Solway Moss into Scotland, through Dumfries, where Dorothy pitied “poor Burns, and his moving about on that unpoetic ground,” through Leadhills and Lanark, where Dorothy rejoiced in the beauty of the sunset. “The evening sun was now sending a glorious light through the street, which ran from west to east; the houses were of a fire red, and the faces of the people as they walked westward were almost like a blacksmith when he is at work by night.” From Lanark they passed to Hamilton. Their tour was to last six weeks, and in the course of it they surveyed the greater part of Scotland south of Inverness-shire. From Glasgow they passed on to Dumbarton, and from

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Dumbarton to Loch Lomond, Loch Katrine and the Trossachs. Thence, having been deserted by Coleridge, who probably found his eager companions too strenuous for him, they crossed to Inverary, and from Inverary they made their way to Glencoe. Turning eastwards, they visited Aberfeldy, Killiecrankie, Blair Atholl, Crieff and Callander, after which they paid a second visit to the magical Trossachs. On September 14th they were back at Callander. During the following days they visited Linlithgow, Edinburgh, Roslin (of Roslin chapel Dorothy gives an exquisite description), Hawthornden, Lasswade (where these tireless people visited Scott, arriving “before Mr and Mrs Scott had risen,”) and Peebles. During the sixth week of their tour they visited Melrose (where Scott joined them), Dryburgh and Jedburgh. On September 22nd Scott, leaving his servant to drive his own gig, travelled with them in their car to Hawick, where he parted from them on the 23rd. On the 24th they were back again on known ground, half regretful that their spell of gipsying was at an end. The remainder of the journey must be given in Dorothy’s own words: “Sunday, September 25th, 1803.—A beautiful autumnal day. Breakfasted at a public-house by the road-side; dined at Threlkeld; arrived at home between eight and nine o’clock, where we found Mary in perfect health, Joanna Hutchinson with her, and little John asleep in the clothes-basket by the fire.”

The journal kept by Dorothy Wordsworth of this

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tour is interesting first of all as recording the impression made on a woman of genius by the Scotland of 1803. It is a record, delicately clear, of a series of impressions made on a mind unusually sensitive and poetical, during a journey through a strange country which appealed peculiarly to the heart and the senses of the writer. In some ways it brings back to our minds that other most interesting record of travel, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*. Dorothy Wordsworth notes, as Johnson noted, the meanness of some of the inns, the poverty of many of the people, the desolation in the Highland glens owing to bad conditions and emigration, the simplicity of the food, the omnipresence of the dram. She writes of the ferryman's wife at Loch Katrine. "‘She keeps a dram,’ as the phrase is; indeed, I believe there is scarcely a lonely house by the wayside in Scotland where travellers may not be accommodated with a dram." Like Johnson too she notices the graciousness of Highland manners, and a hospitality carried to quixotry, sometimes even by the very poorest. But her gift is not, like Johnson's, for wise generalisation. Unlike Imlac she regards it as the business of the poet to "number the streaks of the tulip." Her gift is for detail, and through the delicate accuracy of her impressions, an accuracy which is no whit diminished because all these impressions are poetically conceived, she contrives to give the rhythm of the life of the country through which she is passing, sometimes the rhythm of life itself. She misses nothing in a land of

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many contrasts. Scotland is shown to us through a series of pictures. We see the little wild lads of Wanlockhead, with honeysuckle on their hats, taking to their heels when Coleridge questioned them on their Latin—the English tourists at Lanark, who amused Dorothy by setting out for Loch Lomond with the pockets of their carriage stuffed with heather, “roots and all”—the kind Highland woman exclaiming delightedly, “Ho! yes, ye’ll get that,” every time Dorothy stated one of her simple requirements—the boatman who, although wet and cold, would not approach his own fire until his guests had warmed themselves—the Highland drovers in the inn at Inveroran “sitting in a complete circle round a large peat-fire in the middle of the floor, each with a mess of porridge, in a wooden vessel, upon his knee”—the “joyous bustle” of the boat-load of church-goers returning across Loch Lomond, the men in tartan plaids and Scotch bonnets, the women holding up green umbrellas to protect their fine scarlet cloaks. And every now and again something is described which affects the reader as poetry itself—the sight of a shepherd lad, wrapped in a grey plaid, alone with his sheep on the bare moor, standing in utter quietness and silence—the beauty of the fishermen’s nets overshadowing the boats as they were hung out to dry and “falling in the most exquisitely graceful folds”—the meeting with the solitary woman, begging by the banks of Loch Lomond, “struggling with fatigue and poverty and unknown ways”—the song of the boatman on Loch Lomond,

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“a youth fresh from the Isle of Skye,” who “could not speak a word of English, and sang a plaintive Gaelic air in a low tone while he plied his oar”—the utter peace of the shepherd, lying in the midst of a flock upon a sunny knoll, near the banks of the Tweed, with his face turned towards the sky—the solitary stone near Glenfalloch, which told of the people meeting to worship in the temple of the hills. At times, through one of these impressions, Dorothy gives a brief abstract and chronicle of the life of the “dwellers in the mist,” as when she writes of the little herd lad near Tarbet.

While we were walking forward, the road leading us over the top of a brow, we stopped suddenly at the sound of a half-articulate Gaelic hooting from the field close to us. It came from a little boy, whom we could see on the hill between us and the lake, wrapped up in a grey plaid. He was probably calling home the cattle for the night. His appearance was in the highest degree moving to the imagination: mists were on the hill-sides, darkness shutting in upon the huge avenue of mountains, torrents roaring, no house in sight to which the child might belong; his dress, cry, and appearance all different from anything we had been accustomed to. It was a text...containing in itself the whole history of the Highlander's life—his melancholy, his simplicity, his poverty, his superstition, and above all, that visionariness which results from a communion with the unworldliness of nature.

In one respect Dorothy Wordsworth's journal differs greatly from Johnson's account. Johnson lent himself but grudgingly to the beauties of nature: to Dorothy Wordsworth the joy she received from watch-

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ing the beauty of the world around her was half her life. It is impossible to overestimate the value of the descriptions she gives in her record. We can but marvel at the accuracy, the rigid truth, with which she records her impressions. It is this truth which makes each description have a life of its own, and linger in the memory as a beautiful thing. She is able to portray the very soul of places. There is no confusing the different beauties described in her pages. She finds the perfect words in which to describe the sweet serene beauty of the regions of the Tweed,

More pensive in sunshine
 Than others in moonshine,

no less than to describe the mountains and the mists. There is something most delicately individual in her words. Of the Solway Moss she writes, “the dreary waste cheered by the endless singing of larks,” and the words have the effect of an eagle’s feather dropped on a moor. We never forget the place. She describes the Rock of Dumbarton in noble and simple prose. Her description of the little burying-ground on the banks of Loch Katrine lingers in the memory because of its deep peace, making even death seem companioned and companionable. The description of the view from Inch-ta-vannach, a view including “the ghostly image of Dumbarton Castle,” and “so singular and beautiful that it was like a flash of images from another world,” is one of the most intellectual of Dorothy’s descriptions, intellectual because of the analysis it attempts of the nature of a beauty so magical and so enchanting.

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She makes a brave attempt at describing the indescribable beauty of a sunset sky, reflected “like melted rubies” in the waters of a lake. She manages to give an impression of Kilchurn Castle in a very few words, “a decayed palace rising out of the plain of waters.” Of Mull, seen from the mainland, she writes, “...it was of a gem-like colour, and as soft as the sky.” She gives up in despair the attempt to describe the mountains of Glencoe, and then, through the leap of her imagination to Milton, finds the very words. “They were such forms as Milton might be supposed to have had in his mind when he applied to Satan that sublime expression”—

His stature reached the sky.

In her description of Appin, as in that of the view from Inch-ta-vannach, she attempts analysis.

I must say, however, that we hardly ever saw a thoroughly pleasing place in Scotland, which had not something of wildness in its aspect of one sort or other. It came from many causes here: the sea, or sea-loch, of which we only saw as it were a glimpse crossing the vale at the foot of it, the high mountains on the opposite shore, the unenclosed hills on each side of the vale, with black cattle feeding on them, the simplicity of the scattered huts, the half-sheltered, half-exposed situation of the village, the imperfect culture of the fields, the distance from any city or large town, and the very names of Morven and Appin, particularly at such a time, when Ossian’s old friends, sunbeams and mists, as like ghosts as any in the mid-afternoon could be, were keeping company with them.

All these things were beautiful themselves. And Dorothy Wordsworth succeeded in conveying an impression of their beauty, no small achievement. There