

Stepping Westward:

Writing the Highland Tour c. 1720-1830

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‘Yet who would stop, or fear to advance,
/ Though home or shelter he had none, /
With such a sky to lead him on?’ is the
question posed by William Wordsworth
in his 1805 Highland poem, ‘Stepping
Westward’. More than lifting his title
from Wordsworth’s poetry for his
recently published monograph *Stepping
Westward: Writing the Highland Tour c.
1720-1830*, Professor Nigel Leask sets

out to address Wordsworth’s query
about the phenomenal impulse for the
long eighteenth-century’s traveller, and
indeed, writer, to step westward to the
Highlands and Hebrides of Scotland.
Encompassing over a century’s worth of
military diaries, tour journals, poetry,
fiction, and art, Leask pieces together an
impressive, vivid, and at times,
troubling survey of the Highland tour

that is both politically sensitive and aesthetically interested. Leask introduces his work by way of a rich analysis of Wordsworth's eponymous poem, a technique employed throughout *Stepping Westward*, of examining the diverse and often dizzying facets of the Highland tour through the lens of the imaginative works- poetic, fictional, and visual, which sprung from it. Here, Leask considers that for Wordsworth, as for others, the 'poet's tour is a quest for truth, as much about the human and physical nature of Scotland and its people, as about himself as a man and a poet' (Leask 2020, p. 6). In doing so, Leask thoughtfully epitomises his project, one which seeks to examine the 'human and physical' aspects of the *Gàidhealtachd*, counterpoised by an attempt at an understanding of the men and women who actively sought to engage with it (or in the case of the few, merely encounter it) through the itinerant medium of a Highland tour.

In his opening chapter, Leask proposes that the 'genesis of tour writing' is found in Edmund Burt's *Letters from a Gentlemen in the North of Scotland* (1754). Written during the 'volatile climate' of the 1720s, Leask

designates it as being 'the first modern travel account of the Highlands' (pp. 25, 31). Self-professed by Burt to be a '*dreadful catalogue*', Leask objectively balances Burt's inherently antagonistic and ethnically derisive writings, which at times stray towards the 'sort more to be expected from a Caribbean planter', with the curious aesthetic observations of a time before the nascent sublimity of the dramatic Highland topography had been realised (pp. 23, 40). Such an account is fascinating in its visceral contrast with the work of the majority of the writers included (Johnson's famously insensate *Journey* aside) many of whom were drawn westward by the powerful attraction of the developing aesthetic. As Leask notes: 'In Burt's Highlands then the traveller's eye finds itself excluded, baffled, and thwarted, without the relief offered by the sublime' (p. 49). In his extensive discussion of the construction of the 'new roads' built by General Wade following the 1715 uprising, Leask's characteristic pragmatism is felt, noting that 'rather than scrutinising their next footfall, wary of stumbling into bogs, holes, and other obstructions', Wade's Highland road system 'paved the way

for the development of a new romantic interiority, allowing the tourist to cultivate an aesthetic response to the unfolding landscape, while travelling at an accelerated pace' (p. 55). This 'new romantic interiority', a place both bright and dark in the chiaroscuro of sublimity, is the powerhouse of British touristic endeavours which becomes the Highland tour.

Leask's subsequent chapter, which examines the 'conquest of Caledonia' during the mid-century by an exhausting troupe of 'Roman legions, enlightenment antiquaries, Hanoverian soldiers, and finally tourists', is in many ways the most challenging for his reader (p. 63). The antiquarian quest to reconfigure the military events of the Jacobite uprising of 1745-6 with that of the Roman conquest in 80 CE by Agricola, (what Leask's terms 'Agricolomania'), is discussed artfully through analysis of Walter Scott's favoured novel *The Antiquary* (1816). However, there is too painful a juxtaposition apparent between facile antiquarian pursuits in an idealised 'barbarous' Celtic state, and the very real and present barbarity which followed in the wake of Culloden. This

tragic moment in the history of the Highlands is handled by Leask unflinchingly, comparing English soldiers' propaganda with the accounts of Jacobite survivors. In the aftermath of the fated battle, Leask tells of the victors' rampage through the Highlands 'with orders to plunder, burn, and destroy' and of the women who were 'strip searched and raped', the experiences of which, Leask powerfully evokes through his inclusion of the Gaelic waulking song, 'Achadh nan Comhaichean' (pp. 72-3). Unlike Burt, we are afforded the 'relief offered by the sublime' in the ensuing expertise showcased in Leask's extensive enquiry into the 'Ossian phenomenon' of the 1760s. Discussing the 'reinvention of the Highland landscape', with the new interest in 'Fingalian topography' following the success of James Macpherson's *Ossian* poems, Leask's steady hand guides his readers through the complex, polarising ascent of the Ossianic (p. 86).

The chapters which follow deal with the 'two giants of the Highland tour', Thomas Pennant and Samuel Johnson (p. 170). Pennant's Highland tours of 1769 and 1772 represent for

Leask ‘a watershed in travel writing’ characterised by the prolific traveller’s ‘omnivorous style and interdisciplinary range’ (p. 97). Pennant’s bold directive in presenting ‘the true knowledge’ of a Scotland he deemed ‘hitherto misrepresented’ speaks of the heterogenous, often incohesive collection of work written of the Highlands prior to his travels (p. 101). Leask must here again be lauded for having collated them within such a structured narrative in his previous chapters. Leask’s pioneering explication of Pennant’s tours represents the core of *Stepping Westward* and provides rigour and fresh insight into the otherwise familiar and ‘celebrated’ travels which follow. The ‘most celebrated Scottish tour ever written’ is of course Dr Johnson’s *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* of 1775 (p. 136). However, whilst scrutinising the many parallels alongside the ‘small sympathies, as well as the ideological differences’ between Pennant and Johnson’s tours, Leask’s discerning fieldwork provides an original and persuasive case study which successfully uncovers the influence of

Pennant to Johnson, Boswell, and the great many who followed (p. 170).

The succeeding chapter is undoubtedly the most vibrant in its study of the rise of the newly coined aesthetic of the picturesque following its arbitrar William Gilpin’s sketching tour of the Highlands in 1776. Leask reads the picturesque as being a ‘key mediator between’ the Burkean antithesis of ‘the more established categories of the sublime and beautiful’ (p. 72). However, the deference shown by Leask to the picturesque as succeeding the sublime is not always convincing despite his claims of Gilpin: ‘enab[ling] the emergence of a new verbal and visual attention to the natural world’ (p. 205). Indeed, throughout this chapter, which covers the late and turn of the century tours of Gilpin, John Stoddart, Sarah Murray, and the Wordsworths, Leask himself continually reverts to the language of the sublime in order to make his evaluations. We are troubled to hear of the ‘sublime “solitude” introduced by sheep husbandry’, whilst later Leask notes a prevailing trope of ‘sublime inarticulacy’ in travellers’ attempt to describe the indelible Highland landscape (pp. 182, 193). One is

therefore tempted to echo the words of Stoddart, who having ascended Ben Lomond, notes ‘a scene, not indeed picturesque, for it defies the pencil; but nobly poetical, as it excites the sensations of true sublimity’ (p. 184).

In turning to the ‘Female Picturesque’, Leask’s account of Sarah Murray’s *The Beauties of Scotland* (1799) offers refreshing insight into a woman’s experiences of the Highland tour. Murray’s vivacious account of her travels through the Highlands, which for Leask ‘evokes the metaphor of a roaring Highland torrent’ (again, in terms sublime), are characterised by a ‘patrician *sprezzatura*’ tone contrasted by her energetic enterprise in aesthetic observations (p. 188). Leask contends that ‘the act of viewing scenery is for Murray a strenuous physical activity, a fully somatic experience, as much a part of the sublime as the view itself once attained’ (p. 191). In comparison to such a forceful (and at times, we gather, forced) tour narrative is Dorothy Wordsworth’s contemplative *Recollections of a Tour made in Scotland*, which Leask hails as being ‘perhaps the masterpiece of all the tours studied in this book’ (p. 197). Leask’s

discussion is illustrated brilliantly by his pairing of Dorothy’s thought-provoking ‘recollections’ with close analysis of the poetry written at the time by her husband, William. Leask surmises that if William had broken ground with his poetic tenet of ‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’, then correspondingly, Dorothy’s tour, which was written retrospectively over some twenty months; ‘employs memory and imagination to recover lived experience, in a way that no other travel writer had done before’ (p. 198).

The penultimate chapter begins with a distinct change in tone felt in a damning review by Walter Scott of Sir John Carr’s *Caledonian Sketches* (1809), from which Leask frankly informs us that by this period a ‘Scottish tour had become as commonplace as a trip to Margate or Turnbridge’, and that ‘the whole project of writing a Scottish tour now seemed futile, because the genre was exhausted’ (pp. 218-219). However, at this very moment of ‘exhausted’ interest in the Highlands, Leask offers a compelling examination of how Scott’s creative enterprise performs a ‘poetic reinvention’ of the Highlands (p. 231). Scott’s Highland

poetry and newly fashioned historical fiction are deconstructed by Leask, uncovering the influences of Pennant and others, whilst also sensitively engaging with the problematic implications of Scott's vastly popular literary fabrication of the Highlands as 'the faery ground for romance and poetry' (p. 250). Leask further observes how the 'mass tourism' generated by Scott's 'unprecedented hold on the imaginations of a mass readership in Britain and the wider world' is facilitated by the technological advances of steam (p. 229). There is a strange anachronism to Leask's account of William Daniell's *Voyages Round Great Britain* (1814-25), which contra to earlier travels and the pedestrian tour of John Keats in 1818 (which Leask reads as a form of 'bohemian "counter-tourism"'), is partly performed on a paddle steamer (p. 270). The fact that the monopolising steamboats which were 'aimed at a tourist clientele' bore such names as 'Rob Roy', 'Fingal', and 'Robert Burns', reveals the peculiar unfolding of a modernised mode of tourism which still drew power from the imaginative (p. 264).

There is a fatality to Leask's statement: 'But as the tourists poured in, hungry Gaels poured out' which allows for his interrogation of Scott's role in the expedient rise of touristic popularity in the *Gàidhealtachd*, in contrast to Scott and others' questionable silence surrounding the increasing tragedies of the 'hungry Gaels' (p. 262). Leask selects texts from Robert Jamieson, Stewart of Garth, and the ignominious John Macculloch to illustrate the backlash against Scott's idealised 'Highlandism' which was seen to romanticise and disguise the bleak reality of the accelerating Highland Clearances. It is Garth's voice we hear the loudest when he asks 'how any reader moved by Scott's tale of "fictional distress" could withhold sympathy for the suffering occasioned by the real eviction of 60,000 tenants' (p. 286). That Leask chooses to base the denouement of his text on Macculloch's *Highland and Western Isles of Scotland* (1825), which, as he admits, makes for 'disturbing reading' in its 'racialised justification for landlord policies approaching an advocacy of ethnic cleansing', is testament to the unflinching 'quest for truth' which

characterises *Stepping Westward*. Here, we arrive full circle as Burt's derisive account of the 1720s is subsumed by the 'racist dogma' of Macculloch a century later, just as the tragedy of Culloden is painfully eclipsed with that of the Clearances.

In ending on such a plangent note, Leask compels his readers to face the same mounting paradox which confronted all who undertook a Highland tour during the troubling history of its formation. A paradox of vying wonder evoked by the profound, enduring sublimity of Highland landscape and literary creation, set against the deeply unsettling knowledge of the brutal treatment of the Gaelic people. Leask's mastery of the period's contexts and of the peculiar 'generic synthesis' that accounts for the variegated writings of the Highland tour ultimately tells that beyond the Wordsworthian 'echo of the voice enwrought' in words, poetry, and song, is a 'deafening silence' which echoes far greater (p. 299). As such, *Stepping Westward* is truly monumental in nature, providing students and scholars of this tectonic period of touristic enterprise, of literary and poetic

inundation, and of insurmountable social tragedy, with invaluable insight into the history and manifold contexts of the Highland tour.