11-30-2016

Curious Travellers: Thomas Pennant and the Welsh and Scottish Tour (1760-1820)

Alex Deans
University of Glasgow

Nigel Leask
University of Glasgow

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl

Part of the Celtic Studies Commons, Digital Humanities Commons, and the Literature in English, British Isles Commons

CURIOUS TRAVELLERS: THOMAS PENNANT
AND THE WELSH AND SCOTTISH TOUR (1760-1820)

Alex Deans and Nigel Leask

> The country from *Luss* to the Southern extremity of the lake continually improves; the mountains sink gradually into small hills; the land is highly cultivated, well planted, and well inhabited. I was struck with rapture at a sight so long new to me: it would have been without alloy, had it not been dashed with the uncertainty whether the mountain virtue, hospitality, would flourish with equal vigor in the softer scenes I was on the point of entering on; for in the *Highlands* every house gave welcome to the traveller.
>
> Thomas Pennant, *A tour in Scotland, MDCCLXIX*[1]

The Curious Travellers project (curioustravellers.ac.uk) brings together digital and interpretative work on the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Scottish tour. Focused on the work of Thomas Pennant, the project combines textual resources (both from manuscript and print) and cartographical work, as explained more fully below. Like many digital projects involving spatial humanities, Curious Travellers is both collaborative and interdisciplinary, and it represents the way that such projects increasingly involve scholars from a variety of backgrounds, not only those who primarily work as digital humanists.

Based jointly at the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies (CAWCS) and the University of Glasgow and generously funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), the project seeks over four years to reassess the literary and cultural practice of the Welsh and Scottish tour in the period 1760-1820. This research will produce two

---

[1] Thomas Pennant, *A tour in Scotland; MDCCLXIX*. (Warrington: printed by W. Eyres, MDCCLXXIV. [1774]), 246; hereafter cited as Pennant, *1769*.

substantial and complementary monographs by the project's principal investigator Mary-Ann Constantine (CAWCS) and co-investigator Nigel Leask (Glasgow), considering the Welsh and Scottish tour respectively. Currently under preparation by Elizabeth Edwards and Ffion Mair Jones at CAWCS and Alex Deans and Luca Guariento at Glasgow, the project's digital output will present scholars and the general public with significant new resources: a collection of previously unpublished manuscript tours of Scotland and Wales, and the first dedicated edition and indexing of Thomas Pennant's extensive but scattered correspondence, all to be made freely available through the Curious Travellers website. Through this work, the project aims to recover a sense of both Pennant's contemporary significance and his influence on subsequent travellers and writers. Crucially, Pennant's tours also present the starting-point for the broader task of expanding our knowledge of the role played by the domestic tour in shaping not only the modern genre of travel writing, but the cultural constitution of a multifaceted relationship between Wales, Scotland, and Britain, and the variously convergent and divergent national histories valorised or elided therein.[2]

Pennant's above remarks on leaving the Scottish Highlands as he travelled south along the western bank of Loch Lomond in September 1769, articulate a tension between the imperatives of modernity and the seductive appeal of the unimproved in place and custom, that animates many accounts of journeys to Scotland during the eighteenth century. Often working from his family estate at Downing in North Wales, Thomas Pennant (1726-1798) had established himself as a respected naturalist and antiquarian by the time of his first visit to Scotland in 1769. However the success of Pennant's *A tour in Scotland* (first published in 1771) inclined his ambitions towards further travel writing. Pennant returned in 1772 to take in the Hebrides and parts of the west Highlands and east coast omitted from his earlier trip, putting his travels into writing as the two-part *Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides*, *1772* (first

---

[2] Mary-Ann Constantine argues for Pennant's *Tour in Wales* and, more broadly, "topographical writing in the Romantic period as an important and neglected site for the creation of modern notions of history" in "'To trace thy country's glories to their source;' Dangerous History in Thomas Pennant's *Tour in Wales*,", in *Rethinking British Romantic History, 1770-1845*, ed. by Porscha Fermanis and John Regan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 121-143 (p. 123).

published 1774-1776). Pennant also made several journeys in his native Wales, which appeared in print from the late 1770s.[3]

Critics have long approached the contested representation of national space as a defining feature of Scottish literature in the long-eighteenth century and Romantic period, as writers worked to both interrogate and consolidate Scotland's cultural and political significance within the schema of a post-Union, empire-facing, and linguistically diverse British Isles.[4] If Scottish Enlightenment "stadial history"—increasingly fleshed-out by empirical observations on the influence of topography on economic development, and the measurement and production of place and spatiality through statistical and cartographical mapping—contributed to the intellectual and cultural paradox of how to simultaneously situate and distinguish the local within the universal, such questions in turn expressed the ambiguity of Scotland's geographical, cultural and political place within Britain. Yet Scottish Romanticism as a critical field is yet to fully address the implications of Scotland's "uneven development" in the period, strikingly embodied in the apparently anachronistic proximity of the Lowlands and Highlands.[5] Pennant's two

---

[3] The publication history of Pennant's Welsh tours is particularly complex, appearing first as the distinct publications: *A tour in Wales. MDCCLXX.* (London: printed by Henry Hughes, MDCCLXXVIII [1778]), *A Journey to Snowdon* (London: printed by Henry Hughes, 1781) and *Continuation of the Journey* (London: printed by Henry Hughes, 1783); later incorporated as: *A tour in Wales.* 2 vols. (London: Printed for Benjamin White, at Horace's Head in Fleet Street, MDCCLXXXIV [1784]).

[4] See for example: Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism; the romantic novel and the British Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Janet Sorensen, *The Grammar of Empire in Eighteenth-Century British Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Ian Duncan, Leith Davis and Janet Sorensen, "Introduction,"' in *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism*, ed. Davis, Duncan, and Sorensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1-19; Ian Duncan, *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Murray Pittock, *Scottish and Irish Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Penny Fielding, *Scotland and the Fictions of Geography: North Britain, 1760-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Juliet Shields, *Sentimental literature and Anglo-Scottish identity, 1745-1820* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[5] In their introduction, the editors of *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism* note James Chandler's identification of Scotland's "uneven development" as a key site for the configuration of Romantic "anachronism": Chandler, *England in*

tours of Scotland are distinguished by the sympathy and acuity with which they detail and analyse the economic, social and political plight of the *Gaidhealtachd*—a region and culture seen by many to have been brought under the sway of government only after Culloden. In large part, this was a reflection of the extensive use Pennant made of local expertise and knowledge both during his travels and after, as he added the substance and authority of numerous voluntary contributors to that of his own tour narratives. And yet while Pennant's tours incorporate many of the heterogeneous concerns—economic, natural, cultural, antiquarian— that later formed the substance of Sir John Sinclair's *Statistical Account of Scotland*, as well as the subjects of entire genres in their own right, the tour itself is never simply the transparent medium through which knowledge of various places is ordered and relayed.[6]

Pennant's prose often reflects the structural and syntactical sparseness of the mode of scientific description in which he was practiced, occasionally retaining in print the markers of a research-heavy style of composition that was both intellectually inquisitive and acquisitive. Pennant's background as a naturalist and collector also strongly informed his use of visual culture. In one of his letters, Pennant remarks that "nothing but a drawing explains at a distance an object of natural history"—a maxim of scientific knowledge production borne out in the tours, which are strewn with plates depicting views and "picturesque scenes" for the information and entertainment of readers.[7] In this enterprise, Pennant drew heavily on the skills of his servant Moses Griffith, whom he had trained as his personal artist to accompany him on natural history and topographical sorties. Pennant's career-long relationship with Griffith testifies to the role of visual culture in interweaving the disciplinary borders of natural history, antiquarianism and travel writing. Reflecting this key cultural and aesthetic dimension of the tour, the Curious Travellers project has undertaken to collaborate with and programme a number of significant exhibitions, which began with an inaugural conference in 2014 that addressed a major international

---

1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 108, 131.

[6] See Sir John Sinclair, *The Statistical Account of Scotland, Drawn up from the communications of the ministers of the different parishes*, 21 vols (Edinburgh: Creech, 1791-1799): available online at: http://edina.ac.uk/stat-acc-scot/.

[7] Thomas Pennant to George Paton, 15 April, 1771, NLScotland, ADV MSS. 29.5.5 (2 vols.), i, 5 ; 21 January, 1786, NLS, *ibid*., ii, 121.

exhibition of paintings at the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff by
the landscape artist Richard Wilson (1714-1782), continued with an
exhibition on Romanticism in the Welsh Landscape at the Museum of
Modern Art in Machynlleth in May 2016 (with further events planned for
Wales later in the year), and will be followed by a capstone exhibition at
the Hunterian Museum at Glasgow in 2018, supported by the Paul Mellon
Foundation at Yale.

In addition to illustrating his tours with numerous plates, Pennant
prepared a new map of Scotland to accompany the publication of Part 2
of his *1772 Tour in Scotland*—a remarkable feat in itself, though it was
not completed until 1777, the year after that volume reached print. [8] The
cartographical dimension of the tour, as both text and perambulatory act,
will be addressed by the project through a public-facing digital
resource—currently in development with Chris Fleet and the map
department at the National Library of Scotland—which will allow users
to view Pennant's itineraries through Scotland in 1769 and 1772,
presenting information on the places he visited through a split-screen
display that will show their positions on both modern, and specially geo-
referenced eighteenth and nineteenth-century maps.

The mapping application will complement the project's core digital
outputs mentioned above: an online database and selected transcriptions
of Pennant's correspondence, and a collection of previously unpublished
manuscript tours of Scotland and Wales. Both letters and manuscript
tours will be XML-encoded. As well as reflecting current best-practice in
the digital humanities, this technique is of particular advantage to the
current project as it will allow us to retain both variant eighteenth-century
renderings of toponyms, and the facility for users to search for
standardised modern versions—an important functionality when dealing
with Welsh and Gaelic place names often phonetically spelt by non-
native speakers: evidence of cross-cultural encounters that our
transcriptions will preserve.

As part of his effort to produce detailed descriptions of the places he
visited through the use of local sources, Pennant's party during the 1772
Tour included the Reverend John Stuart of Killin, an expert in botany and

---

[8] On the process behind Pennant's map, see Gwyn Walters, "Thomas Pennant's
Map of Scotland, 1777; A Study in Sources, and an Introduction to George
Paton's Role in the History of Scottish Cartography," *Imago Mundi: The Journal
of the International Society for the History of Cartography,* 28:2 (1976): 121-8;
Thomas Pennant to George Paton, 27 August 1776, NLS, *ibid.*, i, 163.

Gaelic. Pennant's subsequent correspondence with Stuart reveals how he continued to draw on his knowledge after the journey itself had ended, with Stuart providing Gaelic etymologies for locations Pennant had visited in the Highlands and Islands. In a letter of May 1773, Stuart provided Pennant with information on place names on Bute and Arran in the Firth of Clyde:

> On June 17th, the first day of your voyage, you observe that Kingarth in Bute is so named from Kin a head, and garth a corn-field. The Galic words are Ceann a head and gart a corn-field.
> "Loch-fad" i.e. the long lake.
> June 21st "Corra" It should be rather spelt Corry
> 22d. "Machrie" rather Machry.
> "Torr-more" i.e. the great round eminence
> "Drumadoon" In Galic Druim-an-dùin i.e. the ridge of the fort or castle, probably called so from the old round tower which you saw the remains of upon an eminence as you ascended from the shore after viewing the Cave.
> "Fin-mac-coul" rather Fin-mac-Cuil, i.e. Fingal the son of Cumhal.
> "Cairn a baan" rather Carn-baan i.e. the white cairn or heap of stones.
> "Feoirlin" should be written Feorling; and "Shedeagh", Sheddag.
> June 23d. "Torr-an-schian castle" I imagine it should be Torr-an-lian castle, i.e. the castle of the fairy-haunted eminence.
> "Goatfield said to be 1/4th mile high." I suppose it must at least be double that of perpendicular height.[9]

Our split-screen viewer will include a geo-referenced version of Aaron Arrowsmith's 1807 *Map of Scotland* (shown opposite). Comparison between Stuart's letter and Arrowsmith's map demonstrates the historical instability of Gaelic toponyms, and the advantage offered by digital technologies when dealing with the depths of historical and cultural variation in linguistic and visual representations of place.

The collection of unpublished tours will illustrate Pennant's influence on the subsequent development of the domestic tour as both a literary genre and cultural practice ordered around specific sites and itineraries. It will also significantly broaden our understanding of the history of travel writing with a range of previously little-heard voices, including Gaelic-literate enthusiasts of Ossianic poetry, and young writers testing the fash-

---

[9] Letter from John Stuart, Killin to Thomas Pennant, Downing, 12 May, 1773, Warwickshire County Record Office, CR2017/TP369/4/1a.

Detail from Aaron Arrowsmith's *Map of Scotland constructed from original materials*, (London: 1807). Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland: http://maps.nls.uk/index.html

ionable claims of sentiment and sensibility against their own experiences of surprisingly alien landscapes and languages.[10]

By making a significant quantity of Pennant's correspondence available for the first time as a single digital resource, the project will recuperate a sense of the collaborative networks that undergird Pennant's printed tours. In partnership with the Oxford Cultures of Knowledge Project, metadata from Pennant's correspondence will be added to the Early Modern Letters Online (EMLO) database, a free platform which will allow users to explore Pennant's epistolary networks and situate these within the even broader context of eighteenth-century letter-writing

---

[10] See Notebook belonging to Sir John MacGregor Murray, with a description of his tour of Highlands and Islands 1800, Stirling Council Archives, PD60/301 and Eliza Dawson, "A Tour through part of England and of Scotland by Eliza Dawson in the year 1786" (photocopy), NLS, Acc.12017.

culture.[11] Pennant's *Voyage to the Hebrides* is introduced by a dedication praising the spirit of scientific generosity and "facility of communication" shown by Sir Joseph Banks, who had provided the volume with a set-piece written and visual account of the basaltic "Fingal's Cave" on the island of Staffa, which Pennant had been unable to visit due to bad weather.[12] Letters written by Pennant to Scottish correspondents and informants as he solicited information and detail to layer onto his own remarks as a traveller likewise praise the "communicative disposition" of recipients, suggesting that Pennant's dedication to Banks was more than the performance of etiquette associated with the gentleman scientist, and reflected a culture of "communicative action" extending beyond the metropolitan elite of the empire to incorporate office clerks and ministers, and amateur collectors, antiquarians and naturalists, often from remote corners of the British Isles.[13] The replies are often rich in their own right, opening a door on the trans-peripheral construction of Scottish culture and history by figures such as the Gaelic speaking minister Reverend Donald Macqueen of Kilmuir on Skye, whose accounts of Highland superstition weave a colourful tapestry from vestigial traditions; the remains of supposed Druidical temples; Ossianic fragments, and classical accounts of worship among the tribes of ancient Anatolia.[14]

By reasserting the significance of Pennant's Welsh and Scottish tours, the Curious Travellers project will address a much wider and richer field than might have been offered by a writer of more selective or conventionally literary propensities. This heterogeneity may have served to fragment, rather than concentrate Pennant's reputation in the post-Romantic history of travel literature. Yet at the current juncture, one might point out how this quality of Pennant's writing, by reflecting a broader ferment of different ways of thinking about places and their human and natural histories, chimes with contemporary efforts to emancipate political and economic discourse from the certainties of post-enlightenment anthropocentrism, and so to reframe our understanding of

---

[11] http://emlo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/

[12] Thomas Pennant *A tour in Scotland, and voyage to the Hebrides*; MDCCLXXII (Chester: printed by John Monk, MDCCLXXIV. [1774]), i, 299-309.

[13] On the notion of "communicative action" in the history of science, see James A. Secord, "Knowledge in Transit," *Isis*, 95:4 (Dec., 2004): 654-672.

[14] Donald Macqueen to Thomas Pennant, February 1773, Warwickshire Country Record Office, CR2017/TP297/3.

the relationship between the cultural, intellectual, and material worlds.[15] Moreover, the tendency of Pennant and his fellow travellers to encounter and accommodate the unexpected in the places they describe might now be valued for its power to de-familiarise ground that appears literally well-trodden in the accounts of subsequent tourists. These often neglected earlier travel narratives also serve as a reminder of the contingent nature of national and regional self-image, at a time when the composition of the United Kingdom as a cultural and political entity is in many quarters the subject of radical reassessment.

University of Glasgow

---

[15] See for example Quentin Meillassoux, *After finitude : an essay on the necessity of contingency*, trans. by Ray Brassier, (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), and Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter, A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).