

‘Not Worth Going to See’: The Place of Ireland in Samuel Johnson’s Imagination

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It should be stated at the outset that this is a frankly polemical paper. It may ultimately mean no more than a plea to Irish readers to read Samuel Johnson more sympathetically and more often; bearing in mind that there is a need to treat Johnson’s famous ‘opinions’ in their full rhetorical context and to question their relative importance alongside the material that Johnson actually published. It is true that Johnson wrote very little directly about Ireland, but it is important to stress that his broad principles are of interest to anyone studying Ireland in the eighteenth century. Indeed, as the most eloquent anti-imperialist writer writing in English at this time, he has almost automatic claims on an Irish readership.

Johnson is still regarded as the paradigmatic eighteenth-century character and attitudes towards him still tend to colour attitudes to the century and its attitudes as a whole. Determining what Johnson thought of Ireland has a bearing on what Ireland should think of Johnson and, by close elision, what Ireland should think of the eighteenth century. Establishing the relationship between Johnson and Ireland has a bearing on the future health and well being of eighteenth-century studies on this island, in other words. Professing an interest in Samuel Johnson is also a good way of starting a fight. A critic as influential and widely read as Terry Eagleton can dismiss Johnson casually as ‘virulently anti-Gaelic’, despite the mass of evidence to the contrary.¹

Liking and loathing Johnson at the dawn of the twenty-first century continues to be defined by political insecurities. Johnson still tends to be appropriated or expelled wholesale on the basis of his proximity to the political agenda of whomever is commentating on him. He is denounced by left wingers as a right winger, appropriated as a right winger by right wingers, or appropriated by left wingers as a left winger. The one permutation I have yet to see in print is a denunciation of Johnson as left wing by a right wing scholar. Denunciation of labels is a relatively straightforward task. Fewer people have been concerned to take on the harder work of unthinking the trajectories of Whig historiography and to look instead at how the grammar of Johnson’s likes and dislikes was

1 Terry Eagleton, *Crazy John and the Bishop and Other Essays on Irish Culture* (Cork, 1998), p.71.

constructed. What and whom did he feel obliged to uphold or condemn at any given historical moment and what was his moral basis for doing so?

My concern is that, while other parties are busy appropriating or denouncing Johnson, Ireland should not be left behind. Johnson's writings dominate the central decades of the century and the values contained in those writings have a deal to say about the political, economic and cultural relations between the islands of Britain and Ireland or, more accurately, between all the nations contained within this archipelago.

For non-Johnsonians, it is a truncated version of Boswell's Johnson who dominates. Many modern readers remain essentially or residually 'Romantics' in terms of their fidelity to the immediate and their sense of the primacy of the spoken word. Authenticity, inspiration, and truth-value are all conferred upon the word rather than the letter. The first word to come into our heads has a psychoanalytic stamp of truth that the word sweated over does not. Remarks of Johnson overheard by Boswell are regarded as more 'characteristic' and 'revealing' than his carefully chiselled prose. Donald Greene pointed out rightly how alien such preferences would have appeared to Johnson.² In the eighty-fifth number of *The Adventurer*, Johnson described conversation as a combative game.³ Print, on the other hand, is where one reflects seriously and commits oneself.

However, despite this plea for the primacy of print over speech, it is to be admitted that what follows is based, in the main, on Johnson's conversation. But in a sense the problem is not Boswell either, since were Boswell to be read with sustained attention rather than plundered for choice cuts, the Johnson we would meet would defy the familiar stereotype as often as not.

I

To begin with Boswell's Johnson; the anecdotal Johnson. From an Irish perspective there is much that interests. First, it was Boswell who told us that Johnson opposed the whole basis of British rule in Ireland, regarding it as cruel, exploitative and unjust. In his own incomparable words: 'Let the authority of the English government perish, rather than be maintained by iniquity ... Better ... to hang or drown people at once than by an unrelenting persecution to beggar and starve them.'⁴ What he saw as the peculiar and paradoxical political status of Ireland roused his special indignation:

- 2 Greene's Johnson is founded on better evidence than the Johnson constructed merely out of nuggets of Boswell, and contradicts the Abbreviated book of Boswell's Johnson in most particulars. The two best books on Johnson's politics are Donald Greene, *The Politics of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven, Conn., 1960); and John Cannon, *Samuel Johnson and the Politics of Hanoverian England* (Oxford, 1994). Robert Folkenflik has an interesting essay on Johnson's politics in which he referred briefly to Johnson's resentment at the treatment of Catholic Ireland, entitled 'Johnson's Politics', in Grey Clingham (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson* (Cambridge, 1997), pp.102-13.
- 3 Samuel Johnson, *The Advertiser*, 85, in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson* (15 vols., New Haven and London, 1977), ii, pp.411-7.
- 4 James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, L.L.D.* (2 vols., London, 1949), i, p.389.

The Irish are in a most unnatural state; for we see there the minority prevailing over the majority. There is no instance, even in the ten persecutions of such severity as that which the Protestants of Ireland have exercised against the Catholicicks. Did we tell them we have conquered them, it would be above board: to punish them by confiscation and other penalties, as rebels, was monstrous injustice.⁵

The Catholic majority in Ireland were punished as British subjects without having any of the rights of the British subjects. In other words, they were treated as prisoners of war *and* traitors.

Few anthologists seem to bother quoting Johnson's loud denunciations of British rule in Ireland together with his horror at the disqualification and impoverishment of the Catholic majority. Boswell recorded these remarks as frequent and vehement, but he did not, unfortunately, condense any of these denunciations into a single pithy and comical remark, which is, presumably, the reason why they have not achieved posthumous celebrity. Possibly Johnson thought there was nothing pithy or amusing about the penal laws.

Boswell also recorded how one Irish visitor asked Johnson about the possibility of an Act of Union between Britain and Ireland and how he replied: 'Do not make an Union with us, Sir. We should unite with you only to rob you. We should have robbed the Scotch, if they had had any thing of which we could have robbed them.'⁶

These sympathetic noises should not lead us to construct a Johnson who was 'politically correct'. Johnson firmly believed in making fun of people based on their ethnic origin. He did not, however, usually pre-judge individuals or refuse their acquaintance based on their ethnic origin. The variety of his Scottish as well as Irish acquaintance confirms this. The most cursory inspection of Johnson's circle of friends throughout his adult life reveals the fact that his so-called 'circle' was disproportionately Scottish and Irish. His Irish friends included Edmund Burke, Oliver Goldsmith, Arthur Murphy and Edmund Malone, together with various Sheridans, including Thomas, Frances and Richard Brinsley.

Whenever Boswell reported any comparison Johnson made between Scotland and Ireland, the advantage is always with Ireland. Ireland and Scotland seem to function as conveniently opposed terms for Johnson. Even the famous remark 'the Irish are a very fair race, they never speak well of one another' was made in the context of an attack on what he saw as characteristically Scottish 'block-voting'.⁷ The Scots preferred Scotland to the truth; the Irish preferred the truth to following a party line. Johnson (who was parsimonious when it came to praising anyone of whatever nationality) praised the Irish of his acquaintance when he went on to say that 'the Irish are not in a conspiracy to cheat the world by false representations of the merits of their countrymen.'⁸ As so often, by cutting the

5 Ibid., i, pp.483-4.

6 Ibid., ii, p.291.

7 Ibid., ii, p.522.

8 Ibid.

quote short, we reinforce the xenophobe we think we know, but we mistake what Johnson actually meant.

In general, Johnson enjoyed better relationships with people rather than with countries abstractly considered. When asked while on his famous trip how he liked the Scottish Highlands he replied: 'who can like the Highlands? – I like the inhabitants very well'.⁹ Johnson was blessedly free of what we might call the post-Romantic imperialist tourist gaze. He was incapable of looking at a majestic mountain range without worrying about how people could possibly make a living out of such an environment. Indeed, the whole concept of empty space, solitude and depopulation was for Johnson merely depressing and never inspiring. Just as the depopulated landscape of the Scottish highlands failed to inspire sublime raptures from Johnson, so the prospect of the Giant's Causeway could provoke only the famous quip: 'Is not Giant's Causeway worth seeing – yes sir, worth seeing, just not worth *going* to see.'¹⁰ Perhaps Johnson's implied meaning was that the Causeway was not worth expending precious time and money just to say that one *had* seen it. Johnson had no interest in landscape for its own sake, and, as for Irish people, he could meet plenty of them in London.

II

Turning to Johnson's actual writing, references and attitudes to Ireland appear rather thin on the ground. It seems best therefore to apply what we know of his wider political beliefs if we are to infer his likely perspective on Anglo-Irish relations. These beliefs are perhaps best remembered as a result of his anti-American pamphlet *Taxation No Tyranny* (1775), which from the point of view of his posthumous reputation is surely the most destructive thing he ever wrote.¹¹ Johnson opposed the claims of American colonists because, relatively speaking, he believed they had little to complain about. They seemed to be proportionately wealthier than their English, let alone Irish counterparts, and a number of them owned slaves. Indeed, as planters on a foreign shore, he treated them as colonial agents rather than as oppressed colonial subjects.¹²

Like his close friend Goldsmith, Johnson was incapable of separating economic and political issues of freedom and he was incapable of being stirred by abstract political questions (such as the limited extension of franchise) that

9 Samuel Johnson and James Boswell, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland and the Journal of a Tour of the Hebrides*, Peter Levi (ed.) (Harmondsworth, 1984), p.394.

10 Boswell, *The Life of Johnson*, ii, p.291.

11 Note Donald Greene's introduction to Johnson's political writings which contains *Taxation No Tyranny* in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson* (15 vols., New Haven and London, 1977), x, pp.vii-xxxvii. See also *ibid.*, pp.401-55.

12 Johnson included in this pamphlet a typically bitter reflection on the great age of maritime discovery: 'In the same year [1498] hitherto disastrous to mankind, by the Portuguese was discovered the passage of the Indies and by the Spaniards the coast of America.' Johnson, *The Yale Edition*, x, p.421.

clearly would have little bearing on the material living conditions of most people. He was a Tory primarily in the sense of being anti-Whig (a Whig being a creature he described famously as 'the negation of all principle').¹³ If Johnson was reactionary in terms of the deference he paid to church and king, it was because he preferred those ancient forms of authority to the rapaciousness of the monied classes. In other words, unfettered capitalism seemed to Johnson to be more oppressive than feudalism. The awkward but accurate reality is that, in the eighteenth century, reaction to capitalist oppression was exactly that – reaction – eliding into what might be called reactionary politics and a reversion to political models drawn from the past rather than an anticipation of future political states. So called 'reactionaries' can often emerge as rather more sympathetic than so-called 'progressives'.

Many of Johnson's political views can be illuminated by a reading of Goldsmith and *vice versa*. Goldsmith's royalist Rev Primrose, who prefers one tyrant to many, voices views very close to those of Johnson. As is well known, Johnson contributed lines both to *The Traveller* and *The Deserted Village*.¹⁴ Johnson's conclusion to *The Deserted Village* was both typical of Johnson and entirely sympathetic in respect of Goldsmith's poem:

Teach erring Man to spurn the rage of gain ...
That trade's proud empire hastes to swift decay,
As ocean sweeps the labour'd mole away;
While self-dependent power can time defy,
As rocks resist the billows and the sky.¹⁵

What Johnson offered is a biblically cadenced denunciation of British imperialism followed by a characteristic subordination of overtly political concerns to questions of individual moral management. Forms of government may be applauded and lamented, but the appeal was to the individual.

Goldsmith (who clearly had problems with endings) also called upon Johnson to finish off his other great poem 'The Traveller':

How small, of all that human hearts endure,
That part which laws or kings can cause or cure.
Still to ourselves in every place consign'd.
Our own felicity we make or find:
With secret course, which no loud storms annoy,
Glides the smooth course of domestic joy.
To men remote from power but rarely known
Leave reason, faith and conscience all our own.¹⁶

13 Boswell, *The Life of Johnson*, i, p.267.

14 Oliver Goldsmith, *Poems and Plays*, Tom Davis (ed.) (London, 1993), pp.226, 228.

15 *Ibid.*, p.192.

16 *Ibid.*, p.173.

These lines echo Johnson's own 'Vanity of Human Wishes' but they fit the ending of Goldsmith's poem equally well with its sense of 'return'.¹⁷ Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759) also anticipated *The Traveller* in that it offers a circular set of perambulations, a choice of life and environment narrative, concluding with a chastened and sombre return home.¹⁸ When identifying these affinities, I do not want to claim, however, that either writer was parasitic of the other, rather that they shared a common political mood music.

III

Johnson's close identification with London has served to alienate a number of his potential readers. Having arrived in London as a young man, Johnson showed a marked disinclination to move about, perhaps reinforcing his 'narrow-minded' image. However, if Johnson seems the ultimate metropolitan, then it should be restated that his status as a civic moralist necessitated rather than contradicted the pastoral perspectives that he entertained, especially among the *Rambler* papers.¹⁹ Johnson was not a Londoner by birth or upbringing. Like Goldsmith, he was a midlander within his own country, and spoke with a regionally defined accent, remarked on by Boswell among others.²⁰ His first published poem, *London* (1738), contains the memorable couplet:

For who would leave unbrib'd *Hibernia's* Land,
Or change the rocks of *Scotland* for the *Strand*.²¹

The friend of many Irish writers forced to seek their fortune in London, Johnson himself was not 'unbrib'd' in the sense that he always acknowledged frankly the writer's need to make money. When touring the Hebrides he would bewail the fact that Scottish Highlanders could not 'unbribed' remain in their homeland, occupying Nova Scotia as a matter of grim but understandable necessity.²² *London* is an imitation of Juvenal and features one 'Thales' whose farewell to London takes up nearly all the poem. Ironically, Johnson himself, far from saying goodbye to London, had only just arrived there and would remain for the next forty-six years with hardly a break.

Freeing ourselves from the assumption that travel naturally and habitually broadens the mind helps us understand something of Johnson's contempt for 'the tourist gaze' and his desire to stay in one place. As a sizar at Oxford, Johnson

17 Samuel Johnson, *The Complete English Poems*, J.D. Fleeman (ed.) (Harmondsworth, 1971), pp.83-92.

18 Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* (Oxford, 1927).

19 See *The Rambler* in Johnson, *The Yale Edition*, iv, especially numbers 124, 132, 135 and 138.

20 Boswell, *The Life of Johnson*, i, pp.628-9.

21 Johnson, *The Complete English Poems*, p.61.

22 Johnson and Boswell, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, pp.101-4.

would have been surrounded by young men, much wealthier and more stupid than he was, many of whom had completed the Grand Tour and returned more insufferably arrogant and conceited than before they had left. Like many modern travellers, Grand Tourists travelled very often merely in order to advertise their money, the leisure they could afford, and to feel superior to their fellow countrymen and women at home.

IV

Terry Eagleton's attack on Johnson was perhaps extrapolated from the latter's famous and violent reaction to the cult of *Ossian*. Johnson attacked *Ossian* partly because he did not believe that Scots Gaelic was a literary language. In the same breath or, rather, the same sentence that he condemned Scots Gaelic, he made a comparison with Welsh and Irish, which he said are ancient and learned tongues. Irish has a literature because it has been written down. Boswell referred to Johnson's interest in Irish language manuscripts on a number of occasions. He tells us how, in 1757, Johnson wrote to Charles O'Connor, the Irish historian:

I have long wished that the Irish literature were cultivated. Ireland is known by tradition to have been once the seat of piety and learning; and surely it would have been very acceptable to all those who are curious either in the original of nations, or the affinities of languages, to be further informed of the revolution of a people so ancient, and once so illustrious.

What relation there is between the Welsh and Irish language, or between the language of Ireland and that of Biscay, deserves inquiry. Of these provincial and unextended tongues, it seldom happens that more than one are understood by any one man; and therefore, it seldom happens that a fair comparison can be made. I hope you will continue to cultivate this kind of learning, which has too long lain neglected.²³

Twenty years later, Johnson would write again to O'Connor, chiding him for his tardiness and stressing again the urgency of the task. So, far from being 'virulently anti-Gaelic' as Eagleton asserted, Johnson was in fact an urgent advocate of comparative Celtic studies. It is evident from this letter that fifteen years before the *Ossian* furore, Johnson was excluding Scots Gaelic from his list of Celtic languages. Without writing, reasoned Johnson, nothing ancient or authentic could be preserved. The 'oral tradition' was something that Johnson simply had no time for, which makes it all the more ironic that it is the Johnson of 'oral tradition' rather than published achievement, who has preserved the greatest celebrity.

Johnson was not solely to blame for driving a wedge between Irish and Scottish cultural agenda. James Macpherson drove in that wedge far more savagely. His notes to the *Ossianic* poetry are emphatically and repeatedly anti-Irish, pouring contempt on the various Ulster traditions of story-telling involving many of the same characters. Macpherson did his best to cut these heroes off

23 Boswell, *The Life of Johnson*, ii, p.195.

from Ireland; at one point he even attacked the great Scottish scholar, George Buchanan, for daring to suggest that the Scottish people ever arrived in Scotland from Ireland rather than directly from Gaul.²⁴

Johnson's sense of an opposition between talking and writing, speech and literature helps organise many of his attitudes. Johnson preferred written forms in religious worship, preferred traditional to extempore prayers, preferred Catholicism to Presbyterianism. Johnson's opposition to the phonocentric educational theories of Thomas Sheridan led to a breach between the two men, and it is perhaps no accident that it was in Scotland that Sheridan's greatest lecture successes took place.

V

Most readers of eighteenth-century literature are probably aware that Johnson's claim that 'patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel' refers not to sincere love of native country but rather to self-serving politicians who whip up xenophobic feeling to advance their own careers.²⁵ Such politicians care not what forces are unleashed, what blood is spilt, providing they can scare public opinion into providing support for their political candidacy. As an Englishman who respected and enjoyed cultural difference, Johnson did not particularly believe in Britain. Love of country, whether that country be Ireland, England or Scotland was negotiated by Johnson to a point of rational sustainability: decrying national affections could justify imperialist absorption of peoples. Extreme nationalist affection could justify critical absurdities and political violence.²⁶ The Irish, a fair people who never speak well of one another, were preferable to the Scots, whose defence of a Scottish literature has turned literary criticism into a nationalised zero-sum gain. The Irish respect for Shakespeare was contrasted with the Edinburgh audience who, on the first night of John Home's *Douglas*, were to shout 'Whuar's ya Wully Shakespeare noo?'²⁷

Johnson did not drape a flag around Shakespeare, attempting instead to secure Shakespeare's esteem on something like a rational foundation. Not that Johnson ever attacked all Scots. The Scots he tended to attack were entryists rather than separatists – those who wished to define themselves as leaders of the British

24 James Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, Howard Gaskill and Fiona Stafford (eds.) (Edinburgh, 1996), pp.206-7.

25 Boswell, *The Life of Johnson*, ii, pp.547-8.

26 Jacobitism may be conflated with Irish and Scottish nationalisms, although it need not be. In the *Idler*, 10, Johnson introduced us to Tom Tempest and Jack Sneaker, violent Jacobite and violent Whig respectively – the latter so absurd that he 'often rejoices that the nation was not enslaved by the Irish.' The obvious reading of this paper is that its author disavows both forms of high Tory and Protestant paranoia, arguing that political allegiances be subject to some definition of practicable common sense. Johnson, *The Yale Edition*, ii, p. 63.

27 Quoted in Terence Tobias, *Plays by Scots, 1660-1800* (Iowa, 1974), p.34.

empire rather than those who felt excluded from it. When confronted with the decay of Highland society, Johnson was brilliantly and compassionately ambivalent – emigration is impoverishment and loss of identity, but no one can be blamed for seeking a degree of material security in a land that is at least economically viable.

At the same time we can see clear evidence of Johnson attempting to delimit and restrain the effects of national prejudice. If the veneration of Ossian evidenced Scottish bigotry, then Johnson was equally aware that Milton and Shakespeare risked being idolised as English totems to the point where critical reading of their work became practically impossible. While doing more than anyone to elevate the English language and a sense of its literary possibilities, Johnson had little interest in canon reinforcement and nationalist assertions.

VI

One problem with sustaining Johnson's Irish reputation is that it is well known that he had little time for Swift, or at for least the Swift of *Gulliver's Travels*. However, in the *Life of Swift*, it turns out that Johnson liked the dean best when Swift was most Irish – the Dublin dean as opposed to the London misanthrope. Johnson's description of the Wood's Halfpence affair repays careful reading: 'He delivered Ireland from plunder and oppression, and shewed that wit, confederated with truth, had such force as authority was unable to resist.'²⁸

Plunder and oppression were frequent subjects for Johnson's pen. Johnson's attack on the claims of the American colonists has led many if not most people to assume that he was a virulent imperialist. In fact, Johnson's anti-imperialist observations, if suitably compiled, would provide an admirable contribution to any course of post-colonial studies. Johnson speculated that probably the most destructive human animal in history had been Henry the Navigator, fifteenth-century king of Portugal, since he it was who had first encouraged Europeans to move about:

The *Europeans* have scarcely visited any coast, but to gratify avarice, and extend corruption; to arrogate dominion without right, and practice cruelty without incentive. Happy had it been for the oppressed, if the designs of *Henry* had slept in his bosom, and surely more happy for his oppressors.²⁹

In the eighty-first issue of *The Idler*, Johnson ventriloquised a native North American chieftain, delighting in the fact that English and French colonisers had at last started to fight one another: 'Let us look unconcerned in the slaughter, and remember that the death of every European delivers the country from a tyrant and

28 Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets, A Selection* (London, 1975), p.433.

29 *The World Displayed; Or, A Curious Collection of Voyages and Travels* (London, 1759), p.xvi.

a robber.'³⁰ Similarly, Johnson considered the dispute between France and England in Canada as 'only the quarrel of two robbers for the spoils of a passenger.'³¹

Clement Hawes produced a convincing assessment of of Johnson's anti-imperialism when he wrote:

His eloquent critique insists on assuming at least a universal human faculty for practical and moral reflection, without which there can be little choice other than a banal and unhistorical relativism. Thus, Johnson's anti-colonial writings, precisely because they remain stubbornly in and of the Enlightenment, provide almost uniquely supple and forceful examples of critical resistance to the hijacking of reason for purposes of domination.³²

Hawes identified a Johnson who regarded reason as a precious, morally charged commodity rather than a flag of modernity and 'progress'. Humanity is neither condemned to repeat itself, nor destined to perfect itself and the amelioration and liberation of the human species is a difficult, flawed, but essential (ongoing) project.

VII

Ireland did many things for Johnson, testing and focusing his sense of identity and community, challenging his idea of where his own country begins and ends. Johnson in turn has done and can still do many things for Ireland, most notably in terms of the challenge he presents to the still beating heart of Whig history, the teleology of improvement and reform as features of eighteenth-century 'British' experience. An anti-imperialist who saw British rule in Ireland as an unjust exercise of colonial subjugation, he wrote (as opposed to remarked) very little on Ireland itself, but he must, from an Irish perspective, emerge as a fascinating and ultimately sympathetic figure. If recovering an Irish Johnson means reading between the lines, then he will certainly repay this effort.

The effort of application is one that Johnson's whole method and morality in any case requires, since his writings were always subordinating topical political issues to larger questions of abstract human morality. The truly sympathetic reader of Johnson grasps the structural point first and then seeks to apply it, rather than sifting and sorting an unwieldy body of work for promising 'references'. If we can absorb the larger issues of identity, allegiance, oppression and self-delusion, and apply those issues to an understanding of Ireland in the eighteenth century, then readers will be engaging in precisely the sort of moral and critical work that Johnson first and foremost intended.

30 Johnson, *The Yale Edition*, ii p.254.

31 *Ibid.*, x, p.188.

32 Clement Hawes, 'Johnson and Imperialism' in Greg Clingham (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson* (Cambridge, 1997), p.124.