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Samuel Johnson, LLD, ethnologist extraordinary

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

I RE-READ Dr Johnson's 'Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland' with a fresh eye recently, and discovered to my delight that he was an ethnologist. Ethnology means 'people-words', and an ethnologist is one who studies a people's arts and crafts and culture and way of life and customs and beliefs. Had Dr Johnson been alive today, he would have had much to do with the School of Scottish Studies, for ethnology is their business. Perhaps he would have founded a School of English Studies.

Ethnology's sister-word is ethnography, which means 'people-writing'. Dr Johnson's book has an ethnographic core. James Boswell's book, 'The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides', by contrast, does not, for while Dr Johnson's subject is the Islands and their people, Boswell's subject is Dr Johnson. By an 'ethnographic core' I simply mean a substantial section, somewhere in the middle of the book, where travelogue, history, antiquities and economics are all laid aside in favour of a concentrated description of the people's way of life.

Perhaps the technique of the ethnographic core was ultimately borrowed, consciously or otherwise, from Martin Martin's trendsetting 'Description of the Western Islands of Scotland' of 1703. Martin has an ethnographic core. So does Thomas Pennant, in his 'Tour in Scotland, and Voyage to the Hebrides', of 1772 (in fact he may be said to have two ethnological cores, in his accounts of Islay and Skye). So does John Ramsay of Ochtertyre in his 'Scotland and Scotsmen in the Eighteenth Century', another valuable work on the Highlands of the period. And so does the Rev. John Lane Buchanan, in his 'Travels in the Western Hebrides' of 1793, an important work which I mentioned in my last article.

What does Dr Johnson's ethnographic core consist of? Well, it lasts for thirty pages of the Penguin edition of his book, and comes in at the point where the two travellers have come to Ostaig in Skye. It begins with the climate and agriculture of the island, and moves on to minerals, kelp and the cattle trade. From cattle Johnson goes on to discuss horses, goats, sheep, deer, dogs and other animals, and then the appearance and health of the people. Then there is the organisation of society, social changes since the '45, the new status of chiefs, tacksmen and people, emigration ("this epidemick desire of wandering"), the Highland regiments, houses, food, fuel, mills, music, education, religion, superstition and second sight. Finally Johnson speaks of the old hereditary poets and historians, of weapons, funerals and the Gaelic language.

There is of course much else of this kind in the book. Here he speaks of the making of shoes, there of hospitality, now of candles, and then of the custom of fosterage. As befits a lexicographer, he is interested in everything; to him, the commonplace is fascinating.

Boswell, splendid biographer as he is, sheds some light on this. "Last night," he says, "Dr Johnson gave us an account of the whole process of tanning, and of the nature of milk, and the various operations upon it, as making whey, &c. His variety of information is surprizing; and it gives one much satisfaction to find such a man bestowing his attention on the useful arts of life. Ulinish was much struck with his knowledge; and said, 'He is a great orator, sir; it is musick to hear this man speak.'

"A strange thought struck me, to try if he knew any thing of an art, or whatever it should be called, which is no doubt very useful in life, but which lies far out of the way of a philosopher and poet; I mean the trade of a butcher. I enticed him into the subject, by connecting it with the various researches into the manners and customs of uncivilized nations, that have been made by our late navigators into the South Seas. I began with observing, that Mr (now Sir Joseph) Banks tells us, that the art of slaughtering animals was not known in Otaheite, for, instead of bleeding to death their dogs (a common food with them), they strangle them. This he told me himself; and I supposed that their hogs were killed in the same way. Dr Johnson said, 'This must be owing to their not having knives, though they have sharp stones with which they can cut a carcase in pieces tolerably.'

"By degrees, he shewed that he knew something even of butchery. 'Different animals,' said he, 'are killed differently. An ox is knocked down, and a calf stunned; but a sheep has its throat cut, without any thing being done to stupify it. The butchers have no view to the ease of the animals, but only to make them quiet, for their own safety and convenience. A sheep can give them little trouble. Hales is of opinion, that every animal should be blooded, without having any blow given to it, because it bleeds better.'

"BOSWELL. 'That would be cruel.'

"JOHNSON. 'No, sir; there is not much pain, if the jugular vein be properly cut.' Pursuing the subject, he said, the kennels of Southwark ran with blood two or three days in the week; that he was afraid there were slaughter-houses in more streets in London than one supposes (speaking with a kind of horrour of butchering), and yet, he added, 'any of us would kill a cow, rather than not have beef'. I said we *could* not. 'Yes,' said he, 'any one may. The business of a butcher is a trade indeed, that is to say, there is an apprenticeship served to it; but it may be learnt in a month.'"

The difference between Boswell the biographer and Johnson the ethnologist cannot be better illustrated than by the episode of the house by Loch Ness. This was the first Highland house the pair had been in, and it is fascinating to compare the two men's accounts. Let us take Boswell first, because he tells us what happened.

"When we had advanced a good way by the side of Lochness, I perceived a little hut, with an old looking woman at the door of it. I thought here might be a scene that would amuse Dr Johnson; so I mentioned it to him. 'Let's go in,' said he. We dismounted, and we and our guides entered the hut. It was a wretched little hovel of earth only, I think, and for a window had only a small hole, which was stopped with a piece of turf, that was taken out occasionally to let in light. In the middle of the room or space which we entered, was a fire of peat, the smoke going out at a hole in the roof. She had a pot upon it, with goat's flesh, boiling. There was at one end under the same roof, but divided by a kind of partition made of wattles, a pen or fold in which we saw a good many kids.

"Dr Johnson was curious to know where she slept. I asked one of the guides, who questioned her in Erse. She answered with a tone of emotion, saying (as he told us) she was afraid we wanted to go to bed to her. This *coquetry*, or whatever it may be called, of so wretched a being, was truly ludicrous. Dr Johnson and I afterwards were merry upon it. I said, it was he who alarmed the poor woman's virtue. 'No, sir,' said he, 'she'll say, "There came a wicked young fellow, a wild dog, who I believe would have ravished me, had there not been with him a grave old gentleman, who repressed him: but when he gets out of the sight of his tutor, I'll warrant you he'll spare no woman he meets, young or old."'

"'No, sir,' I replied, 'she'll say, "There was a terrible ruffian who would have forced me, had it not been for a civil decent young man who, I take it, was an angel sent from heaven to protect me."'

"Dr Johnson would not hurt her delicacy, by insisting on 'seeing her bed-chamber', like Archer in *The Beaux' Stratagem*. But my curiosity was more ardent; I lighted a piece of paper, and went into the place where the bed was. There was a little partition of wicker, rather more neatly done than that for the fold, and close by the wall was a kind of bedstead of wood with heath upon it by way of bed; at the foot of which I saw some sort of blankets or covering rolled up in a heap.

"The woman's name was Fraser; so was her husband's. He was a man of eighty. Mr Fraser of Balnain allows him to live in this hut, and keep sixty goats, for taking care of his woods, where he then was. They had five children, the eldest only thirteen. Two were gone to Inverness to buy meal; the rest were looking after the goats. This contented family had four stacks of barley, twenty-four sheaves in each. They had a few fowls. We were informed that they lived all the spring without meal, upon milk and curds and whey alone. What they get for their goats, kids, and fowls, maintains them during the rest of the year.

"She asked us to sit down and take a dram. I saw one chair. She said she was as happy as any woman in Scotland. She could hardly speak any English except a few detached words. Dr Johnson was pleased at seeing, for the first time, such a state of human life. She asked for snuff. It is her luxury, and she uses a great deal. We had none; but gave her six pence a piece. She then brought out her whisky bottle. I tasted it; as did Joseph and our guides: so I gave her sixpence more. She sent us away with many prayers in Erse."

The fact that Boswell's 'old looking woman', Johnson's 'old woman', had five children, of whom the eldest was 13, suggests that she was only 30-45 years old. As for her reluctance to let these strangers enter her bedroom, it has been pointed out that in that very house an English officer committed rape and murder in 1746. She could have been anything between 3 and 18 at the time. It was no joking matter.

Finally, then, Johnson's version of the episode. Compared to Boswell's racy account, it is pure ethnography. "Near the way, by the water-side, we espied a cottage. This was the first Highland hut that I had seen; and as our business was with life and manners, we were willing to visit it. To enter a habitation without leave, seems to be not considered here as rudeness or intrusion. The old laws of hospitality still give this licence to a stranger.

"A hut is constructed with loose stones, ranged for the most part with some tendency to circularity. It must be placed where the wind cannot act upon it with violence, because it has no cement; and where the water will run easily away, because it has no floor but the naked ground. The wall, which is commonly about six feet high, declines from the perpendicular a little inward. Such rafters as can be procured are then raised for a roof, and covered with heath, which makes a strong and warm thatch, kept from flying off by ropes of twisted heath, of which the ends, reaching from the center of the thatch to the top of the wall, are held firm by the weight of a large stone. No light is admitted but at the entrance, and through a hole in the thatch, which gives vent to the smoke. This hole is not directly over the fire, lest the rain should extinguish it; and the smoke therefore naturally fills the place before it escapes.

"Such is the general structure of the houses in which one of the nations of this opulent and powerful island has been hitherto content to live. Huts however are not more uniform than palaces; and this which we were inspecting was very far from one of the meanest, for it was divided into several apartments; and its inhabitants possessed such property as a pastoral poet might exalt into riches.

"When we entered, we found an old woman boiling goats-flesh in a kettle. She spoke little English, but we had interpreters at hand; and she was willing enough to display her whole system of economy. She has five children, of which none are yet gone from her. The eldest, a boy of thirteen, and her husband, who is eighty years old, were at work in the wood. Her two next sons were gone to Inverness to buy meal, by which oatmeal is always meant. Meal she considered as expensive food, and told us, that in Spring, when the goats gave milk, the children could live without it. She is mistress of sixty goats, and I saw many kids in an enclosure at the end of her house. She had also some poultry.

"By the lake we saw a potatoe-garden, and a small spot of ground on which stood four shucks, containing each twelve sheaves of barley. She has all this from the labour of their own hands, and for what is necessary to be bought, her kids and her chickens are sent to market.

"With the true pastoral hospitality, she asked us to sit down and drink whisky. She is religious, and though the kirk is four miles off, probably eight English miles, she goes thither every Sunday. We gave her a shilling, and she begged snuff; for snuff is the luxury of a Highland cottage."

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