

Scottish Literary Heritage and National Identity: A Case Study of Boswell's *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*

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For a long time, the history of “Scottish Literature” has been overshadowed by the concept of “British literature”, and thus Scottish literary heritage has been seen as “regional characteristics”. The Act of Union 1707 led to a growing concern for Scottish national identity. In *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, the famous Scottish-born biographer James Boswell chose to take advantage of Scottish literary heritage as a point of penetration to express his own Scottish national identity with Scotland in literature and Scottish literature.

Keywords: Scottish literature, literary heritage, national identity, James Boswell, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*

Introduction

German folklorist Kaschuba and Yang (2010) suggested that literary forms such as fiction and poetry are important means of creating collective identities. Literature not only participates in the construction of nationhood, but also further constructs the culture of the nation. Hence, literature is regarded as one of the important media of constructing national identity (Wang, 2010). In *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History*, British historical sociologist Anthony D. Smith (2001) proposed the definition of national identity as:

the continuous reproduction and reinterpretation by the members of a national community of the pattern of symbols, values, myths, memories, and traditions that compose the distinctive heritage of nations, and the variable identification of individual members of that community with that heritage and its cultural elements. (p. 20)

The great Scottish-born biographer James Boswell (1740-1795) grew up in the 18th century after The Act of Union 1707 and witnessed the subtle conflicts between Scotland and England, which awakened his sense of Scottish national identity. Such national identity can be seen in his reinterpretation of Scottish literary heritage, which is reflected in his *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1785). The book tells Boswell's travel to the Highlands of Scotland with the great English literary figure Samuel Johnson (1709-1784). The *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* has long been considered as a “preface” to Boswell's biographical masterpiece *Life of Johnson* (1791), or a supplement to Johnson's *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (Schalit, 1967). In other words, the unique academic values of Boswell's *Journal* have not been explored yet. However, several important issues, such as Scottish national identity and Scottish national image presented in this *Journal* still deserve more

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extensive and in-depth attention and study. For instance, Boswell's reinterpretation of Scottish literary heritage is one of the significant aspects to express his own national identity.

Boswell's Reinterpretation of Scottish Literary Heritage

Boswell's interpretation of Scottish literary heritage in *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* takes implicit and explicit two main forms: The first notes the famous Shakespearean play *Macbeth* set in Scotland by quoting its original lines, emphasizing Scottish symbols in the world's classic literature; and the second narrates the well-known Scottish writers and poets, such as James Macpherson (1736-1796), a famous poet who had a significant impact on European literature, and Allan Ramsay (1686-1758), an important Scottish national poet. Boswell's reinterpretation of Scotland's literary heritage reshapes Scotland's national image and expresses his own identification of Scotland.

Implicit Scottish Literary Symbol

Macbeth is Shakespeare's classic play, which is set in Scotland and has become one of the iconic Scottish symbols in the history of literature. The protagonist Macbeth is a real person in Scottish history, and Shakespeare took the character and part of plot from English historian Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande* (1577), the historical records of which mainly drew from the Scottish philosopher and historian Hector Boece's *Historia Gentis Scotorum* (1526). According to records, Macbeth killed Duncan (the old king in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*) and initiated a 17-year reign over Scotland, during which Scotland flourished (Macarthur, 1874). In Boswell's trip to the Scottish Highlands, he and Dr. Johnson passed through the original site of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and hence he frequently and consciously mentions the quotations from *Macbeth* in *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*.

For example:

In the afternoon, we drove over the very heath where Macbeth met the witches, according to tradition. Dr. Johnson again solemnly repeated—

*How far is't called to Fores? What are these,
So wither'd, and so wild in their attire?
That look not like the inhabitants o' the earth,
And yet are on't?*

He repeated a good deal more of *Macbeth*. (Johnson & Boswell, 2020, p. 90)

Boswell and Dr. Johnson's travel route passes through "Fores", the castle of King Duncan in *Macbeth*. Note that "the very heath" they pass by is the site where Macbeth met the three witches in Act I of Shakespeare's play (Rosenblum, 2019). In this passage, Boswell not only refers to the scene where Macbeth encountered the three witches, but also quotes the original lines of *Macbeth* in full. The narration shows Boswell consciously links Scotland in the geographic spatial dimension with Scotland as a setting in the literary space, to strengthen the association between Scotland and the world's masterpiece and to further suggest the image of Scotland represented behind the lines of *Macbeth*. It's recognized that space and literature always have a close connection: Where there is a "story", there is "space" for the "story". Space is not only a background of the story, but also bears the meaning of political history. Therefore, Boswell attaches great importance to Scotland's spatial connotation with both geographical and literary attributes in order to highlight the significance of Scotland as a cultural symbol in the world's classic literature. In this way, he expresses his Scottish national identity.

Here is another example:

This day we visited the ruins of Macbeth's castle at Inverness. I have had great romantick satisfaction in seeing Johnson upon the classical scenes of Shakespeare in Scotland. (Johnson & Boswell, 2020, p. 143)

Boswell here directly regards *Macbeth* as a Scottish icon in Shakespeare's classic works, showing that his references to *Macbeth* throughout the *Journal* are conscious attempts to achieve a national narrative and express his national identity of Scotland. In the English-born Shakespeare's writing, the Scots are "portrayed as noble and refined as the English" (Houston, 2009). In the *Journal*, Boswell also clearly associates the word "elegant" with England (Johnson & Boswell, 2020, p. 112), implying that Boswell admires the so-called "genteelness of the English". Therefore, it's fair to say that Boswell's conscious repetition of the play *Macbeth* has a sense of Scottish national identity: Boswell aimed to reshape the image of the Scots. He attempts to highlight a "refined" and "elegant" impression of the Scots on potential readers through the widely recognized Shakespearean plays, which reflects his buried feelings for the Scottish nation. As a real figure in history, Macbeth left a positive image in Scottish history and contributed a lot to the development of Scotland. Therefore, Boswell's emphasis on *Macbeth* can be seen as evidence of his Scottish national identity.

Explicit Scottish Literary Symbol

James Macpherson. James Macpherson is considered as a leading Scottish poet of the 18th century. His collection of ancient Scottish poet Ossian's Gaelic poetry has become one of the greatest landmarks of Scottish literature, which had a significant influence upon European literature. Beginning with *Fragments of Ancient Poetry collected in the Highlands of Scotland* (1760), Macpherson produced a series of poems purporting to be translated from Scottish Gaelic Poetry, the most representative of which is *The Works of Ossian* (1765). Macpherson claimed that most of these poems came from the Scottish bard, Ossian, whose poems are mysterious and mournful, portraying the desolate landscape and gloomy weather of Scotland. These poems have established a distinct and exotic national image of Scotland in the history of literature. Moreover, the unique world of the Scottish Gaels and the atmosphere of emotionalism have left a vigorous impression in the world literature (Ferber, 2010). Macpherson's poems which were claimed to belong to "Ossian" had a profound impact on the development of European Romanticism, various well-known literary figures, such as William Blake (1757-1827) in England, Ugo Foscolo (1778-1827) in Italy, and Goethe (1749-1832) in Germany were deeply influenced (Ferber, 2010). As Macpherson's works spread to the whole Europe, "Ossian" has become a signature of Scottish culture, and the old tradition of Scottish romance it represents has been a symbol of Scottish national pride and identity.

It has always been controversial that whether Macpherson's poems were truly translated from Scottish Gaelic, or they were just Macpherson's own works but falsely attributed to "Ossian". However, just as the German philosopher and nationalist scholar Johann G. Herder (1744-1803) argued, even if none of the poems were created by the bard Ossian, they were still a well-intentioned lie and still deserved our respect (Craske, 1997). In *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, Boswell makes several references to Macpherson's poems, mentioning the heroic figure "Fingal" to the audience who were sceptical to the authenticity of "Ossian" poems. Such behaviour obviously showed that Boswell's reference to Macpherson has an important connotation in terms of national identity. His examination of the authenticity of Macpherson's poetry has objectively led to further exploration of Scottish Gaelic folk poetry, bringing it to the forefront of scholarly research.

Here is an example:

His notion as to the poems published by Mr. M'Pherson, as the works of Ossian, was not shaken here. Mr. M'Queen always evaded the point of authenticity, saying only that Mr. M'Pherson's pieces fell far short of those he knew in Erse, which were said to be Ossian's. (Johnson & Boswell, 2020, p. 119)

In this passage, Boswell faithfully documents the controversy over whether Macpherson's poetry was truly translated from Scottish Gaelic. At that time, a great many English intellectuals, represented by Dr. Johnson, believed that poems of Ossian produced by Macpherson were fakes. William Wordsworth (1770-1850), the flagship of the English Romantic movement, asserted that "All hail, Macpherson! Hail to thee, Sire of Ossian! The Phantom was begotten by the smug embrace of an impudent Highlander upon a cloud of tradition" (Wordsworth, 1974). In contrast to the English, however, the Scots embraced James Macpherson. A typical example is Mr. M'Queen in Boswell's narration, who "always evaded the point of authenticity", insisting that the poems truly written in Erse (i.e., Scottish Gaelic) were much better than Macpherson's poems which were translated into English. And this suggests what the Scots defend is not the authenticity of Macpherson's works; what they really defend and cherish is that the precious literary heritage and old Scottish national culture.

Boswell's authentic account of these controversies reflects the widespread interest in Gaelic poetry concerning the Scottish Highlands at the time, and partly contributed to a comprehensive investigation of Ossian's poems in English and Scottish academic circles in 1805. The Scottish writer Henry Mackenzie (1745-1831) investigated and interviewed a large number of Scottish writers, poets, and general public who were aware of the figure, "Ossian", but only gained a neutral, or we may say, ambiguous conclusion: There truly existed a large number of Ossian-themed Scottish Gaelic poems in Scottish Highlands, but there was no direct evidence to show that Macpherson's works were collected and translated from Scottish Gaelic (Mackenzie, 1805). Furthermore, these controversies pushed Scottish Gaelic poetry into the field of worldwide academic research. Since then, many great scholars and writers like Wordsworth, Herder, and even Jorge L. Borges (1899-1986), continued to explore and study the Ossian's poems, and Scottish Highlands and its literature heritage continued to exude magic over the centuries. Ossian has gradually become a magnificent symbol of Scottish national culture. Therefore, Boswell's conscious writing not only actively shows his pride in the revitalization of traditional Scottish literature, but also objectively strengthens the literary image of the Scottish nation as well as highlighting values of Scottish national culture. In this way, Boswell euphemistically expresses his inner pride in the value of Scottish traditional culture, showing his deep national feelings and Scottish national identity.

Another example is:

I took Fingal down to the parlour in the morning, and tried a test proposed by Mr. Roderick M'Leod, son to Ulinish. Mr. M'Queen had said he had some of the poem in the original. I desired him to mention any passage in the printed book, of which he could repeat the original. He pointed out one in page 50 of the quarto edition, and read the Erse, while Mr. Roderick M'Leod and I looked on the English; —and Mr. M'Leod said, that it was pretty like what Mr. M'Queen had recited. But when Mr. M'Queen read a description of Cuchullin's sword in Erse, together with a translation of it in English verse, by Sir James Foulis, Mr. M'Leod said, that was much more like than Mr. M'Pherson's translation of the former passage. Mr. M'Queen then repeated in Erse a description of one of the horses in Cuchullin's car. Mr. M'Leod said, Mr. M'Pherson's English was nothing like it.

When Dr. Johnson came down, I told him that I had now obtained some evidence concerning Fingal; for that Mr. M'Queen had repeated a passage in the original Erse, which Mr. M'Pherson's translation was pretty like. (Johnson & Boswell, 2020, p. 119)

In this paragraph, Boswell and his friends attempting to verify whether Macpherson's poems were truly translated from Erse. The test not only presents his defense of a literary works rooted in Scottish nation, but also the defense of Scottish national culture. That's because Macpherson and his poems are iconic symbols of Scottish nation, just as Borges (1982) once said: "He wanted his poem to belong to his country, not to himself" (p. 112). Borges highly considers Macpherson as a great and important poet and infers that the deep national emotions are contained in his "translation" of Ossian's poems and his portrayal of heroes, such as "Fingal". This means Macpherson's works not only have a far-reaching effect on literature, but on constructing national image as well. Since Macpherson's poems drew a huge response among the whole Europe, even William Wordsworth who questioned the authenticity of "Ossian", had to admit that "it travelled southward, where it was greeted with acclamation, and the thin Consistence took its course through Europe, upon the breath of popular applause" (Wordsworth, 1974). Due to this, it's recognized that the poems of Ossian have brought a strong sense of national identity to the Scots.

These words in this passage reflect the sentiment of the Scots for these poems which brought glory to Scotland. Owing to the Battle of Culloden in 1745-1746, the Scottish highlanders were forbidden to carry weapons and were even forbidden to wear national dress by English law. In view of such social background, many Scots felt the need to resist English cultural hegemony with typically Scottish traits, so anyone or anything Scottish was considered to have political value (Moore, 2017). And Macpherson's poems, which are overflowing with his pride in the quaint customs and culture of the Highlanders and the pure Gaelic language (Stafford, 1988), were naturally sought after and embraced by the Scots. Therefore, the Scottish heroes portrayed in Macpherson's poetry were undoubtedly endowed with national sentiment of the Scots, and Boswell's writing absolutely reflects his identification of Scottish nation.

Allan Ramsay. Allan Ramsay was a Scottish poet, publisher and impresario of early Enlightenment Edinburgh. He maintained national poetic traditions by writing Scots poetry and by preserving the work of earlier Scottish poets at a time when most Scottish writers had been Anglicized. Ramsay contributed a lot to Scottish literature, for he indirectly gave impetus to more accurate editing of Scottish poetry and song later in the century. Being admired by Robert Burns as a pioneer in the use of Scots in contemporary poetry, he has been considered as an important representative of Scottish writers. In Boswell's *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, he also mentioned this famous Scottish poet:

Kingsburgh was completely the figure of a gallant Highlander, —exhibiting "the graceful mien and manly looks", which our popular Scotch song has justly attributed to that character. (Johnson & Boswell, 2020, p. 107)

In his description of the Scottish Highlanders, Boswell quotes the line "the graceful mien and manly looks" from the famous Scottish poet Allan Ramsay's poem, which praises the elegance and manliness of the Highlanders. The line is from Ramsay's "The Highland Laddie" (1724), which admires the loyalty, reliability, and gracefulness of a young Highlander from a woman's point of view. Boswell's quotation of the phrase is highly appropriate here. In Ramsay's poem, the Highlanders are exemplified as "manly" (Whitelaw, 1843): graceful, polite, and with a strong and independent appearance. In "The Highland Laddie", Ramsay makes numerous references to Scottish cultural symbols, such as the famous "tartan plaidy" (Whitelaw, 1843), placing the narrator (and the poet himself) within the cultural landscape of the Scottish nation. Through these cultural symbols, Ramsay fully showed his love and praise for the Scottish nation and his deep national identity.

Ramsay had been collecting and composing poetry in native Scottish language, and in 1724, he published *The Tea-table Miscellany*, from which “The Highland Laddie” is taken. In the preface, Ramsay clearly expressed his national feelings and caused a great response. This was not long after The Act of Union 1707, and it can be argued that the Scottish poems Ramsay wrote and collected were important in reshaping and highlighting the image of the Scottish nation (Pink, 2021). To some extent, the 18th-century Allan Ramsay and his poems represent a pride in the Scottish national literary tradition and a symbol of Scottish national identity. Boswell was not only familiar with this Scottish national poet but highly appreciated him as well. He once praised Ramsay’s other collection of Scottish ballads, *The Gentle Shepherd* (1725), as a beautiful portrait of the Scottish countryside and life (Liu, 2018). Therefore, Boswell chooses to quote Ramsay’s poem about the Highlanders in order to praise the temperament of the Scottish Highlanders, and affectionately calls the poem “Our Popular Scotch Song”. The word “our” reflects Scottish national identity of Boswell, which reflects his familiarity with Scottish poetry as well as a deeper national connotation. His reference and recognition of Allan Ramsay reveal his emotional stance and national identity.

Conclusions

The fact that Scottish-born writer James Boswell was long hidden in the shadow of his best friend, English-born writer Samuel Johnson is kind of similar with the embarrassment position that “Scottish literature” has always been overshadowed by the concept of “British literature”. To some degree, the masterpiece of Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, further led other works of Boswell were overlooked. Nevertheless, the huge success of this biography should not be a “barrier” for scholars to study Boswell’s other works, especially the national identity, thoughts, and feelings in those works.

Literature is one of the major media for individuals to express their national feelings and one of the key factors in constructing national identity (Wang, 2010). For instance, Boswell expresses his Scottish national identity in *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* through his reinterpretation on Scottish literary heritage. By mentioning Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and quoting its full lines for several times, Boswell stresses the literary image of Scotland in world classic literature. Besides, Ossian’s poems produced by James Macpherson and Scottish folk poetry written and collected by Allan Ramsay also come up a lot. Both implicit and explicit literary symbols of Scotland have presented Boswell’s understanding of Scottish literary heritage, and further constructing his deep and sincere Scottish national identity.

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