

**Tom Furniss, *Discovering the Footsteps of Time: Geological Travel Writing about Scotland, 1700-1820*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018. Pp. 305. £80. ISBN 9781474410014.**

What do you see when you look at a mountain? This was among the more fertile questions in the intellectual culture of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Britain. This period saw the codification of sublime and, latterly, picturesque aesthetics, modes of looking that went to work in literary genres as divergent as statistical surveying and epic poetry. Looking at mountains, even climbing them, laid bare fundamental relationships between subject and object, viewer and landscape, mankind and God. How can you be sure that you are looking at a mountain correctly and without prejudice? Are mountains always to some degree mirrors?

1700-1820, as Tom Furniss's new book explores, saw the emergence of a new geological enterprise that contributed to reshape thinking about mountains and landscapes. Perhaps the earth was considerably older than the Bible indicated. Even more radically, perhaps the planet was not a finished creation, but a changing mass that recorded and remained subject to the unimaginable contingencies of 'deep time'. Such revelations were not (only) produced from the comfort of writing desks, but through developing practices of scientific travel, centred on areas of outstanding geological interest including the Scottish Highlands and Western Isles.

This book contends that the negotiation of objectivity and subjectivity that would characterise Wordsworth's nature poetry was also active in geological travel writing. It begins in the late seventeenth century, when directives from the Royal Society established a methodology of natural history that required empiricism and objectivity to be watchwords of scientific travel writing. Furniss then tracks a gradual complication of this 'epistemological decorum' (59), reaching a climax with a tour undertaken in 1784 by the French professor Barthélemy Faujas de Saint-Fond, whose account is presented as 'the first "Romantic" geological tour of Scotland' (129) because it is openly subjective, emotional and narrative-driven. Equally, Furniss finds Faujas engaging with a 'notion of a dynamic earth' (129) that is also termed 'Romantic', the traveller's eye (or rather, pen) conjoining subject and unstable object in a process of 'creative interaction' (130). In this sense, then, geology itself (as opposed to the static taxonomy of mineralogy) becomes a harbinger of Romanticism. The book moves towards 1820, by which time it finds that geology has parted ways with the Romantic to enter a new phase of rigorous disciplinarity.

Furniss's account is not a scientific history but a literary one. This perspective proves fruitful in drawing out tensions in the source tours, which are shown contemplating what (if any) role the 'literary' should have in the work of geological discovery. The book is a useful case study in the Enlightenment/Romanticism (non)binary that has exercised literary historians in recent years. (It is worth noting that the Wordsworthian aesthetics and 'place-specificity' (11) Furniss adopts are in 2018 among many contested models of Romanticism.) Equally, this study provides a substantial contribution to work on early travel literatures by chronicling a geological component – indeed, Furniss's (sometimes frustrating) tendency to quote frequently and extensively from both primary and secondary sources means that the book approaches the effect of an anthology of this sub-field. In geographical terms, the book centres on key locations, chief among them the Isle of Staffa with its celebrated basalt columns, popularised by the account of Joseph Banks in Thomas Pennant's 1772 tour and thereafter a fashionable destination that combined both geological and Ossianic forms of the sublime.

Pennant is a transitional figure here, largely in step with the empirical conventions of natural history, but presenting hints of an aesthetic consciousness Furniss associates with geology and Romanticism. Certainly the authoritative persona of the gentleman-scholar in

Pennant pressurises the totem of objectivity. And indeed, the notion that he ‘mostly eschews speculations about past and future’ (121) in favour of empirical immanence may be true of Pennant’s geology but not his larger project, which draws so heavily on ideas of stadial history and ‘improvement’ that the 1772 tour ends in a conversation with the ghost of the historical Highlands. Furniss is probably at his best in a chapter on James Hutton, whose ‘long geological perspective indicates that the very fabric of the British Isles is a relatively temporary product of the geostrophic cycle’ (185) and nicely bears out a sense of epistemological revelation.

Anyone with an interest in mountaineering knows that ‘tourism’, a set of activities and attitudes clearly discernible in Britain by about 1800, combines both leisure and labour. Still, Furniss’s largely successful book inhabits a specific moment in the culture of travel, when touristic subjectivity was integrated in an especially close dialogue with scholarly objectivity. The polite labour of these travellers was establishing not only what mountains mean, but also what the purposes of travel might be in an age of mobility, when people were on the move in unprecedented ways, including but not limited to work and war.

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