A pig's dinner at Corry

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

THE useful thing about folklore is that it provides a gauge of public opinion where gauges of public opinion may otherwise be lacking. The principal accounts of Samuel Johnson (1709–84) are by James Boswell, a sort of literary paparazzo whose hobby was attaching himself to famous people. Johnson was Boswell's hero: the great man might be difficult but words like "bullying" or "gratuitously insulting" are never used. Johnson, he explains, was a manic depressive who hated to be alone, feared death and was a dedicated – and ruthless – professional in the Olympic sport of talking.

Think about sports heroes today. "Winning is all that counts." Or: "It's all about scoring goals." If you lose, it's because you just aren't as good. That's Johnson.

Then there's Boswell. If you're interested in him, you should start, as I did, by reading Roger Hutchinson's excellent biography, "All the Sweets of Being". He was a likeable, amusing fellow with a couple of bad habits who scribbled ceaselessly about himself.

It's usually considered that most biography is pretty objective, while autobiography is flawed, because people don't tell the truth about themselves and couldn't judge their own worth if they tried. With Boswell, thanks to his "method", it's the other way round.

His "method" is the accumulation of day-to-day detail. Boswell's biography of Johnson is huge and detailed, but it's enjoyable because Johnson was a superstar in a sport which Boswell also played. If Johnson was a striker, Boswell was a hard-working winger in the same team. He played with him, trained with him, travelled with him, suffered the same knocks. With Boswell's mental camera rolling all the time (his technique was a combination of good memory and copious notes taken as soon afterwards as possible), Johnson's contribution to the sum of human happiness was secure. No "footballers' wives" here. Just footballers.

Boswell also applied his "method" to himself in the form of diaries. The process of turning Boswell's diaries into highly readable books has been going on since about 1928, which means it has already lasted longer than his lifetime (1740–95). Boswell was cheeky, self-obsessed and (like Johnson) a manic depressive, but his diaries weren't meant to be published, so they provide as complete and rounded a picture of a human being as it's possible to have. No depths are unplumbed.

Talkers, writers, footballers and Hollywood stars may add to the sum of human happiness through their art, but we need to see the balance-sheet. Have they achieved this by wrecking the lives of those who crossed their paths? Were their achievements great enough for us to forgive them? Johnson was more aware of this than most – in each of his "Lives of the Poets" he describes a man, then assesses his poetry, and finally asks, does the one justify the other?

This is where folklore comes in. Right or wrong, in a holistic sort of way, it tells us how people were remembered. In her classic "Skye: The Island and its Legends", reprinted last year by Birlinn, Otta F. Swire told a Johnson story that could only have come from a player in some other team, because there's nothing like it in the whole of Boswell's "Life of Johnson". While being entertained by Lachlan and Anne MacKinnon at Corry, Johnson seems to be enjoying his dinner. It consists of a Skye delicacy which resembles Irish stew but is made with partially salted mutton. Says Mrs MacKinnon: "I hope you like this dish, sir?"

Johnson replies: "Madam, this food is only fit for hogs."

"Then," says Mrs MacKinnon, "won't you have some more?"

I'm interested in this story because I've just discovered a variant of it. In the October 1897 issue of "The Lady's Realm", Mrs MacKinnon's great-great-granddaughter by her first marriage, Mrs Margaret Macalister Williamson, told how at dinner one day her great-great-grandmother said to Dr Johnson, "Sir, how do you like the Scotch broth?"

He replied, "Madam, it is fit for pigs."

She quietly rejoined, "Will you allow me, sir, to give *you* another plateful?"

We know that Johnson liked Scotch broth. Boswell tells us that at dinner in Aberdeen a couple of weeks before, Johnson ate "several platefuls", and found he was "very fond" of it. Says Boswell: "You never ate it before, sir."

Johnson replies: "No, sir, but I don't care how soon I eat it again."

So what are we to make of the incident at Corry? Johnson was sober, as I will show later, so only three possibilities remain. The first is that it's true and Johnson was rude. The second is that it's true but taken out of context: for example, if Johnson had previously remarked of himself that in matters of food he was a pig – which he was, as Boswell's "several platefuls" confirms.

The third is that it's not true but based on image rather than reality. In his published account of the tour, "A Journey to the Western Islands", Johnson insulted an entire nation. He described our language as "the rude speech of a barbarous people, who had few thoughts to express"; he accused us of being "seduced" by fondness for our "supposed ancestors", and concluded that we "love Scotland better than truth".

There was a good deal of this sort of stuff going around at the time. The philosopher David Hume, whose statue stands (or rather sits) outside the High Court in Edinburgh, wrote privately of the English: "Nothing but rebellion and bloodshed will open the eyes of that deluded people . . . An Englishman is a man (a bad animal too) corrupted by above a century of licentiousness . . . I am delighted to see the daily and hourly progress of madness and folly and wickedness in England . . . the consummation of these qualities are the true ingredients for making a fine narrative history, especially if followed by some signal and ruinous convulsion, as I hope will soon be the case with that pernicious people."

Hume died in 1776 still hoping for a revolution in England, but when it came it was in France.

If this somehow reminds you of current debates, consider what Johnson said in Edinburgh when James Ker, the Keeper of the Records, showing him the Treaty of Union, helpfully remarked: "Half our nation was bribed by English money."

Johnson: "Sir, that is no defence; that makes you worse."

Concerned at where this was going, the Keeper of the Advocates' Library put in sharply that "we had better say nothing about it", but Boswell pointed out that Johnson was no doubt pleased at having "had us last war, sir, to fight your battles".

Johnson: "We should have had you for the same price, though there had been no Union, as we might have had Swiss, or other troops. No, no, I shall agree to a separation. You have only to *go home*."

In London, then, Johnson had conceived a dislike of the Scots. It was public knowledge, and he wasn't the kind of man who recanted or issued apologies: that would have been an own goal. So he must use his trip to Scotland to enable him to say, when it suited him: "The Scots are a bad bunch. I know, because I've been there."

Unfortunately this was an abuse of hospitality, as he and Boswell seldom used inns, so his book caused an explosion of Gaelic verse. Here's a tiny sample.

On bha thusa dòlaim,
Làn musaich' agus ròice,
Bu ghusaire gu mòr leat
Le rucas bhith gad fhòirneadh
Na trusadh don taigh òsta.

("Since you were niggardly, / Full of nastiness and gluttony, / You were keener by far / To intrude yourself with arrogance / Than to repair to the hostelry.")

Tha droch oilein spàrrt' ort
'S cha dealaich e gu bràth riut,
'S ged theirinn e cha bhàrdachd,
Gur trom an t-eir' air fàrdaich
Do sheileir chumail sàthach.

("Bad breeding's jammed into you / And will always be part of you, / And though I say it without sarcasm, / It's a heavy burden on a household / To keep your cellar satisfied.") By *seileir* the poet, James Macintyre I think, means either "cellar" or "pantry". Either way, it refers to Johnson's large stomach.

There's an important point about food and drink to bear in mind here. In the years around 1773, when Johnson and Boswell came to call, famine was a frequent visitor to the

Highlands. Johnson himself reports on *Bliadhna an Earraich Dhuibh* in Skye, just two years earlier. "In the year Seventy-one they had a severe season, remembered by the name of the Black Spring, from which the island has not yet recovered. The snow lay long upon the ground, a calamity hardly known before. Part of their cattle died for want, part were unseasonably sold to buy sustenance for the owners; and, what I have not read or heard of before, the kine that survived were so emaciated and dispirited, that they did not require the male at the usual time. Many of the roebucks perished."

In contrast to this, there was a brisk trade in smuggling which earned much-needed cash to help pay steeply-rising rents. Johnson says of the isle of Coll: "The malt-tax for Col is twenty shillings. Whisky is very plentiful: there are several stills in the island, and more is made than the inhabitants consume."

This was cliping, and it was inconsiderate of him to put it in his book. The economy of the Highlands and Islands was showing a deficit in foodstuffs and a surplus of marketable spirits. If enlightened commercial principles had been applied, this should have led to a healthy balance of trade and a decent standard of living for all. HM Customs and Exise had other ideas.

Johnson himself was a teetotaller. Not being inclined towards moderation, he gave up drinking wine when he found it affected his talking. Now he drank prodigious amounts of tea, which in the islands of 1773 was considered quite louche. Weirder still, he was also a Sabbatarian, but we won't get into that. One man who should have known better (since he was born in 1762 only a mile or two from Corry) was the Gairloch poet William Ross:

An t-Olla MacIain le 'Bheurla,
Le 'Laideann 's le 'Ghreugais-chainnt,
Gun dh'fhàg stuth uaibhreach nan Gaidheal
Teang' a' chànanaich' ud mall.

Nuair thug e ruaig air feadh na h-Alba
'S air feadh nan garbh-chrìoch ud thall,
Dh'fhàg Mac na Brach' e gun lide,
'Na amadan liotach dall.

("Dr Johnson with his English, / With his Latin and his Greek, / The noble whisky of the Gael / Made that linguist's tongue slow. / When he paraded all round Scotland / And around the Highlands yonder, / The Son of Malt left him speechless, / A stammering blind nincompoop.")

Ross was a well-educated young Gael, one of the best poets we ever had, who had read Johnson's "Journey to the Western Islands" (1775) and heard gossip from his Skye relations. He was yet to have the pleasure of reading Boswell's "Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides" (1785), which makes it clear that all the alcohol Johnson consumed on the trip was for a cold in the head one night at Dunvegan, being "prevailed with to drink a little brandy when he was going to bed", and in the Great Inn at Inveraray when it was all but over. "After supper," writes Boswell, "Dr Johnson, whom I had not seen taste any fermented liquor during all our travels, called for a gill of whisky. 'Come,' said he, 'let me know what it is that makes a Scotchman happy!' He drank it all but a drop, which I begged leave to pour into my glass, that I might say we had drunk whisky together."

That speaks volumes. And it's important here, because when – if – Johnson insulted Mrs MacKinnon's cooking in the farmhouse at Corry, he didn't have the "excuse" of being drunk. But William Ross didn't know that.

2 March 2007