

Sites of Celtic Authenticity in post-Ossian Francophone Travelogues

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Abstract

Through a series of close readings from French-language travelogues on the “Celtic” north, this article illustrates the importance of place to the authentic experience of poetry among the generations that had fallen under the spell of Ossian at the end of the eighteenth century. It traces the motif of the “poetic encounter” through texts by Faujas de Saint-Fond, Necker de Saussure, Charles Nodier, Astolphe de Custine and Alfred Erny. Spanning almost a century, these texts show that in investigating the distant past there is no substitute for going *sur place* and experiencing the landscape. This article contrasts the various ways in which the “Celtic” land generates poetry: through the medium of ghosts, visions or just through inspiration. An evolution of attitudes towards untranslatability and poetic authenticity is also traced and is contextualized in the history of translation.

Sans contredit le plus beau point de vue de l'Écosse
est pris du coin du feu, vis-à-vis d'Ossian et de
Walter Scott.¹

—Custine

Introduction

Torn between a desire to imagine a landscape from the comfort of his own armchair and the need to experience the site conjured by the words on the page, Custine here expresses a tension endemic to the travelogue genre. Despite his ostensible reluctance, Custine did make the journey to the northern “Celtic” peripheries of Britain to see with his own eyes the “terre poétique” made famous by Macpherson’s controversial “translations” from the Gaelic. When he wrote his *Mémoires et voyages* (1830) Custine was following in the footsteps of a rich tradition of Scottish travelogues in French that attempted to establish the authenticity of Ossian either by searching for ancient poetic manuscripts, by reading the past in the faces and words of peasants or even by assessing the terrain and pondering the effect of the landscape on the traveller’s psyche. A series of close readings will trace the motif of the “poetic encounter” through the following texts: *Voyage en Angleterre, en Écosse et aux îles Hébrides* (1797), *Voyage en Écosse et aux îles hébrides* (1821), *Promenade de Dieppe aux montagnes d'Écosse* (1821), *Mémoires et voyages* (1830) and “Voyage dans le pays de Galles” (1867). I

¹ Astolphe de Custine, *Mémoires et voyages*, 2 vols (Paris: Vezard, 1830), II, p. 415; modern edition by Julien-Frédéric Tarn (Paris: François Bourin, 1992).

have selected these works to illustrate the evolution in ideas of what constitutes authenticity, in attitudes towards distances both geographical and cultural, and language and intelligibility. I pay particular attention first to the relationship between the landscape, or nature, and the supernatural, including visions and ghosts of past poets, and then the notion of distance and language barriers will be contextualized in the history of translation theory.

There is little doubt about the impact of Ossian's poetry on European culture:² Goethe included large chunks of it in his cult novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (1774); Napoleon is said to have kept a copy in his pocket even in battle, presumably in Letourneur's French translation of 1777. Chateaubriand was so influenced by the new aesthetics of the northern landscape that he was known as the French Ossian.³ However, Ossian is also one of the most notorious hoaxes in literary history, with Macpherson suspected of writing the poetry himself. Its paradoxical success is nicely summed up by Malcolm Chapman: "Macpherson's Ossian was largely inauthentic with respect to any genuine Gaelic verse tradition, but it was the very voice of authenticity for the developing sentiments of Romanticism in Europe".⁴ It permeated European consciousness and a search for evidence of Ossian's authenticity *sur place* became a reason for French travel northwards.

Ossian is inseparable from attitudes towards the Celtic in Europe, and particularly in France. French-language travelogues show a growing awareness of Celticity from the late eighteenth century, when notions of Celticity could be quite vague, to the heyday of pan-Celticism around 1900.⁵ For instance, Ossian is named by Madame de Genlis in her description of her visit to the Ladies of Llangollen in 1792, although she was in Wales and not in Scotland. In her attempt to make sense of their landscape and climate she evokes a general

² A collection of poems purportedly sung by the third-century warrior poet Ossian, collected and translated from Gaelic into English by James Macpherson in the 1760s, culminating in *The Works of Ossian* (1765).

³ For an overview of Ossian's impact on European culture see Howard Gaskill (ed.), *The Reception of Ossian in Europe* (London: Continuum, 2004), and on France see the still essential Paul Van Tieghem, *Ossian en France*, 2 vols (Paris: Rieder, 1917).

⁴ Malcolm Chapman, *The Gaelic Vision in Scottish Culture* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), p. 42.

⁵ This conclusion is reached by Kathryn Jones, Carol Tully and Heather Williams in their survey of attitudes towards Celts in French travelogues to Wales: *Hidden Text, Hidden Nation: (Re)Discoveries of Wales in French and German Travel Writing (1750–2015)* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020).

fusion, or confusion of Celticity through this reference to Scotland, which is supplemented by a reference to Ireland.⁶ Scotland also comes to influence perceptions of Celtic landscapes at home in the Hexagon, as when Stendhal is quite open in his *Mémoires d'un touriste* about seeing the Breton landscape through the filter of his reading of Walter Scott.⁷ As key witnesses to and respondents to the Ossian controversy, and to the role of Celticity in the European imagination, these travelogues have certainly been overlooked.

Although scholars the length and breadth of Europe were attempting to prove that their nation preserved the cultural prestige of the Celts, French travellers had a more urgent motive to investigate this Celtic phenomenon than their European neighbours because of the growing interest in France's Celtic past.⁸ The Revolution had sparked a new enthusiasm for the Gauls, thought to be the ancestors of *le peuple*, and thus Celtic sites potentially carried much significance, such that even sites outside the Hexagon, or perhaps especially sites outside the Hexagon, which were thought to have better preserved the past, helped citizens of the new Republic make sense of their Frenchness. For the Swiss writer Necker de Saussure Scotland would be a key site because he sees the Gaels in the Highlands as a remnant of France's past, that is as Gauls who had been pushed across the map to the north of Scotland and isolated there.⁹

Poetry and poets in and of the landscape

These travelogues are more than the by-product of literary tourism. Juxtaposing texts by Romantic wanderers (Nodier, Custine) with those by Enlightenment thinkers (Faujas,

⁶ Mme de Genlis, *Mémoires inédits de Madame la comtesse de Genlis, sur le dix-huitième siècle et la révolution française, depuis 1756 jusqu'à nos jours*, 8 vols (Paris: Ladvocat, 1825). On her 'Celtic confusion' see Jones, Tully and Williams, p. 36.

⁷ Stendhal mentions Scott by name in his *Mémoires d'un touriste*, 2 vols (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1854), II, pp. 6, 7, and later describes people and conversations as 'tout à fait dans le genre de celles de *Waverley*', II, p. 10.

⁸ Michael Dietler, "'Our Ancestors the Gauls': Archaeology, Ethnic Nationalism and the Manipulation of Celtic Identity in Modern Europe", *American Anthropologist*, 96 (1994), 584–605; Annie Jourdan, "The Image of Gaul during the French Revolution: Between Charlemagne and Ossian", in Terence Brown (ed.), *Celticism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), pp. 183–206; Ian B Stewart, "Language and the National Past in Napoleonic France: Reassessing the Académie celtique, 1805–1813", *French History*, 35: 2 (2021), 219–42.

⁹ Necker de Saussure, *Voyage en Écosse et aux îles hébrides*, 3 vols (Geneva: Paschoud, 1821), I, p. xxviii, based on travel in 1806, 1807 and 1808. Subsequent references are given in the text with the abbreviation NdS if necessary.

Necker), before contrasting these with post-Romantic travellers (Erny and Martin), will demonstrate the value of travelogues for studying the history of ideas. All the texts considered here go beyond descriptions of physical terrain to deal with the supernatural and with ghosts of Ossian and his entourage. On one level, the landscape that the travellers experience once they have arrived in the Highlands settles any doubt over Ossian's authenticity because the proof of the poems can be found in the geographical conditions of the site. If you visit the place, says Custine, you will no longer question the veracity of the poems: "En parcourant cette terre rêveuse, personne ne se demandera si Ossian a existé".¹⁰ In the majority of assessments, seeing the landscape is proof enough, though visiting the home of MacNab in the hope of glimpsing some manuscripts is also a common feature in travelogues. Necker goes there in full knowledge that he is following a beaten track, explaining that Pennant and Faujas "et tous les voyageurs" have been there before him. Incidentally, he is no luckier than his predecessors as he is informed that the manuscripts had been sent to Edinburgh to the Highland Society (NdS, II, p. 240). Much less common is the disappointment expressed by Necker at one point in his three-volume travelogue: "Cette contrée célébrée par Ossian pour la grandeur de ses forêts, ce pays auquel il donne toujours l'épithète de boisé [the woody Morvern] a perdu toute sa beauté" (NdS, II, pp. 252–253).

The presence of ghosts can be traced to Thomas Pennant, author of "watershed" travel texts on the Highlands in the 1770s.¹¹ Faujas de Saint Fond (1741–1819), a vulcanologist who travelled in 1784, has no time for ghosts, and writes what seems to be a parody of the kind of ghostly Ossianic visions that he had read in English travel literature. Whereas Pennant had made use of an Ossianic ghost figure who visits him in his sleep, in order to voice social critique,¹² Faujas writes a parody, or "burlesque" of Ossianic ghosts when he describes his

¹⁰ Astolphe de Custine, *Mémoires et voyages*, 2 vols (Paris: Vezard, 1830), II, p. 368. Subsequent references are given in the text with the abbreviation AdC if necessary. Modern edition by Julien-Frédéric Tarn (Paris: François Bourin, 1992).

¹¹ Nigel Leask, *Stepping Westward: Writing the Highland Tour c. 1720–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 97.

¹² Leask, *Stepping Westward*, p. 133.

travel party mistaking an old miller covered in flour for the divine poet himself.¹³ One of his companions, Williams Thornton, tells the freezing party, lost in a midnight storm, that this is the land of Ossian: “cette terre a été foulée par les pas de l’immortel Ossian”, when a white-haired old man in floating white drapes appears:

A peine eut-il proféré ces paroles avec le ton de l’enthousiasme, qu’un vieillard à tête nue et à chevelure blanche, vêtu d’une draperie flottante de la même couleur, nous apparût: “C’est Ossian, s’écrie Thornton; c’est ce divin poète qui accourt au nom de son illustre père; tombons à ses pieds.” Mais l’ombre, sans proférer une parole, sans jeter un seul regard vers nous, traverse gravement le torrent, et disparût. Est-ce une illusion? Est-ce un rêve, nous écriâmes-nous? car nous avons tous vu le même objet à la clarté de la lune; nous l’avions vu distinctement. Nous étions dans l’étonnement, dans l’attente et dans une sorte d’inquiétude, lorsque quelques instans après, nous entendîmes des hommes qui venoient à notre aide. La chute d’eau n’étoit que l’écluse de deux moulins qu’on avoit lachée; le fantôme blanc, un vieux meûnier, qui, réveillé par nos cris, accouroit en chemise et tête nue à notre secours; mais qui, voyant des voitures, des chevaux, et entendant des hommes qui ne parloient pas sa langue, alla, sans mot dire, faire lever ses voisins.¹⁴

Louis Albert Necker de Saussure (1786–1861), son of the writer and educationalist Albertine Adrienne Necker de Saussure (1766–1841), toured Scotland while studying science at the University of Edinburgh in 1806–1808, but did not publish his weighty travelogue until 1821.¹⁵ This scientist self-identifies as a non-poet type of writer when he describes being annoyed that a quiet sea is slowing down his crossing and claims that only a poet could be

¹³ Nigel Leask, “Fingalian Topographies: Ossian and the Highland Tour, 1760-1805”, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39:2 (2016), 183-196 (192).

¹⁴ Barthélemy Faujas de Saint-Fond, *Voyage en Angleterre, en Écosse et aux îles Hébrides* 2 vols (Paris: Jansen, 1797), pp. 361-362.

¹⁵ See John Hollier and Anita Hollier, “French and Geneval views of Scotland in 1821: Charles Nodier’s *Promenade de Dieppe aux montagnes d’Écosse* and Louis-Albert Necker’s *Voyage en Écosse et aux Îles Hébrides*”, *Studies in Travel Writing*, 23: 2 (2019), pp. 99–118.

interested in this calm as its appeal is only aesthetic (NdS, I, p. 329). However, he cannot avoid paying some attention to the emotional and aesthetic sides of his experience, and his horror at the “lac noir” at Ben Lomond (I, p. 314) leads him almost to hear Ossian’s voice in “cette vieille terre qui se présente encore à nos yeux telle que l’ont vue et chantée Ossian et les anciens Bardes. On pouvait croire entendre dans le mugissement du vent, la mystique et sombre voix du Barde écossais” (I, p. 314). Although he blames the weather, and distances himself from credulity with the awkward phrase “on pouvait croire entendre”, the connection with Ossian at this point is inescapable.

At Staffa, location of the famous Fingal’s cave, named after Ossian’s father, Necker again distances himself from the heroes of the past and any visions of them. He says that the place’s beauty is enhanced by its situation: it is isolated, forgotten and suffers tremendous storms. But most of all it is enhanced by Ossian, or what is conjured up by the name Fingal:

[T]ous les souvenirs que rappellent le nom de Fingal donné à cette grotte. Fingal, Ossian, et ses bardes se sont peut-être jadis rassemblés sous ces voûtes, la musique de leurs harpes harmonieuses accompagnoit le son de leurs voix, et mêlée à celui des vagues et des vents, elle a peut-être plus d’une fois fait résonner les cavités de cette grotte.

(II, pp. 300–301)

The repetition of “peut-être” provides a safe distance for this scientific observer, as the sounds and setting allow him to suggest the ancient presence of the bards. Similarly at the Cullen mountains, “chanté par Ossian” (III, p. 43), Necker finds a scientific way to describe what is basically a ghost:

J’aimois à rattacher à ces lieux déserts l’idée des anciens héros qui les avoient habités, et des Bardes qui chantoient leurs exploits. Je me plaisois à me figurer ces poètes

inspirés, parcourant ces vallées obscures et profondes, laissant égarer leur imagination mélancolique à l'aspect des scènes imposantes de cette nature sauvage, et croyant voir dans les brouillards, dans les nuées légères qui voltigent autour de ces hautes montagnes, les ombres de leurs pères et de leurs héros, errer encore après leur mort près des lieux qu'ils avoient long-temps habité [*sic*]. Il me sembloit intéressant de retrouver dans une contrée qui présente des traits si frappans et si sublimes, l'aliment d'une poésie si bien adaptée aux lieux qui lui ont donné naissance.

(III, p. 44)

It is the poets of old who were credulous, “croyant voir”, whereas he, the modern traveller, is simply enjoying imagining the naïve poets—“Je me plaisois à me figurer”—and finding it intellectually stimulating: “Il me sembloit intéressant.” The people's credulity is explained or excused by the weather: “Les Gaëls croyoient aussi aux revenans et aux esprits; ils se figuroient qu'ils les voyoient et qu'ils conversoient avec eux. Les brouillards et les nuages, qui dans ces contrées alpestres prennent mille formes bizarres, pouvoient souvent paroître des ombres et revêtir la figure humaine aux yeux d'une imagination exaltée” (III, p. 234). He again distances his own voice from those of people with an “imagination exaltée”.

The Romantics are clearly different from the Enlightenment travellers when it comes to ghosts. Charles Nodier (1780–1844) is remembered as the father of the Gothic tale in French, and travels in 1821 in pursuit of the authentic Scotland, weighed down by his reading of Ossianic texts.¹⁶ He seems obsessed with “la mythologie des nuages”¹⁷ in the northern skies, and writes sumptuous descriptions of the tricks that clouds and mist can play on perception (p. 229), as they generate apparitions (“chimères”, p. 246), visions of shipwrecks or giants (p. 232). The soundtrack is also described, when the sounds of nature are modulated into harp

¹⁶ Sébastien Vacelet, ‘Ex-dono Charles Nodier: les pérégrinations d'une bibliothèque de voyage en Écosse’, *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 41: 1–2 (2012–2013), pp. 1–24. See also Hollier and Hollier.

¹⁷ Charles Nodier, *Promenade de Dieppe aux montagnes d'Écosse* (Paris: Barba 1821), p. 189. Modern edition by Georges Zaragoza (Paris: Champion, 2003).

music: “Les bruits singuliers des échos qui se renvoient à des distances infinies la moindre rumeur du moindre flot, et qui finissent par vous apporter je ne sais quel frémissement harmonieux, comme celui qui expire dans la dernière vibration d’une corde de harpe; la tradition des premiers temps, et avec elle les noms d’Ossian, de Fingal, d’Oscar ...” (p. 189)

Nodier plays with the idea that Ossian and his entourage of characters may be the products of the clouds, or a trick of the weather: “j’ai cru voir Malvina” (p. 178). His use of an affirmative verb, but in the past, attributes Malvina to a mere moment, so Nodier does not quite admit to the vision. On the one hand he is proposing the special effects of weather, clouds and rocks as a rational explanation for all these apparitions and impressions of music. But he is not entirely denying the magic of the place; physically being in the different Scottish environment is having this effect on his imagination. Indeed, parts of his travelogues read like a gothic tale. During one of the frequent Scottish storms, ancestors appear without warning and fly from mountain to mountain as “ombres”, and bards and heroes dissolve into rain (p. 293). Only in Scotland could this happen, since in England, he asserts, “les nuages ont perdu leur poésie” (p. 293).

Astolphe de Custine (1790–1857), who is best known for his later Russian travelogue (1839), travelled to England and Scotland in 1822. His is the most somatic of the texts considered here, and the most melodramatic. He falls under the Scottish spell, and the “terre poétique” that he finds on leaving the dreaded England (“en Angleterre, tout me repoussait”) affects his whole body, as Scotland’s “terreur poétique” causes him “battements de cœur” quite independently of the physical exertion of climbing (pp. 217, 245). He revels in his near-death experience at the top of a mountain, and imagines himself there in the company of the ghosts of Ossian: “Je me croyais mort, et il me semblait que je voyageais dans les nuages avec ces esprits d’Ossian qui vont porter aux vivans la guerre et la tempête” (p. 400). His choice of verb in “il me semblait” allows for the ghosts to be explained away by his physical state of exertion.

Language and distance

All the travelogues stress the specificity and difference of the landscape, and the distance between the travellers' homes and what is observed in Scotland. The difficulty of the journey itself is valorized partly in a spirit of adventure and proud pioneering, often felt in Necker's account, as when he deliberately opts for a more difficult route, "un chemin peu fréquenté" to Inverness, meeting up with his travel party later (III, p. 40). The Romantics are no different, and Custine literally writes, "J'aimerais mieux voyager péniblement" (II, p. 363). This difficulty of access is also stressed because of an association of peripherality of place with authenticity of culture that had been well established by thinkers such as Rousseau and Herder, and seen in a travel writer such as Jacques Cambry in Brittany.

What is more surprising, perhaps, than the valorization of arduous, centrifugal journeys away from civilization is that, in the Romantic texts, there is also a valorization of the peripherality or non-accessibility of language. Put another way, untranslatability, or not being able to understand a peasant song fully, seems to be a marker of authenticity for these observers. For something to be convincing it needs to be difficult and different. Language barriers, which are so crucial to the genre of travel writing, and so often glossed over, persuade the traveller of authenticity, and inaccessibility is sought. In contrast to Enlightenment travellers such as Necker and Faujas, who see language barriers as a problem to be solved, Romantics do not want translators or transparency. Faujas avails himself of the services of an intermediary informant: the daughter of a host (Mac-Liane de Torloisk), who has studied the poetry and music of native Hebrideans and is then able to claim that English writers only doubt the authenticity of Ossian because they lack the language.

This difference is illustrated in Nodier's encounter with Mannah, the boatwoman at lake Katrine.¹⁸ He begins by regretting not having studied Gaelic, as this would have allowed him to hear "un chant gallique dans sa primitive beauté" (p. 257), rather than just sounds. Perhaps

¹⁸ The striking similarity between this episode and Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper" is noted by C. W. Thompson, who, in *French Romantic Travel Writing: Chateaubriand to Nerval* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 62, points out that this is most likely a coincidence.

there are no guides or intermediaries about because solitude is an important part of Romantic travel. But this is more than a practical problem. He then admits that this barrier may have enhanced the experience and states at this point that the goal of his travels has been attained as he now has the proof that these songs are real: “[J]e ne doutais plus que ce pays n’eût conservé des chants traditionnels du genre héroïque” (p. 258). The doubts that he had before travelling: “[C]ar j’apportais de France la conviction très-profonde que l’*Ossian* de Macpherson était tout simplement la plus heureuse et la plus magnifique des supercheries littéraires” (p. 258) have been cancelled out. Being physically present at the site is what proves to Nodier that Ossian is real, but the proof is enhanced by not understanding a word of Mannah’s song. In presenting this “striking image of mysterious and appealing otherness”,¹⁹ Nodier shows that he wants Mannah’s meaning to escape him because he needs his goal to remain just beyond his grasp.

In a similar valorization of language barriers, Custine seeks out difficulty not only in the terrain but also in terms of language, as we see in his encounters with singing shepherds. Of the first one he writes:

Je n’ai pu laisser passer leur conducteur sans lui demander encore si le lieu de sa naissance n’était pas la patrie d’Ossian. Mais, soit que je ne prononçasse pas ce nom à sa manière, soit qu’il n’eût jamais entendu parler d’Ossian, il ne put me répondre, et continua sa route en chantant sur un air triste des paroles *que je n’ai pas comprises*. C’étaient peut-être les Exploits de Fingal ou les Amours de Malvina.

(p. 335, emphasis added)

And the second shepherd “chantait des paroles *que je ne pouvais comprendre*, sur un air semblable à une psalmodie religieuse” (p. 374, emphasis added).

¹⁹ Thompson, p. 62.

Custine admits in these two instances that he does not understand what they sing, and that he is not understood by the shepherd, blaming himself for maybe mispronouncing “Ossian”. In any case, the first encounter is presented as a failure of communication. But he perseveres with shepherd two, and gets his host to translate from “Gaelic” into English:

Cette traduction était sans doute imparfaite, cependant je la préfère encore à l’imitation que j’ai tâché d’en faire en vers français. C’est une espèce de ballade dont je n’ai pu rendre la naïveté. Cependant je ne la crois pas d’un temps très-reculé, on y trouve déjà quelques idées qui se ressentent de l’afféterie moderne, et j’avoue, à ma honte, que ce sont celles qui m’ont le moins coûté à exprimer.

(p. 375)

Even if he does get a translation, he likes it to be imperfect because the authentic version is untranslatable, maybe by definition. And the parts that are easy to express are a disappointment and lead him to conclude that these are not authentic. The poetry needs to be opaque or eccentric.

Translation, foreignizing, Romanticism

The valorization of not understanding, observed here in Nodier and Custine, fits with what we know of French Romanticism’s attitude towards the Other, at least since Madame de Staël’s championing of Germany and the north. It is best shown in the history of translation, which gradually comes to prefer “foreignizing” translations that allow a certain strangeness, over “domesticating” ones that smooth over otherness.²⁰ This new preference for a more disrupted or strange text is seen emerging in these Ossianic travelogues. Peter France in his survey of travel and translation confirms that this approach was not a feature of earlier travelogues:

²⁰ Although they have received criticism, the twin terms *domesticating* and *foreignizing* have become critical shorthand for describing the two extremes of translation practice, popularized by Lawrence Venuti in *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 16.

“[T]he eighteenth century was little concerned with the business of untranslatability”.²¹

Change came from Germany around 1800, when Schleiermacher and Schlegel “set German respect for the Other against French annexation”.²² What we can see in these travelogues is the beginning of the end for the tradition of fluency.

Awareness of and interest in Celticity crystallized in the middle of the nineteenth century when Renan published his influential essay ‘La Poésie des races celtiques’,²³ and continued to grow up until the First World War, as shown in the comparative study of French and German travel writing *Hidden Texts, Hidden Nation*.²⁴ A post-Renan travelogue to another Celtic place—Wales—provides a remarkable example of poetry in the landscape that transcends all language problems. In my final example translatability is not problematized, or even mentioned, rather it is a given. Alfred Erny, who travelled with historian Henri Martin in the 1860s, describes the picturesque setting of Dolbadarn castle, on a peninsula between two lakes in Snowdonia, in an account culminating in a poem:

De cette hauteur, les plaintes d’un captif me sont portées par la brise.

Là, enchaîné, abandonné, gît Owen, et je vis encore pour raconter cette histoire, pour dire comment cette tour est devenue la tombe vivante d’Owen, d’après l’ordre de son frère.

J’errais au milieu de ces tristes montagnes, me lamentant sur mon héros absent, quand des sons douloureux ont frappé mon oreille. Je me suis arrêté, et j’ai frémi; car dans la voix que j’aimais je crus reconnaître le chant de mort d’Owen.

D’une naissance royale et puissante, élevé en courage et en belles actions, quel Saxon osait envahir notre terre, ou tirer l’épée, quand il était là? À la guerre on le reconnaissait à son bouclier brisé. Comme le grand Roderic il ne cédait jamais.

²¹ Peter France, “Lost for Words: Travel and Translation”, Besterman Lecture 2000, *From Letter to Publication* (Oxford: SCEV, 2001), pp. 201–216 (p. 207).

²² France, p. 208.

²³ Ernest Renan, “La Poésie des races celtiques”, *Revue des Deux Mondes*, n.s. 5 (1854), 473–506, reprinted in *Essais de morale et de critique* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1928), pp. 375–456.

²⁴ Jones, Tully and Williams.

Les portes de son palais ne s'ouvrent plus, on n'entend plus la harpe dans sa grande salle, ses amis sont vassaux de ses ennemis, le malheur et le désespoir l'ont anéanti.

Lui, le bon, le juste, il n'est plus; son nom, sa gloire, tout s'est envolé en fumée.

Il n'estimait les trésors que pour les donner. Il n'aimait que les États libres.

Personne ne le quittait mécontent. Il donnait à tous, surtout à moi!

Ses lèvres étaient roses comme la lumière du matin; sa lance toujours prête était ferme et brillante; des taches rouges y brillaient et témoignaient de la défaite du Saxon.

C'est une honte qu'un prince pareil demeure ainsi exilé et captif. Oh! Combien d'années de honte sans fin obscurciront le nom du seigneur du Snowdon!²⁵

Ostensibly in the voice of the thirteenth-century Welsh bard, lamenting the captivity of Owen Goch / Owen le rouge, who was imprisoned in the tower by his own brother, Llewelyn, the last of the Welsh princes,²⁶ the text reads suspiciously like a Romantic French poem. If the proper nouns were taken out it might be mistaken for a piece by Chateaubriand. It is nature that speaks here—the mountaintop lament is carried on the wind, the mountains themselves are “tristes”, the sounds are “douloureux”. The theme of death runs throughout: the bard is hearing a “chant de mort”, the tower is a living tomb, the verb “gésir” (“gât”) is used, the hero is “absent”, indeed “anéanti” and more simply: “il n'est plus”; never will his palace doors reopen, never will the harp sound. Absence and loss dominate and the bard, abandoned, is a Romantic hero who wanders in these sad mountains, shudders when he hears the “sons douloureux”, and has the ability to express in language the painful message carried by the wind.

²⁵ Alfred Erny, “Voyage dans le pays de Galles”, *Le Tour du Monde*, 15: 1 (1867), 257–288 (286).

²⁶ Owain ap Gruffudd (also known as *Owain Goch* (Owain the Red)), who died in 1282, was brother to Llywelyn ap Gruffudd and Dafydd ap Gruffudd and, for a brief period in the late 1240s and early 1250s, ruler of part of the Kingdom of Gwynedd (in modern-day north Wales).

Although there is no mention of language barriers or of the challenge of translation, this poem is real, though the original has been much reduced.²⁷ Erny and his co-traveller Martin undoubtedly found it in *The Literature of the Kymry* (1849) by Thomas Stephens, an amateur scholar with whom they had been in touch.²⁸ Stephens was part of a new generation of Celtic scholars who wanted to edit scientifically, and his book gives a literal translation into English. So it is Erny, or Erny and Martin, who have reimagined it as a Romantic poem for their own purposes. It becomes a self-pitying, nostalgic poem that fuses psychology and landscape to authenticate their journey in Wales, land of the Celtic fathers. The original Celtic poetry, hidden here, is what makes the travellers experience the place as authentic. This landscape, finally reached in north Wales, allows them to make sense of, and reimagine, the poetry they have read at home in France.

Erny and Martin's journey and travelogue is clearly a continuation of the earlier searches in Scotland, but rather different in that the landscape remains empty. There is no peasant informer, and no ghost: the bard who sings the poem is simply imagined as part of the poem. Maybe by the 1860s singing-shepherd types were no longer roaming this land? Erny and Martin made this journey, of course, after the advent of trains and mass tourism. Maybe this poetry is presented differently because they did not have any difficulty accessing the material, as they were in touch with native amateur Celtic scholars. If the foreignizing trend explains what we saw in Nodier and Custine, there is something else going on here. I suggest that Erny and Martin see themselves as insiders—signed up to a Celtic, or Celtomaniac, agenda—and are therefore searching for sameness and mutual understanding between France and the Celtic parts of Britain rather than difference. Henri Martin has been dubbed

²⁷ It is a mangled version of a thirteenth-century Welsh poem by Hywel Foel ap Griffri ap Pwyll Wyddel. For an interpretation of the complex Welsh poem see Brynley F. Roberts, in R. Geraint Gruffydd (ed.), *Cyfes Beirdd y Tywysogion VII: Gwaith Bleddyn Fardd ac Eraill* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), 181–199 (p. 191), and for a discussion of Erny's use of it see Heather Williams, 'La Construction du Moyen Âge dans les récits de voyages français portant sur le pays de Galles', in Hélène Bouget and Magali Coumert (eds), *Quel Moyen Âge? la recherche en question, histoires des Breagnes* 6 (Brest: Centre de Recherche Bretonne et Celtique, 2019), pp. 65–81.

²⁸ Thomas Stephens, in *The Literature of the Kymry* (Llandoverly: William Rees; London: Longman, 1849), pp. 379–381, lists *Myvyrian Archaiology of Wales* as his source for the poem, p. 267.

“Celtomaniac”²⁹ and sees the Welsh as his kin through a “sympathie fraternelle pour un peuple si fidèle aux souvenirs de nos communs ancêtres”.³⁰ What he is searching for in Wales is confirmation of similarity, not exoticism. In this sense, his Celtomania is post-Romantic, and his conviction produces a different experience of a Celtic site in Britain. French texts are distinct from English or German travelogues because, although highly fashionable across Europe, only in France was the Celtic hypothesis part of a mainstream, state-backed attempt to establish the origins of the new nation after the rupture of the French Revolution.³¹

Conclusion

Nigel Leask’s recent *Stepping Westward*, “the first book of its kind dedicated to the literature of the Scottish Highland tour 1720–1830”, omits non-Anglophone travelogues.³² I hope my discussion, however brief, has demonstrated the richness and potential of these French-language sources. I have only been able to scratch the surface here, and there are many other Francophone travelogues to Scotland that would repay close attention in investigating the broader question of Celticity, such as those of émigré Jacques-Louis de Bougrenet de La Tocnaye (1767–1823), Amédée Pichot (1795–1877), Alexandre de La Rochefoucauld (b. 1768) and Marc-Auguste Pictet (1752–1825), not to mention French fiction set in Scotland such as Sophie Cottin’s *Malvina* and Nodier’s pair *Le Lutin d’Argail* (1822) and *La Fée aux miettes* (1832) and, later on, Jules Verne’s *Voyage à reculons* (1859–1860)³³ and *Les Indes noires* (1877). More generally, the fact that Chateaubriand’s René flees to Ossian’s Scotland in his imagination, and Senancour’s Oberman also muses on Ossianic landscapes, leave us in

²⁹ Michael Glencross, *Reconstructing Camelot: French Romantic Medievalism and the Arthurian Tradition* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995), p. 111; Heather Williams, ‘Celtomania’, in John T. Koch and Antoine Minard (eds), *The Celts: History, Life, and Culture*, 2 vols (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2012), I, pp. 174–175.

³⁰ Henri Martin, *Études d’archéologie celtique: notes de voyages dans les pays celtiques et scandinaves* (Paris: Didier, 1872), p. 33.

³¹ One thinks, for instance of the Académie celtique, founded in 1805 under Napoleon.

³² Leask, *Stepping Westward*, p. 6. The exception to this omission is Faujas, whose travelogue is available in (a much abridged) English trans.: Barthélemy Faujas de Saint-Fond, *Travels in England, Scotland, and the Hebrides*, 2 vols (London, 1799).

³³ Not published until 1989.

no doubt of the importance of Scotland to French Romanticism.³⁴ These travelogues, then, can shed new light on the Ossian authenticity debate, on the role of Scotland and Celticity in French Romanticism and attitudes towards the Other, and in nineteenth-century nation-building.

An authentic Celtic site in the nineteenth century is a productive landscape that generates poetry, but the way it does this changes over time and depends on the commitment and agenda of the observer or traveller. It may involve peasant singers, bilingual intermediaries, ghostly poet figures or the poetry/music of nature itself, carried on the wind. The starting point for investigation is the Scottish travelogues that search for “evidence” or “proof” of Ossian’s authenticity either in the form of a particular landscape, a native bard or just an ordinary traveller who is intimately connected to the site (typically a peasant or shepherd). The imagined space of Ossian’s Highlands demands to be traced through French culture as it gradually extends to cover all of Celtia, and even affects the understanding of Frenchness.

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³⁴ Chateaubriand, *Atala, René, les aventures du dernier Abencérage*, ed. Jean-Claude Berchet (Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1996), p. 174; Senancour, *Oberman*, ed. Béatrice Didier (Paris: Livre de poche, 1984), pp. 339–340.