Samuel Johnson’s attitude to Scotland and its inhabitants has traditionally been assessed in terms of caricature hostility. From Boswell’s reported confession to being a Scotsman who ‘cannot help it’, via the infamous definition of ‘Oats’ in the *Dictionary* (‘meant to vex’, as Johnson admitted), to the Great Cham’s crowning comparison of the troublesome Irish fly and the bloodsucking Scots leech, Johnson’s outlook appears consistently prejudiced and insular: ‘he considered the Scotch, nationally, as a crafty, designing people, eagerly attentive to their own interest’, colonials comparable to ‘Cherokees’ and even ‘ouran-outangs’.¹ What is there left to explain? A great deal is the answer, as some more recent critics have understood, taking as their key text that fascinating paradox the *Journey to the Western Isles* (1775), a thoughtful record of a long and trying journey by an ageing man to a country he was supposed universally to despise and detest, but which he ended up dignifying. For Pat Rogers, Johnson chose his tour as a rite of passage for his Grand Climacteric at sixty-three, as a kind of reverse Grand Tour and as a homage to the ‘lapsed nationhood’ overthrown in the Rising of 1745.² In Rogers’s view, therefore, age and decline, the opposition of native vigour to foreign manners and the metonymic loss of Scotland and the Stuarts, are all subtexts to the language and itinerary of the Tour. On this reading, Scotland, far from being merely despised, stands for something critical in the life and values of Johnson himself. Whatever one’s view of these accounts, each of them implicitly recognises an important thing about Johnson: the extent of his interest in Scotland, and the number of references he makes to it. To some degree this can be explained by the interposing voice and influence of Boswell, but although this can account for Johnson’s teasing of his biographer (and Scotland is not the only subject on which he teases), it cannot altogether explain the depth of intellectual attention Johnson gave the country, especially when he sojourned there. In this essay, I suggest three major reasons for Johnson’s Scottish interests: the state of the country as a proxy for the state of the Church, its locus as the major source for the Jacobite debate, and its

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¹ J. Clark et al. (eds.), *Samuel Johnson in Historical Context* © Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited 2002
monitory significance as a warning that the decline Scotland has experienced has threatened England too, and might do so still. Here the Grand Tour idea put forward by Rogers is interesting in its suggestive implications; for just as Italy was in the eighteenth century an awful example of the state to which a great civilisation might be reduced, so in its lesser way Scotland serves the same purpose for Johnson: a ruined seat of Renaissance learning.

The peculiarity of Johnson’s interest in Scotland strikes us immediately if we stand back from it. His knowledge of and interest in its history was profound. Englishmen who disliked and belittled Scotland were not difficult to find in the eighteenth century, but their typical state was one of ignorance: they knew little of Scotland, and cared less. That this was an appealing position in Johnson’s time can be seen from the conflation of Highland and Lowland Scot, flea-ridden savage and ingratiating Edinbourger in the political cartoon tradition in which ‘Sawney’ (Alexander) on his ‘Boghouse’ is a synecdoche for the Scottish character in general, uncivilised, militant, and voracious for sexual mischief and a full belly. The political and later the perceived economic threat posed by the Scots led to the same kind of collectivist ethnic caricature of them as intruders and immigrants as afflicted the Irish in the nineteenth century.

Although Johnson can adopt this mode, he nearly always does so in teasing exchanges. Elsewhere he displays a considerable understanding of Scottish history and culture, and does so in terms that emphasise not its backwardness, so much as its decay. As Jonathan Clark points out, like Thomas Ruddiman (1674–1757), whom Johnson admired, himself one of the last scions of Scoto-Latin and Episcopal culture, Johnson ‘was predisposed to see Scots society in decay’. Again and again it is evident from the language and encounters of the Tour that ‘Johnson like Ruddiman believed that the decline of learning went together with the advance of Presbyterianism’. In opposition to this advance, Ruddiman had himself been involved in the ’15, and one of his sons was transported for his part in the ’45. Johnson himself ‘pointedly refused to enter a Presbyterian church’ while in Scotland, while in his Dictionary the illustrations of the meaning of ‘Presbyter’ and ‘Presbyterian’ are drawn from Samuel Butler (1613–80), Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) and Charles I, all among its most decided opponents.

In these circumstances, it is little wonder that Aberdeen, Ruddiman’s city, made such a favourable impact on Johnson:

the scene at Aberdeen had made such an impression upon him that he often said, on his return to London, to Dr. Dunbar [Professor of Philosophy at King’s] that if he ever removed from the capital, he would incline to fix in Aberdeen. ‘What’, said the professor, ‘in preference to Oxford?’ ‘Yes sir’, replied Johnson, ‘for Aberdeen is not only a seat of learning, but a seat of commerce, which would be particularly agreeable.’ This he so