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Samuel Johnson and the Scots

Lead: One of the regular targets of the wit of Samuel Johnson, eighteenth century England's man of letters, were the Scots. He once said, *The noblest prospect which a Scotchman ever sees is the high road that leads him to England.*

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Since 1603 England and Scotland had been governed by the same monarch, yet relations were often strained and Scotland remained an independent state until the Act of Union in 1707 merged the two states

as the United Kingdom of Great Britain. It is from that point that the two nations were merged and became British rather than English or Scottish. Over the next century, Britain surged ahead of the world in industrial development, established its dominance over the sea lanes, built and lost its first empire, and grew itself into the wealthiest power in the world with London as the worldwide center of commerce, trade and culture.

Johnson was extremely proud of his English heritage and like many of his fellow countrymen maintained a light-hearted but rather condescending view of England's imperial partner to the north. Some

went so far as to denigrate Scottish culture and its educational system - after all, they were not born as true “Englishmen.” In his 1755 dictionary, his definition of “oats” implies an ill-disguised disdain for the Scots: *oats – “a grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people.”*

Yet, Johnson could hardly have ignored the significant contributions of Scottish inventors or the achievements of the Scottish Enlightenment, writers such as David Hume or moral economists such as Adam Smith. Johnson’s biographer, friend and travelling companion, James Boswell, was Scottish, and Johnson enjoyed the company of

Scottish intellectuals in London. Johnson and Boswell travelled to Scotland in 1773, and subsequently both wrote of their experiences and the Scottish hospitality they received. One suspects that his attitude was similar to that between the descendants of those who fought in the American Civil War, Rebel versus Yankee, can't live with them, can't live without them.

Some critics believe Johnson's conservatism, nationalism and just plain snobbery supported a full-bore prejudice against the Scots, while others point out that his remarks were playful and in jest and that his comments about them rose from a witty, lively banter: "*Much may be*

made of a Scotchman, if he be caught young.”

Research by Ann Johnson, at the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

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