

Knowing Landscape, Knowing Country: Improvement, Enlightenment, and Ideas of Nature in Scotland, 1750-1815

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My research for the summer focused on the role of landscape and nature in the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment, an intellectual movement focused on using new types of knowledge to change individuals, society and even nature. I asked how these changes came about both intellectually and culturally, and how they influenced and impacted the physical environment. Although there are numerous studies of the cultural importance of the Scottish landscape, as well as studies of nature in the Enlightenment, my research brought together these two lines of inquiry to form a more complete picture of how nature was used and perceived in the eighteenth century. My work explores and expands upon the role and agency of nature in the Scottish Enlightenment to further understand how human ideas of nature changed at the beginning of the modern era.

Scotland's long history of intellectual advancement, as well as its distinctive Highland landscape, make it a fascinating place to study. Through my research I was able to investigate the ways in which Scotland acts as a case study of the ideological and cultural clashes that characterized the Enlightenment period. The country exemplifies the eighteenth-century tension of new ideas, such as agricultural science, being applied to old concepts like traditional land ownership and subsistence farming. This summer of research has helped me to prepare for an honors project through which I will continue to study Scottish environmental history.

I spent the first four weeks of the summer in Scotland, where I also studied abroad in the Spring 2017 semester. This opportunity allowed me to immerse myself in Scottish culture, to see the landscape, and to visit archives with unique collections. During a brief stay in Glasgow, I visited the National Library of Scotland's Kelvnhall Archive, as well as the Hunterian Museum, which contains important medical and natural history collections. I spent several weeks in Edinburgh at the National Library of Scotland, where I had the privilege to view unpublished eighteenth-century manuscripts on Scottish agricultural improvement, as well as scientific records, journals taken by intellectuals touring Scotland, and many personal letters and papers such as those of Sir Walter Scott. While in Edinburgh I also visited the National Museum of Scotland, which held an exhibit on Scottish improvement and the intellectual elite of Edinburgh. Finally, I spent a week in Inverness, the only city in the Scottish Highlands, using materials held at the Highland Council Archive, such as estate papers, and also visited the Inverness Museum and Art Gallery and the Highland Folk Museum. The time I spent in these archives offered me the opportunity to view unpublished manuscripts and rare books - I viewed more material than I could read in just a few short weeks, so I was able to take photographs to reference throughout my research. When I returned to Bowdoin in July, I reviewed the photos I had taken and will now be able to use those sources in my work. I have also been able to delve into the historical literature surrounding this topic with the assistance of my advisor, Meghan Roberts, to place my archival research in its proper historical context.

This summer of research has been invaluable in gathering knowledge and sources for my upcoming honors project. I have become increasingly aware of the current state of the field of environmental history, and this knowledge will help me to make a more significant scholarly intervention through my honors project. Through my examination of primary and secondary sources, I have realized the complexity of attitudes towards the environment that were held during the Scottish Enlightenment, ranging from upper-class improvement mandates and abstract science to traditional valuation of the landscape as a hereditary homeland. By comparing the disparate ideological clashes that characterized this period of change, I drew the conclusion that Scottish landscape was dramatically altered by changing land use patterns due to new and more modern understandings of how humans should interact with their native landscape. I look forward to continuing this research during the upcoming academic year to further understand the significance of nature in the Scottish Enlightenment.

Faculty Mentor: Meghan Roberts

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