

## An alchemy of the imagination

Duncan Bryden takes a lightning tour through the influences that have shaped Scottish interpretation.

In 1788, mathematician John Playfair walked to Siccar Point on the East Lothian coast with founding geologist James Hutton, and found his mind 'grow giddy by looking so far into the abyss of time'. By interpreting the Scottish landscape Hutton was able to provoke, relate and reveal to his admiring followers, two hundred years before Tilden, a past world so deep it was terrifying.

Pioneering scientists like Hutton used the interpretive techniques of the day to convince their audiences. Primed by the Scottish Enlightenment and the industrial revolution, this interpretation was meat and drink to the hungry Victorian mind. Cultural commentators of the day like John Ruskin instructed their readers that the past was everywhere apparent if only they knew how to look. In America, the trinity of Muir, Emerson and Thoreau fed this growing interest in landscape interpretation.

Aboriginal cultures still use storytelling to interpret and learn from the past. Scratch the surface of any developed nation and stories, hidden and dusty, emerge blinking into the glare of modern living. In Scotland, the bard-like keeper of these oral stories that tied people to their ancestral heritage and to their place is called a shennachie. But not all bards have been as scrupulous with their sources as we might wish. James MacPherson was one who took the stories to questionable heights. Born near Aviemore in 1736, MacPherson was only 23 when his book *Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland* propelled him to J. K. Rowling levels of international literary fame. His Harry Potter was Ossian – a second century Celtic hero. Was Ossian fact or fiction? Critics remain uncertain, but Napoleon and a U. S. president were reputed fans. For Victorian Scotland, MacPherson's work, combined with Sir Walter Scott's writing, set a tone which is still driving Scottish tourism and interpretation today: the misty glens and bens – essentially Highland images that characterise Scotland across the world.

During the nineteenth century, private collectors demonstrated their philanthropy by donating collections to kick-start the nation's museums. But the early museums emphasised display rather than interpretation, with curatorial information presented in idiosyncratic ways. A great uncle of mine was one of the first curators at Kelvingrove in Glasgow, and I still have his spidery handwriting on a label as an example of early museum interpretation.

Changing social circumstances following World War I and Depression in the 20s and 30s saw a small growth in independent travel and the appearance of interpretive travel guides. But there was little to offer the new tourists in the way of facilities on site. In the U. S., Mission 66 spent \$1 billion between 1956 and 1966 to build new

visitor centres in National Parks; in Britain post war austerity held back interpretation. England and Wales enjoyed a National Parks Act in 1949, but park designation in Scotland was blocked by landowning interests. It took devolution in 1999 to get a similar Act in Scotland. National Forest Parks filled some of the gaps, but as with the Nature Conservancy and even the National Trust for Scotland priorities lay with conservation of the asset or, for the Forestry Commission, timber production. Scottish interpretation had lost its way.

In 1967, as part of national land use planning strategy, the Country Commission for Scotland (CCS) responded to public pressure by supporting Ranger Services, and Country and Regional Parks. At the CCS the redoubtable Don Aldridge set interpretation into the public sector lexicon as an acceptable management tool. Acceptability prompted fact finding missions to America. After his visit, one young entrepreneur pre-empted the Eden project with a commercial interpretive attraction based on the Caledonian Pinewood. Despite over 35 years of fires, changing fashions and financial soul-searching David Hayes' Landmark Centre continues to be a financial success true to its interpretive roots.

Public sector enthusiasm for interpretation in the 80s and 90s was part of regeneration work, with new heritage attractions appearing in places once reliant on traditional industries. One-off funding from European, Millennium or National Lottery sources fuelled success, failure or flat line mediocrity, depending on how attractions followed interpretive principles of identifying authentic core themes, clear target audiences and short term re-investment.

What of the next chapter? Some rural communities, for whom a sense of place is central, own land and its interpretation for the first time in centuries. Commercial companies are using interpretation to change behaviour affecting climate change.

Niche heritage guides and tourism services are increasing. Interpretation-led design is driving new attractions. Academia is meeting the need for professional interpretive training and scholarship. A new political imperative is coming out of the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood. A leaner public sector must focus on customer needs and partnership delivery of clear public benefits. Hutton's percipient view of the earth, with 'no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end' is perhaps an allegorical view of interpretation. If interpreters in Scotland can meet new challenges with style and imagination, past and present vision, and a will to inspire giddiness by peering over the horizon, we will have an alchemy to make us all glad.

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No vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end  
*James Hutton, geologist*