

**Inspiration and Spectacle:
The Case of Fingal's Cave in Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature**

Fingal's Cave is one of at least twelve sea caves on the tiny Scottish island of Staffa. It is, without doubt, the most famous and was depicted in countless written and visual records of visits to the island in the nineteenth century. As Jennifer Davis Michael observes, "perhaps no other British site in the [Romantic] period was rendered in so many different arts" (2) and, as Marianne Sommer and others have shown, Fingal's Cave was a key site in the "cave rave" (Sommer 197) that began with the Romantics and lasted throughout the Victorian period.

Staffa, known to Viking travellers as the isle of staves for its basalt columns (Dean 194), and the iconic Fingal's Cave were, the story goes, "discovered" by Sir Joseph Banks in 1772 and were first made known to the world when his journal of travel appeared in Thomas Pennant's 1774-1776 multi-volume, *A Tour in Scotland, and Voyage to the Hebrides, 1772*. Banks, who was on his way to or returning from an excursion to Iceland (twentieth and twenty-first century histories are inconsistent on this point), stopped off at Staffa to visit the cave and wrote the first—and most influential—study of its geological features and the experience of looking upon them. Banks, in his detailed description of Fingal's Cave published within Pennant's book pronounced it "the most magnificent ... that has ever been described by travellers" (301). This publication, the story continues, made Staffa "known to the outside world" (Michael 2; see also Dean 194, Gordon 69, Shortland 5-6), and thus initiated a flurry of tourism to the island by some of the most eminent writers and artists of the Romantic period and beyond. Michael Shortland writes that Banks "set in motion a tide of enthusiasm and research in caves which lasted for over half a century" (6). Banks's account also encouraged the connection between Fingal's Cave and the

poems of Ossian, son of Fingal, as Michael discusses in “Ocean meets Ossian: Staffa as Romantic Symbol.” The repetition and consistency of this narrative in studies of Fingal’s Cave is remarkable both for what it reveals about the significance of this “extraordinary” site in British cultural history *and* because the narrative is, to a surprising degree, an illusory one.

This article is divided into three sections. The first asks whether the story of Staffa’s “discovery” by Banks is apocryphal and argues that any analysis of the cultural history of Fingal’s Cave in the nineteenth century must begin with Banks, three decades before the new century. The second and third sections consider how else we might read the dense complex of texts and images produced during the nineteenth century about Staffa and its most-visited cave. The literary and broader cultural history of Fingal’s Cave is, we argue, an extremely useful case study for re-thinking Romantic and Victorian literary and artistic representations of natural spaces. Reading about Fingal’s Cave provides ample evidence for Doreen Massey’s broad claim that “the way we imagine space has effects” (4) and, more particularly, supports her insistence that space is “never a closed system” (11). Both the island and the cave are, to play on a phrase from her book *For Space*, best conceived of as spaces “of loose ends and missing links” (12). Massey’s reconceptualisation of space as inherently relational and constituted by multiplicity, together with her insistence on its social, cultural, and ideological significance, is especially useful for analysing the relationship between actual environments and their representations. Massey’s work is particularly valuable for literary studies. Not only does she argue that space is “always under construction” and thus recognises the inflection of real spaces and imagined spaces, but she employs a narrational metaphor to redefine space as “the simultaneity of stories-so-far” (12). In the introduction to *For Space*, Massey declares

her interest in “ordinary space; the space and places through which, in the negotiation of relations within multiplicities, the social is constructed” (13). To some extent, our interests diverge from Massey’s as we focus on a space that, in almost every published account, is described as “extraordinary.” Nevertheless, our aims are consistent with her contention that every space is fundamentally—and inescapably—a social construct.

Massey observes, “Space does not exist prior to identities/entities and their relations” (10). One of the things which fascinates us regarding the nineteenth-century discourse about Fingal’s Cave (and, indeed, about caves in general) is that the inescapable sociality of space seems to have been one of the insights nineteenth-century visitors gained from their experience of the cave, certainly in the opening decades of the century. Time and again, travellers journeyed to Staffa in search of a pure, unmediated encounter with a natural, utterly non-human space. They sought a unique and spontaneous congress with nature, an objective that was framed by the concept of the sublime. Instead, they found a densely crowded space, noisy with the chattering of other tourists and, perhaps more significantly, saturated by the impressions, thoughts, and responses of prior visitors both to this space and to others like it. They wanted to see, hear, and feel the reality of the earth, but found a space “burdened with the products of culture” (Fletcher 27). As early as 1819, the geologist John MacCulloch lamented that “description has long since been exhausted on the cave of Fingal” (qtd. in Shortland 8). However, the outpouring of texts and images about its geology and mythology did not slow down as the century progressed.

The lesson of Fingal, for even its earliest visitors, was that if one does feel profoundly and personally moved by such a landscape, it is ultimately impossible to unthink the linguistic and discursive matrix through which we understand and

experience any space, however distant or different it may be from the terrain of our everyday lives. The second part of this lesson, and central to this article, is an argument that the necessary derivativeness of human perspectives of extraordinary natural spaces does not mean that the spaces themselves are somehow subsumed by human culture and discourse. Rather, our comparative analysis of a diverse cross-section of written and visual responses to Fingal's Cave reveals the extent to which this space confounded and complicated nineteenth-century understandings of the earth and our place in it.

This article attempts a geocritical study of Fingal's Cave in the nineteenth century. It analyses a selection of poetry, travel writing, fiction, and art produced by some of the many people who visited Staffa between 1772 and 1900. Geocriticism is a relatively new and untested approach to the study of space in literature, which is most often associated with the French critic, Bertrand Westphal, whose book on the subject was published in English in 2011. Westphal's book was translated by another primary advocate of geocriticism, the American literary critic Robert T. Tally Jr. and released alongside a collection of essays edited by Tally exploring the potential of this proposed "new field of literary studies" (Prieto 19). Tally explains, in his translator's preface to Westphal's book, that "geocriticism attempts to understand the real and fictional spaces that we inhabit, cross through, imagine, survey, modify, celebrate, disparage and on and on in infinite variety" (x). The guiding principles of geocriticism, as it has been formulated thus far, are: that it is "geo-centred" rather than "ego-centred" or focused on particular places rather than the authors or artists who have depicted them; that it insists on "multifocalization" rather than privileging a singular point-of-view and thus promotes comparative analysis of a diverse corpus of texts about particular places; that it appreciates and highlights the extent to which the

human experience of space involves all the senses; and, finally, that thinking about space always involves thinking about time. For Tally, “active exploration—in every sense of the word, for better or worse—of the real and imaginary spaces of literature is the goal of geocriticism” (*Geocritical Explorations* 2). The promise of geocriticism is in its implicit acknowledgement that “literature is a product of the earth as well as a product of culture” (Heringman 5). This is evident in Westphal’s insistence on referentiality: geocriticism argues for the return of the referent in literary theory in a way that chimes in with the concerns of ecocriticism. As Greg Garrard writes: “The challenge for ecocritics is to keep one eye on the ways in which ‘nature’ is always in some ways culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists, both the object and, albeit distantly, the origin of our discourse” (10). Like ecocriticism, geocriticism thus trusts in the existence of a prior reality with which representation is in dialogue: it asks “what the text and the place are doing ... and doing to each other” (Westphal 6).

It is clearly beyond the scope of this article to offer a full literature review of “geocriticism.” Instead, the argument adopts (and adapts) some of geocriticism’s ideas and methodologies in order to explore the interface between Fingal’s Cave and its representation in art and literature—that is, between the actual, referential space, or “geospace” of the cave, and the represented space. The geocritical insistence on the integrity of the spatial referent has two clear benefits for analysing the history of human interactions with caves. First, it does away with the postmodern conceit that no physical reality exists prior to human perception and representation. A basalt cave formed through volcanic activity and wave action is a stark reminder of the prior existence of landform to human history. Second, it accepts that the “space” we comprehend and traverse *is* produced in culture. “After all,” Westphal writes,

a place is only a place because of the ways in which we, individually and collectively, organize space in such a way as to mark the topos as special, to set it apart from the spaces surrounding and infusing it. Our understanding of a particular place is determined by our personal experiences with it, but also by our reading about others' experiences, by our point of view, including our biases and our wishful thinking. (x)

The annals of Fingal's Cave in the nineteenth century exemplify the never-ending dialectic between the reality of space and its representation that geocriticism seeks to describe and understand. They reveal also that thinking critically about space and its significance to the human condition is not a late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century innovation. Instead, it was a constant, if mostly implicit, theme of nineteenth-century representations of extraordinary natural landforms.

The "Discovery" of Fingal's Cave

The cultural history of Fingal's Cave in the long nineteenth century, as it has been explained to date, is a linear (and utterly anthropocentric) story about the string of famous and influential people who visited Staffa and were inspired to record their impressions. The story begins, as mentioned, with Banks in 1772 and the account of his journey to Staffa published in Pennant's tour book in 1774. The first problem with this oft-repeated narrative is the claim that Banks *discovered* Staffa and the cave, an error that can be traced to Pennant's dedication in the tour book:

Dear Sir, I think myself so much indebted to you, for making me the vehicle for conveying to the public the rich discovery of your last voyage, that I cannot dispense with this address the usual tribute on such occasions. You took from me all temptation of envying your superior good fortune, by the

liberal declaration you made the HEBRIDES were my ground, and yourself, as you pleasantly expressed it, but an interloper. May I meet with such, in all my adventures! (i)

Without exception, scholars who have examined the rich textual and visual archive of visits to Staffa in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have adopted Pennant's enthusiastic praise for Banks's discovery of the island and overlooked the subtle suggestion here that, unlike Pennant himself, Banks had the "good fortune" to meet clement weather on his journey to see the cave and was "but an interloper." This counter-narrative of trespass and opportunism—passed over by Pennant as a pleasant courtesy on Banks's part—in fact runs through the latter's narrative and puts a very different spin on the cultural (and ideological) significance of Staffa and Fingal's Cave. While a number of scholars place "discovered" in quotation marks or expand it to "re-discovered" to signal an awareness that Banks was not the first person to visit the island or cave, there has been no serious disagreement on this point, and Banks is universally acknowledged as the progenitor of Fingal's Cave as an icon in nineteenth-century geology, tourism, literature, and art. This is not, however, how Banks portrays himself.

The first report of Banks's visit to Staffa was not in Pennant's book, but in a short article published in *Scots Magazine* in November 1772. The article states that Banks went ashore on Staffa as *one* member of an expedition on a return voyage from Iceland; he was accompanied by Daniel Solander (the Swedish botanist who, along with Banks, was with Captain James Cook on his first voyage to the South Pacific aboard the *Endeavour* [1768-1771]) and Dr. James Lind (a Scottish physician who, in 1770, had been admitted as a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh and later became a fellow of the Royal Society). The article intimates that their

decision to journey to Staffa was prompted by hearing of the island's reputation as a natural wonder—a chronology that does not resonate with the usual account of Staffa's "discovery" by Banks:

In visiting the western islands of Scotland, they went ashore on the island of Staffa, which is reckoned one of the greatest natural curiosities in the world.
(637)

In the same vein, the description of the cave in *Scots Magazine* characterises the expedition party as foreign travellers in a region well known to locals:

There is a cave in this island, which the natives call the *cave of Fingal*; its length is 371 feet, its height about 115 feet, and its width 51 feet: the whole sides are solid rock, and the bottom is covered with water 12 feet deep. (637)

The much longer version of events written by Banks and published in Pennant's volume about his own travels in Scotland does not just add detail; it tells the story differently.

In July 1772, Pennant was prevented from landing on the "wondrous isle" by "rocky seas"; it was in his terms "a great consolation" that he was able to publish Banks's "most accurate account" (299). Importantly, given the dominant narrative of Staffa's discovery, Banks makes no explicit mention of Solander and Lind in his section of Pennant's book, although his tale does at least begin in the collective first person. Banks does however, introduce another character to the tale, who goes largely unmentioned in existing studies of Staffa. Soon after arriving on the island of Mull, they are introduced by a Scottish gentleman, Mr. Macleane, to "an *English* gentleman, *Mr Leach*, who no sooner saw us than he told us, that about nine leagues from us was an island where he believed no one even in the highlands had been and on which were pillars like those of the *Giant's-Causeway*" (299). There are two footnotes to this

passage of Banks's text, which are especially interesting. The first expresses Banks's gratitude to Mr. Leach:

I cannot but express the obligations I have to this gentleman for his very kind intentions of informing me of this matchless curiosity; for I am informed that he pursued me in a boat for two miles, to acquaint me with what he had observed: but unfortunately for me we out-sailed his liberal intention. (299)

The second glosses Mr. Leach's claim that not even highlanders had been ashore:

When I lay in the sound of *Iona*, two gentlemen from the isle of *Mull*, and whose settlements were there, seemed to know nothing of this place; at least they never mentioned it as anything wonderful. (299)

In short, Banks (based on the dubious authority of Mr. Leach) claims Staffa, visible on the horizon from nearby islands, for England and Englishmen. He almost concedes in the second footnote that it is absurd to write that Staffa was unknown to locals—and thus to Scotland—but this is quickly buried beneath his eagerness to tell a story of *English* discovery and adventure. The party immediately sets sail for Staffa, under the guidance of Mr. Macleane's son and Mr. Leach and anchors on the west side of the island ("where boats generally land"! [302]), but as it is too late to proceed to the cave, they strike camp "near the only house on the island" (the strongest piece of evidence that Staffa was no *terra nullius*) (see Mills 165). Throughout his account, Banks depicts himself less as an explorer breaking new frontier, than as a traveller reliant upon the direction and knowledge of his guide, the curious Mr. Leach. This is not, however, how the story was interpreted and used. The vision of Banks as an agent of empire who creates new territory for England when he "discovers" Staffa—or, at least, brings it out of the mist—is central to our understanding of the potency of Fingal's Cave as a cultural icon in the nineteenth century.

In October 1773 Samuel Johnson and James Boswell, travelling together around the western islands of Scotland, “saw the island of Staffa, at no very great distance, but could not land upon it, the surge was so high on its rocky coast” (Boswell 344). Nevertheless, as Shortland notes (6), Johnson did remark on the island that had been “so lately roused to renown by Mr. *Banks*,” and, further, followed Banks’s lead in claiming a greater appreciation of the island than the locals whom he “reproached with their ignorance, or insensibility of the wonders of *Staffa*” (Johnson 330). In her essay “Ocean meets Ossian,” Michael argues that the “tone for Staffa’s depiction” throughout the Romantic period was set by scientists in the late eighteenth century, and in particular by Banks. She writes that he “set a precedent for later accounts not only by offering precise measurements of the pillars and the cave, but also by commenting on the artfulness of their ‘design’” (2). Banks exclaims “Compared to this what are the cathedrals or the palaces built by men! mere models or playthings, imitations as diminutive as his works will always be when compared to those of nature” (301). Michael sees Banks’s account as an account concerning the origins of the architectural metaphors that prevail in literary representations of the cave. What she misses is that architecture (and the human body) have for centuries provided the vast majority of metaphors used in descriptions of caves. Fingal, with its gothic arch, cathedral ceiling, inner temple and “convenient Stairs” (Keats 134) is not unique in this regard.

Banks’s description of Fingal’s Cave draws also another key trope in the description of caves which was well established by the late eighteenth century: the space is so astonishing that it defied description. This, of course, made caves key sites for trafficking within ideas of the sublime:

The mind can hardly form an idea more magnificent than such a space,

supported on each side by ranges of columns; and roofed by the bottoms of those, which have been broke off in order to form it; between the angles of which a yellow stalagmitic matter has exuded, which serves to define the angles precisely; and at the same time vary the color with a great deal of elegance, and to render it still more agreeable, the whole is lighted from without; so that the farthest extremity is very plainly seen from without, and the air within being agitated by the flux and reflux of the tides, is perfectly dry and wholesome, free entirely from the damp vapours with which natural caverns in general abound. (Pennant 301-302)

Both Westphal and Tally present geocriticism as a field of study indebted to the key thinkers associated with the spatial turn in critical theory across the humanities and social sciences, which took place in the closing decades of the twentieth century. For Tally, Westphal's work demonstrates "how modernism and postmodernism have altered fundamentally the way in which thinkers understand space, no longer as a stable or inert category, but rather as a complex, heterogeneous phenomenon" (*Spatiality*). What the corpus of texts about Fingal's Cave shows—and we don't think that *this* space is remarkable in this regard—is that late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sightseers in the Hebrides were not as naïve about space as the pioneers of geocriticism suggest. To the contrary, the history of efforts to represent this extraordinary space reveals a stunning level of understanding that the notion of space as a "mere container" (Tally, *Geocritical Explorations* x) is a nonsense, and further, that a natural space such as Fingal's Cave is no less inert than the humans who look upon it or move through it. To walk or boat into the cave prompted poets, scientists, painters—and the Queen—to reflect (however fleetingly or unconsciously) on their place on the earth—both materially and spiritually. To visit the cave caused

them, that is, to question the binary which positioned British travellers as the *subjects* who gazed and acted upon the spatial *object*. As Noah Heringman observes, these reflections in the Romantic period were symptomatic of “changing attitudes towards the Earth’s material and towards materiality itself” (xiv). Further, the fiction of Banks’s “discovery” of Fingal suggests that the “matrix of cultural practices surrounding landscape aesthetics” (xiv)—such as tourism, amateur naturalism, the consumption of travel narratives and art—was inextricably linked to the activities and dreams of Empire which dominated Britain in the nineteenth century.

“... one of the most extraordinary places I ever beheld”: A Geocritical Analysis of Fingal’s Cave in the Nineteenth Century

One reason, perhaps the main reason, that Fingal’s Cave attracted so much attention in the closing decades of the eighteenth century and through the nineteenth, is that it rapidly became an emblem of *spatial otherness*, of spaces which exist beyond the boundaries of ordinary human experience. It thus became a site through which to explore what it means to be human on earth. The prevalence of *this* cave in Romantic aesthetic and scientific discourses is explained, in part, by the popularity of what Heringman calls “aesthetic geology.” His *Romantic Rocks, Aesthetic Geology* begins with a question that is relevant to understanding Staffa’s appeal to Romantic travellers: “Why are rocks and landforms so prevalent in the literature of this period?” (xiii). He goes on to write,

Romantic descriptions of the earth’s material differ from much recent environmental discourse by presenting the earth in its otherness, its nonhuman aspect. These metonymic figures register a growing recognition that the earth evolves according to a previously unsuspected logic. Rocks stand for the environment as a whole because, paradoxically, the recognition of their alien

physicality coincides with the early industrial drive for mineral resources. (1) Following publication of Banks's record within Pennant's *A Tour of Scotland, and Voyages to the Hebrides*, Fingal's Cave rapidly became a forum for discussions—admittedly often subtextual—about the human/nonhuman binary. Heringman argues that rocks became the “privileged aesthetic objects” of the period because of the challenge the emerging discipline of geology posed to the “place of consciousness in the physical environment” (xv). What is apparent in the published responses to Fingal's Cave from the first half of the nineteenth century is a collective confusion about the bearer of agency in relation to the wonders of the earth. This place, which to Romantic eyes, ears, and feet seemed the product of some inexplicable, clearly nonhuman, process of design, seemed somehow always already Romantic. Poets, in particular, depicted a fantastic landscape that belonged jointly to the literary past, through the genre of romance, and the geological past, “a time so remote that its vestiges can be read only as signs of obscure, titanic processes” (Heringman 4).

Following Banks's record of his excursion, Fingal's Cave became a place of pilgrimage for numerous Romantic and Victorian luminaries—poets, novelists, painters, and musicians—as well as Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, who were rowed under its arched roof on the royal barge on 19 August 1847. Amongst those who made the sometimes difficult journey to Staffa to see the famous cave were Sir Walter Scott, John Keats, William Daniell, Felix Mendelssohn, J.M.W. Turner, William Wordsworth, Jules Verne, and Alfred Lord Tennyson.

Sir Walter Scott, an early visitor, records his impression of the cave in a letter to Miss Joanna Baillie, dated “Ulva House, July 19, 1810”:

Yesterday we visited Staffa and Iona: The former is one of the most extraordinary places I ever beheld. It exceeded, in my mind, every description

I had heard of it; or rather the appearance of the cavern, composed entirely of basaltic pillars as high as the roof of a cathedral, and running deep into the rock, eternally swept by a deep and swelling sea, and paved, as it were, with ruddy marble, baffles all description. You can walk along the broken pillars, with some difficulty, and in some places with a little danger, as far as the farthest extremity. Boats also can come in below when the sea is placid,—which is seldom the case. (Lockhart 405)

Scott visited Fingal's Cave (along with various other Hebridean caverns) again in 1814 during his tour of Scotland's northern and western isles, an account of which is recorded in an intimate travel diary he wrote "partly for his own future reference but mainly so that his family and close friends could share the experiences he enjoyed during a voyage that took him to some of the most scenic and historically evocative outposts in the British Isles" (Dekker 156). As George G. Dekker notes, during this six-week tour Scott plays "the part of Romantic tourist to the hilt, searching out and moralizing upon spots of historic interest, penetrating the interiors of labyrinthine caverns, deciding whether a scene was 'sublime,' 'terrific,' or 'beautiful'" (156). Subsequent to his voyage Scott draws on his visit to the "sublime" cave on Staffa—which he judged one of "the three grandest caverns in Scotland" (qtd. in Dekker 163)—in the fourth canto of his narrative poem *The Lord of the Isles* (1815):

Then all unknown its columns rose,
Where dark and undisturbed repose
The cormorant had found,
And the shy seal had quiet home,
And welter'd in that wondrous dome,
Where, as to shame the temples deck'd

By skill of earthly architect,
Nature herself, it seem'd would raise
A Minster to her Maker's praise!
Not for a meaner use ascend
Her columns, or her arches bend;
Nor of a theme less solemn tells
That mighty surge that ebbs and swells,
And still, between each awful pause,
From the high vault an answer draws,
In varied tone prolong'd and high,
That mocks the organ's melody. (Scott 442)

Heringman sees something uniquely English in the idea that landscapes such as this are “romantic”: “The most romantic landscapes in England seem to be those few that stand in some way outside human control or between art and nature” (264). He singles out Staffa and the Giant's Causeway as prime examples of the degree to which this notion became “naturalized in landscapes across the United Kingdom” (265). Like Banks (and many others) Scott depicts Nature as the artist or architect of Fingal's Cave—of a form and sight more wondrous than any ever designed or built by human hands. There is a conceptual link here between the other stock idea Scott attaches to the cave—that it “exceeds” description. The astonishing thing about Fingal's Cave as Scott's poem pictures it (and a landscape must provoke astonishment to be “sublime”) is perhaps encapsulated in the line “Then all unknown its columns rose.” Such landscapes ultimately confound faith in the primacy of human agency, a sense that lasted well beyond the Romantics. Most notably, in 1882 Frederick Cope Whitehouse delivered speeches to scientific associations in Montreal and New York claiming that

humans made the cave. He repeated his argument in an article in an 1882 article in *Popular Science Monthly*.

Keats was similarly inspired by the “natural architecture” of the cave when he visited in 1818. As Andrew Motion explains, Keats was fortunate enough to strike good weather on his visit:

Even though tourists regularly sailed from the mainland to Staffa, admiring its basalt columns rising sheer out of the water, and peering into the echoey cathedral of Fingal’s Cave, the sea swell meant that they could only occasionally set foot on the island. (291)

Keats and his companion, Charles Brown, were in luck. After landing in a small cove they were able to walk “along the sides of the cave on the pillars which are left as if for convenient Stairs” (Keats 134), before delving further into the darker recesses of the cavern.

In a letter dated 26 July 1818, Keats provides “a full and precise description” of the cave “for the benefit of his brother Tom” (Colvin 292), in which “he abandoned his recent experiment with guidebook sobriety” (Motion 291). The letter draws on a standard semantic cluster for depicting subterranean landscapes, by which caves become analogues for built spaces on the surface, most often religious buildings or chambers:

One may compare the surface of the Island to a roof—this roof is supported by grand pillars of basalt standing together as thick as honey combs[.] The finest thing is Fingal’s Cave—it is entirely a hollowing out of Basalt Pillars.

Suppose now the Giants who rebelled against Jove had taken a whole Mass of black Columns and bound them together like bunches of matches—and then with immense Axes had made a cavern in the body of these columns—of

course the roof and floor must be composed of the broken ends of the Columns—such is Fingal's Cave, except that the Sea has done the work of excavations and is continually dashing there—so that we walk along the sides of the cave on the pillars which are left as if for convenient Stairs—the roof is arched somewhat gothic wise, and the length of some of the entire side pillars is 50 feet—About the island you might seat an army of Men each on a pillar—The length of the Cave is 120 feet and from its extremity the view into the sea through the large Arch at the entrance—the colour of the columns is a sort of black with a lurking gloom of purple ther[e]in—For solemnity and grandeur it far surpasses the finest Cathedrall. (Keats 133-34)

In the same letter he includes the verses commonly titled “At Fingal's Cave” which elaborate on the problem of non-human agency before concluding with a fantasy of a wild space purified of human interlopers:

This was architected thus
By the great Oceanus
Here his mighty waters play
Hollow Organs all the day
Here by turns his dolphins all
Finny palmer's great and small
Come to pay devotion due—
Each a mouth of pea[r]ls must strew
Many a Mortal of these days
Dares to pass our sacred ways
Dares to touch audaciously
This Cathedral of the Sea— (134)

And he proceeds on a more prosaic level to tell of the violation of the place by the tourists who now flock there:

So for ever will I leave
Such a taint and soon unweave
All the magic of the place—
'T is now free to stupid face
To cutters and to fashion boats
To cravats and to Petticoats.
The great Sea shall war it down,
For its fame shall not be blow(n)
At each farthing quadrille dance. (134-35)

Keats's poem—which he did not publish separately—suggests that to travel to Staffa in pursuit of a unique and solitary experience of wild “solemnity and grandeur” was, even by 1818, a wrongheaded pilgrimage. Ann C. Colley has pointed out a similar conflict in travellers' accounts of efforts to experience the sublime in mountain landscapes. Nineteenth-century travelers set out to visit mountains (and caves) with a very clear vision of themselves standing alone in wonderment (like Cortez in Keats's “On First Looking into Chapman's Homer”): “At a flash, the individual submits to the power of the scenery. Full of reverence, admiration, and respect, a person stands, in solitude and silence, reduced to insignificance before the sublimity of the scene” (Colley 14). However, the very fact that the key elements of the sublime experience were so well known meant that, as Colley shows, travellers were just as likely to realize the utter, even comic, conventionality of their tourist dreams as they were to feel a sense of true astonishment. She points out too that mountain tourist diaries are “punctuated with conventional phrases of verbal inadequacy” (36). The ubiquity of

such phrases in records of Staffa relates both to its significance in the discourse of the Romantic sublime and to a broader discourse about caves as *other* spaces. In the same letter Keats wrote that “it is impossible to describe” (134) the cave adequately in words: “I am puzzled how to give you an Idea of Staffa. It can only be represented by a first rate drawing” (133).

Those “first rate drawings” were executed during the visit of the English landscape and marine artist William Daniell, who made several aquatint engravings of Fingal’s Cave from original pencil drawings he made for the ambitious topographical publication *A Voyage Round Great Britain*, published in eight volumes between 1814 and 1825. These include exterior views such as “Entrance to Fingal’s Cave, Staffa” (Figure 1), as well as interior views, the most famous of which is “In Fingal’s Cave, Staffa” (Figure 2).

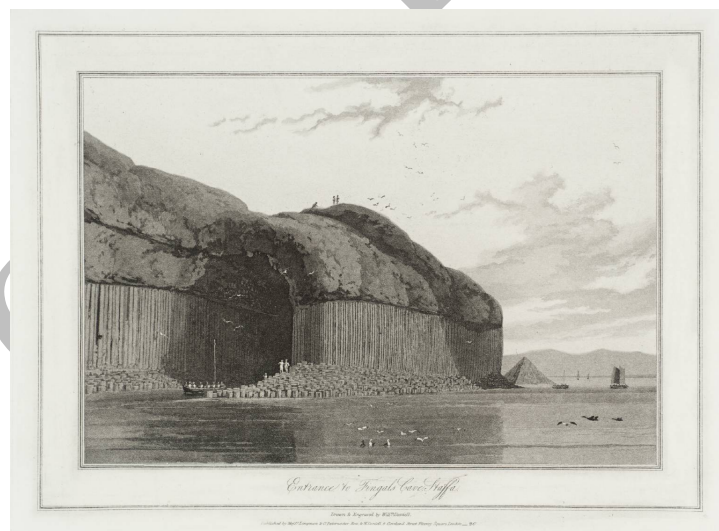


Figure 1: ‘Entrance to Fingal’s Cave, Staffa’



Figure 2: 'In Fingal's Cave, Staffa'

The “grand pillars of basalt standing together as thick as honey combs” (Keats 133) seem at first to be the key elements in Daniell’s “In Fingal’s Cave, Staffa.” The diminutive figures in the first drawing and the tiny boats that feature in both, appear to be the only human references in the pictures—dwarfed by the huge basalt pillars, which echo the religio-architectural language of the poetic descriptions. But the pillars in these images are highly stylized rather than realistic representations of the cave’s geomorphology; the column’s rough surfaces are too smooth and the uneven broken columns too splendidly regular. Daniell’s images translate “geo-space” into a human (English) register. This is especially clear in “Entrance to Fingal’s Cave” in which the cliff-tops and surface turf appear like a massive thatched roof, and the two human figures to the right of the cave entrance (impossibly large in terms of perspective) seem visually synonymous with the columns. These images—like those in Pennant’s volume, in which the island is crawling with armed men—highlight the fact that representations of “wild places” are never neutral, but shot through with prevailing ideas about the meaning and significance of such environments. Both images are also oddly static, despite the subtle suggestion of movement and sound in

the waves in “In Fingal’s Cave, Staffa.”

One of the best known pilgrimages to Fingal’s Cave is that made by Felix Mendelssohn, a visit which inspired him to compose one of his most recognised works, the overture, *The Hebrides, Opus 26*, also popularly known as the *Fingal’s Cave Overture*. After a three-year gestation period, it was first performed at London’s Covent Garden Theatre in 1832.

Mendelssohn travelled to the cave in August 1829 in the company of his diplomat friend Karl Klingemann, who records the visit in a letter home. As Shortland points out, Klingemann “was not only unimpressed but seems to have been mildly repelled” (8) by Fingal’s Cave:

A greener roar of waves surely never surged into a stranger cavern, whose many pillars make it look like the inside of an immense organ, black and resonant, utterly without purpose, completely isolated. (qtd. in Isham 57)

In contrast, Mendelssohn was positively awestruck: “In order to make you understand how extraordinarily the Hebrides affected me, I send you the following, which came into my head there,” he wrote to his sister, adding the musical notes which would form the opening bars of his overture (Isham 57). In Elizabeth Bray’s view, Mendelssohn’s overture is “the finest evocation of the cave”:

Those great surges of wave-like music haunt us still, recreating for us “that vast cathedral of the sea, with its dark lapping waters within, and the brightness of the gleaming waters without” (to quote Mendelssohn’s own description). (96)

Westphal insists that geocritics should be sensitive to the essential polysensuality of space. To use Paul Rodoway’s phrase, Mendelssohn’s overture is a reminder of the “sensuous geography” of Fingal. Any nineteenth-century individual walking into the

cave carried with them a heavy load of preconceptions, but these did not fully contain or explain the rush of visual, aural, and physical stimulæ delivered by the cave itself.

In 1830 J.M.W. Turner, one of the most respected British artists of the period, sketched the cave during a trip to Scotland following his commission by the publisher Cadell to illustrate an edition of Sir Walter Scott's *The Lord of the Isles*. He travelled to Staffa in stormy weather in 1830. Turner in his "Staffa Sketch Book," presenting many interior views of the cave, shows that he was amongst those passengers who were able to explore the cave, despite the inclement weather. One of his drawings was used to develop *Fingal's Cave, Staffa*, an illustration that appeared on the title page of the tenth volume of Scott's *Poetical Works* (1833-1834). His visit also produced one of his most famous works, the painting *Staffa, Fingal's Cave*, which was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1832. Shortland, in his essay "Darkness Visible: Underground Culture in the Age of Geology," argues persuasively that even though Turner sketched on site his images nevertheless present a "contrivance,"

with all the important elements of the image modeled, one might say, from nature and yet against nature. For one thing, the sea actually prevents access to the right side of the cave. For another, the columns are not curved but neatly perpendicular. And finally, the setting sun cannot be seen from within the cave, which faces south. (10)

As Shortland also points out, Turner's closer view of the cave was "prepared to fit Scott's verses" (10); it thus presents a direct example of the degree to which allusion or interdiscursivity can trump naturalism.

In the larger painting, Michael detects Turner's complex understanding of the interface between nature and human industry. Whereas the sketch of the interior emphasizes geological formations, the painting "scarcely shows the cave at all":

Rather, it mingles the sea-mist surrounding Staffa with the steam from Turner's own tour boat, thus commenting not only on the tourist trade that has flocked to the island but also on the technology that makes that trade, along with such works of art, possible. (9)

Michael's analysis of the painting emphasizes Turner's play on the dichotomy of nature and artifice. The "smoky steamy haze" (9) from the steamboat means that the cave is barely visible and thus, she argues, suggests that the human pilgrimage to the cave is as "important as the destination" (9). Michael sees this "rivalry" reflected in the visual parallel of the "vertical masts and stacks of the steamboat" (9) with the shape of the island. It is implicit also in the juxtaposition of the painting's straightforward descriptive title, *Staffa, Fingal's Cave*, and the image's vagueness: "As the steamboat departs from Staffa, the steam flowing behind it seems to merge with the geological formations, further blurring the lines between artifice and nature and between solid mass and vaporous space. ... As the steamboat is naturalized, the island is redefined as the product of artifice" (9). Another layer of meaning in this painting relates to Westphal's insistence that geocritical studies must assume the inseparability of spatiality and temporality. Michael sees in the steam—"generated from fire and water"—a subtle reminder of the "elements that formed Staffa in the first place" (9). The nineteenth-century passion for the island and cave is thus rendered ephemeral, in stark contrast to the millennial history of the geospace. Turner's painting emphatically does not see this space as a stable or inert container, but rather communicates the instability and dynamism of the space and the matrices through which it is perceived and understood.

Michael reads Turner's painting as an affirmation of the industrial age's supremacy over nature, but one could just as easily interpret it as a visual rendition of

the anxiety of human contamination or pollution that Keats expressed. When the painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy, Turner selected the following lines from Scott's *Lord of the Isles* to be displayed alongside it:

Nor of a theme less solemn tells
That mighty surge that ebbs and swells,
And still, between each awful pause,
From the high vault an answer draws (Scott 442)

Examined alongside these lines, the painting does not so much seem an invitation to future tourists as it seems a warning. Wordsworth, who visited the cave three years after Turner did, is more explicit about his disappointment at finding the cave overrun with steamboat passengers.

Like Keats, Wordsworth recorded his responses to Fingal's Cave in both letters and verse following his visit to Staffa in 1833, fifteen years after his fellow Romantic poet. Wordsworth relates his visit amidst a crowd of tourists in the oft-quoted opening lines of sonnet XXVIII, "Cave of Staffa," the first of four sonnets that he wrote following his visit to the cave (from "Poems Composed or Suggested During a Tour in the Summer of 1833"):

We saw, but surely, in the motley crowd,
Not One of us has felt the far-famed sight;
How *could* we feel it? each the other's blight,
Hurried and hurrying, volatile and loud. (371)

But Wordsworth's negative experience was not his final impression of Fingal's Cave. As his note to the poem explains: "at the risk of incurring the reasonable displeasure of the master of the steamboat, I returned to the cave, and explored it under circumstances more favourable to those imaginative impressions, which it is so

wonderfully fitted to make upon the mind” (725). His second visit is recorded specifically in sonnet XXIX, again entitled “Cave of Staffa,” and subtitled “After the Crowd had departed”:

Thanks for the lessons of this Spot—fit school
For the presumptuous thoughts that would assign
Mechanic laws to agency divine;
And, measuring heaven by earth, would overrule
Infinite power. (371)

In Westphal’s terms, all of the published nineteenth-century accounts of visits to Staffa are “exogenous” or produced by outsiders. While the 1882 report in *Scots Magazine* of Banks, Lind, and Solander visiting the island does refer to “natives”—presumably from surrounding islands—who use the cave of Fingal as a place name, there are as far as we know, no nineteenth-century local (or “endogenous”) accounts with which to contrast the literature and art we have discussed in this article. The record of visits to Fingal’s Cave is thus unusually homogenous; it is impossible to perform the kind of “multifocal” analysis Tally and Westphal promote. This homogeneity partly explains the extreme repetitiveness of accounts of visiting Staffa (see Dean 195). The record of Staffa suggests a concerted effort—both by the individuals we have discussed and collectively—to transform Fingal’s Cave into a metonym for the human condition, and quite particularly for the emotional and aesthetic experience of visiting a place where one does not belong. The fantasy of entering an undiscovered, uninhabited place undergirds almost every account of visiting Staffa.

In marked contrast to his literary forbears, Alfred Lord Tennyson, who visited the cave in 1853, was not moved by the cavern’s sublime architecture. Writing to

Emily Sellwood Tennyson from Oban on 4 August 1853 he observes, almost in passing, “The cave is not so grand as I expected” (68). But it continued to inspire others, most notably, perhaps, the French novelist Jules Verne, an Anglophile and Scotophile.

Verne, an inveterate traveller, openly acknowledged that his voyage to Staffa and his visit to Fingal’s Cave inspired his 1882 romance of the Scottish Highlands, *Le Rayon vert* (illustrated by Léon Benett), published in English the following year as *The Green Ray*. “I had a most pleasant tour of Scotland,” he responds in answer to a question from Gordon Jones during a 1904 interview published in the journal *Temple Bar*,

and among other excursions paid a visit to Fingal’s Cave in the Isle of Staffa. This vast cavern, with its mysterious shadows, dark, weed-covered chambers, and marvellous basaltic pillars, produced upon me a most striking impression, and was the origin of my book ... “The Green Ray.” (Jones 667)

Verne devotes a whole fourteen-page chapter of *The Green Ray* to his description of the “wondrous spectacle” (264) of the “spacious, lofty cave, filled with a dim, mysterious light” (263), which for the heroine Helena Campbell is nothing less than “an enchanted palace” (266). She imagines that the waves breaking in the cave are the “supernatural music that Waverley heard in his dreams” (266), while her companion, Oliver Sinclair imagines that “when Walter Scott was seeking his imagery in the poetical past of the highlands he thought of the palace of Fingal” (269). Verne’s detailed description of the cave juxtaposes geology and ecclesiastical architecture, linear measurements and the sublime, and draws its imagery from art, literature, and music in an attempt to capture the awe of the enormous basaltic cavern. And, key to the drama of the novel, the cavern is the setting for Oliver’s dramatic

rescue of Helena from the tempest that threatens to drown her, which finally brings the lovers together.

Several of Léon Benett's forty-four illustrations (engraved by F. Meaulle) feature Fingal's Cave. The exterior of the cave is the subject of the novel's frontispiece, while several internal illustrations depict other views of the cave, both internal and external. One illustration of the interior, showing the platforms from where the Victorian visitors could view their underground pleasures (Figure 3), is mirrored on late-nineteenth century postcards, which invariably depicted the steamer and longboat that carried tourists from the mainland to the cave (Figure 4). Kirsty Mills notes that as early as the 1820s, 300 tourists a week were arriving by paddle steamer and being put ashore in the ship's boats (172).



Figure 3: "Outside, the horizon appeared in all its splendour" (facing 266)



Figure 4: Fingal's Cave postcard, circa 1883

Wordsworth's dislike of the motley crowds of tourists is echoed in Verne's text, in which Helena's party remain unperceived in the nearby Boat Cave when they spot "the steamer laden with tourists from Oban cast anchor in sight of the island," fearing that their visit to the cave would be spoilt by the "noisy excursionists" (252).

The desire to describe the natural, wild places of the earth, which reaches its zenith in the nineteenth century, and can be seen here in the work of artistic luminaries from Scott to Turner to Mendelssohn, has, ironically, given rise to "the regular routine of the excursion, which consisted of a visit to the cave of Fingal and a walk on the slopes of the island" (Verne 252), that in turn has ruined the natural solitude that Wordsworth, and later Verne's central characters sought. As Helena observes as she first enters the cave and sees "an iron hand-rail, imbedded in the rock," "I think this hand-rail rather detracts from the romance of 'Fingal's palace'" (263).

Works Cited

- Boswell, James. *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides, with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* 1785. 3rd ed. London, 1786. Print.
- Bray, Elizabeth. *The Discovery of the Hebrides: Voyages to the Western Isles 1745-1883*. 1986. Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1996. Print.
- Colley, Ann C. *Victorians in the Mountains: Sinking the Sublime*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010. Print.
- Colvin, Sidney. *John Keats: His Life and Poetry, His Friends, Critics and After-Fame*. 1917. New York: Octagon, 1970. Print.
- Dean, Dennis R. *Romantic Landscapes: Geology and Its Cultural Influence in Britain, 1765-1835*. Ann Arbor: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 2007. Print.
- Dekker, George G. *The Fictions Of Romantic Tourism: Radcliffe, Scott, and Mary Shelley*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005. Print.
- Fletcher, Lisa. "... some distance to go": A critical survey of Island Studies." *New Literatures Review* 47-48 (2011): 17-34. Print.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. Ed. John Drakakis. London: Routledge, 2004. The New Critical Idiom. Print.
- Gordon, John E. "Rediscovering a Sense of Wonder: Geoheritage, Geotourism and Cultural Landscape Experiences." *Geoheritage* 4 (2011): 65-77. Print.
- Heringman, Noah. *Romantic Rocks, Aesthetic Geology*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004. Print.
- "Historical Affairs." *Scots Magazine* 34 (Nov. 1772): 622-38. Web.
- Isham, Howard. *Image of the Sea: Oceanic Consciousness in the Romantic Century*. New York: Peter Lang, 2004. Print.
- Johnson, Samuel. *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*. 1775. New ed. London, 1791.
- Jones, Gordon. "Jules Verne at Home." *Temple Bar* 129 (1904): 664-71. Print.
- Keats, John. *Selected Letters*. Ed. Robert Gittings. Rev. with new Intro. and Notes by Jon Mee. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. Oxford World's Classics. Print.
- Lockhart, J.G. *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott*. Vol. 1. Paris: A. and W. Galignani, 1837. Print.
- Massey, Doreen. *For Space*. London: Sage, 2005. Print.
- Michael, Jennifer Davis. "Ocean Meets Ossian: Staffa as Romantic Symbol." *Romanticism*

13.1 (2007): 1-14. Print.

Mills, Kirsty. "Fingals Cave, Staffa." *Proceedings of the Fourteenth International Symposium on Vulcanospeleology, August 2010*. Ed. Gregory J. Middleton. N.p.: Organising Group, Fourteenth International Symposium on Vulcanospeleology, 2010. 163-78. Web.

Motion, Andrew. *Keats*. London: Faber, 1997. Print.

Pennant, Thomas. *A Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides; 1772*. 1774. 2nd ed. Part 1. London: Benjamin White, 1776. Web.

Rodaway, Paul. *Sensuous Geographies: Body, Sense and Place*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Scott, Walter, Sir. *Poetical Works*. Ed. J. Logie Robertson. 1904. London: Oxford UP, 1971. Print.

Shortland, Michael. "Darkness Visible: Underground Culture in the Golden Age of Geology." *History of Science* 32 (1994): 1-61. Print.

Sommer, Marianne. "The Romantic Cave? The Scientific and Poetic Quests for Subterranean Spaces in Britain." *Earth Sciences History* 22.2 (2003): 172-208. Print.

Tally, Robert T., Jr., ed. *Geocritical Explorations*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. E-book.

---. *Spatiality*. London: Routledge, 2013. The New Critical Idiom. Kindle.

Tennyson, Alfred Lord. *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson*. Vol. 2, 1851-1870. Ed. Cecil Y. Lang and Edgar F. Shannon, Jr. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1987.

Verne, Jules. *The Green Ray*. Trans. Mary de Hauteville. London: Sampson, Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1883. Print.

Westphal, Bertrand. *Geocriticism*. Trans. Robert T. Tally Jr. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. E-book.

William Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*. Ed. Thomas Hutchinson and Ernest de Selincourt. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974. Print.