

LEGCIES OF AN IMPRESSIVE SPAN

Two men of the enlightenment, both born into poverty, showed how dedication and imagination could transform Scotland's fortunesand its view of itself.

The Duke of Sutherland's monument, standing high above Golspie, has been the subject of much debate. Some say it is a memorial to a national disgrace and should be pulled down, others that it should be left, its sheer size a grim reminder of the scale of the iniquity of a man who stands out, even in the sorry history of the Clearances, for the extent and savagery of the evictions carried out in his name. I have another suggestion, however, knock the Duke off his perch certainly, but replace him with Thomas Telford. Telford is as deserving of a monument in the Highlands as the Duke is unworthy of one.

The two men were contemporaries - Telford's dates were 1757-1834 and the Duke's 1758-1833 - and diametric opposites. In contrast to the rapacious Duke, Telford, an Enlightenment figure and the father of civil engineering, was one of the greatest benefactors of the Highlands and his motive, in exact opposition to the Duke's pursuit of private wealth, was to improve the public economy and thus the life of all the people. He set out to do this by improving communication. The lairds, he said, were only interested in sheep, not in people. He did not see as they did, but rather how improved communications would develop the human economy, reduce emigration and help preserve a viable population.

This is Telford's 250th anniversary and it is marked by an exhibition at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery (SNPG) where the scale of his contribution to the Highlands is made clear. He designed and built much of the road network we still use, more than 1,200 miles in total and, in creating it, he built more than a thousand bridges, most of which are still in everyday use. He built the Caledonian Canal, improved the Crinan Canal and designed or improved harbours around the Highland coastline (as he also did in the rest of Scotland too). He even improved the spiritual welfare of the region by designing and building 31 churches and 41 manses "in scattered and remote situations".

What is astonishing about Telford is that this achievement, which is alone on a scale to match the Romans, the greatest road builders in history, and which he carried out on a terrain that had defeated even them, was only a small part of his total output. Born in poverty near Langholm, Telford trained as a stonemason and graduated to building. Through the patronage of Sir William Pulteney he became county surveyor of Shropshire. The logic of this connection is concealed by Pulteney's name. A successful Scots lawyer, he was born William Johnstone in the same part of the world as Telford. Pulteney was the Shropshire name that went with the money he married. Through his position in Shropshire, Telford graduated from builder to engineer, designing canals and bridges and in the process greatly developing the use of cast iron. His proposal for a single-span cast-iron bridge over the Thames in London was never carried out, but is nevertheless one of the most spectacular images in this show. The Menai Suspension Bridge, linking Anglesey to mainland Wales, was built and still stands, however.

It is beautiful, but it also had the widest span in the world when it was built. It was part of the road Telford constructed, now the A5, connecting London to Holyhead, and so the crossing to Ireland. Telford's practical philosophy in road design was that it should be possible to maintain a speed of 8mph. Times have changed, but his roads still serve.

The Pontcysyllte Aqueduct on the Ellesmere Canal, also in Wales, is another beautiful construction. It carries the canal for 1,007ft (307m) in a cast-iron channel raised on tall stone arches 126ft (38m) above the river below.

The sheer beauty of this structure, as of so many of Telford's designs, such as the Dean Bridge in Edinburgh, for instance, would justify discussing his work in an art column, but it is also a reflection of Telford's position in the convergent thinking of the Enlightenment. His humanity, his empiricism, the clarity of his thought, the strength of his visualisation and his scientific engagement with the nature of the materials he used all come together in the elegance and economy of his designs.

In a tribute to Telford the SNP has commissioned photographer Michael Reisch to make a series of large-scale photographs of Highland landscapes. They are not of specific places, but are composite images that give some idea of what the terrain was like through which Telford built his Highland roads and in which he built his bridges. On one occasion Telford's friend, the poet Richard Southey, travelled through the Highlands with him. He aptly christened him the Colossus of Roads.

The Duke of Sutherland was no Colossus, even though his statue, 100 feet high on its pillar and set on top of a hill, really is colossal. Perhaps when it is finally taken down and a fittingly colossal statue of Telford replaces it, it should be used to repair one of his bridges.

If Telford was a great practical benefactor of the Highlands, William McTaggart was a great Highlander. He was born at Machrihanish on the Atlantic coast of Kintyre in 1834, the year after Telford's death and, unusually in the community of Scottish artists at the time, was a Gaelic speaker. Born poor, like Telford, his too was a story of talent overcoming disadvantage. Assisted by a local chemist, he travelled to study art in Edinburgh which became his home, though the sea and indeed the wide seascapes of the west coast were a frequent subject in his painting, especially later in his career. This is not any anniversary for him, but an exhibition at the Fleming-Wyfold collection in London marks the publication of a monograph on McTaggart written by Norwegian Per Kvaerne. The author explains the enthusiasm that led him to write the book as the result of having Scottish pictures around him in his childhood home in Norway, including several McTaggarts, and learning to love them. His father had bought them when serving as Norwegian Consul in Glasgow in the 1950s. He has written an excellent book and it does indeed mark an anniversary, for it is published exactly 100 years after the first monograph on the artist, which was written by James Caw, McTaggart's son-in-law and later Director of the National Galleries of Scotland. Sadly, the reproductions in the new book are not up to the standard of the text, nor indeed do they do justice to the scintillating, windswept brilliance of McTaggart's best work. Nevertheless, it is an important book, and a welcome addition to the still limited bibliography of Scottish art.

The show in London is there to remind us too just how good McTaggart was, and how original. Coincidentally, it opened just before the exhibition *Impressionists and the Sea* closed at the Royal Academy. The conjunction meant you could make the comparison and see how very different McTaggart was from any of his continental contemporaries.

He was not an Impressionist, but a great Romantic landscape painter in a line that runs from Turner and Constable to Jackson Pollock and at his best he yields to no-one in the vivid brilliance of his painting.