

Tracking Tourism: Visitors' Books and their Value

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The idea of a book for visitors to sign still lingers on in some private homes but is mostly now only to be found in churches, hotels and guest houses, and smaller tourist attractions. Its primary value is to get some feedback, and it is often now electronic. Yet it was once a standard protocol for all sorts of places to ask (or even require) visitors to sign themselves in; great houses, sporting lodges, industrial works, castles and gardens, battlefields, and even cemeteries. Some asked only for name and address, others invited comments, and as such they are a significant source of information to the historian of tourism as to how many visitors and from what distance an attraction drew. And what their experience was. Sadly their attrition rate has been high, thrown out or cut up, but this study quarries a wide range of what has survived in Scotland – from Abbotsford House to the climbing inn at Sligachan and the Glasgow Necropolis – to show their vivacity and value.

The idea of a book for visitors to sign still lingers on in some private homes: it used to be *de rigueur* in Morningside, but is mostly now only to be found in churches, hotels and guest houses, and smaller tourist attractions. Its primary value is to get some feedback, and it is often now electronic. Yet it was once a standard protocol for all sorts of places to ask (or even require) visitors to sign themselves in: great houses, industrial works, castles and gardens, battlefields and even cemeteries. Some asked only for name and address, others invited comments, and as such they are a significant source of information to the historian of tourism as to how many visitors and from what distance an attraction drew.¹ While the term 'visitors' book' is used of both kinds of register, the purpose of a book for visitors at a tourist attraction was to record visitors, that for a hotel to register those who were to stay. It follows therefore that not all signatures in a hotel register, depending on location, were those of tourists; they would include business travellers.

These books have their limitations, as will be discussed, and other than the odd volume their survival rate has been low: cut up for the signatures of the famous,² lost to the wartime paper drive, or simply thrown out. Thousands – perhaps tens of thousands – have gone, but where they have survived, either in private hands or in libraries and archives, they can be of significant use. They

¹ The use of visitors' books is raised in A. J. Durie, 'Sources for the Study of Tourism in 19th century Scotland', *Scottish Archives*, 2 (1996), 21–3.

² Paradoxically a significant signature can boost the value, and therefore the chances of survival for a register. Virginia Wolff's signature from 1892, when she was but ten, in a Cornish lighthouse's visitors' book more than doubled its price when sold recently.

offer, for example, a response to that most difficult of questions: how many visitors did a given locale attract? In a world before the turnstile, they are often all that we have as to numbers. They can also shed some light on the class of visitor, their motivation and how the visit came about: in a party or through an excursion, for example, and whether the flow was summer season only.

This article will review the forms and functions of the visitors' book. It will look at examples of the genre for Scotland from the earliest known survivors (New Lanark Mills in the late eighteenth century) through to hotel, big house, battlefield and other books from the nineteenth century. The study draws on material held in a variety of locations:³ from the Athole (later Atholl) Arms at Dunkeld (1834–45; 1866–85); from the fishing inn of Tibbie Shiels at St Mary's Loch near Selkirk (1866–9, 1868–73, 1898–1906, 1911–22); for the Borestone at Bannockburn (1895–1907); the Burns' Monument (1845–60) and Burns' Cottage at Ayr (1860–4); Abbotsford House (1833 onwards); and Doune Castle (1853–8) and refers to some others, such as those for Glenquoich, Heriot's School and the Glasgow Necropolis. The only long series are for Abbotsford and Tibbie Shiels; the rest are but odd volumes, survivors of what will have been a much longer run. The article gives examples of what has been done with the books in a systematic way, and how the findings feed into the study of tourism in Scotland. It underlines how the books need context, and what may inform that, and invites those who may come across such books to regard them as a valuable resource.

While the focus of this study is their value now, it is worth observing that the primary function of the visitors' book when created was administrative. They allowed owners and guides to keep track of who and how many were visiting an attraction and who was resident in an hotel. The hotel register acted as a starting point for a guest's stay, to record their arrival, and to make up the bill on departure. It is significant that inside the front cover of the first visitors' book for the newly opened Stronachlachar Hotel is the imprint of the Hotel Stamp; 'STRONACHLACHAR HOTEL LOCH KATRINE, D. FERGUSON [the proprietor] PAID.' They provided a follow-up address should mail or belongings need forwarding. They were a handy and accessible record for the management as to which visitors were on the premises. When an American hotel burnt to the ground, with several deaths, no-one could be sure who the dead were because the register had been destroyed.⁴ The hotel register played a wider role. They could be used to track the movements of people of interest to the police. During

³ The Abbotsford books are held at Abbotsford House, the Athole registers at the Hotel, the Bannockburn and Wallace Monument volumes in Central Regional Archives, the Burns' visitors' books at Ayr Public Library, those for Tibbie Shiels are privately held. The list of locations may have been overtaken by events; at the time of the research several of the private owners were considering their deposit in an archive.

⁴ Cf 'Burning of an American hotel', *The London Standard*, 11 January 1883. When a large hotel in Milwaukee burnt to the ground, there were some 30–60 dead, but as 'the hotel register is burned, it is impossible to furnish a complete list of casualties'.

the so-called Assassination Conspiracy of 1883 the police were able to track one suspect through the American Exchange in the Strand, which had some accommodation and kept a careful register of all Americans who called there, with their London addresses published in a newspaper weekly.⁵ Hotel registers were often cited in divorce proceedings, as to who had signed themselves in and with whom, and indeed actions for breach of promise or marriage. But visitors' books from other attractions also featured, notably in the Yelverton case. In August 1857 a Major Yelverton went through a form of marriage in Ireland with a Maria Longworth, whom he had first met in the Crimea where she was nursing. He subsequently threw her over in favour of a rich widow, whereupon she sued for declaration of marriage. They had gone on a tour through the Highlands during the whole of which she said they travelled together as man and wife. Produced in court by her as proof their married status was the entry in the visitors' book – 6 November 1857 – made by him at Doune Castle of 'Mr and Mrs Yelverton'. It has to be said that the signature is not very distinct. The keeper of the castle testified, however, that he thought they were man and wife and that she had not struck him as a 'flighty light person'.⁶ She was to lose on a technicality, but public opinion had little doubt as to whom should be believed: her and certainly not Major Yelverton whom most regarded as an Irish cad.

There was an administrative and a legal context. A particular role in Scotland lay in relation to the *bona fide* traveller. You could be sold alcohol by a hotel on a Sunday only if you were a genuine traveller from a distance, and having arrived, the hotel register had to be signed before getting any drinks. In August 1874⁷ one Charles Durie, a mason, was hauled up before the Police Court at Brechin, along with two companions, charged with obtaining drink at a local hotel on the previous Sunday and also (presumably to cover their tracks) with tearing the leaf out of the hotel register book on which they had written their names. The signatures in the register could also be used should a tourist skip without paying their bill as proof of fraud, which 'may generally be judged by whether the parties appear to be respectable and have given their names and addresses ... to the hotel keepers'.⁸

Hotel registers appear in humour of the period [cf. 'What is the retired list? Answer "a hotel register at night"'⁹] and in the literature of the period. One such story, serialised in *The Dundee Courier* during September and October

⁵ *Aberdeen Weekly Journal*, 13 June 1883.

⁶ NRS, CS 46/73/8: Court of Session papers. See D. Crow, *Theresa: the Story of the Yelverton Case* (London, 1966).

⁷ *Dundee Courier*, 27 August 1874.

⁸ Argyll and Bute Council Archives, Argyllshire Constabulary. Orders and Regulations for the Regulation of the Argyllshire Constabulary framed by James Fraser and approved by the Sheriff (Glasgow 1894), 31. General Order number 12. Tourist and Others Refusing to Pay Their Hotel Bills.

⁹ 'Wit and Humour', *The Lancaster Gazette*, 20 May 1882.

1873, by the American writer Horatio Alger, is of an orphan, turned loose in the streets of Glasgow to support himself as a shoeboy. His blackguard uncle (who holds the money that should be his) is finally tracked down in Manchester by the use of hotel registration details.¹⁰

When and where the visitor's register first made its appearance in Scotland is not known, but it was certainly established practice by the later eighteenth century. When Robert Heron visited Taymouth Castle in 1792, he was required to enter his name in an 'Album kept at the House for visitors'.¹¹ In the Duke of Atholl's written instructions to his guides at Blair Atholl, there is the clause that the principal guide must check that those visiting had put their names down 'either at the porter's lodge or at Crerar's inn, *where books for that purpose must be kept*' [my italics].¹² The books at tourist attractions might be signed on arrival or after the tour. A visitor in 1817 to the New Lanark Falls recorded, 'On our return through her Ladyship's policies we visited the Summerhouse where as was the custom for tourists we set down our names in a book'.¹³ Four years previously in June 1788 the intrepid English traveller, Elizabeth Diggle, had reported to her sister that:

We drank tea at Laurencekirk. The waiter came in with two large books which he said that Lord Gardenston ordered to be given to strangers. Upon opening them we found written for title 'the Album to be given to Strangers'. And so everybody amuses themselves with writing what they like – isn't it very droll?¹⁴

It is a reasonable inference that there was nothing exceptional about being asked to sign such a book. Quite why there were two books she does not explain, except perhaps that one may have been filled, and she was to peruse it for previous visitors' comments. Great houses kept separate books for their house guests and for their grounds; at Blair Castle there were household books from the 1830s onwards in which were kept the names of the family and of strangers who stayed there.¹⁵ Distinctions were made: when Chauncey Townshend and his companion visited Dollar Castle they were shown round by an elderly woman who insisted that they must sign the visitors' book. But not that for the *hoi-polloi*:

¹⁰ E. H. Alger, 'The Shoeblack or a Fight for Fortune', *The Dundee Courier*, September–October 1873. I have not been able to confirm this was ever published in book form, and wonder if what he did was only to cannibalise one of his American stories and recast it in a British context?

¹¹ R. Heron, *Observations on a Journey Through the Western Counties of Scotland* (Perth, 1793), 241.

¹² Blair Atholl MSS bundle 721, *Set of regulations, (1814)*. I owe this reference to Dr Anne Cameron.

¹³ Glasgow City Archives, TD 6371: MS, Anon, *First tour to the Highlands*, 1817.

¹⁴ Glasgow University Library, Gen MS 738: Elizabeth Diggle, *Journal of a Tour from London to the Highlands of Scotland in 1788*.

¹⁵ Information from the Archivist at Blair, Mrs Jane Anderson, 16 May 1995.

Ye must na' gang before ye ha written yere names in the Buik, the gentlefolk's buik.
I keep twa; ane for the gentles and ane for the rabblement.¹⁶

That books existed in all places where visitors called, and that people were aware of their value, can be further confirmed by allusions such as that of the Reverend Paul Fraser. Writing about Inveraray for the *Old Statistical Account*, he stated that the pleasure grounds which had drawn as many as one hundred visitors a week in 1790, were two years later receiving double that number.¹⁷

The earliest surviving visitors' books in Scotland seem to be those for New Lanark Mills, the first of which covers 1795–9, and the second 1821–32.¹⁸ New Lanark was a convenient staging point for those wishing to break their journey between Carlisle and Glasgow, and there were the two separate attractions there: the Falls of the Clyde and David Dale's textile mills and school. The first of these books for visitors is a simple record as it is merely a notebook which has been ruled into three unheaded columns, the first for the month, the second for the day, and the third for the signature. By the 1820s, the format had changed in that the book now had preprinted headings in bold: 'DATE, NAME, RESIDENCE'. The Glasgow Necropolis Visiting Book¹⁹ for 1835 had an interesting variant on the core questions asked: date, names, residence and country, and then 'by whom introduced', e.g. in June 1840 a party was brought by Hugh Smith, who described himself as 'proprietor'. This kind of 'signing in' by members for visitors who were their guests, a screening process, was to be adopted by sporting and gentlemen's clubs, and continues yet. Some visitors' books are no more than lists of names and dates, as is true of that kept at Bannockburn. But the standard form was that of date, name and residence, as shown in the later New Lanark books. Maria Edgeworth, en route to see Walter Scott, signed the book on 28 May 1823 adding 'with two sisters', and giving her address as St Albans, Herts.²⁰ What is remarkable is that she signs as the signatures of women are very rare indeed. There was no column in the New Lanark visitors' book for comments, as became standard though not universal later, but some signatees did add a line or two, e.g. 'returning from a tour to the Highlands.' A few gave their full title or occupation: minister, physician,

¹⁶ C. Townshend, *Descriptive Tour in Scotland* (London, 1846), 36.

¹⁷ Rev. P. Fraser, 'Parish of Inveraray', in (ed.) J. Sinclair, *The Statistical Account of Scotland*, V (Edinburgh, 1793), 290.

¹⁸ These are held in Glasgow University Library, Special Collections UGD 42/7/1/1.

¹⁹ Glasgow City Archives, TD 192: bundle of loose papers relating to the Glasgow Cemetery Company, 1834–44. These are unfortunately in very poor condition, but good use has been made of them by R. Scott, *Death by Design. The True Story of the Glasgow Necropolis* (Edinburgh, 2005), 17–25.

²⁰ According to M. Butler, *Maria Edgeworth. A literary biography* (Oxford, 1972), 418, these were her half sisters, Harriet and Sophy. They were on their way to Edinburgh and the Highlands before visiting Abbotsford in August. Why she signed her address as 'St Albans' is not clear.

Writer to the Signet, surgeon to the North British Staff, land surveyor, portrait painter, etc.

What the data in the New Lanark register allows, similar to those books with more than just a simple list of names, is an assessment of how many visitors there were, when they came and from where, and to a lesser extent, some sense of which groups in society were represented. Each of these is an issue of significance to our understanding of tourism. Of course, the movement of individuals matters, and it is pleasing when these can be tied to accounts of the visit experience. The eye does light up when coming across Charles Dickens at Abbotsford or Garibaldi at Doune Castle or Tennyson at Alloway or Hans Christian Andersen at Heriot's School.²¹ Or a lady describing herself as 'Poet Laureate to the Howards', but best known for her complex and high profile divorce, Caroline S. Norton, at Glenquoich, the Ellice family's shooting lodge in Inverness-shire.²² There is some reason, however, to be sceptical when one comes across in the register at the Birnam Institute – both written in the same hand – the signatures of Rudyard Kipling and Robert Louis Stevenson on 11 October 1894 when the dying Stevenson was in Samoa at work on what was to be his last, and unfinished, work, *Weir of Hermiston*; people could and did abuse the register.²³

But for the historian of tourism it is the numbers that matter. We have little hard information about who went where, or for how long, a deficiency long regretted. Thomas Boyd, the editor of *The Oban Visitors Register*, expressed the view in 1891: 'It is a pity some sort of visitor's census was not taken annually so as to enable one to form an opinion exactly how matters stand'.²⁴ But it is possible to get some sense from the visitors' books of absolute numbers, and of relative appeal. It has, however, first to be asked how complete the entries are. Did everyone sign in? At a great house the housekeeper stood over visitors, collected entrance money or a gratuity, and guides at scenic sites were keen to catch visitors. But whatever the process, the books were not necessarily perfectly kept everywhere. An instruction dated 25 August 1844 in the visitors' book at the Athole Arms hotel at Dunkeld, a book entitled 'A record of the arrivals of the nobility and Gentry at the Duke of Atholl's Arms Inn and Hotel',²⁵ states

²¹ The signature is at Heriot's Hospital for 17 August 1847. According to M. McCrae, *Simpson. The turbulent life of a medical pioneer* (Edinburgh, 2010), 111, later that day Andersen was a guest at a dinner party given by James Young Simpson where drug sniffing – ether – was practised, which Andersen thought 'distasteful'.

²² National Library of Scotland, dep. 356, Glenquoich Visitors' Book, 28 September 1848. She adds a stanza of praise to her host: 'When father Ellice from the town retired/he brought the comforts that the town admired/In this far distant, solemn, stony nook/he evidently claimed a good French cook.'

²³ Birnam Institute Visitors' Book, kept at the Beatrix Potter Centre; there are quite genuine signatures of Lady Millais and Christabel Pankhurst.

²⁴ *The Oban Visitors Register*, 19 August 1891.

²⁵ The book covers 16 May 1834 to September 1845. A second surviving volume covers the

disapprovingly that 'this book very much neglected; to be left in the parlours for the visitors' names.' Not every individual signed in, or was signed in. Parents would sign for their children ('and family'), and tour organisers for their party. Sometimes the party number is specified, as with Thomas Cook at Abbotsford in July 1873 with a party of 137 American teachers, or a forty-strong party of Good Templars at Darnaway Castle on 21 June 1887,²⁶ but at others times it is not. How many make up a 'large party', as was brought to Doune by Lady Goderich on 18 September 1855? Or a choir on an outing?²⁷ So some degree of guesswork is required.²⁸ By addition and assumption, one can establish that Doune Castle had 1,000 or so visitors a year between 1854 and 1857, the Burns' Monument 1,600–1,800, and Abbotsford House in 1858 as many as 5,000. In the late nineteenth century, the Borestone at Bannockburn drew far fewer visitors, only 3,000–4,000 annually in the later 1890s as opposed to over 35,000 for the Wallace Monument (where admittedly there was far more to see).

It is a great pity that none of the hydro-hotel registers have survived, even where the businesses have continued as at Crieff and Peebles. We know that registers were kept, and kept rigorously. And visitors examined them: 'we paused to sign the visitors' book, noting the names of those in front of us,' wrote one visitor to Dunblane Hydro in 1882, adding that the visitors' book showed that about 10,000 visitors had been in the house since it was opened four years previously.²⁹ Had a run survived, it would have been possible, if laborious, to see whether the same names recurred year after year. The repeat or return custom is much valued in any business, but especially in tourism. Did this clientele return year after year, as seems to have been the case with the Scottish seaside? Deeside Hydro reported in 1887 that half to three quarters of its visitors returned each year.³⁰

When in the course of the year visitors signed in is also significant. The main influx to the tourist destinations was from May through September, as was the trade for hotels such as the Atholl Arms on the tourist trail. Doune Castle, Abbotsford, and the Wallace Monument had very few visitors from November until late April. It is possible also to draw findings from the addresses listed as to where the visitors came from, whether the catchment area was local,

years 1866–85.

²⁶ Darnaway Castle Visitors' Book, 1873–1930 (property of the Earl of Moray).

²⁷ The book at Tibbie Shiels (15 July 1876) does contain the details of St Andrews Choir from Hawick, with not just names but voice: treble, tenor, bass, alto and conductor.

²⁸ The question of how best to assign numerical values is discussed in detail in A. J. Durie, 'Tourism in Victorian Scotland: the case of Abbotsford', *Scottish Economic and Social History*, 12 (1992), esp. 45.

²⁹ J. Scrymgeour, *A Few Days at the Hydropathic Establishment* (Dunblane, 1882), 3.

³⁰ *Healthy Life*, July 1887, 89. See also, of Hastings Hydro: 'on looking over the visitors' signature book we find many have repeated their visits which is a good proof that both the visitors and the patients have been treated well' (*Healthy Life*, July 1889, 59).

regional, national or international. Those to the Burns' Monument tended to be overwhelmingly (80–90 per cent) from Scotland; whereas at Abbotsford English, European and American visitors were a much more significant proportion (35–40 per cent), which reflects the relative pull of Burns and of Scott. The numbers of American tourists are worth particular attention; then, as now, they stayed longer and spent more. Even in the 1790s there was the occasional American visitor at New Lanark: Christopher Fuller from Charleston on 17 June 1797. Real expansion, however, rested on *inter alia*, better transatlantic transport, especially after the American Civil War. Numbers at Abbotsford rose from a hundred or so each year in the first half of the nineteenth century to several thousand by the later nineteenth century. They tended to sign by state or town rather than 'USA', but when Elihu Burritt visited Abbotsford on 9 September 1863 during the Civil War, he noticed what he called new and bad initials, USA and CSA, as it were 'chasing each other up and down the pages of the visitors' register'.³¹ What will have caught his eye is the signature of one B. B. Bildeburg, Texas, CSA, two weeks previous to him, but there were others, a Captain Oliphant and party from New Orleans on 4 July and another, G. B. Tennant, who spelt out his loyalty in full, 'the Confederate States'. The same is noticeable in the Ayr Burns' Monument register for 6 September 1861: 'Allan C Crawford of Missouri, CSA'. The visitors' book for St Rollux [sic] Works in Glasgow records a number of Japanese visitors whose interest was industrial rather than cultural.³² What is also significant is to trace the arrival of tour groups: Thomas Cook himself at Abbotsford, 29 June 1859, there with wife and daughter and a party of 80 visitors, and back again with another group both on 9 August and 5 September. The signature of his trusted senior guide, W. E. Franklin of Newcastle, is to be found several times between 1876 and 1880 in the book at Dunkeld with Cook's parties. The student reading party is another group to watch out for and, from the later nineteenth century, American college study tours.

From the books it is possible to see fluctuations from year to year, and over the longer term. Falling numbers were explained by the tenant who rented the Wallace Monument in 1906: 'the numbers are not coming to Stirling ... and all the specially conducted trips brought by Cook, Lindsay Mackay, the London Polytechnic are leaving out a visit to the Monument.'³³ There is visible in the registers the impact of the First World War which reduced tourism in general and torpedoed visiting from overseas: Stronachlachar Hotel at the west end of Loch Katrine experienced a total collapse in its business, from over 1,000 visitors in 1913 to just 165 in 1916. Not surprisingly the hotel closed in 1917.³⁴

³¹ E. Burritt, *A Walk from London to John O' Groats* (London, 1864), 348.

³² Glasgow University, Centre for Business History Library: St Rollux [sic] Visitors' Book, 1874–1958. Unfortunately this book appears recently to have gone astray.

³³ Central Regional Archives SB10 1/1; Custodiers' Committee Minutes: 12 February 1906.

³⁴ Glasgow City Archives, TSD 202048: Hotel Visitors' Book, 2 July 1911–10 October

But sometimes reasons for decline may not be so readily apparent. It could be a change in the owner's attitude. Numbers at Darnaway Castle plummeted after 1902 to a mere handful when a new heir who was a keen shot preferred to have his house filled only by his friends and his policies kept private.³⁵ Only special visitors were allowed. Loose in the visitors' book is a letter to the housekeeper dated 1 October 1901: 'please let the bearer see Randolph's Hall', the castle's medieval hall.

The visitors' books offer some reasons as to why people were visiting a tourist site or staying at a hotel. The *Inverness Courier* carried in August and September 1843 lists of arrivals at the main hotels, the Union and Caledonian, which one imagines, must have been drawn from their registers. Some guests were on the way to shooting quarters, or on a pleasure tour, or fishing expedition, a botanical tour and others en route to Strathpeffer for the waters. Some destinations are named: Skye, Inveraray or the Western Isles. Captain Clinkscales RN and his Lady were on a marriage tour and the honeymoon features quite frequently: Archibald Butler and lady 'on their marriage' signed in at the Athole on 24 September 1835. Mr and Mrs Roxburgh of Dundee, on 'an honeymoon expedition' were at Dunkeld on 7 June 1836. 'Married this day', announced Robert Parker of Troon in the visitors' book for the Burns' Monument on 4 June 1858. Whereas visitors called at attractions only during the day and then moved on, hotel guests would be staying overnight, and it would be useful to know how long their stay was. But as a general rule hotel registers were only for checking in, not alas length of stay. There are occasional remarks: the Athole visitors' book notes that a Mr Highet stayed 42 nights in the autumn of 1834 and Edward Lander (22 September 1869) there declared his intention to stay for 13 days before being in Inverness at the Caledonian Hotel 'on Sunday next'.

Tourists have always been inclined to leave their mark on the places that they visit, their initials cut into the rock or pencilled on the walls of the shelters that landlords had erected. There was a fashion for engraving lines of poetry on the windows of inns, of which Burns' savage lines from 1787 at Inveraray Inn are the most memorable: 'there's nothing here but Highland pride and Highland scab and hunger'. A visitor to Tarbet in 1817 found a poem, written on a pane of glass from 5 October 1771, the friendly rhyming of a self-styled tavern muse, one Thomas Russell, directed to those who had a notion to climb Ben Lomond.³⁶ The visitors' book was a natural focus for the poetic, or doggerel impulse. They do generate some light on what the visitor experience had been of the local scenery or the service, comments which were not always complimentary. Mr Elgar from Middlesex in September 1867 offered only praise about the Athole Arms: 'a most hospitable landlady and attentive waiter'. But Miss Barbara Tulish of Daisy Bank, Maryfield, Dundee,

1925.

³⁵ Personal communication from the Earl of Moray, 22 July 1992.

³⁶ Glasgow City Archives, TD 6371: Tour to the Highlands in 1817.

was scathing in 18 May 1883: ‘This hotel is filthy’. The registers at Abbotsford contain complaints of being kept waiting for admission. The visitors’ book (1846–63) at Glenquoich³⁷ (which remarkably is titled in French as the ‘*Livre Des Voyageurs*’) had a column entitled ‘Complaints’. This section, in what was more in the way of a house journal than a register, was mostly used by the guests to exchange cheerful comments on each other. But there were occasional grievances aired, the most common of which was about the dilatory and irregular arrival of letters and papers: ‘the state of the post here is frightful’, wrote one visitor in August 1846. There is a delightful sketch from the following year entitled ‘A Highland “Will o’ the wisp”, or the Glenquoich post coming in’, a tartan-clad cherub distributing letters to a throng of ladies with hands outstretched.

Where there are comments, they add colour. As a generalisation, cyclists are the most verbose, though sportsmen come a close second: climbers and especially fishermen, as the books at Tibbie Shiels attest. Significantly some of the visitors’ books at this country inn added additional columns beyond the standard date, name and address; room was allowed for comments on the weather and ‘angling and miscellaneous remarks’. This drew the following comment (18 June 1867):

after a careful analysis [*sic*] of the attendant circumstances under which the signatures of the distinguished and patriotic cusses inscribed in this truly interesting volume were made, the writer has come to the extraordinary conclusion that nowhere in Scotland can be found such remarkable changeableness.

Mountaineers and climbers saw their chance in the visitors’ book at the Ben Nevis Observatory hotel, although all too often the level of wit was low: ‘missed the view and viewed the mist’. Some of the comments have the ring of reality: ‘words fail me to express my delight at seeing the word HOTEL and more especially the fact of being able to get a few cups of tea prepared hastily by two of God’s creatures’ (23 June 1907, visitor from Nottingham). Others wanted something stronger: ‘why is this a temperance hotel?’³⁸ The Sligachan Hotel on Skye, a noted centre for climbing and walking in the Cuillins, in the 1890s as part of its upgrading from an inn started to keep a book ‘for climbing remarks only’³⁹ which has survived, although its companion hotel registers of the period

³⁷ This book contains some photographs of the guests, the first of which appears in 1849, and it appears that these may have been taken during their stay. Mabel Thomas complained on 25 August 1863 of ‘having my hair powdered to have my photograph taken which powder I cannot get out.’ A page from this book is accessible at <http://www.nls.uk/family-history/pop-ups/glenquoich-book>.

³⁸ *Wm. T. Kilgour, Twenty Years on Ben Nevis, (Paisley, 1905)*, chapter XIII, ‘Extracts from the Visitors Books’, 105–8. According to L. Byrne, ‘The Archives of the West Highland Museum, Fort William’, *Scottish Archives*, 16 (2010), 97–8, the six volumes of the visitors’ books of the Observatory have been deposited there.

³⁹ National Library of Scotland, Acc. 11538/16. The first entry is dated 17 July 1893 and

have not. It contains a list of routes, illustrated with drawings and photographs. This was valued by visitors, and perusal recommended to all intending to climb in the area.⁴⁰ Badinage and exchanges relieved *ennui*, but there was sometimes an edge. The Doune Castle Visitor book⁴¹ records the visit on 15 February 1855 of James Campbell and wife of St Andrews, 'going away to Australia tomorrow morning' to which someone has added 'best thing they can do!!' ... and a third hand 'Pig!!' Sometimes the registers were home to downright rudeness. Beside the signatures of Mr and Mrs Tobine from County Cork, 21 September 1838 at Dunkeld, someone has added 'NB the ugliest woman I ever saw'. Or just honesty: 'I am half fou' scribbled JR from Craigie House colliery in the Burns' Monument book for 18 February 1858.

New forms of transport make their appearance and warrant entry in the register. The first cyclists, proud of their progress, are noted at Dunkeld in September 1870: 'on a bicycle tour from Oxford'. George Cayley Smith who checked in there on 20 May 1872 insisted on telling the company how long it had taken him to cycle from Perth via Glenalmond College, 4 hours 10 minutes. On the same page, two fellow cyclists (T.H. and I.M.C.) followed suit, with a wordy summary of their 106-mile outing which had taken in Killiecrankie and Tummel Bridge. Their boasting, 'nothing like it done before', provoked abusive marginalia: 'Who cares what T.H. and I.M.C. did, Fools are communicative'. From the later 1890s, motoring and motorists feature. A Daimler car arrived at John O'Groats Hotel on 2 October 1897 starting ambitiously for Land's End.⁴² A disgruntled motorist from Dalry summarised his misfortune in the register at Tibbie Shiels (19 June 1903) as 'motor car broke down on road, dragged it two miles. Carted home with a horse'. What is discernible is that cycling and motoring altered patterns of travel; they brought business to remote country inns, but it tended to only to pause and then pass through. These travellers too versified: 'Motoring on Sunday/is it a sin/rain is pouring outside/whisky pouring in/brandy beer or whisky/say which you chose./If it doesn't soon clear up,/We'll all be on the booze' (May 1905). Or on 23 April 1900, courtesy of the Tweed Lodge Cycling Club: 'The bounders on bikes/breaking the Sunday, O blame them not/they'll be sore on the Monday.' Sketches also feature, notably in the Tibbie Shiels registers, of the inn itself, the landlady, local scenery, visitors aplenty, or a steam engine, a farthing bicycle (19

explains that the proprietor has asked for notes of two climbs on 13 and 14 July 1893 'which may perhaps be of use to future climbers who are not familiar with the Coolins'. I am grateful to the referee who suggested this source, and who also pointed out the value of the Glenquoich book.

⁴⁰ See, for example, *Baddley's Thorough Guide to Scotland* (New Edition, Edinburgh, 1908), section on Mountaineering, lxiii: 'For full information as regards climbing the Coolins, see the "Climber's Book" of the Scottish Mountaineering Club which is kept at Sligachan.'

⁴¹ NRS, CS 96/2424.

⁴² F. Wray *The Visitors' Book* (London, 1937), 45.

May 1879) climbers and fishermen; a hawk and the heron. Some of these have some merit ...

When in the 1930s Fitzwater Wray was compiling his entertaining *The Visitors' Book*, he drew heavily on the books for the John O'Groats Hotel, and in his section for Scotland ('Scots Broth') he refers to registers which he had seen for himself at Tushielaw Inn in Ettrickdale, the Hopetoun Arms at Leadhills and the Struan Inn at Glengarry. He cites lines from an entry inserted by Andrew Carnegie in July 1892 in the remote inn of Rhiconich in Sutherland, but expressed concern that a recent fire might have destroyed the book. Whatever the cause, many, or most have been lost. We know of the register at Sligachan Hotel from an extract quoted in a general tourist handbook⁴³ about midges, but the book itself has gone. What would we give for the Album of visitors to Iona and Staffa, kept for several years at the Sound of Ulva Inn, which amongst other things contained a poem by James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd. Disgruntled by the cost of his boat for the sail round the headland of Mull, his disenchantment with both the locality and the locals is caught in his lines, 'her mountains are barren – her haven is dull/her sons may be brave, but they're cursedly greedy.' Frederick Spencer, a visitor in the summer of 1815 referred to the Album as a book that held innumerable poetical effusions, most of which, he judged, were very poor, including some by Scott. The Album was transferred to Ulva, and its present whereabouts are unknown since Lachlan Maclean of the Glasgow Ossianic Society had access to it in 1833.⁴⁴

Visitors' books are a resource to be prized. This study has set out to show what can be done with these registers, a genre in which there is growing interest. A large-scale project, analysing visitors' books for hotels in Ireland, is about to be launched under the direction of Professor Kevin James of the University of Guelph. In Ireland, as in Scotland, hotel registers are in particularly short supply thanks to fire, bankruptcy, changes in ownership and quite simply their lack of value to management once they ceased to be current. In Scotland we do have some, and in addition others for tourist locations. It may well be, however, that there are more to come to light, presently held in private hands, tucked in hotel attics, or buried in estate papers, particularly as their value to the historian is recognised.

Write, write, tourist and traveller
Fill up these pages, and in good order
Write, write, Briton and foreigner,
Why leave such margins? Come nearer the border!⁴⁵

⁴³ 'The following is extracted from the Visitors' Book at the Sligachan Hotel "Did aebdoy ken/Sic an awfu' glen,/Wi' its mosses and mides and ridges;/But ainst within/The Sligrachan Inn,/We forive them a' - a' but the midges'" (Baddeley, *Thorough Guide*, 271).

⁴⁴ See J. Hogg, *Highland Journeys*, ed. H. B. de Groot, vol. 25 of *The Collected Works of James Hogg* (Edinburgh, 2010), Appendix VII, 'Did Hogg Visit Staffa?', 250–3.

⁴⁵ Tibbie Shiels Visitors' Book, entry for 17 July 1876.