

## MYTH AND MAJESTY IN THE HEBRIDES



Fingal's Cave. PHOTO IAN PARSONS

Where the eastern edge of the North Atlantic Large Igneous Province touched the British Isles, two of the most famous geological localities on Earth were created. The Giant's Causeway, on the north coast of Antrim, Northern Ireland, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and Fingal's Cave, on the little island of Staffa, in the Inner Hebrides of Scotland, is world famous for its musical connections. Both are built of Tertiary basalt with stunningly regular columnar jointing. It is easy to see why the early Irish believed that some sentient being was responsible for the Causeway, because it slips under the waters between Ireland and Scotland as a series of what looks, for all the world, like mighty stepping-stones. Myth has it that the Causeway was built by an Irish giant, Finn MacCumhaill (Finn McCool – yes, really!), so that he could go to fight a Scottish giant, Benandonner, who lived on Staffa. We know better, but as an early piece of stratigraphic correlation it is not so far from the truth.

Fingal's Cave became famous because it inspired the German composer, Felix Mendelssohn, to write his marvellous 'Hebrides' overture, which captures so perfectly the bluster and endlessly changing light of the Western Isles. There will not be many readers who cannot remember the haunting and insistent little phrase which begins the work and holds it all together. Mendelssohn visited Staffa on 7<sup>th</sup> August 1829, travelling on a new-fangled paddle steamer from the port of Oban on a round tour of

the island of Mull, stopping at Iona (where St. Columba introduced Christianity to the Picts of northern Britain in 563 AD) and Staffa, a trip of about 180 km (112 miles). The weather was bad, and the steamer had to spend an unplanned night in Tobermory on Mull. The twenty-year-old Felix was seasick, but the great cave made an impression that led to one of the most evocative pieces of music ever written.



Stepping stones to Fingal's Cave at Staffa. PHOTO THOMAS CLARK

Three years later Fingal's Cave was painted by the famous English painter, Joseph Turner, who produced a wonderful fuzzy seascape with an early steamer (perhaps the one Mendelssohn travelled on?) laying a black plume of smoke towards its mouth. Turner tried to sell the picture in the United States, but it failed to sell for thirteen years. When eventually bought, unseen,

through a broker, the new owner was disappointed, finding the execution 'indistinct'. To which Turner replied, '...tell him that indistinctness is my forte'. It certainly was—you have to look very hard to see the columnar jointing!



Staffa shoreline. PHOTO THOMAS CLARK

Today there are regular small boat trips to Staffa during the summer months, weather permitting, from Fionnphort, on the western extremity of Mull, and from Iona. When I made the trip a few years ago, the skipper, who was a fisherman outside the tourist season, gave a flawless account of the geology, at both a regional and a local scale. Even for well-travelled readers of *Elements*, I can promise a magical day out, on a sea studded with islands and with the mass of the Mull volcano forming the eastern skyline. And, imagine, the western equivalent of these rocks is on Baffin Island! He was a big lad, was Finn MacCumhaill!

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