

14<sup>th</sup> May

### Memory verse

Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance: **behold, he taketh up the isles as a very little thing.** Isaiah 40:15

### Something to read

More British islands today!

On 14<sup>th</sup> May 1832 Felix Mendelssohn's Overture *The Hebrides* or *Fingal's Cave* received its first London performance.

The young German composer Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) loved London and London audiences loved his works. In 1829 he went on a walking tour of Scotland with a friend. He found the islands of the Inner Hebrides breath-takingly beautiful and inspiring: here is his sketch of **Ben More** on the **Isle of Mull**.



Mendelssohn was a child protege who had been born into a Jewish family but his parents left their Jewish faith and had little Felix and his sister baptised when he was seven. Mendelssohn may not have understood much about this at the time but later in life he was

certainly a true Christian. He had an interest in church history and even wrote a symphony, *The Reformation Symphony*, that includes Luther's "A Mighty Fortress is our God" played in sombre triumph on the trombones. One of Mendelssohn's greatest achievements in his own time was the revival of interest in the music of the Lutheran composer J S Bach (1685-1750) which he championed and conducted. His own oratorios *St Paul* and *Elijah* were very popular in England where the tradition of large scale performances of Handel's *Messiah* by amateur choral societies was beginning to get underway.



You can see from the illustration above that Mendelssohn was an accomplished artist and his sketches from his travels in Scotland still exist. He found the wonderful scenery of Scotland very inspiring. He and his friend took a boat trip to the Island of **Staffa** which is uninhabited, apart from the puffins, but the attraction to Mendelssohn and other tourists was Fingal's Cave (left). This is a huge sea cave of basalt columns accessible only by boat.

### Some geology to research

Find out more about the fascinating rock formation of Fingal's Cave and the associated formation, **The Giant's Causeway** which is in Northern Ireland).<sup>1</sup>

### Map Work

You can use the OS maps as we did yesterday<sup>2</sup> to find the islands and features I have highlighted in **green**. Find the distance between Staffa and St Kilda. To visit Staffa today one has first to travel to

1 Reliable information can be found here: <https://creation.com/a-giant-cause>.

2 Available at <https://www.bing.com/maps>

Mull and then to Iona. Boat trips from Iona depart for Staffa, weather permitting, and if the sea is not too rough, visitors are able to land and explore the island and the cave.

### Something to listen to

Find a recording of Mendelssohn's *Fingal's Cave Overture* to listen to.<sup>3</sup>

The Overture begins with a rocking theme (called the “first subject” in musical terminology) that makes us think of waves. Which instrument does Mendelssohn use to picture the crashing of the breaking waves? (At 34 seconds in, for example.)

There is a beautiful lyrical (song-like) tune, the “second subject” that begins at 1:47. Which section of the orchestra plays it first?

You will be able to follow these two themes throughout the piece if you familiarise yourself with them first.

### A literary mystery to ponder

Fingal, after whom the cave is named, was a semi-mythological character who appeared in some poems published in the 1760s by James Macpherson. Macpherson claimed they were translations of Gaelic poems he had collected in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and that they were the work of an ancient bard, Ossian. The poems were immensely popular but a storm of controversy arose over their authenticity. Had Macpherson just made them up? Samuel Johnson (lesson for April 15<sup>th</sup>) was convinced they were forgeries. Johnson had travelled in the Hebrides but considered the Gaelic language “barbaric”. You can read about it all in the Optional Resources file for today's lesson which is taken from H E Marshall's *History of English Literature*. I have also included her retelling of the Fingal story itself for you to read.

Dr John Macdonald (yesterday's lesson) was convinced that the tales were authentic. He was a native Gaelic speaker who was happier preaching in Gaelic than in English and he had made a study of the question He wrote:

In the whole course of my travels in the Highlands, I did not meet with an individual, so far as I recollect, who did not hear of the race of Fingal; and to whom the names of Fion, Ossian, and Oscar were not familiar, even though they could not repeat the poems and tales of these heroes.

Persons, in the different counties through which I travelled, who never had any intercourse with each other, repeated the same tales and poems with very little variation. That there existed such a race as the Fingalians, that their time was in remote antiquity, and that the poems of Ossian are genuine, are as firmly believed in the Highlands as the truth of any tradition whatever. Learned and unlearned, young and old agree in this. It is the general belief that the Fingalians were natives of Scotland, and resided chiefly there; but frequently visited Ireland on warlike expeditions. Having asked an old Highlander in Lochalsh, who had fought at Sheriffmuir, and who was in his hundred and twentieth year, whether he believed in the genuineness of Ossian's poems, “Do I believe the Bible?” was his indignant reply.

The question, then raised, and since so often discussed, whether the Ossianic poems are the productions of an ancient poet called Ossian, or of a modern poet called Macpherson, may now be regarded as settled.

Modern scholars think, as H E Marshall explains, that Macpherson *had* collected genuine Scottish ballads using scribes to take down the oral tradition but had made alterations of his own to the material he collected and adding much that was his own work – but you will have to judge for yourself!

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3 Such as the one here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdQyN7MYSN8>

### Something to draw

Staffa is famous for its puffins. Find a picture of one in a bird book and see if you can draw it.<sup>4</sup>

### Something to sing

Did you know that Mendelssohn wrote the hymn tune we now use for “Hark The Herald Angels Sing”? Below are the words for you to sing. They are by Wesley adapted by Whitfield. In case you think it strange to sing a “Christmas” hymn in May, here is a little story I once heard about a village chapel.

It was a Sunday in May. The visiting preacher gave out the number for the second hymn and as the congregation turned to the place in their hymn books they began to nudge one another and look round at the organist. An elder stepped up to the pulpit, “I think that's the wrong number,” he said quietly to the preacher, “that number's *Hark the Herald Angels* sing.”

“That's what I have chosen,” replied the preacher, “I shall be speaking about the incarnation. We should not think of that subject or praise God for sending his son to be born of a virgin only once a year!”

Hark! The herald angels sing,  
“Glory to the newborn King!  
Peace on earth and mercy mild,  
God and sinners reconciled.”  
Joyful, all ye nations rise,  
Join the triumph of the skies,  
With th'angelic host proclaim:  
“Christ is born in Bethlehem.”  
Hark! The herald angels sing,  
“Glory to the newborn King!”

Christ by highest heav'n adored,  
Christ the everlasting Lord!  
Late in time behold Him come,  
Offspring of a Virgin's womb.  
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,  
Hail the incarnate Deity,  
Pleased as man with man to dwell,  
Jesus, our Emmanuel.  
Hark! The herald angels sing,  
“Glory to the newborn King!”

Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace!  
Hail the Son of Righteousness!  
Light and life to all He brings,  
Ris'n with healing in His wings.  
Mild He lays His glory by,  
Born that man no more may die,  
Born to raise the sons of earth,  
Born to give them second birth.  
Hark! The herald angels sing,  
“Glory to the newborn King!”

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4 There is a tutorial that will help here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mv6vcZGvsOo>