

The Making of the Modern Scottish Highlands, 1939-1965: Withstanding the ‘Colossus of Advancing Materialism’

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This is a book about discourses – the conflicting ideological positions from which the idea of a region and culture in transition was formed and fragmented – not about how the Highlands were made ‘on the ground’. It is not a materialist account in the sense of being an empirical economic and social history. However, as its sub-title hints, it is nevertheless concerned with the confrontation between a perceived ‘ethnic culture’ and the impact of capitalism. In the 1970s, social scientists besotted with development theories applied the internal colonialism thesis to the Celtic Fringe: the Highlands could be regarded as a peripheral region, not just exploited but deliberately retarded in its growth by the metropolitan core. Through modernization, not only was the old order dismantled, but also history was revised so that its ‘traditional’ culture came to be seen as by definition backward and less-than-fully modern. From a policy perspective, it followed that ‘development’ was needed to ensure planned integration within the UK economy. Against this, historians such as James Hunter have argued that the view from within could be otherwise. Crofting, for instance, might be interpreted as a rational and increasingly contemporary response to straitened circumstances rather than the last stand of a doomed way of life. The recent experience of the Highlands and Islands certainly casts doubt upon the wisdom of the industrial and social strategies imposed by government after 1965, while crofting is thriving, but what of the ideological battlefield from which these divergent ways of seeing emerged?

In casting the period between the outbreak of the Second World War and the mid 1960s as the ‘pivotal moment’ (p. 11) in the transformation from what was seen as old and what was regarded as new, Burnett throws down a refreshing historiographical challenge, for although ‘no one could escape the loaded history

of the Highlands' (p. 269) and particularly the long shadow cast by the Clearances informing so much thinking, it is important to re-evaluate the works of Ian Grimble, John Prebble and others whose 'uncritical, emotive and popular history largely informed public discourse' (p. 31). We should understand both why the era after Culloden holds undue influence in historical interpretation and why a much briefer mid 20th-century spell represents the critical juncture.

By way of establishing a context, the first third of the book considers the period from 1745 to 1939, enumerating a set of motifs – victimhood, pauperization, fatalism, loss of place, people or deer – that underlay the later discussion of Highland affairs, alongside the idealization and exile associated with emigration but also the resistance built around claims to land and language. Although these fall under the chapter heading of 'economic and social perspectives', Burnett's aim is to establish the rhetorical force of particular themes using copious extracts of poetry and song. While many of the quotations here are vivid and illuminating, the story is a familiar one of 'gnawing nostalgia' coupled with revivalism. Read: Chapman, Womack, the Golds. In Iain Crichton Smith's words: 'He who loses his language loses his world'; hence the desire of J. S. Blackie to fuse Gael and Highlander wherein the 'maintenance of a race of genuine Highlanders in the Highlands' could be achieved by using Gaelic as 'one of the oldest and least mongrel types of the great Aryan family of speech' (p. 53). While a folkloric urgency to preserve was redolent of the Celtic twilight, the romanticism of Ossian and Balmorality was met by the ethnic chauvinism of William Sharp ('Fiona MacLeod') whose claim that 'in the maelstrom of the cities the old race perishes' (p. 83) was as much anti-modern as it was eugenic. The 'idea of Highland culture', then, was partly an invented tradition imposed from without and partly indigenous cultural defence. The attendant mythology is confusing to analyse; indeed, since Burnett himself talks about 'the Gaels' throughout it is sometimes difficult to establish just where the essentialism ends and constructionism begins in his own diagnosis. As he goes on to acknowledge, 'calls for reimagining what it means to be "a Gael"' (p. 282) remain problematic, not least because the valorization of such a figure renders the people themselves both marginally 'other' and politically impotent.

Because the cultural and linguistic *Gàidhealtachd* is distinguishable from the Highlands as a geographical region, those who tackled the 'Highland problem' after 1939 failed in achieving a harmonious solution blending 'the idea of a special "way of life" [that] was founded upon an interwoven and spiritual uniqueness of place' (p. 96) and the hard-headed materialism of most political assessments. The watchword of the era was planning, initiated by Labour's *Plan for Post-War Scotland* (1941) and culminating in the formation of the Highlands and Islands Development Board in 1965. Part two of the book establishes the different political approaches, then considers the activities of the agencies set up by government. While nationalism struck a discordant note within post-war Europe, and the Conservatives were deliberately lacklustre regarding state-directed initiatives, the Liberals were relatively imaginative – wanting to finance immigration, set up a Highlands university – but had no power. Meanwhile, collectivist strategies, from the idea that the people should take over all of Scotland north of the Highland line 'as a great State Farm and National Park' (p. 103) to afforestation, new roads and ferry terminals and the air ambulance service, caught the mood of reconstruction. A policy history, rich with quotation from government reports and white papers, almost inevitably becomes turgid, and parts of the discussion are heavy going. Nevertheless, vivid glimpses emerge amongst the campaigning literature, as when the Labour Party made proud boast of its work to develop hydro-electricity:

At Morar in Inverness-shire and at Lochalsh in Wester Ross the other day, a crofter's wife pulled a switch and the dim glows of the paraffin lamps were eclipsed by the flood of electric light (*West Stirling Gazette*, 1951, cited p. 141)

The emblematic bringing of power to the glens highlights features of the ongoing debate. A key means of job creation, resource provision and thus of staying the haemorrhage of depopulation, it was a precursor of Labour's 'white heat' of technological progress. Opposed by landowners and others, who argued in the romantic tradition of landscape appreciation that the scenic beauty of the region and its attendant tourism and field sports would be forever ruined, hydro schemes forged ahead under the expert pilotage of Tom Johnston. Johnston was Secretary of State for Scotland from 1941 to 1945, and in a pre-devolution era

Burnett rightly underlines the strategic significance of the role: with no later incumbent matching Johnston's calibre until Willie Ross took over in 1964 the result was drift and indecision. The Advisory Panel on the Highlands and Islands performed a thankless task as a sounding board, creating more reports, the *Scotsman* lamented, 'for the Secretary of State's private consumption' (p. 147). When Harold Macmillan took to the grouse moor, those locals not conscripted as loyal ghillies and beaters either got in the way of the prey, or most often remained invisible. Yet members of the Highland Panel persisted in their advocacy, and Burnett provides excellent coverage of the campaigning concerns of its two most illustrious members, the writers Neil Gunn and Naomi Mitchison. There is also much useful policy history excavated from the reports of the Crofters Commission, reflecting, not least, the continuing emotive questions of land-use and land-ownership during an era when putting large tracts under state control and focusing on agriculture alone failed to effect economically viable solutions or to empower crofters themselves.

In part three, the analysis shifts to contemplating 'the view from within', focusing first upon the output of intellectuals – principally Gunn and Mitchison (whom Burnett interviewed) – as 'Highlands representatives', and second 'the body of records generated by the Gaels themselves' (p. 184), namely *An Gaidheal*, the bilingual magazine of *An Comunn Gàidhealach*, the key pressure group promoting Gaelic language and culture as well as 'the furtherance of the cultural dimension of the "Highlands" as the *Gàidhealtachd*' (p. 219). As both socialists and supporters of Scottish nationalism, Gunn and Mitchison sought to preserve a noble civilization threatened by the 'blind forces of advertisement' (p. 190), where the wireless (latterly television) killed ceilidhing, and tourism turned crofters into waiters and chambermaids. Both also felt that the physical environment encouraged a particular outlook on life, and in this sense shared the holistic vision of Adam Collier and Frank Fraser Darling, whose research projects sought to place crofting within an ecological balance of natural, social and economic forces. But they were also prepared to advocate grand plans after the example of the Tennessee Valley Authority or the Norwegian government's attempts to stabilize its rural population. Stymied by the absence of entrepreneurial activity and the absence of a significant middle class most plans were doomed as sceptical Highlanders showed little will to become involved in local decision-making bodies that were perceived as agents to enforce orders made elsewhere.

Burnett suggests that, wishing to preserve Gaelic but unable to speak it, these writers may have created a misplaced optimism in the durability of the language that failed to perceive just how far outside material influences, including the BBC of which Mitchison had been critical, had succeeded in infiltrating and impoverishing the culture. By 1961, only 1.7 per cent of the Scottish population spoke Gaelic and a significant proportion lived in Glasgow anyway. Against Gunn's broadly inclusive encouragement of immigrants, *An Comunn Gàidhealach* married appeals for language regeneration and socio-economic development by demanding that jobs be reserved for Gaelic speakers. It was an idea destined to fail and one that reflected the group's restricted membership and purchase within the community, both Gaelic-speaking and otherwise. In the early 1950s the Scottish Education Department gave especially positive support to the founding of summer camps and other recreational ventures to support 'informal education' in the language. The subsequent failure of the initiative due to the indifference and hostility of locals, some of whom saw Gaelic as a handicap to their children's advancement, was doubtless highly embarrassing to cultural purists. For the historian, it demonstrates the dangers of reliance upon sources that convey less than representative opinions. The same chapter mentions two other sets of valuable but limited records: the detailed parish surveys included in the third Statistical Account of Scotland undertaken in the 1950s and 1960s, and the voluminous ethnological archive of the School of Scottish Studies, established in 1951 to 'collect the rich music and folklore of the Gaels and preserve this material for posterity through taped sessions' (p. 241). Burnett misses a couple of opportunities here. First, he uses evidence from the Statistical Account to illustrate the perceived contrast between the 'spiritually uplifting and morally sound life in a Highland parish' and 'demeaning mere survival in the degrading urban jungle of Scotland's cities', one that is being breached as, to quote one contributor, 'Gambling, especially on the football pools, is prevalent ... Sunday newspapers are delivered to certain homes. A considerable proportion of the younger ladies indulge in smoking' (p. 259). Such material is rich in social observation, but it is nonetheless a view from the manse. The survey's contributors were parish ministers and one can only expect to discern local culture as they saw it. Second, although he claims the work of the School of Scottish Studies helped in developing 'greater

understanding and engagement between Gaels and the wider community' (p. 240), its preservationist ethos just as surely contributed to a sense of difference and vanishing otherness. This said, its archive does contain invaluable oral material that might have been used to get at the voices sadly omitted from other sources. What of the intangible heritage of living tradition? (Or did the School, in its antiquarian quest, simply fail to capture present-minded cultural views?) The documentaries made by the Films of Scotland Committee from 1955 onwards would provide another fascinating source, in contrast promoting the modernising virtues of industrial schemes and tourism, although in narration and imagery they exude propaganda rather than social realism.

The author makes a strong case for what he terms a 'retreat to essentialism' (p. 257), as the language and culture of the perceived ethnic homeland became diluted. Its manifestations included not just the piety of ageing clerics and a suspicion of outsiders undertaking surveys, but also a perverse masquerade of superiority. One commentator notes: 'The less intelligent lower strata of society talk English with an accent more akin to Glasgow and the industrial belt than the soft Gaelic accent of the western seaboard' (p. 260). Another, discussing incomers to the pulp-milling town of Corpach, intemperately asserted that 'squalid clusters of prefabricated houses sprang up and to them came the scum of the industrial midlands of England and Scotland' (p. 260). These are comments neither more nor less offensive than those printed in the *Scots Magazine* in 1762 remarking that Highlanders 'are caught in the mountains when young ... As they are strangers to fear, they make very good soldiers when disciplined ... They discover an extraordinary submission to and affection for their officers' (p. 76). One externally perceived Highland problem had been military, solved by the taming of uncouth savages; another Highland problem was the internal experience of cultural attenuation as generations emigrated and the Gaelic language declined. Underlying both was an unfortunate ethnocentrism.

There were many Highland problems, and here the constructionist character of the argument provides both its strength and its limitation. In the final paragraph of his conclusion, Burnett indicates that he has sought to identify 'the growing dissonance between the idea of the Highlands as the "land of the Gael" and the realities of contemporary experience' (p. 282). The extent to which he has demonstrated this is difficult to assess. The book aims explicitly to articulate the different 'voices', and Burnett is very successful in mining his sources to provide a sense of competing rhetorical positions. Conflicting philosophies are carefully lined up behind the dramatis personae of public debate. Thus we hear what poets, politicians and policymakers think, but the unchannelled voice of the people scarcely emerges. It is one thing to consider endangered Gaelic-speaking natives, but what about the integration of non-Gaels and other Highlanders? There is much concerning white papers and the white heat of modernity, but what about 'white settlers'? Was all as in Corpach? Lived experience filters through from some of the opinions, observations and encounters we read of. The *Glasgow Herald* claimed, for example, that 'the reaction of the Outer Isles to the prospect of losing their isolation betrays neither regret nor resistance' (p. 162) and that 'paradoxically, the measures introduced to tackle the "Highland problem" actually contributed to out-migration' because they 'facilitated a desire to move to those places where the trappings of modernity were more widely available' (pp. 258-9), hence the further paradox of most Gaelic speakers living outside their home region. Yet the analysis might have been enriched by a smattering of quotations from oral recollection, and, indeed, visual material from various *comuinn eachdraidh*, the local history societies established in the Western Isles during the 1970s and now online. In fairness, this could descend into an infinite regress of confusing micro-histories, and is anyway more the stuff of latter-day revisionism. As Burnett notes, 'the discourse of race ... lingers on ... encouraged by the elevation of culture as an economic driver in local community development, or the way in which heritage and culture tourism are promoted' (pp. 281-2). Since 1965 much has changed, and oil (particularly in the Northern Isles), the European Union, BBC Alba and the rest have made more or less impact. Several communities have benefitted greatly from crofters' buy-outs, but in line with those theorists of the 1970s, the economic future still depends largely upon decisions made outside the area. And as comparisons with other regions where language and culture are fundamental to the maintenance of a sense of belonging would surely reveal, securing the culture always meant more than just securing the land.

Links

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