

REVIEW: BOOKS ABOUT THE HIGHLANDS

Catherine Maclean

James Hunter (1995). **On the Other Side of Sorrow: Nature and People in the Scottish Highlands**, Edinburgh: Mainstream, £17.50, hb, ISBN 1851587659, 219pp

E. Mairi MacArthur (1995). **Columba's Island: Iona from Past to Present**, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, £12.95, pb, ISBN 0748607374, 208pp

Such is our fascination with the Highlands and Islands, and their cultural significance for Scottish society and beyond, that there has always been and continues to be a massive volume of material published about the area. It is possible to discern some trends in recent publications: a concern with ownership and management of land and how this relates to those who actually live on it (Jedrej and Nuttall 1996, Cramb 1996, Wightman 1996), an increasing emphasis on the accounts of 'ordinary people' rather than the more traditional academic approach to history (MacArthur 1990, Jamieson and Toynbee 1992, Craig 1990), and, related to this, a move towards publications which are 'good reads' although not at the expense of good scholarship. Jim Hunter is one of the foremost in this school of writing. It was said of his last book that it 'will be able to feed back into the society it sprang from and take its place on the shelves of a thousand homes as well as in the libraries of academe' (Craig 1995).

Hunter himself notes in this, his most recent book, that 'the academic perspective on the Scottish Highlands is typically external' (p.27). Hunter and MacArthur are part of the new, readable, self-declaredly and passionately 'internal' school of writers. It is still sometimes possible to detect a certain amount of academic lip-curling when faced with the 'scholarly but readable' genre. This, however, is not an attitude I share: what, after all, is the point of

Catherine Maclean is a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at Edinburgh University, currently carrying out research in Sutherland.

a book that is not an interesting and enjoyable read? Difficult or challenging ideas do not necessarily need to be difficult to read about.

The two books under review here are not particularly about difficult ideas, although Hunter's does call for a fairly radical reassessment of the relationship between people and the environment in the Highlands and Islands. They are, however, interesting and informative: it says something for them both that during reading them I thought of several people who would appreciate one or both as presents.

MacArthur's book on Iona would certainly be an ideal present for someone about to make a trip to the island, and reading it myself made me more tempted to go there. This is a good introduction to the island and its history for all those like myself who are guilty of harbouring vague and prejudiced ideas of Iona as somewhere flat, green, tourist- and Christian-ridden. **Columba's Island** is organised into short chapters covering, as the title suggests, a variety of different aspects of island life from medieval religious history to the effect of regular summer visitors on the social and economic life of Iona in the 20th century.

Columba's Island draws upon MacArthur's PhD research and earlier book on Iona (1990), an arguably more cohesive account of island life from 1750-1914. As MacArthur herself states in her preface to **Columba's Island**, the intention of the second book is to take the social history of the islanders further forward, through the 20th century, and also to take a fresh look at 'that first and famous story of Iona, of monks and missionaries and ministers' (p.x). A perhaps unavoidable consequence of this is that at times you have the sense you are lurching through a hotchpotch of widely disparate material. It is quite easy to lose sight of the unifying theme, which is the overshadowed story of the local population, present on the island from before Columban times until today.

For me, one of the strengths of the book is the way important national issues are shown through the context of Iona's inhabitants and the impact of such issues on their lives. George MacLeod, the Iona Community leader, once claimed that 'what happens in Iona is not an island affair but a national one' (p.161). As MacArthur points out, for those who actually lived there, the emphasis was precisely the other way round. She later comments 'if you study any locality, however small, and try to write about it with clarity and integrity, then you are illustrating human experience and touching on human values that are universal' (p.195). I feel that her accounts of how the

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community on Iona coped under such circumstances as the 1840s Disruption and potato blight, Depression in the 1920s and '30s, and the Second World War, achieve this illustration of human experience.

The book also emphasises the significance of Iona's role in the history of Scotland, and beyond. An example of this is the discussion of the court set up on Iona in August 1609 by Knox, the Bishop of the Isles (pp.59-60). This gives an interesting background to the breakdown of links between chiefs and people which is commonly associated with the 1745 rebellion. Knox drew up a bond which was a key component in a strategy mapped out some years before by James VI, designed to plant 'civilitie' in the lawless and insubordinate corners of his kingdom through drawing chiefs into the landed society of Lowland Scotland by gradually altering their manners and attitudes. This involved, amongst other things, a reduction in military retinues, a restriction on firearms, a ban on harbouring fugitives, and a reinforcing of adherence to the religion and education of the state. When the chiefs renewed the bond in 1616 this last clause was strengthened: all their children over the age of 9 had to be sent to Lowland schools, and could not inherit property or tenant Crown lands if they could not speak and write English. This type of historical information is found throughout the book, making it more than a 'local' history of a small community.

The mixture of medieval history and 20th century biography does make for a slightly patchy style, although perhaps this impression is heightened by the contrast with the practised elegance of Hunter's prose. Although I was interested in the earlier chapters and more 'traditional' history, I felt that MacArthur's book seemed to come to life and pick up tempo when it moved more into the author's biographical/oral history research material. There is a large measure of family history, with personal examples from the MacArthurs of Clachanach, and some wonderful photographs. MacArthur prefaces the book by saying it

'is at times highly personal and anecdotal, and makes no claim always to be totally objective, as I am too close to the subject for that...Events at Clachanach, the croft where my father was born, make up one thread that runs intermittently through the story and this is simply because the family information I had access to was particularly full and varied, and what happened there was fairly typical of what happened on holdings across the island' (p.xi).

I felt she was right to acknowledge this without apology as these sections were among the best of the book.

Like MacArthur, Hunter has written an earlier book with a degree of overlap (**A Dance Called America**). The focus is entirely different, and so the overlap does not really grate, although by the time I had read the second book I did feel that I had heard far too often that Hugh MacLennan thought everyone who ever mattered in Kintail was dead and gone.

The main argument of Hunter's new book is that environmentalism had Highland roots, but has since developed in such a way that environmentalists were more influenced by external, romantic perceptions than by Highland realities. The result of this is a situation where the outlook of environmentalists seems alien and threatening to many of those who live and work in the Highlands. Hunter states his aim in this book as helping to reconcile the thinking of these two sets of people, who in his opinion have more in common than they might believe. His book takes an optimistic line: 'it contends that, in the Scottish Highlands anyway, people and nature can, after all, co-exist in ways which will benefit both. And it seeks to establish a basis for such co-existence in a heritage which belongs equally to Highlanders and environmentalists' (p.17).

One of my favourite aspects of this book is that, in his argument for valuing 'internal' and 'literary' interpretations of the Highland past, Hunter includes a broad range of Scottish poetry (Gaelic and English, medieval to contemporary) in a beautifully arranged synthesis. This work is a pleasure to read.

On the Other Side of Sorrow is wide-ranging, ambitious in its scope and broad in its knowledge. Iona is touched upon, described as 'one of Europe's leading intellectual centres - a source of literacy, of learning and of several innovative strands of thought' (p.49) in Columba's time and for some centuries afterwards. Also discussed are the remote origins of the enduring conviction that there is nothing morally wrong in poaching, in the early Gaelic law codes regulating management of land, woods and game. There is a sparkingly sarcastic critique of the writers of the Celtic Twilight (dismissed as 'more than slightly off their heads' (p.116)) and an interesting discussion of how romantic writing has contrasted with the often grim reality of Highland life, from Ossian in the 18th century to Scott's novels in the 19th. Ossian furnished 18th century Scotland with 'a wonderfully unthreatening national identity' (p.95) and as such was far more suitable than Robert Bruce

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or William Wallace. Scott, who knew and understood the Highlands and Highland history well, was also aware that the Ossianic phenomenon had shown that 'the public liked its Highlanders kept safely in the past' (p.98). More modern environmentalist authors, such as Tomkies, have written of the Highlands as if its natural state is an unpeopled wilderness.

Hunter successfully hammers home the unsettling assertion that very little in the Highlands is as nature intended, and that even such an attractive location has not escaped 'the frequently pernicious consequences of our own collective conduct' (p.149). The typically treeless Highland glen may be charming but it is also evidence, as Frank Fraser Darling pointed out half a century ago, of a devastated countryside. Although still beautiful, the area is in need of repair and regeneration, a process which has begun, and which, to put it simply, consists of bringing back more (native) trees and more people, and cutting down the numbers of sheep and deer. Hunter believes that policy at present suffers from fragmentation - Gaelic language in one box, the corncrake in another, and so on for crofting, forestry, and tourism. Instead of this compartmentalised approach, he calls for a more holistic strategy.

My only reservation with Hunter's argument is that there is a tendency for 'highlanders' and 'environmentalists' to come across as two distinct and mutually exclusive categories, with the latter being external to the Highlands. Given his own comments on the need to turn our backs on what Said has called 'appalling tribalism' - 'Can we define the term 'Highlander' in such a way that the issue of a person's ancestry becomes of much less importance than the fact that such a person lives in, works in, is committed to, this quite amazing tract of territory?' (p.172) - I think he needs to recognise more clearly that there are people living in the Highlands and committed to them who are, to varying degrees, part of the environmentalist 'camp'. The sort of conflicts he describes, involving issues such as commercial forestry, sheep numbers, and land use, can be and are enacted on a small-scale and local level within the Highlands: between residents of the same village; between crofters with different outlooks; and so on.

Both the books under review here are readable and well presented, with nice covers, line drawings and photographs. Personally I prefer MacArthur's choice of illustrations as the photographs in Hunter's book seemed to be exactly the sort of coffee-table glossy images of a romantic, desolate and uninhabited region that he spends much of the book criticising. However, in general I am all for books in this 'scholarly and readable' genre. I would recommend MacArthur's book for anyone planning to travel to Iona, or

someone like myself ignorant about the island and wanting a basic overview - over time and without purely focusing on its Christian communities. Likewise, Hunter's book is a page-turner for anyone interested in the history, poetry, people and landscape of the Highlands.

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