

REVIEW: WHITE SETTLERS

E. Mairi MacArthur

Charles Jedrej and Mark Nuttall (1996), **White Settlers: the Impact of Rural Repopulation in Scotland**, Luxembourg: Harwood Academic Publishers, pb, £12.99, ISBN 3718657538, 195pp.

'A white settler is an incomer who falls out with everybody...'

Wry laughter greeted this comment, delivered in a matter-of-fact and by no means rancorous tone by a woman from Wester Ross. Had Charles Jedrej and Mark Nuttall chanced upon her in the course of their fieldwork, she might well have contributed this pithy quote to the many others they collected. It reflects, after all, one recurring theme in their study: it is the visibility of some incomers - what they actually do or say - that matters, rather than their existence per se. The occasion, a few years ago, was a conference on the uses of oral history, itself a field which challenges us to think about our own understanding of the past and the sometimes equivocal processes through which we reconstruct it. As the authors of this book stress more than once, the reality underlying their chosen topic is ambiguous, 'and does not make for a straightforward analysis'.

The subtitle may convey worthy academic restraint but the title hits the bookshelf browser in the face. And so it should. The term 'White Settler' was adopted in Scotland, by Scots, uneasy though its colonial references may make some of us feel. 'Can Scotland survive the white settlers?' is but one of the headlines that shriek from the collage of press cuttings on the book's cover. The research was undertaken between 1990 and 1993. Reading it in the autumn of 1997, I am keenly aware of yet another flurry of media coverage, sounding the alarm over a resurgent 'wave of racism' north of the Tweed. More pertinent still, of course, is the new political context, as

E. Mairi MacArthur publishes local history from her home in Inverness and is the author of several books about the island of Iona.

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Scotland prepares for a measure of self-government. The thought-provoking insights of **White Settlers** are thus important and timely.

The demographic trend at the heart of this study has been named 'counterstream migration' and was first detected in industrialised Europe about twenty-five years ago. After a century when steady urban growth, at the expense of countryside dwelling, was the norm, the opposite began to happen. Rural populations ceased to decline. In Scotland in the 1970s all rural districts, save three, experienced rapid growth, a pattern reinforced over the last decade. The reasons include increased employment opportunities in rural areas, so keeping at home some who would otherwise leave to find work, plus greater ease in commuting to city jobs. Others actively choose to live, and make a living, in the country. The concern of Jedrej and Nuttall is not primarily the dry dissection of who is moving where and why, but the ambiguities and complexities informing these choices.

The first two chapters examine the layers of meaning in such apparently simple vocabulary as 'local' and 'incomer', 'urban' and 'rural', and set the historical scene. Objectively measured, the distinctions between town and country have become blurred in recent decades. Wherever we live, many of us drive the same cars, consume the same goods, read the same newspapers and, in this high-tech age, work at increasingly similar sorts of job. Yet there remains a deep-seated conviction among those who go, occasionally or permanently, to the country that there they do experience a basically different 'way of life'. That is often precisely why they want to go. Once there, of course, they are perceived to have come in to the given community. For some practical purposes, such as qualifying for council housing, objective definitions may be arrived at: three years residency in a locality in Highland Region, for example. For those who regard themselves as 'locals', however, the term carries symbolic significance way beyond the strictly geographical. It implies historical longevity and a sense of belonging, all the more so when tested against the allegedly temporary and rootless newcomer. So the latter reinforces the image of local permanence yet assumes a potential for change at the same time - even although disrupting the very qualities that attracted them in the first place is the last thing on the hopeful country-dweller's mind. This dilemma is a thread running throughout the book.

Chapter Two provides a useful summary of various Acts of Parliament, official reports and settlement schemes relating to the rural population of Scotland. The primary intent, however, is to highlight the commentary on what has happened over the last hundred years or so. The drift of people away from the land was viewed overwhelmingly as a bad thing: a unique

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way of life was being lost, robust peasant stock was being drained away, the nation as a whole would suffer. These anxious images find close parallels, the authors argue, in the language used today about the opposite phenomenon - the repopulation of the Scottish countryside. In the course of this historical review the prominence of the Highlands in the whole debate is considered. The authors are not the first to wonder why the evictions and resistance of the Levellers in Galloway in 1724, for example, are largely unremembered while episodes of the Highland Clearances remain etched onto public memory.

Much of the direct experience in the book is indeed culled from fieldwork in the Highlands and all the more welcome, then, is the interesting comparison between one such area, Gairloch in Wester Ross, and Nithsdale in Dumfries and Galloway. Both sets of voices lament the loss of 'community' as they used to know it, but the reaction in the south west is more muted. There, in-migration is seen as just part of a whole process of social change in which locals also participate. Many now commute to nearby towns for work, shopping, school, leisure, and fewer folk, whoever they are, really have the chance or inclination to learn the detail of their own community: 'Nowadays, the children go to school in Thornhill and learn about the world. But they don't seem to know much about the area they live in'. From the north west the tone is sharper. The impact of incomers is linked to the direct dilution of a distinctive culture even though the main elements of that culture - the Gaelic language and the crofting system - face threats on a broader front also. The incomers' impressions in both places suggest some disappointment about what a 'traditional' people or way of life has in reality turned out to mean.

Many new residents start out as visitors and the role of tourism in fostering some of these misconceptions is highlighted. As far back as 1840, McPhun's **Steam Boat Pocket Guide** to the west Highlands took care to include only what was 'worthy of the stranger's notice'. Today, heritage centres proliferate and, even as one who has helped create such a facility, I am forced to acknowledge, ruefully, the ironic observation: 'Arguably never was Scotland, and the Highlands in particular, so rich with traditions'. And the authors underline a contradiction inherent in the visitor business: 'The tourist induces tradition but in circumstances such that it seems to those involved as if tradition is being eroded'. The book closes with a look at whether crofting could indeed be a sustainable model for future rural societies, at the perennial questions of land ownership and access to natural resources, and at the empowering of communities to participate more meaningfully in decisions

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that affect their lives. These are all contemporary issues where the local/outsider conflict regularly rears its head.

Before this, however, is a pivotal chapter entitled 'Contested Landscapes'. Here are teased out the elements which build up a relationship between people and place and the subtle but critical difference between living 'in' as opposed to 'at' a location. At the heart of the former lies the role of place-names, an astonishingly detailed repository of information about people and events, belief and practice. Incomers, who do not have the key to this local lore bank, understandably create their own set of associations, and the highly personal 'memoryscape' thus comes to be eroded twice over: once through the loss of locals and the disappearance of a particular way of life; and again by the superimposition of new meanings from outside.

That old chestnut - landscape for survival or for scenic attraction - is a further stage along these diverging paths. The authors' examination of the issues remains, overall, topical. Even as this review is written, the designation of Sites of Special Scientific Interest looms large at the Scottish Crofters' Union AGM and acrimonious soundbites snap back and forth in the furore over the Cairngorms funicular project. One key problem, which such public controversies seldom address, is how to reconcile the national or international definition of a place - e.g. 'natural heritage area' - with the many layers of local significance it may also have. This, it has just struck me, is exactly the dilemma posed by the spot which I have studied in most detail, the island of Iona. Someone once assured me that Iona was 'for the whole world', so strongly was their view a historical and spiritual one. Yet, as one with primarily local links, I found it well nigh impossible fully to grasp what they meant.

Grasping the grounds of the dilemma, however, can lead to dialogue at least. This book should raise many such questions in the reader's mind. The authors themselves point to one interesting area of further research, that of returning exiles who have, to a degree, both an inside and an outside perspective. And what are the examples, and impact, of the many positive experiences of newcomers to rural areas? Given that an understanding of local history and culture cannot be genetic but is learned - albeit over such a long period and in such a locality-specific way that it may appear to be 'in the blood' - may incoming families not acquire a similar depth of knowledge in time? What of the particular areas of Gaelic language, music and song where debt is already freely acknowledged to certain 'outsider' collectors, Edward Dwelly and Margaret Fay Shaw to name but two?

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As one unfamiliar with the concepts and jargon of the discipline, I was relieved to find **White Settlers** much less daunting than many social anthropology texts. Its accessibility is enhanced too by frequent references to literature - the backdrop of solid, rooted communities in the novels of Neil Gunn, for example, or the elegaic contemplation of an unpeopled landscape in a Norman MacCaig poem. Striking, too, are the vignettes of community life in the Highlands today, as articulated by folk who live there. Even where local examples are now out of date there is something to ponder, as in the aims of the first Isle of Eigg Trust some years ago. The emphasis then on rapid repopulation contrasts with the situation today where the islanders are politely warding off enthusiastic would-be settlers until the social and economic needs of the present population are clarified.

Lastly, in an all too often blinkered arena, it is refreshing to be directed towards comparative experience elsewhere, whether in Yorkshire or Cornwall, a northern state of India or the Arctic lands. Jedrej and Nuttall's own specialist areas are Africa and Greenland respectively. While providing some interesting parallels, these earlier fields of research gave the authors 'an obtuse enough angle' to come at the Scottish scenario with a proper degree of detachment. It seems to this reader that their results are also sympathetic and positive enough to form a very worthwhile contribution to what has to be a maturing, not a stagnant, debate. As an avowed aim in the introduction states, any such debate must try 'to promote institutions and policies which are likely to contribute to a rich and viable rural dimension of the Scottish landscape. After all it is ours'.

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