

## REVIEW: OUT ON THE EDGE

*Chris Harvie*

Ninian Dunnett, **Out on the Edge: Voices from Scotland**, Edinburgh: Canongate, 1999, pp. xiii and 215, ISBN 0862417775, £8.99.

'Surely, in such a small country as ours', Iain Crichton Smith wrote in his introduction to Ninian Dunnett's book, 'community will remain'. That was in July 1998. By October he was dead, one among a host of 'old folk eloquent'-MacCaig, Mackay Brown, Sorley MacLean, Naomi Mitchison - that the land could ill afford to lose. It is good that he had the chance to endorse this sensitive documentary, whose composer has modestly withdrawn into 'the quicksilver at the back of the mirror', and with a minimum of editorialising, allowed his people to speak for themselves. It should be essential reading for every Scottish politician.

What emerges is not just a country 'out on the edge' of Europe, but a people awkwardly poised between remarkable advances, many of which they have themselves prepared the ground for, and the possibility of complete social and psychic collapse. This is, ultimately, a troubling book, because Dunnett's fair-mindedness, and Henry Mayhew-like inclination to let his interviewees talk for themselves, throw up several strong common themes, few of which are reassuring.

This tendency emerges despite the fact that a proportionately greater number of interviewees seem to come from rural areas. Dunnett has a particular feeling for the sea, otherwise further away from our consciousness than it should be. Some absences are on the whole welcome. If the no-show of politicians or civil servants deprives the book of a particular didactic direction, they would probably tend to cast their own overlong shadows. More regrettable is the absence of interviews with controllers of incoming industry, American or French or Far Eastern, and with tourists - the raw material of Scotland's crucial service industry.

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*-Chris Harvie is Professor of British and Irish Studies at the University of Tübingen.*

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The constant themes seem to be those of industrial collapse and social insecurity, driven by Scotland's exposure to a particularly dynamic, and specifically Scottish-propelled, finance capitalism. To use the Scottish Council Foundation's recent classification, the bulk of Dunnett's interviewees seem to come from the median area of 'insecure Scotland'. Dunnett's explicit intentions emphasise this. **Out on the Edge** is a book primarily about paid work, preparing for it, or recollecting it in retrospect. So neither Scotland's pensioner incomers, nor the 'excluded Scotland' of the West Scottish housing schemes, feature much.

Yet this amounts to around a third of the population, the sort of people whom Bob Holman allowed to voice their situation in **Faith in the Poor** (1998). What he found was grim enough - though a large number of his people, women in particular, were truly heroic - and seemed likely to get worse, with the mounting impact of a drug culture. We can now see the extent to which this menace has come, in districts like Fraserburgh, to drag the insecure down into the ranks of the excluded.

We are left with a sharp sense of the central incompatibility of New Labour's twin goals of enterprise and social justice. The first remains, while control is exercised from abroad, something which is only likely to aggravate insecurities, while the diseconomies are piled on to the increasingly fragile social network. The inevitable outcome will be 'rationalisation': the abandonment of the excluded, the ugly rumours out of the NHS that we are increasingly hearing, along the lines of 'thou shalt not kill, but needst not strive/officiously to keep alive'.

As I write, the Scottish Executive is plunged into an arcane dispute over spin-doctors wheeling, dealing and fibbing, and party advantage being extracted therefrom. But outside the restaurant, hungry people are queuing. Dunnett has been talking to them, and MSPs should **be paying** attention to what they have said.

**REFERENCE**

Holman, B. (1999), *Faith in the Poor*, Lion.

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