

REVIEW: VIRTUAL VISITING?

David McCrone

Carl MacDougall, **Carl Painting the Forth Bridge: A Search for Scottish Identity** London: Aurum Press, 2001, hb, 281 pp, £17.99, ISBN: 1854106406.

When Edwin Muir's classic **Scottish Journey** (1935) was republished in 1985, Christopher Smout observed in his introduction that it 'has the clarity and impact of a brilliant photograph'. The Journey was undertaken by Muir in 1934, who by then lived in London, and the chapters are based on his visits to Edinburgh, the Borders, up the west coast to and including Glasgow, and finally to the Highlands. Muir captured the economic and cultural depression of a country which had fallen from its heights of Edwardian self-confidence.

MacDougall's book plainly set out to revisit these places, in the context of a new self-confidence fostered by the Scottish Parliament, and the chapters more or less mirror those of Muir. The flysheet comments that the book follows 'loosely' in the footsteps of Muir. How 'loosely' is hard to say, for one does not get much of an impression of these places at all, at least directly. Instead, the chapters are built up from references and newspaper articles which convey very little of what these places are like in the new Scotland.

Like Muir's, the book is a quest for Scottish identity, for, the author tells us, authentic expression has been absent from the cultural life of the nation. To try and give an account of Scottish identity in the late 20th century through the prism of diverse places is of course very worthwhile. MacDougall is critical of the new National Museum of Scotland: 'because the slant is personal, the overall effect is a lack of purpose and even reason' (p.52). That seems a rather apt, if sad, description of this book. It seems that almost all of it is written from secondary sources, books and newspapers in the main, and

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there is very little actual feel for place. It would be unkind and inaccurate to say that the author has not been to these places, for getting around is so much easier than in Muir's day. There are, however, few new insights into the new Scotland here, at least drawn from visiting the places Muir visited. One begins to sense that 'based loosely' on the footsteps of Muir is to claim far too much.

Some of the 'geography' is amusingly strange. Thus, 'along the road from Kirriemuir is Arbroath' (p.216) is only true if you're not trying to get there directly. 'Anderson' ('flattened to build the main artery across the river' (p.160)) should patently be 'Anderston'. Curiously, we are told that 'An Aberdonian is someone born between the Rivers Dee and Don, which, coincidentally, is where the local maternity hospital is situated' (p.222). As someone who happened to be born there, this reviewer wonders what makes it a coincidence. Where else would you find it? Stonehaven? Again, we are told on p.78 that the 'antithesis of Border life is to be found in places like Montrose and Kirriemuir, where sources of local identity rest with the football team'. Not only does this statement make it sound as if the likes of Eyemouth and Duns are at the opposite ends of some unspecified spectrum, but one feels for the good folk of Montrose and their less than successful senior football team, still more for so much being invested in Kirrie Thistle of the Angus junior league.

The book suffers severely from word processing 'paraphitis'. The text leaps about wildly. For example, on p.132 there is a brief paragraph on Bone's wartime lithographs in Glasgow, and the next paragraph begins 'By the end of the 19th century ...'. There is much more of that sort of thing, and the general impression is of a book without much purpose. What probably began as a good idea – to have a writer explore the new Scotland by retracing the footsteps of Edwin Muir – simply does not come off: except with the unintended consequence of sending the reader back to the original classic. MacDougall's journey has thrown away the map, and the reader ends up lost.

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