

## **REVIEW: PEOPLE AND WOODS IN SCOTLAND**

*Andrew Midgley*

T. C. Smout (ed.), **People and Woods in Scotland: A History**, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002, 228pp, hb, £45, ISBN 0 7486 1700 0; 244pp, pb £14.99 ISBN 0 7486 1701 9.

Environmental history is a boom industry. Growing out of a concern for (what some would consider) the current environmental predicament and a desire to understand the origins of social conflicts over environmental issues, environmental history has sought to deepen our understanding of how humans have engaged with, and altered, the natural environment. But the popularity of environmental history is about more than the academic unpicking of a complex story; it is thought to have utility at a time when many are seeking new approaches to forest and environmental management. As the concept of biodiversity and the practices of action planning become entwined in governmental approaches to the environment, and as Scottish forestry undergoes a period of post-devolution re-orientation with the publication of the **Scottish Forestry Strategy** and the introduction of the Scottish Forestry Grants Scheme, environmental history is in ever greater demand. With respect to forests, questions are asked about which forests are relatively more natural (and thus implicitly more valuable); what sorts of characteristics more natural woodlands would have; the processes that forests have undergone (so that managers might know what can, in this age of restoration, be undertaken in order to reverse those processes); and where forests of different types were in the past. **People and Woods in Scotland** addresses some of these questions.

In seeking to offer a history of environmental and social change from the retreat of the ice 11,500 years ago to the present, this text sets itself a truly

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gargantuan task. But by retaining a focus on the way that people have used the forests, the way that use has influenced forest extent and composition, and by tracing the changing approaches to management, this collection manages to tell a rich and compelling story. Demonstrating the interdisciplinary nature of environmental history, palaeoecologists, archaeologists, historians and recent practitioners all contribute. But what is offered is more than a set of discrete disciplinary perspectives; rather, each author weaves multiple sources of evidence together to tell a convincing tale. Most of the book tells this story chronologically. Richard Tipping starts by reconstructing the processes of colonisation after the last ice age and by drawing upon archaeological evidence of the impact of early hunter-gatherer populations. Ian Armit and Ian Ralston take up the story by looking at the ways in which wood was used by iron-age communities, whilst Anne Crone and Fiona Watson trace the trend towards greater scarcity of wood through the middle ages. Mairi Stewart extends this story of a declining resource by exploring the changing position of woodlands in the social upheaval between 1600 and 1800. In particular, she examines the use of woodlands by communities and the gradual but comprehensive shift toward management for profit. Syd House and Christopher Dingwell move on to explore the connections between changing forestry practices and imperial expansion with plant hunters seeking new commercially viable species, and David Foot traces the monumental changes that took place through the twentieth century with the influence of the Forestry Commission.

Well illustrated and with a limited but useful bibliography, this book is oriented toward the general reader. As such, it does not engage fully with many of the debates in environmental history; rather, in its chronological structure it provides a broad overview. Yet for all its bypassing of the detail of the more technical debates, many of the chapters refer to contemporary issues and are open about their continuing contestation. Tipping, for example, points to the changing ideas in ecology and some of the resultant difficulties in interpreting the palaeoecological record. Indeed, he gives a sense of not only the variability through time as woodlands responded to climatic conditions but also variability over space at the same time, which implicitly raises questions about, and complicates, any easy recourse to notions of reforesting Scotland. Others, notably Crone and Watson and Stewart, detail the way woods were used as society changed and thus emphasise the entanglements of the natural and the cultural. No solace in an idealised Nature can be found here.

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Another strength of the volume is the way that the chapters work together. This is a relatively smooth ride and I for one enjoyed being presented with the big picture. At the same time the chapters productively complement each other by taking subtly different approaches. As I read Armit and Ralston's contribution on the uses to which wood was put by iron-age people, I longed for less of the litany of fact and more for an assessment of how these events were embedded in broader cultural ideas and circuits of power. But then in the following chapters, as the authors are able to utilise different sorts of historical data, these broader issues come more to the fore. Stewart's contributions on community use and the subsequent management of woods for profit, for example, trace the changes in tenure systems, and at the centre of attention in the chapter by House and Dingwell is the notion of improvement, the role of the landlord or the estate owner and networks of institutional influence embedded in imperialism.

If there is a problem with this book then it begins to become apparent in the chapter on the twentieth century. This is an interesting chapter focusing on the establishment of the Royal Scottish Forestry Society, the establishment of forestry as an academic discipline and the changing practices of the Forestry Commission. The problem is not the fact that it goes lightly on the Forestry Commission (which is understandable since the volume was commissioned by the Forestry Commission and Foot was himself a former Forestry Commissioner); it is that what is missing is any reference to the developing science of ecology. This absence would appear to be remedied in the following chapter where Richard Worrell and Neil Mackenzie – both eminent woodland and ecological consultants – assess the ecological impact of using the woods. But, if anything, their appraisal throws into greater relief the potentially problematic position of ecology. It is problematic because after most of the book, in which we have been given an interesting history of the complex connections between social and environmental change, the contemporary way of thinking about and acting towards woodland is left unquestioned. On the one hand, while the authors of the previous chapters refer to the changes in woodland extent and composition, Worrell and Mackenzie re-cast their claims through the vocabulary of ecology. One gets a sense of the ecologist having the last, authoritative word. On the other, Worrell and Mackenzie refer to 'native', 'semi-natural' and 'ancient' woodlands and to 'biodiversity', and yet there is no recognition that, whilst we might take these sorts of terms for granted, they have a history and frame our understanding of woodlands in very specific ways. Ecology becomes a way of seeing that gets incorporated within environmental history and then

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taken for granted. It seems odd that a volume that seeks to unpick social and environmental relations studiously avoids analysing perhaps the most important development: the one that currently holds sway but which itself has a long history. This book therefore not only tells a complex story; it illustrates some of the complexities and tensions within environmental history itself.

As I read I tried to keep in mind a hope expressed by Smout in his introduction on behalf of the collective: that the book would be enjoyable and useful to read. Enjoyable it certainly was. The complex tale of woodland history that this book tells has only enriched my interpretation of Scotland's landscapes. In that personal sense, then, it was useful too. But I remain uncertain about its broader utility. In the context of environmental history's potential contribution to policy, I wonder about the degree to which the lack of reflection on ecology is helpful. For those seeking advice – the managers and policymakers – the prominent position of the science of ecology would appear to be precisely right. Indeed, as the best knowledge we have, the centrality of ecology is no doubt essential. Yet if we simply implement ecological knowledge and talk about and act towards forests through the discourse of ecology without reflecting on it, do we then not limit our understanding of contemporary issues, of which ecology is part? Whilst the position of ecology may situate environmental history favourably with respect to policy, could environmental history not make itself more useful by also examining ecology itself?

Despite this uncertainty, **People and Woods in Scotland** is an interesting read. It demonstrates what a vibrant and exciting interdisciplinary meeting ground environmental history is, and the interwoven story that results is crucial in complicating our understanding of Scottish woodlands. As a broad overview for the lay reader it is definitely a useful book.

*April 2003*