Review

John A. Burnett, *The Making of the Modern Scottish Highlands, 1939-1965: Withstanding the 'colossus of advancing materialism.'* Ulster and Scotland Series. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011. Pp. 312. 978-1-84682-241-4. €55.00.

John Burnett's wonderful book is a nuanced and sympathetic account of the impact of welfarism and reconstruction on the post-war Scottish Highlands. In the aftermath of the Second World War the desire to regenerate the region, to overcome decades of underdevelopment, outmigration, and cultural decline, came up against a trenchant desire to protect Highland exceptionalism from what seemed like the "colossus of advancing materialism" (back cover). For Gaels versed in the history of their country, regeneration often appeared as little more than the latest incarnation of *improvement* behind which Anglo-government authority would be foisted upon the region. Burnett does not go too far in stating that this was the moment in which the modern Highlands were created and that these debates continue to inform almost every aspect of public policy. What is remarkable about Burnett's narrative is the deftest of skill with which the author analyzes these conflicting perspectives on post-war change. For Burnett, the post-war environment did not exhibit a 'genuine' internal voice, which sought to oppose the 'disingenuous' and nefarious external voice of commercial change. Instead, differing perspectives aligned along a multitude of political, geographical, and linguistic positions both within and without the *Gàidhealtachd*. Burnett's cognizance of these subtleties is exemplified in his

treatment of Gaelic. Burnett correctly sees Gaelic as more than a linguistic medium but as means of cultural expression, which was, in part, fashioned around conflicting interpretations of reconstruction. As Burnett categorically states, “it is difficult to sustain the argument that the Gaelic thought process ... whether in Gaelic or not, differed greatly from that of a mindset overwhelmingly shaped by the English language” (p. 24). This brief review hardly does justice to the skill with which the author has treated the often emotionally-charged nature of his source material.

Such nuance, however, is a partial product of the book’s greatest flaw. Like so much written on the history of the Highlands, the author is far more interested in perception than in the socio-economic conditions in which such perceptions were framed. Few would dissent from Burnett’s argument that this was the period in which the modern Highlands were created, but his contribution might be more aptly termed ‘the making of the modern Highland discourse.’ It is telling, for instance, that his account ends in 1965 with the establishment of the Highlands and Islands Development Board (later Highlands and Islands Enterprise), an organization which has been at the forefront of commercial change in the region for over four decades, most recently in the building of a new university campus in Inverness. There is an incongruous neglect of the actual changes instituted by various governmental and non-governmental organizations in this period. Six pages (pp. 138-43) on the North of Scotland Hydro-Electric Board (NSHEB), for example, does not do justice to an institution described as “one of the most outstanding achievements of any public-service body in post-war Britain and ... certainly the most fundamental contribution from any agency in twentieth century Highland history” (Ewan A. Cameron, “The Scottish Highlands,” *Scotland in the Twentieth Century*, ed. T. M. Devine and R. J. Finlay (Edinburgh: EUP, 1996), 162). Burnett’s focus on

perception reveals itself in the relative scarcity of archival sources which underpin the book. The National Archives of Scotland hold thousands of files relevant to the NSHEB and other institutions, including planning meetings, committee minutes, court cases, and even personal correspondence between various estates, the Crofters Commission, and government bodies. Only the tiniest fraction of this material seems to have been consulted. Much might also have been done to contextualize the account with similar pressures throughout post-war rural Britain. Burnett states that the Highlands shared many similarities with other rural regions trying to balance continuity and change in this period, but cultural scholarship with a pan-British lens, such as Judith Tsouvalis's *The Critical Geography of Britain's State Forests* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), might have added to the power of Burnett's argument.

This might be a redundant criticism, unfair to the author's approach; the discourse of change is clearly the author's primary focus and, in that, this reviewer can think of no other book which exhibits so thoroughly nuanced an approach to Highland imagery. But in analyzing Highland imagery, *The Making of the Modern Scottish Highlands* does not constitute a great leap forward in the historiography of the region. Our historiographical obsession with imagery and perception, while critical to understanding the Highlands, continues to occupy a disproportionate share of academic output. Until there is a more rigorous examination of socio-economic change in the region, the perceptions created by these changes will continue to generate one, rather than multiple, perspectives on the past.

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