REVIEW

Scott McG Wilson. *The Native Woodlands of Scotland: Ecology, Conservation and Management*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015. Pp. 353. ISBN: 9780748692859. \$50.00 CAD.

Visible impacts of anthropogenically-driven climate and wider environmental change are evident all around us. But human agency must be understood as just one factor in a dynamic interplay of longer term atmospheric, oceanic and even tectonic changes affecting all planetary biota and better understanding is needed of how the impact of that interplay on natural ecosystems changed in scale and form over time. This volume looks at just one suite of ecosystems; the four distinct native woodland types recognised in Scotland. It provides a cool, even-handed assessment of the roles performed by human and “natural” actors in processes which have had—and continue to have—a direct effect on those ecosystems. Written ostensibly as a textbook/handbook for ecology and environmental science for students up to advanced undergraduate level, *The Native Woodlands of Scotland* also provides an invaluable entry-level reference point for non-science qualified environmental historians and a more general audience seeking a broad understanding of the historical development and current state of these distinctive habitats. Supplemented by a gazetteer of key sites, this volume is both a “state of the game” student text and an indispensable handbook and guide to Scotland’s still evolving but dangerously challenged native woodlands.

From the perspective of the environmental historian, Scott Wilson has provided a broad outline of current understanding of Scottish woodland development from the end of the last episode of glaciation down to the present. That span—in excess of 10,000 years—has the benefit of permitting some understanding to be secured of the broad trends across the millennia and of dispelling the fallacy of popular notions of steady state conditions until the irruption of anthropogenic factors in the Mesolithic period. The downside is that to accommodate this span in a manageable text

requires a shallowness of discussion that does, in some places, become too superficial to provide any significant grasp of the complexities in the processes being reviewed. Where this becomes most evident is in the reflections on loss of TEK (traditional environmental knowledge) in respect of resource management and what this means in terms of impacts on biodiversity and the future sustainability of landscapes which have become cultural icons. What is lacking is recognition of the clear gulfs that persist between professional practice and official policy on the one hand and public perception and acceptance of the changes that will become increasingly evident in the coming decades.

It is also clear to see where the academic discourse in respect of medieval population expansion and resource exploitation regimes across both uplands and lowlands, in the context of the medieval climate anomaly and the subsequent “little ice age”, that has been continuing within environmental history over the last twenty years has failed to engage with the conservation and management sectors (and vice versa). We have a far broader and deeper understanding of the human processes involved, of the cultural and socio-legal frameworks within which woodland exploitation occurred, and the responses to both anthropogenic and non-anthropogenic challenges to security of supply than the discussion in this volume suggests. The non-appearance in the reading lists of key pieces of research such as the work by Alasdair Ross on the northern Cairngorms in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries or by John Harrison on the exploitation of the natural resources of Flanders Moss from the twelfth century onwards, or by this reviewer on fuel transitions from medieval to mid-nineteenth-century Scotland, all produced in the last decade, is disappointing, especially as those regimes are described as “poorly understood”. There is now the capacity and the capability to produce better models for the ecological impact of these management regimes as they evolved in response to changing environmental conditions. Productive dialogue—and inter-disciplinary research projects—is needed between environmental historians and ecologists to broaden understanding of the interaction of human and wider environmental processes in creating the landscapes we value so much today. It is hugely encouraging to

see where convergence between disciplines is possible and happening. The contribution that environmental history can make to the debate that is still needed to win over public acceptance of some of the profound changes to come is huge. This volume shows where that dialogue can and should be happening now to both frame and better-inform public discourse on the future for Scotland's woodlands.

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