As one of the major issues which sustained a sense of Scottish particularism during the devolution campaigns, land and its ownership has remained prominent since the reconstitution of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. Indeed, the centenary of the Vatersay raids demonstrated that history remains a potent tool for generating political capital, with David Stewart, Labour MSP for the Western Isles, highlighting that it was ‘100 years since the 10 fishermen from Barra and Mingulay, who sought to establish crofts as a way of life on Vatersay, appeared at the Court of Session in Edinburgh accused of breaching an interdict imposed upon them by the absentee landlord, Lady Gordon Cathcart…’ He added that in more recent times ‘it was the Labour-led Scottish Executive that led the way in introducing land reform measures to give communities such as Gigha and South Uist greater control of their land.’

The extent to which this type of posturing is absorbed by the wider public is open to question, but similar sensibilities, albeit stripped of party politics, underpin Ben Buxton’s work on The Vatersay Raiders. Birlinn, similarly, seem to have sensed an opportunity to produce a popular and exciting work of history as a tie-in to the centenary, with the cover blurb demonstrating the breathless tone of a film trailer: ‘all they wanted was land: land for crofting and land on which to build a house.’

From the outset, the author sets out the parameters of the study quite clearly – he does not use Gaelic sources, for example, and expresses the hope that this work can be a platform for further research. The first two chapters comprise a 70-page run through 1400 years or so of history to give the reader the context in which the later raids took place. The background of the author is apparent in discussions of the archaeological place-name evidence which underpinned
Vatersay’s hybrid Celtic-Norse heritage, and racial theories based on this heritage were postulated by contemporaries seeking to explain the ‘lawless’ actions of the raiders. Although there is too much material on the well-publicised shipwreck of the *Annie Jane* in 1853, which does not add significantly to the later discussion of the land raids, it is refreshing to see the author getting beyond the hackneyed ‘traditional’ versus ‘commercial’ dichotomy (p. 42) with respect to landlordism. Some acknowledgment might have been given of the difficulties which faced John Murdoch in the 1870s when he began concerted efforts to radicalise the Hebridean crofters in South Uist, for example, he found that the crofters owned portraits of Lady Gordon Cathcart, the proprietrix – something he put down to the prevalent ‘ice of repression.’ The way in which this apparently cowed population broke out into revolt within the space of three decades is glossed over far too quickly in chapter three.

As might be expected, the most interesting part of the book is that which deals with the central theme, and Buxton does a good job of describing the tension which developed over the possession of Vatersay after 1900, in terms of early failed negotiations with the proprietrix, the physical ‘direct action,’ and the subsequent court trials of the raiders. The imprisonment of the raiders made Vatersay a *cause célèbre* along with Braes, Glendale, Tiree, Aignish, and others, both among contemporaries and in the later canon of crofting resistance. There are some interesting individual personal stories woven into the narrative, from the raiders themselves to those such as Lord Pentland who had their reputations damaged by the aftermath of the disturbances. Overall, though, even allowing for a ‘popular’ style, there seems to be too much direct quotation at the expense of broader contextual material – the Congested Districts Board might be an instant turnoff for the non-specialist reader, but surely a wider discussion of the land issue more generally in Britain at this early stage of the twentieth century would have been beneficial.

The final chapter is a rather desultory, but hopeful (a cynic might say ‘over-optimistic’) account of the islands since the 1920s, which walks a slightly unsteady line between local minutiae and the wider Highland economic picture. Based on considerable archival research, *The Vatersay Raiders* contains fairly comprehensive references, a useful bibliography and
many relevant and interesting photographs. *The Vatersay Raiders* might not have the sort of academic rigour which will see it adopted as a course book in Universities, but it does not claim to fulfil this role. What it will do is introduce a wide audience to an important event in Scotland’s rural past, make a contribution to the history of the Western Isles, and indeed to the wider study of social unrest in Scotland before the Great War.

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