

The Destruction of the Caledonian Forest: Myth and Reality

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There is a version of Scottish woodland history that can be regarded as the 'popular version of woodland history'. The rough outline of this popular history is as follows: after the last ice age a massive forest developed in Scotland. The destruction of the so called Caledonian Forest began during the Neolithic period, and the Romans made a second major impact, burning large areas in warfare. From the fifth century AD various invaders, most notable the Vikings, cleared the forests for strategic reasons, shipbuilding, construction and so on. Then in the 17th and 18th centuries the Great Wood of Caledon was cleared for iron smelting in the west and, more recently, for timber, cattle, deer and sheep.

This is a logical and widely accepted story of destruction but the question is what its origins are and how reliable this history is. In this paper I shall discuss how the 'Myth of Caledon' became part of Scottish popular culture. It will be shown that the Myth is a 19th century creation and how more fallacious elements were added to it during the 20th century. Then it sets out to discuss the shortcomings of the popular version of Scottish woodland history and how the authors who popularised it ignored evidence that refuted much of the myth.

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