

Book review by Jan Oosthoek

T.C. Smout, Alan R. MacDonald and Fiona Watson, *A History of the Native Woodlands of Scotland, 1500-1920*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005. xiv + 343 pp. 69 illus. £60 cloth.

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The history of the woodlands and forests of Scotland has been at the heart of environmental history of this part of the British Isles as the discipline developed and flourished from the early 1990s. The fruits of this work conducted over the past fifteen years have been synthesised in *A History of the Native Woodlands of Scotland, 1500-1920*, which charts the relationship the native woodlands of Scotland and its people from the 16th to the end of the 20th century.

The introduction contains a valuable discussion of concepts such as native and ancient woodland, sustainability and other terms, which connects modern issues and themes related to forest and habitat conservation with the historical management and use of native woodlands. The first two chapters discuss the extent and character of the woodlands in the long period since the expansion of deciduous forest at the end of the last Ice Age c.10, 000 years ago, and then, using more detailed documentary records, describe in more detail the fluctuations in woodland cover since 1500. The second chapter makes good use of early maps, such as the Pont maps of the 1590s and Roy's Military Survey of the mid-18th century, which provide valuable information about the extent of the woodland, degree of enclosure and forest type.

The next three chapters focus on the exploitation of the woods for local use such as pasture, charcoal, building materials and tan bark throughout the period covered by the book. Chapters Eight and Nine examine the external demands on the forests and native pinewoods in particular. The authors show convincingly that, contrary to common belief, the decline of the native woodlands was not caused by "outsiders", by which they mean the English and Irish. They conclude that external enterprise was short-lived in the Highlands during the 18th century owing to rapid forest regeneration, and had little impact on the extent and character of the native pinewoods.

Chapter Ten, "Woodland management in an industrial age" provides an account of the decline of traditional woodland management in the 19th century and the conversion of coppice stands into plantation forest. This process culminated in the establishment of the Forestry Commission after the First World War. The second half of the chapter focuses on the fate of the native woodlands under the forestry policy changes during the 20th century, beginning with the establishment of a strategic timber reserve from 1919 and ending with the development of more environmentally sensitive management from the 1980s. The latter part of this chapter provides an analysis of native woodland policies towards the end of the 20th century. This short but useful analysis of the latter 20th century extends beyond the remit of the book, but helps to connect historical management with more modern developments and preoccupations.

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The latter part of the book examines four case studies of woodland management in the Central Highlands (chapter 11) and Western Isles (Chapter 14) and the impact on the woodlands from interests of the Navy in the 17th century (Chapter 12) and Irish traders operating in the western Highlands during the 18th century. These case studies provide detail to the general history of management, use and exploitation of the native woodlands developed in previous chapters.

The History of the Native Woodlands of Scotland is a good academic piece of work that has been well researched. The four centuries of pre- and post industrial use of woodlands which is the main focus of the book are covered in sufficient detail, but there is scope for more analysis of 20th century policies. This is beyond the scope of the present volume, and its absence has been recognised by authors in the introduction, who state that “it will demand another set of authors to do it justice”. As it is, the work provides a valuable biogeographical resource for social and economic historians as well as for ecologists and environmental scientists concerned with landscape change in Scotland. Woodland management and availability is necessarily entwined with other economic activities such as mining and fishing that require wood to support them. For the ecologist, the book provides information on the dynamics of woodland cover in relation to human exploitation. The implication of much of the book that woodland use is not necessarily destructive, is refreshing. For woodland managers the material covered here provides important insights into the sustainability of native forest. However, the authors also make an appeal to the interested layman, hoping to achieve an increased appreciation of the historical value of the native woodlands of Scotland. In this respect I think the authors have succeeded.