

## Book review

### **Scotland since prehistory. Natural change and human impact.**

**Scottish Cultural Press, Aberdeen, 1993, 140 pp., ill., ISBN 1-898216-03-x, £ 14.95.**

In December 1992 a conference was held organised by the Institute for Environmental History of the University of St. Andrews that explored themes in Scottish environmental history. The papers presented at this conference resulted in the publication of *Scotland since prehistory* and provides a good demonstration of the breath and vitality of the environmental history in Scotland. It provides an overview of the major themes in Scottish environmental history and indicates agendas or future research.

After reading of the introduction and the first few chapters it becomes clear that a central theme is missing. The reader gets the impression that the book is no unity but a collection of unrelated articles. However, the editor has been aware of this problem and tried to group contributions with related themes, for example the first five chapters dealing with Scottish forest history.

In the first contribution of the 'forest triptych' explores Graeme Whittington the use of pollen analysis in research of the deforestation history of Scotland. Chris Smout continues with an article in which he describes the decline of the Scottish forests from prehistoric times till the modern period. He concludes that most forest were gone well before the 19th century. Hughe Cheape ends the forest part of the book with a case study of forest management on Clanranald estate.

Reading the three forest contributions makes clear that the process of deforestation in Scotland has been a long process that speeded up during the Middle Ages. The main causes of the decline of the forest cover were climatic changes and, most important, the activities of local farmers.

The next part of the book can not be as clearly defined as the first part. But after careful reading the reader will discover that each contribution is dealing with a typical environmental problem of Scotland's past. Thinking about Scotland is thinking about sheep, salmon and midges. The opening chapter of this unit is dealing with the environmental impact of sheep farming in the Highlands. Alexander Mather concludes that the impact was not as extreme as one might expect. Following on Mather, John Smith describes that the changing number of deer in the

Highlands since 1780 and the impact of these animals on the environment. In chapter 9 David Summers is moving from a land to the aquatic environment. He describes the changes of the salmon-catch data to argue that changes at sea were more important than changes in the landscape in explaining variations.

The 'Scottish part' concludes with one of the most curious of the book. It is dealing with one of the most annoying insects a tourist can encounter in the Highlands: the midge. This tiny insect is hanging in thick over the heaths, lakes and peat bogs during the summer month. Alasdair Roberts is raising the intriguing possibility that midges have only recently become a plague in the Highlands. He based this thesis on 18th and 18th century sources such as military accounts, novels and scientific texts on fauna in the Highlands. The problem with all these sources is that they show no consistent picture. This makes clear how difficult the interpretation of sources in environmental history can be.

The last chapter of Scotland since prehistory will attract the attention of anyone looking at the table of contents. It is not about Scottish environmental history but is dealing environmental change in the Sahel. But what has the Sahel to do with Scotland? The two regions are thousands of miles apart and the climatic and physical conditions are completely different. The answer can be found in the introduction where the editor justifies the presence of this article in a book about Scotland with writing that "Toulmin's account of the Sahel [] remind us that problems of cultivating marginal land which have loomed so large in Scottish history exist also in very different climates and times".

This comparison does not seem entirely valid. The climate and culture of Scotland are too different from those in the Sahel to be able to compare the two. The only valid similarity I can see is provided by the author who argues that local people know better than experts of how to treat the local fragile ecosystems.

In spite of the lack of a Leitmotiv Scotland since prehistory provides an excellent overview of the most important themes in Scottish environmental history.

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