

Landscapes of the Imagination

James Fenton *22 January 2014*

Maybe it is the long winter nights, but at this time of the year our imagination tends to run riot: the Christmas images of snowy scenes, winter wonderland, Santa's sleighs, festivals and feasts, the birth in the barn; the resolutions for a better world in the New Year and the long summer days still beyond the horizon. It is comforting to hold such images, such landscapes of the imagination where reality is not particularly welcome.

However I have come to the conclusion over the years that we also view the solid world in which we live through the prism of the imagination: we do not necessarily see what is in front of our eyes. We do not in fact see the real landscapes of Scotland. Because the term 'landscape' has many meanings, I should stress here that I mean the physical landscape of land, buildings, soil, rock, water, vegetation and sky, not the more abstract landscapes that modern jargon has introduced such as the 'policy landscape' and the 'political landscape'. In this essay I will be concentrating primarily on the Highland landscape.

Let us stand back for a minute and imagine the exile coming home to Scotland by sea.

... In your years abroad you held the landscapes of Scotland dear in your mind: the unspoiled hills and glens, the white but n' bens scattered across the countryside, the lochs with their wood-fringed shores, the town centres of solid buildings that have stood the test of time, rivers that tumble unhindered to the sea, the monarch of the glen standing in a rugged mountain landscape... As the coastline heaves into sight a two-dimensional Scotland is revealed, the outline of hill and bealach diffuse in a purple and blue, blemishes removed, nothing more. Excitement arises. Homecoming 2014. You imagine the pure, unsullied landscape that will slowly disaggregate before your eyes. You remember the VisitScotland website you had checked out before returning: "The dramatic scenery of the Highlands is true natural beauty on a grand scale... Come and discover Scotland, world-famous for its awesome scenery... The magnificent diversity of Scotland's mountain landscapes is equally matched by the breathtaking scenery and rich wildlife." And the Scottish Highlands website: "Scotland's breathtaking and stunning glens are unique and inspiring places which have remained unchanged for thousands of years..."

"Unchanged for thousands of years." That was reassuring, and a romantic glow permeated the heart. There was no stopping the ship as the shore drew near and the detail of the land began to emerge. You noticed first that the profile of the hills were broken by new structures, that their slopes were compartmentalised and scarred; then you noticed the pinpricks of white that emerged into houses, more than you remembered, and that was good, but you noticed many stood apart from the landscape, not forming part of the whole; and as the ship came in to berth you noticed the ugly, reinforced sea walls, large rocks scattered carelessly along the shore ...

Is the exile's view any different from our own? Do we not all to some extent hold the romantic image of the unspoilt Highlands in our minds, reinforced by the constant reiterations from marketing circles and the glossy pictorial calendars? The Highlands are distant from most of the population and when we leave our homes and head for the hills, do we notice anything that is not included on our romantic pre-existing mental map?

Maybe because landscape is change is slow, with the things we value lost through slow attrition, we do not notice the changes. But we should because I believe that we are slowly losing the aspects of the hills that we cherish in our hearts: the grandeur of nature unsullied by human interference, distant views across wild scenery, the roaring burn, the undammed loch. You will find that the

landscapes of reality differ markedly from those of our imagination. I can remember in my lifetime when you could drive east to west across the watershed of Scotland without seeing a fence or much sign of human infrastructure at all. Now this is impossible. There has been an ever-changing stream of development over the past century or so. First it was the long fences erected over the mountain tops at the start of the sheep farming days; then it was the Forestry Commission which, starting in 1919, created what was termed 'blanket forestry', particularly once deep ploughing was developed where ploughs ripped straight lines across everything in their path. There followed a period of taking-in hill land and of ploughing ditches in the moors (moor grips) as part of agricultural improvement schemes – and the ditches still stand out today. Then it was the hydro-schemes of the Tom Johnston years, resulting in about 50% of Highland catchments being modified, and the associated network of dams, pipes, pylons and poles. Then phone masts. (I remember holding a one-person campaign by refusing at first to have a mobile phone because of the need for masts in the hills: it failed dismally!) Then new hill tracks for agriculture and sporting purposes, in addition to the ones needed for access to the ever-increasing forestry, hydro-electric and phone mast schemes. More recently it has been deer-fencing for native woodland, together with the soil mounding and tree planting that goes with many of them. And then there are the windfarms which have entered the remotest areas where in the past nobody ever thought development would occur; and these, of course, have their associated miles of new access track. Now it is small scale hydro schemes, where it seems the fate of every burn or river to be dammed and piped. And there are other smaller, less obvious things going on. I remember walking in Jura a couple of years back and noticed that the burn I was walking up had had a digger along, deepening all the pools for fishing, dumping the rocks alongside; and then there are the small pools dug on grouse moors; and the tracks of off-road vehicles leaving pockmarks across the soft, peaty land or eroding the hilltops...

There is also, of course, is the Scottish Forestry Strategy which has a target of 25% of Scotland under trees. If arable land and permanent pasture is included (we need to grow food), this would mean 33% of the remaining land being wooded; and if areas of deep peat and unplatable areas such as mountain tops are excluded, this would result in an additional 25% of our open moorland being under trees. Considering that in 1900 only about 4% of Scotland was wooded, from any perspective, this is a fundamental change in the landscape of Scotland? Have we really thought this through? Is this really what we want?

One result of this tree planting and other effort is that the landscape has been transformed from a 'natural landscape', defined as where the scenery and vegetation pattern has been 'designed' by nature to a 'cultural landscape' where they have been designed by people (us!). Natural landscapes are becoming increasingly rare on a global scale as humans increasingly take over the whole planet, and Scotland is no different. Do we really want to pass on to future generations a Scotland where every square inch is being utilised for an economic purpose, whether every last watt of wind or water is extracted for electricity, all the plant production harvested for food or timber, and all the animals managed for food or sport? Where, in other words, nature is not allowed to be wild. If this becomes the case, we will lose understanding of how natural systems operate, of nature itself.

What is perhaps surprising is that there are any areas of such untrammelled land free of artefacts left in Scotland, what is nowadays termed 'wild land'. Unfortunately for most of us, our landscape is safeguarded through technical planning legislation which has to be ploughed through if we want to understand the issues. Recently Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) identified 'Core Areas of Wild Land' and a consultation on their location has recently finished. These areas are also subject of debate in relation to the Scottish Government's current update of its planning policy – the Main Issues Report of the National Planning Framework (NPF3) and the Scottish Planning Policy (SPP). The consultative draft of the SPP stated: "Plans should identify and safeguard areas of wild land character... displayed

in some of Scotland's remoter upland, mountain and coastal areas, which are very sensitive to any form of intrusive human activity and have little or no capacity to accept new development.”

However the Government has stated that it does not want to give statutory protection to any Core Areas of Wild Land so we need to be on our guard to protect those that remain. For example, in relation to the consultation on NPF3 the Government states that a number of respondents “stressed that any framework should not be overly restrictive, but rather should allow for the flexibility to deal with applications on a case by case basis. There was also a concern that certain areas – be they National Parks and National Scenic Areas or Core Areas of Wild Land... should not become ‘no go’ areas for new wind farm development...” Incidentally National Scenic Areas are the main national designation to safeguard Scotland’s finest landscapes, although few people seem to have heard of them!

The construction of vehicle tracks into our wild hills has been an issue for many years and we have now reached the situation where areas remote from vehicle tracks are few and far between. A recent report produced by a consortium of NGOs states: “Hundreds of kilometres of tracks for forestry, agriculture and field sports have been built to very low standards under Permitted Development Rights (PDRs), and yet PDRs have not been amended... Local communities and national communities of interest are denied any say over the construction of tracks in Scotland, yet bear many of the impacts. Natural amenity, often of great importance to rural communities and highly valued nationally is lost.”

Currently tracks built for agricultural and forestry purposes which are not in National Scenic Areas or nature conservation sites are exempt from any sort of planning control – they have Permitted Development Rights and can be built at the whim of the landowner. Tracks built for field sport purposes do not have such PDRs and should be subject to planning scrutiny. It would appear, however, that many are built without planning consent; in fact where an estate has both agricultural and farming interests it can be difficult to disentangle whether a new hill track is for sport (needing permission) or agriculture (not needing permission). The conspiracy theorists would say that agriculture is sometimes used as a spurious post hoc justification!

NGOs have been lobbying the government for many years on bringing all hill tracks under planning control, but the government remains equivocal on the issue. Which leads on to the government’s views on protecting Scotland’s landscapes generally. A look at their websites indicates that the most inspiring language that they can come up with is: “Scotland is renowned for its distinctive and diverse range of landscapes.” However they come across as slightly schizophrenic about our landscapes, not being sure in themselves whether they are there to provide an aesthetic backdrop to daily life or exploited for their economic potential: “Scotland’s countryside and landscapes are important both for their intrinsic environmental value and because of the opportunities for social and economic development.” This perhaps is reflected also in the National Parks legislation where a commitment to realising development potential sits alongside conservation.

And what about the independence White Paper? What does this say about how committed a future independent Scotland is to protecting the Scotland that is perhaps strongest in our imagination: the hills, mountains, lochs, glens and islands? The actual country in which we live? It starts well, with the First Minister stating: “Scotland is an ancient nation, renowned for the ingenuity and creativity of our people, the breathtaking beauty of our land...” But in the 650 pages of the document that is also about the end of it! There is only one paragraph on wildlife and landscape: “Scotland has a spectacular natural environment and rich biodiversity. The Scottish Government recognises that our natural assets underpin our economy and the health and wellbeing of our citizens and visitors”, the only identified action being: “If we form the government of an independent Scotland we will seek to

enshrine environmental protection in the constitution.” One paragraph on the whole natural environment of Scotland!

Additionally there is only one question in the 207 pages of 650 questions on the issue, and the only additional information that can be gleaned is that the government would be “committed to ensuring that an independent Scotland will deliver on its European and international obligations.” Not much detail here... Is the Scottish landscape so unimportant that this is all it merits? There is in fact no European or international law dedicated to landscape conservation, although there is the less formal European Landscape Convention. What action is the government of Scotland going to take to conserve the beauty that the First Minister refers to? Are they afraid that looking after the only planet on which we all live will bring about the depopulation of Scotland?

Am I just a romantic Luddite, with anti-development views that will only lead to depopulation of the glens, bringing on a second Highland Clearances? For talk such as this, of wanting the hills to remain wild, can lead to such accusations. Don't get me wrong: we need development but it should always proceed on the understanding we know what we are losing and society is happy that the gains outweigh the losses. After all there is only one Scotland and it has to last all of us for ever. But I fear that, without greater commitment to looking after it, the landscapes of the imagination might be all that are left.

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