

IN PRAISE OF MOORLAND

James Fenton, 21 July 2014

It is now high summer and soon the heather moors will be coming into bloom, turning into that glorious purple which once symbolised the Scottish Highlands. I use the past tense because this no longer seems to be the case.

Not so long ago the open heather moors were seen as one of the country's main tourist attractions, with numerous J. Arthur Dixon postcards of purple heather, often with a Scottie dog and/or Westie in the middle surrounded by a tartan sash. In my youth it was common to see visitors returning back to England with a sprig of heather attached to the bonnet of their car, but this is a rare sight nowadays, if seen at all.

The VisitScotland website is a good place to demonstrate this change: you will be hard put there to find any pictures of heather moor or, in the Nature & Geography section, any mention of 'moorland' or 'heather' in the text; this is in spite of there being a whole section devoted to Forest & Woodlands, which are described as "teeming with wildlife and flora." The absence of any reference to moorland is mirrored in the Cairngorms National Park section of this website: the overview paragraph of the park merely states: "Visit the unspoilt wilderness of Cairngorms National Park where you can explore vast forests filled with wildlife, enjoy some of the best hillwalking in the country and ski down snow covered mountains. You'll also find plenty fun outdoor activities to suit a variety of interests in Britain's largest National Park." Likewise you have to drill down quite deeply to find a picture of heather moorland on the Cairngorms National Park Authority's own website – and this a National Park where heather moor is perhaps the commonest landscape.

It is as if moorland is slowly being made invisible, whether heather moors or the many other types of moor. So why is it slowly being written out of our natural heritage?

There are plenty of examples of appreciation of moorland in the past. For example, the author John Buchan enjoyed walking the open Border Hills and in his short story *Streams of Water* in the South he says:

"And all around hills huddled in silent spaces, long brown moors crowned with cairns, or steep fortresses of rock and shingle rising to foreheads of steel-like grey. The autumn blue faded in the far sky-line to white, and lent distance to the furthest peaks... I am an old connoisseur in the beauties of the uplands, but I held my breath at the sight."

The judge Lord Cockburn in 1853 in his book *Circuit Journeys* describes his impression of the route from Braemar down Glenshee to Perth:

"A brilliant, though cold day. But a glorious district.... O these large, heathery, silent hills. Treeless, peakless, and nearly rockless! Great masses of solitary silence, broken only by high rills, tumbling into raging and sparkling torrents in the valley! And the gradual opening of the rich low country, ending in the beauty of Perth! Were I to see it yearly for a thousand years, I cannot conceive that the impression would ever fade."

Of a previous journey in 1841 through Glen Moriston past Loch Cluny and down Glen Shiel he writes:

"I have been told to go and see Glenmoriston almost all my life, and now that I have seen it, I am satisfied that I have never got this advice too strongly... For our first hour the rain checked itself in order to let us see the lower part of the glen in peace. I cannot pay these four wooded miles, –

where the softness of the birch contrast so naturally with the savage rocky stream – a higher compliment than by saying that they reminded me of some parts of the unrivalled Findhorn, by far the finest of British torrents... As the valley opened and rose, its masses of wood disappeared, though it was long adhered to by sprinklings of fine birch and of noble old, branchy Scotch fir; til at least it was a composition of mountain and of water alone. And it would not be easy to find better specimens of either... There is no cultivation, singularly few inhabitants, not one single seat, scarcely above two farm-houses, and these both towards the lower end, not a village, nothing but mountain and water. And I saw enough to satisfy me that the mountain had everything that rock, precipitousness, and peaked summits could give them. Seen in in a fine day it must be a noble range...

“That dog Anderson* has excited my wrath again this morning again this morning, by saying, which I had not observed before, that ‘from the east end of Loch Cluany to about four miles beyond the inn, the glen is pretty level, and barren without grandeur.’ There is not half a mile level in the whole 36 miles; and except that there are no grapes or even wheat, there is not an inch of barrenness in them. Is there any barrenness of torrent or rock; and for what else did God toss the earth about so?”

*He is quoting the first edition of Guide to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, including Orkney and Zetland, by G. and P. Anderson.

And of the Aviemore area in 1838 he writes:

“The natural elements here admit of no good change. My river, and my rocks, and my mountains, and my lakes, and my glens, and my plains, are all perfect.” Interestingly he goes on to say that “There has been more burning of heather... than I remember to have seen before.”

Lord Cockburn would have welcomed the recent map of wild land as produced by Scottish Natural Heritage for he states after a visit over the Rest and Be Thankful in 1838:

“As I stood at the height of the road and gazed down on its strange course both ways, I could not help rejoicing that there was at least one place where railways, canals, and steamers and all these devices for sinking hills and raising valleys, and introducing man and levels, and destroying solitude and nature, would for ever be set at defiance.”

Moving further north, Charles St John 1809-1856 in his book A Scottish Naturalist wrote:

“The tract of country preserved as a deer forest [Sutherland north and west of Altnaharra] comprises a most extensive range of mountains, the best in all Scotland for the purpose. Reaching away to the north-west and west, the forest takes in corrie after corrie, and mountain after mountain, of the most wild and romantic character. Fitted, too, for scarcely any other purpose than as a refuge for wild animals, the most determined utilitarian could not say that the ground was wasted, nor suggest a better use to which to apply it. It is far too barren to make sheep farming remunerative, and any other way of attempting to make the mountain in that district useful to mankind would be a labour thrown away.”

By ‘deer forest’ he does not of course mean trees but uncultivated land. Nowadays developers would be able to make money from this area in ways not envisaged by Charles St John (and to the chagrin of Lord Cockburn) through the construction of forestry plantations, wind farms and hydro-electric schemes – especially in these mercenary times of land use policies when land is not just allowed ‘to be’ but has to be of economic use. But I digress.

This small sample of writings from the past will not necessarily be representative of all the views of visitors and the local people, but it does illustrate previous appreciation of the open nature of the Scottish landscape, unwoodedness being a characteristic that distinguishes the Scottish hills from those of mainland Europe. Romantics such as those quoted above appreciated the open moors and hills of the Highlands and wanted to keep them that way (which is not to say that they did not appreciate the wooded areas as well).

So why is this appreciation being lost? There may be a clue in Charles St John's quote above where he refers to a large tract of Sutherland as being deer forest. Deer forests, together with grouse moors, are often symbolic of the exclusive use of the land for the aristocracy. Hence open moorland has become associated politically with the landowning lobby: it is derided because of its association. But is it moorland's fault that it is perceived to be the preserve of the rich?

But perhaps a more important reason for the lack of appreciation of moorland can be traced back to Frank Fraser Darling, and those of his ilk, who said that the Highlands are a degraded landscape owing to deforestation over the centuries at the hand of humans: in the words of the historian James Hunter in his book *On the Other Side of Sorrow* they should be seen as a 'devastated countryside'.

Hence our open moors are nowadays not seen as places to be appreciated for their wildness but places for deprecation owing to their degraded state: in reality they should be covered in trees. An example of this mindset can be found in the Cairngorm National Park's Authority 'Nature Action Plan 2013-18' (available on their website). It first of all states:

"Heather moorland in the uplands plays a huge part in the look and life of the National Park. It covers around 40 per cent of the land. The tones of ling, bell heather, other woody shrubs, grasses and sedges that grow in the moors are a fundamental aspect of the seasonal shifts of colour in the Park. These moors support animals like the economically important red grouse, rare netted mountain moths, and reptiles like the adder."

However in its vision for the National Park in 2063 it states:

"A natural transition from woodland to montane scrub to upland heath is developing throughout the National Park."

By "upland heath" it means the short wind-pruned heathland found at the highest altitudes, not the heather moors that characterise most of the hill slopes and lower hills. It can be seen that there is no space for such moorland in this vision: the implication is that the park authority would like to see all converted to woodland and scrub in the long-term.

However the vision continues:

"Productive grouse moors and high-quality stalking remains a mainstay of life, contributing environmentally, economically and socially."

It is not clear how maintaining productive grouse moors will mesh with the moors becoming woodland and scrub referred to above. There does appear to be a contradiction here.

Another illustration of how our appreciation of the Highland landscape has shifted away from moorland in recent years can be found by further analysis of the VisitScotland website: a search for

'moorland' will reveal only 991 hits, for 'woodland' 8,680 hits. Almost an order of magnitude more results for woodland! And a more detailed 'heather moor' search will reveal only 101 hits compared to 664 for 'pine woodland.'

Are we being brainwashed here? Is there a subliminal message of woodland 'good', moorland 'bad'? That looking after moorland is seen as a top-down activity preserving a degraded landscape for an elite, whereas woodland creation is a bottom-up, community activity restoring a degraded landscape for the many?

What would John Buchan, Lord Cockburn and Charles St John think of this? Or do we discount their views, themselves being members of the privileged elite?

But what if Frank Fraser Darling was wrong, that moorland is not merely degraded woodland but an important natural habitat in its own right, one that distinguishes Scotland from the uplands of mainland Europe? What then of these modern visions?

Do people, do you, really know our moorlands that we are losing? How many of you have walked the moors with a wet west wind blowing cold, but exhilarating on your cheeks? Have run downhill through deep, sunlit heather, holding closely the hands of your children laughing at your side? Have surprised red grouse on the ground and watched the covey fly away downwind, creaking, while, in turn, mountain hares are watching you, trying to calculate your every move? How many of you have admired the bog cotton, brighter even than snow, as it shakes continually in the ceaseless wind, or have jumped the long bog pools and peered into their depths for the dragonfly? How many of you have found rare bog mosses, or looked for midges in the sundew, wishing if only they could catch some more?

How many of you have experienced the peace of the great wide moors, have walked long days and been so alone that the cry of the golden plover brings tears to the eyes? How many slept under the stars after a long day's tramp in the company of John Buchan, lying half asleep on the hilltop, listening to the wind rustling through the bent and fescue, watching the light ebb over the treeless, cloud-shadowed moors, feeling cool caresses of the breeze on your face, and drifting off to sleep while glad to be alive? 'Come forth, the sky is wide and it is a far cry to the world's end...' How many of you have skied alone across the frozen heaths and bogs, through the mountains in the short winter days, have faced the winter blizzards, have been tired and hungry, and yet been happy in the endless wastes with only a tent or snowhole for shelter?

How many could rejoice (or mourn) in pentatonic and compose love songs, understanding completely the words of the song 'like the white lily floating in the peat hag's dark waters'? How many of you really know Scotland? And if you did know it, why would you want to get rid of the cold, bleak, windy, windswept, midge-ridden, rough, boggy, and yet glorious, oh so glorious moors? Why do you want to replace the call of the whaup, the creak of the grouse, the pip-pip of the pipit, the beauty of parnassus, the orange glow of the asphodel, the blue of the milkwort, the smell of the myrtle and of heather in bloom, the black of the peat hag, the white of the bog wood, this fairy magic... Is this not the heart of Scotland? Is this not what shaped our ancestors and defined our country? Why the rush to destroy it?