

IN PRAISE OF MOORLAND

James Fenton, 6 August 2014

Let us go, lassie, go
To the braes o' Balquhither,
Where the blae-berries grow
'Mang the bonnie Highland heather;
Where flie deer and the rae
Lightly bounding together,
Sport the lang summer day
On the braes o' Balquhither.

Robert Tannahill

The Braes of Balquither (1821)

IT is now high summer and the heather moors are coming into bloom, turning into that glorious purple which was at one time the symbol of the Scottish Highlands. I say "at one time" because I am not sure this is still 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.

However the moors are still celebrated by some, particularly now that the Glorious Twelfth is upon us, the date when the grouse shooting season opens and there is a race to get the first bird down to London restaurants. For red grouse are intimately linked to heather; it is their home, and their fate and the fate of the heather are intimately entwined.

Beyond the sporting fraternity, however, heather moorland is no longer the potent symbol of the Highlands it once was. On the VisitScotland website, 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. The absence of any reference to moorland is mirrored in the Cairngorms National Park section.

It is as if moorland were slowly being made invisible, and by moorland I am here meaning any area of unwooded ground dominated by the indigenous vegetation of heaths, bogs and grassland. Because our rocks are hard and acidic, our soils waterlogged and infertile, and our climate cool and damp, trees are discouraged and our native heathers, sedges and grasses take over. These moors are the tracts of open ground that we see when we drive south over the hills to Moffat or through the Dalveen Pass to Thornhill, when we drive north to Glencoe over Rannoch Moor and onwards through Glen Shiel to Skye, or to Inverness via the wilds of Drumochter Pass. They are the vast boggy lands of Caithness and the Western Isles, the rugged landscapes of Sutherland and Wester Ross and also, far to the south, of the Galloway Hills; they are the gentler heather moors of the Cairngorms and the Angus Glens, and the grassy moors of Argyll and the Southern Uplands.

And Scotland is a world centre for such temperate moorland. Indeed we are the world centre for the red grouse, that iconic bird of the heather moors, and for plants such as heather, cross-leaved heath and bog asphodel. These are common species here, but being common we tend to take them for granted and not recognise how rare they are in the world – although interestingly the European Union does recognise most of the moorland types as being of international importance. The moors are also the home of many birds that depend on an open, tundra-like landscape, such as golden eagles, hen harriers, dunlin, curlew and redshank.

In fact our open moorland has an unbroken ecological link back to the last ice age, with its vegetation retaining one of the most natural patterns in Europe (I do not include here the small-scale pattern caused by heather burning). "Naturalness" is a key determinant of global nature conservation value and, in the same way we all want to keep as much of the Brazilian rainforest as possible, we should be taking the same view of our rainforest equivalent – our indigenous moorland. But although without trees, owing to the high organic content of its soils and peat it does store at least as much carbon as a forest, and often a lot more – and hence is important in consideration of climate change.

In the past, moorland landscapes were so common that Scots probably took them for granted. However nowadays it can be hard to envisage what the Scottish landscape was like before the great estates started planting trees in the eighteenth century, before the Forestry Commission was formed in the twentieth, and before agricultural improvement removed the last of the moorland from the lowlands. Recent research, for example, has shown that trees were rare in the Stirling area at the time of the Battle of Bannockburn with, presumably, open moorland dominating. The Highlander sleeping in his plaid under an open sky, whether thieving cattle or legally droving; the Border reivers marching hither and thither on their continual raids; the clansmen following their chiefs into battle, including Bonne Prince Charlie on that fateful day at Culloden; the Covenanters preaching to the faithful in the wilds of Galloway; the crofters taking their beasts to the summer shielings; the common man, lowland or upland, out cutting his peats ... To all of them the moors would have been their everyday environment.

But moorland has now retreated almost completely from the lowlands, with places such as Fenwick Moor above Glasgow, Auchencorth Moss south of Edinburgh and Flanders Moss near Stirling being but relicts of their former selves. Often the memory of this moorland lingers only in place names, particularly those containing the words "moss" or "muir". And in the uplands, particularly during the second half of the 20th century, great tracts have been lost, either converted to forestry plantations or reclaimed for agriculture. And the process of loss continues. The Scottish Forestry Strategy has a Government commitment to plant 10,000 hectares of trees a year, and where else can the trees be put, for surely we will not want to give up the places where we grow our food? And there is a current fashion for converting moorland to native woodland, which I discuss in more detail below.

As well as the ongoing loss of moorland to forestry (loss to agriculture is now rare), there is now underway a major loss of the quality of our moors through the industrial development of windfarms, hydro-electric schemes and miles and miles of access tracks. In the lowlands, often the last bit of remaining moorland, the last remaining bit of natural vegetation, is the rough grazing to be found at the top of the local hills, areas too exposed for conversion to farmland. But these are also the windiest locations and the places with least economic constraints – hence the obvious place to build a windfarm (and also telecommunication masts). So perhaps it is these areas, these last places where it is possible for most people to experience that little bit of wild nature without travelling too far from home, it is these areas of moorland which are under the greatest threat. But of course windfarms are being built on moors everywhere in Scotland, particularly in the Southern Uplands and in areas of the Highlands where the national grid is nearby. I sometimes think it would be better to have two new nuclear power-stations producing enough electricity full-time for the whole of Scotland than to industrialise all our moors in order to squeeze out every last kilowatt of power from the wind or water. There is a danger of us losing our wildness completely from the cumulative impact of windfarm after windfarm. And is a country without wild places one in which we would want to live in? But I suppose nowadays land has to earn its keep, to be useful. In these mercenary times it appears we cannot afford the land just "to be".

So moorland is retreating everywhere. But why, you might reasonably ask, am I concerned about the loss of what was once the commonplace? Firstly, on an emotional plane, I feel we are losing the "old Scotland" - the landscapes that contributed to the Scots being the people that they are; the everyday landscapes that once shaped our culture and mindset. A culture that is being replaced amongst other things by what I see as an alien, imported one from the south (and Scandinavia), a culture of trees and woodland. Secondly we are losing our last remaining areas of wildness, areas of untamed nature which were once so much a characteristic of Scotland. If the trend of moorland loss continues, we would nowhere be able to remember what nature was like in the raw. And thirdly, we are losing the habitats, plants and animals that are one of Scotland's main contributions to global biodiversity.

So why is there not a widespread outcry at this loss? Why is there no NGO dedicated to preserving moorland, as there is for every other habitat or species? Although there are organisations devoted to conserving Scotland's wild places such as the John Muir Trust and the Scottish Wild Land Group, these organisations are keen, for the reasons below, to keep covering the moors with trees.

Perhaps one reason for the lack of general concern about the loss is because the hill ground is often grouse moor or deer forest, 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. And the association is strong. Since the decline of the clan system, landowners have been widely accused of clearing people off the land to make way at first for sheep and later for deer. And it is true that they preferred to have exclusive use of the land, "their land" as they saw it, for their own recreational ends: there are many stories of walkers being ordered off the estate. But this exclusiveness has always rankled, so that on the return of the Scottish Parliament after its 300-year absence one of its first acts was to bring in the Land Reform Act of 2003, giving legal access to everyone. However people still see the moors as the preserve of the elite where deer stalking or grouse shooting is something you do once you have become rich and joined "the establishment". The "Glorious Twelfth" is not glorious in everyone's eyes.

Another reason is that killing wild animals for sport is frowned on by many people, so that the moors are associated with the recreational killing of deer and the slaughter of grouse. But if, from the conservationist's perspective, there are too many deer, does it really matter whether the deer are killed by someone who is paid a salary to kill them or by someone who pays a fee to kill them? Although I do not shoot myself, I do eat meat, including venison and grouse, and I would prefer that my food had come from a clean kill on the open hill than from a wild animal farmed for eventual slaughter. Interestingly I note that, as a source of revenue, sport shooting is being offered on some estates which are now in community ownership. Does this now make recreational shooting acceptable?

There is however another reason for the lack of appreciation of moorland which can be traced back to the English ecologist 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*, the Highlands are a "devastated countryside". The existence of moorland is a result of the human destruction of the forest so that there is almost a moral imperative to put trees back into the landscape. I even remember hearing one famous Scottish conservationist in a television programme refer to heather as "a weed". The blame for the continuing lack of trees is put firmly at the landowners' door because they encourage the red deer who are responsible for overgrazing the land.

Therefore our open moors are nowadays not seen as places to be appreciated for their wildness but places for deprecation owing to their degraded state. "Putting trees back into the landscape" is a

key activity of virtually all Scottish conservation NGOs and of both national park authorities. It has also been taken up by some landowners such as the Danish billionaire Anders Povlsen who, in addition to Glen Feshie, has bought two moorland estates in Sutherland to fulfil his vision of “restoring” the ecology of the area by creating large areas of new native woodland.

I think we are being brainwashed here through a potent mix of ecology and politics, that there is 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. For, unlike grouse shooting, woodland creation is widely promoted as a community activity by the likes of Reforesting Scotland, Trees For Life and the RSPB.

But what if Frank Fraser Darling was wrong, that moorland is not merely degraded woodland but, as I believe, an important natural habitat, one that distinguishes Scotland from the uplands of mainland Europe? That it should not be damned by its association. That it needs to be looked after in its own right regardless of politics, that we need to separate the activities that take place on the land from the land itself.

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, have walked long days and been so alone that the cry of the golden plover brings tears to the eyes? 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? 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? Is this not the heart of Scotland?

So, if we want to keep our moorland, what is to be done? Scottish Natural Heritage's new map of wild land is a start because most of the areas identified consist mainly of moorland: we should use this map to prevent further encroachment of windfarms, hydro schemes, new woods and tracks in these locations. However there is a lot of moorland outwith these areas. Hence we need to produce a moorland strategy for Scotland as a whole, a strategy which will identify the key moors we want to retain. Although there is a forestry strategy, it is surprising there is no moorland strategy – but perhaps not so surprising for the reasons given above. As it is, the chief defenders of our moorland are those who want to shoot grouse and deer over it, and are willing to pay good money to do this. Hence the shooting lobby appears to be the first line of defence, although I am told that some shooters are no longer coming to Scotland because the proliferation of windfarms is ruining the ambience and wildness of our moors and hills...