

## Introduction

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I am not ignorant that foreigners, sailing through the Western Isles, have been tempted from the sight of so many wild hills that seem to be covered all over with heath, and faced with high rocks, to imagine that the inhabitants, as well as the places of their residence, are barbarous; and to this opinion, their habit as well as their language, have contributed. The like is supposed by many that live in the south of Scotland, who know no more of the Western Isles than the natives of Italy, but the lion is not so fierce as he is painted, neither are the people described here so barbarous as the world imagines.

Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland circa 1695*

Paradox, duality and division rather than unity and consistency are often presented as the essence of the Scottish experience: a 'stateless' nation without its own government for nearly three centuries; a society riven by sectarianism; an education system which denigrated its indigenous cultures, and a media which marginalised its native languages. Our history and literature abound in binary oppositions and 'polar twins': Bruce and Wallace; Robert Wringhim and his alter-ego in Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*; Jekyll and Hyde; or the Scottish and English selves which compete for possession of Chris Guthrie in *Sunset Song*. Surely the most fundamental and enduring instance of Scottish schizophrenia is that of Highlands and Lowlands. *Miorun mòr nan Gall*, 'the great ill-will of the Lowlander', is a tag associated with the great eighteenth-century Gaelic poet and prophet of the '45 Jacobite rising, Alexander MacDonald—Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair. It has come to act as shorthand for historic Lowland hostility towards Highlanders, and for the Lowland indifference to Gaelic culture that still persists in some quarters today. The paradox that is regularly bemoaned as an impervious feature of modern Scottish identity is that Lowlanders have nonetheless been so ready to identify with Highland images—

bens and glens, kilts and bagpipes, whisky and clans—as definitive symbols of Scottish nationhood.

The origins of both the perception of a ‘Highland/Lowland’ divide and of its accompanying paradox have each been the subject of much scholarly discussion. Two acknowledged pivotal figures are the late-fourteenth century Scottish chronicler, John of Fordun, and Sir Walter Scott. A famous passage in Fordun’s *Chronicle of the Scottish Nation* is the main basis of the orthodoxy that the dichotomy between ‘Highlands’ and ‘Lowlands’ first emerged in the mid- to late fourteenth century, and became a core feature of ‘Lowland’ identity from the fifteenth century. It is also widely accepted that the paradoxical turn of appropriating ‘Highlands’ as a means of asserting Scotland’s distinctiveness began in the late eighteenth century, with the failure of the ’45 and the impact of Ossian; and became automatic in the nineteenth, particularly after Scott’s celebrated stage-managing of a Highland extravaganza for George IV’s visit to Edinburgh in 1822, and Queen Victoria’s adoption of Balmoral, purchased in 1848, as her summer residence. This book is intended to offer critical perspectives on these two key issues, individuals and epochs, and in the process to probe some core assumptions about the nature of the medieval division and modern paradox.

The essays in the book do not represent a ‘lineal’ and chronologically continuous exploration of ‘Lowland Perceptions of the Highlands’. Neither do they all branch equally from a common core, as would be the case if each essay took an agreed single dimension of the subject and tackled it from the perspective of different disciplines and source-types. Instead, a more fluid, multi-layered pattern is attempted with the intention of allowing interrelationships to be more readily appreciated and explored. Readers are not encouraged to regard this book as a comprehensive guide. It is hoped, rather, that they will find it thought-provoking and will seek to develop their own conclusions from it. Each essay, of course, is also an independent piece of work in its own right, and can be read and enjoyed on its own merits.

The book naturally falls into two sections. Part One is focused on the 'Highland/Lowland' divide in the middle and later middle ages, and Part Two on aspects of the 'Lowland' appropriation of the 'Highlands' from the later eighteenth century to the early twentieth. Each part consists of four contributions, and the relationship between the four items in each section is essentially similar. Each part opens with essays which act as surveys of the period in question, although through the medium of different source-types. Martin MacGregor provides a fresh examination of perceptions of the 'Highlands' in the work of late-medieval writers, and Anne MacLeod discusses the relatively underexploited subject of visual representations of the Highlands in the era between Macpherson's *Ossian* and the Crofters' War. This is followed in each case by a radical reappraisal of the two key figures in the current scholarly consensus about how the medieval division and modern paradox came about. In Part One Dauvit Broun develops Martin MacGregor's critique of Fordun's oft-repeated account of the Highland/Lowland divide by arguing that this ultimately has its roots not in the social or cultural realities of the mid-fourteenth century, but in the ideology and identity of the twelfth and thirteenth. In Part Two Alison Lumsden takes a fresh and deeper look at the fiction of Walter Scott, and finds that he was not simply the high literary equivalent of the artists and travellers discussed by Anne MacLeod. Instead, Scott can be read much more compellingly as interrogating and deconstructing received romantic ideas about the 'Highlands', rather than as creating and sustaining them.

Each part of the book is completed by picking up a central theme from the first two essays and approaching this from different angles. The third essay in each sequence of four explores a subject that is closely related to the second essay. In the first part Stephen Boardman adds a new dimension to the challenge to the consensus about the nature of the 'Highland/Lowland' divide by tackling head-on the assumption that the Crown was only really comfortable in its relations with the 'domesticated' lowlands of the kingdom, and was instinctively antipathetic to the 'Highlands'. He shows that the early

Stewart kings (who ruled at precisely the time when scholars have hitherto considered the 'Highland/Lowland' divide to have first become apparent) were, if anything, more intimately involved with large parts of the 'Highlands' than they were with the south of the kingdom. He also shows that the Stewarts, whose name derives from their hereditary holding of the office of steward of the royal household, embraced significant parts of Gaelic Scotland within their lordship from at least the early thirteenth century, and that some leading members of the family even bore Gaelic epithets. This tale of adaptation to life 'beyond the dusky barrier' finds an echo in the parallel essay by Douglas Gifford in Part Two. Neil Munro's career path took him on the reverse journey, from Argyll and Inveraray to Glasgow and the Lowlands, but his roots in the Gaelic world lend a peculiar interest and flavour to his treatments of it. Gifford's essay forms a natural companion piece to Alison Lumsden's fresh take on Scott, not only because he likewise argues cogently for hitherto unsuspected depth in a writer's treatment of the Highlands, but specifically because Neil Munro's Highland fiction resonates explicitly with Scott's, for example with the allusions to *Rob Roy* which Munro deploys in his most compelling Highland novel, *The New Road*.

The last essay in each part offers a strikingly different but complementary perspective on an issue emerging from the first essay and explored in the second and third essays. In Part One, the first three essays all offer different challenges to the assumption that perceptions of Highland backwardness, and of a 'Highland/Lowland' divide, must necessarily relate to some fundamental social or cultural reality. The documentary evidence for what this reality may have been, however, is simply not thick enough on the ground for large parts of Gaelic Scotland in this period to enable the contrast between the 'fiction' of perception and the 'facts' of real life to be drawn convincingly. The same does not apply to Tuscany, one of the most document-rich societies of late-medieval Europe. Samuel Cohn Jnr shows that 'Lowland' perceptions of the Tuscan 'Highlands' could be even more vicious than we find in any Scottish source, even in the

case of an eye-witness account. He demonstrates, however, that scholars who take the trouble to examine the copious material in the archives are handsomely rewarded by the discovery of a picture of 'Highland' society wholly at odds with contemporary literary depictions of economic and religious backwardness, depictions which until now have been read at face value.

In Part Two, the simultaneous tendency to emphasise and denigrate the exploitation of the 'Highlands' as a core element of 'Lowland' identity is probed by highlighting how the process of appropriation was itself much more ambiguous than might at first sight be supposed. This is explored by Alison Lumsden and Douglas Gifford by focusing on the work of two major authors. In Ewen Cameron's essay, the main link with this overall theme is with Anne MacLeod's contribution. On one level Anne MacLeod is concerned with how the Highlands provided inspiration for people who had (at best) a limited interest in real Highlanders. At the same time, her essay also shows vividly how the Highlands became significant not so much for Lowlanders and their Scottish identity, as for those from further afield seeking fulfilment of particular aesthetic and philosophical needs. This theme of the enhanced importance of the Highlands not only within Scotland but beyond is a central feature of Ewen Cameron's essay, in which he shows how they became a magnet for diverse political interests in the 1880s. He also draws attention to how this was inspired particularly by Highlanders taking the initiative and protesting in a way that was previously regarded as unthinkable. It may have been more as landscape rather than as people that the Highlands had first become embedded in the visual consciousness of many beyond Scotland, but it was as communities taking action—in a manner reminiscent of Cohn's Tuscan Highlanders *ca* 1400—that the Highlands captured the imagination of a wide spectrum of diverse political forces, if only briefly.

Both parts represent re-examinations of the two key elements of the 'Highlands' within today's Scottish identity that have been inherited from the past. The very idea of the espousal of mock-

'Highland' traits would be impossible without some notion of 'Highlands' in the first place. In this historical context the 'Highlands' are revealed, even more acutely than has previously been supposed, to be a mental construct of those who identify 'Highlanders' as 'others', and who, in a Scottish context, see themselves as 'Lowlanders'.

In a book addressing Lowland perceptions, it might have been assumed that the place of Gaels within this process, and their attitudes towards it, would be unlikely to feature much beyond the title's Gaelic component. In fact, it may be indicative of the more rounded account hopefully offered here that liminal and mediating figures with Gaelic credentials put in a number of appearances. John Murdoch is the outstanding example among several in Ewen Cameron's essay, and to him and Neil Munro we could add James Macpherson, George Buchanan, Walter Kennedy, and perhaps even the author of the famous Fordun passage itself. Martin Martin, author of the quotation which opened this introduction, is of the same ilk. Even so, the Gaelic perspective could naturally form the subject of a collection of essays in its own right. If so, it is hoped that it will not be based on the notions of the inherent 'division' between 'Highlands' and 'Lowlands', and the enduring 'paradox' of the appropriation of 'Highland' images for Scottish nationhood, that have been challenged in this volume. The 'division' is, first and foremost, a function of the imagination of particular groups in particular contexts, and the 'paradox' is a rich interplay of genuine interaction and self-aware ambiguity. Together they help to make Scottish experience much more engaging and vital than would be true if these essays had been faced instead with challenging a traditional emphasis on superficialities like unity and consistency.