

University of Edinburgh: Geography Department Lecture

Wild Land, Rewilding and Repeopling

James Hunter

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Brexit Britain, we're told, is overcrowded.

Maybe, in some places, that rings true.

But not where I come from. The Highlands and Islands.

OK, our population's up by 22 per cent in the last fifty years – as compared with only two per cent in Scotland as a whole.

And as shown by estimates of just two weeks ago, that rate of increase is continuing.

But in the north, for all that, we still have fewer people than two centuries ago.

Take Sutherland – whose landscapes and whose history I've, of late, spent time exploring.

This is one of Europe's empty quarters.

England's population density is 413 people per square kilometre.

Scotland's is 68.

But each square kilometre in Sutherland contains, on average, just two people.

And since most folk in Sutherland live close to its seashores, the district's huge interior is almost uninhabited.

You get some sense of this when on the 50-mile length of single-track road from Lairg to Bettyhill by way of Altnaharra.

For mile, after mile, after mile, you see no homes, you meet no other vehicles.

Stop, for a moment, on this road – beside Loch Naver – where the road winds to and fro along the shore.

Across the loch, a pretty hefty chunk of water, the ground slopes upward, eastward, southward to the summit of Ben Klibreck.

Which gives its name to Highland Special Landscape Area Number 8, Ben Klibreck and Loch Choire.

And to Scotland's Wild Land Area Number 35, Ben Klibreck/Armine Forest.

In the paperwork describing Wild Land Area 35 and Special Landscape Area 8, you find these phrases:

- perception of emptiness
- unobstructed by human elements
- strong sense of naturalness
- arresting wild land qualities
- sense of solitude
- notably secluded
- strong sense of remoteness

I have no quarrel with these words.

They tell you how those places seem to folk who had the job of mapping and describing Landscape Area 8 and Wild Land Area 35.

I simply register the point that this is *not* how those same places seem to me.

In my head they're linked with people.

People like William MacKay.

MacKay was born, raised, spent most of his life in Landscape Area 8 – in Wild Land Area 35.

Neither he, his wife Janet, their children nor their neighbours would have recognised those terms – nor descriptors like remoteness.

To them the place was *home*. Just that.

As it had been for all the generations named when William worked his way through a long *sloinneadh*.

This is a Gaelic term meaning, roughly, family tree.

But it's much more than that. His sloinneadh underlined a person's ancestry – his links with folk who mattered in his clan.

In a kin-based, quasi-tribal world of the kind the Highlands were, this was important. Your sloinneadh fixed, proclaimed, made known your status.

A status that, in William's case, was high – his sloinneadh linking him with his clan's founders and spanning something like four hundred years – years through which folk named in William's sloinneadh occupied a biggish slice of what's now Landscape Area 8, Wild Land Area 35.

This long connection between William's people and their place ended in 1807 – when the Countess of Sutherland evicted William and his neighbours ... and established on the land thus cleared and emptied Britain's most extensive sheep farm.

Following their eviction, William and Janet, elderly now, moved to Grumbeg, on Loch Naver's western shore, its site adjacent to the road I mentioned.

To live there with their daughter and her husband.

But Grumbeg too was earmarked for destruction.

In May 1819, its dozen families were among the hundreds of such families turned out of homes that were then burned when all Strathnaver was put under sheep.

As it happened, Janet MacKay died just prior to her new eviction.

The graveyard where she's buried is nowadays beside a church that's just another of this area's many ruins.

You'll find the remnants of this church at Achness, Ach an Eas ... the name means settlement beside a waterfall ... the waterfall being where the Mallart River flows out of Wild Land Area 35 and tumbles down into the Naver.

The Achness church's minister, until his congregation was removed in its entirety, was Donald Sage.

‘Well, Janet,’ Sage remembered William saying as this man, in his nineties, saw his wife go to her grave ... ‘Well, Janet, the Countess of Sutherland can never flit you any more.’

Today a lot of Sutherland is scheduled as wild land.

And even bits that aren’t mostly lack much habitation.

Recently, wild land’s been mapped, described and analysed extensively.

But in all of this, I think, one key dimension’s missing.

A sense of history ... a sense of what’s been altered, often radically, over time.

A sense that much that’s now thought wild was made the way it is by human action ... not so very long ago.

Around and inside wild land areas is a deal of archaeology.

From medieval times, the iron age, the bronze age, even earlier.

Archaeology that shows our empty landscapes were lived among, and occupied, by people for maybe five millennia.

What’s being preserved in wild land areas, then, is very often something that – in fifty centuries – has existed for just two.

To talk this way’s at once to raise suspicion.

Suspicion that one’s motives are akin to those of that most avid of developers, Andy McChuckemup from John McGrath’s great piece of 1970s theatre, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*. Here’s Andy in full flow:

Picture if you will, right there at the top of the glen – beautiful vista – the Crammem Inn, High Rise Motorcroft – all finished in natural, washable, plastic granitette ... Picture if you will, a drive-in clachan on every hilltop where previously there was hee-haw but scenery.

Well, I’d best be clear that *I’m* not for a drive-in clachan on Ben Klibreck.

Or wind turbines, come to that.

Indeed if there's to be some change in wild land areas, I'd prefer that it was change in a quite different direction.

By way of rewilding.

By way of recognition that much of what we call wild land is ecologically knackered.

Not so much wild as grazed-out, barren, unproductive.

Wild land's like that because, in many instances, that's how its owners like it.

As sporting estate.

Meaning, less euphemistically, a place for killing things.

And as habitat, ironically, far less diverse and rich than when Wild Land Area 35 was where William MacKay, and many others, kept their cattle.

1819, in Sutherland folk's recollection, was *bliadhna na losgaidh*, the year of the burnings ... that year's spring being when evicting parties torched the centuries-old communities they destroyed.

With people thus disposed of, attention switched to getting rid of other obstacles to what the organisers of evictions called 'improvement'.

Newly arrived sheep farmers wanted, naturally, to minimise stock losses. This from my recent book about these happenings:

Some of these losses, it was agreed, were attributable to predation by eagles, foxes and other 'vermin'. That's why Sutherland's sheep farmers collectively offered bounties to killers of such predators. One pound (more than many labourers then earned in a month) was paid 'for the head and talons of each full-grown eagle', five shillings 'for the egg of an eagle' and two pounds 'for the face and ears of a bitch fox [or vixen] with young'. The resulting slaughter – intensified by the inclusion of lots of other birds and mammals in the bounty scheme – was on a scale sufficient to ensure that some species were driven to or (in the case of sea

eagles and red kites) beyond the edge of localised extinction. In just twenty months between August 1819 and March 1821, it was reported, the overall tally included ‘112 fully-grown eagles, 18 young eagles, 211 foxes, 317 wildcats, [pine]martens and polecats, 516 ravens, 281 hawks [meaning hen harriers, red kites and other raptors], 1,183 carrion crows and magpies, and 500 rooks and jackdaws’.

Think about the 130 eagles killed in those few months.

Today in Sutherland you couldn’t match that total.

Because today, despite a plethora of conservation measures ... the latest being the mapping and protection of wild land ... there aren’t that many eagles to be found there.

The prey they’d need is missing.

Because, to repeat, so much of our terrain, wild land included, is ecologically knackered.

Why this is so’s been well set out by someone I’m privileged to know.

His name’s Reay Clarke. A retired farmer. Living still in the farmhouse at Edderton where he was born in 1923. And two, three years ago, already in his nineties, Reay published his first book.

A book that tells the story of his family’s long involvement in sheep farming ... not at Edderton, where Reay’s father became tenant in 1921, but at Eriboll on Sutherland’s north coast.

Towards the close of his book, Reay reflects on what has happened to the land from which, two hundred years ago, a human population was expelled.

The relevant chapter’s headed by some lines from Jeremiah:

They have made my pleasant portion a desolate wilderness. They have made it desolate and, being desolate, it mourneth unto me.

‘The hill lands ... have gone back,’ Reay writes. They’ve gone back a long way.

By way of evidence, he cites the cattle numbers those same hill lands once carried.

The enormous flocks kept by the earliest sheep farmers in localities where such a thing's long been impossible.

Here's Reay on what went wrong:

On the hills of Sutherland the generous sweep of the cow's tongue had been replaced by the sheep's selective nibble. The cow is a general grazer. While she will not eat perennial weeds like dockens and thistles, she grazes the grasses and herbs by sweeping them into her mouth with her tongue and then cutting these off by closing her teeth against her upper dental pad ... She profits the land in two ways. Her method of grazing gathers both fine and rough herbage, thus improving the sward. Then she drops her dung back on to the land where it breaks down, feeding the insects and feeding the soil.

Reay Clarke. In contrast, he points out, sheep are selective grazers. This, if other stock are present, is no problem. But the whole point of the clearances was to put land, in its entirety, under sheep. A little more from Reay:

The generous grazing of many cows and the selective bite of a few sheep are both needed to establish and maintain fine pasture. In the natural world all grazing systems have a variety of animals to harvest the herbage. In Sutherland the mixed summer grazing of former years, by cattle with a few sheep, goats and ponies, was changed to an all-the-year-round defoliation by a single species – sheep ... The mixed grazing of [the older] transhumant pastoral husbandry created a diversity of plants in the sward and an increase in the fertility of the soil. The continuous single-species grazing by sheep slowly destroyed that store of wealth.

Reay Clarke. Who's old enough to have known, to have spent time with, the pioneer ecologist Frank Fraser Darling – whom I myself am old enough to have had the chance to interview not long before he died in 1979.

The way the north of Scotland had been treated, Frank Fraser Darling thought, had drained the area of what he called 'productiveness ... fertility'.

Still prevalent 'forms of land usage', he insisted, had to change.

Hence, the concluding sentence from Fraser Darling's 1954 preface to his *West Highland Survey*, that magnificent book which Scotland's then Department of Agriculture ... because they didn't like the end point of research that they'd commissioned ... refused point-blank to publish.

And, finally, the bald unpalatable fact is emphasised that the Highlands and Islands are largely a devastated terrain, and that any policy which ignores this fact cannot hope to achieve rehabilitation.

Frank Fraser Darling. What he called 'a devastated terrain' is what today we call 'wild land'.

And present policy is very much to keep it exactly as it is ... 'wild' from one perspective ... 'devastated' from another.

Well, I'm with Fraser Darling and Reay Clarke.

Hence my preference for rewilding.

For bringing back our native woodland ... bringing back much else as well.

Including people.

Not necessarily *inside* our wild land areas.

But in their general vicinity – where some at least of our innumerable cleared communities could stand repopulation.

As could the Scottish countryside more generally.

Which brings me to the way that planners, governments, public agencies respond to, think about, the notion of new homes in rural areas.

Attitudes to landscape – officialdom's or otherwise – tend to the conservative.

How things are, we think, is – for the most part – the way things ought to be.

Hence a comment I heard once from a forester.

The outcry about planting a hillside, he said, is matched only by the other outcry, half a century later, when you take the trees away.

I remember too a letter, in the Edinburgh *Evening News*, when I lived in this city in the early 1970s.

There was then something of a stushie about proposed development that might impact – adversely it was claimed – on Calton Hill.

The letter I'm recalling had ostensibly been held up in the post.

For something like 900 years.

It objected to King Malcolm's plans to wreck the Edinburgh skyline ... by building a big castle on the rock.

Wrapped up in that's a thought worth hanging on to.

For if there was no castle on the rock, for sure you wouldn't get permission to build on it today.

Any more than you'd get clearance for a drive-in clachan on top of Arthur's Seat.

The same's true of a lot of rural housing.

If it wasn't there already, present policy would not permit it to exist.

Now, as McChuckemup might put it, picture if you will another road.

The road that parallels the Outer Isles Atlantic coast – from Tarbert down the western side of Harris and then on through the Uists to Barra and to Watersay.

There's crofting township after township on, or near, this road.

With township homes strung out across the machair – that flower-rich, bird-rich habitat produced when vegetation rests on shellsand from the sea.

This blend of machair, crofts and houses can strike visitors as timeless.

But it isn't.

In the early nineteenth century much of this Atlantic seaboard was emptied of inhabitants ... in the same way as Sutherland.

Unlike in Sutherland, however, people eventually came back.

When, in the decades after 1900, political agitation, together with land seizures, persuaded governments to engage in what was called land settlement.

Meaning the creation of hundreds of new crofts in places that had earlier been cleared.

Which is why the crofting landscape all around that Hebridean road I mentioned is much newer than, for instance, the greater part of central Edinburgh.

Land settlement wasn't limited to the Outer Isles.

Take Portnalong on the west side of Skye and not far from the Cuillin.

Here, in the mid-1920s, on what had been Talisker sheep farm, the then Board of Agriculture laid out no less than 68 new crofts.

Their occupants first lived in wooden huts that gradually gave way to self-built homes consisting, to begin with, of poured-concrete gables and walls of corrugated iron.

The *Daily Mail* of 1929 was quite ecstatic – describing Portnalong as a ‘remarkable success’.

Neil Gunn, the novelist, when visiting, was equally impressed:

There can be no doubt of the happy contrast in which ... the [Portnalong] settlement ... stands to the same land under the dominion of the old lairds ... Less than a century ago, Portnalong was cleared of its inhabitants ... [Now] as we wandered [there] ... we came on new houses everywhere ... all built to the same pattern ... corrugated iron sides with front-door porch and roof of artificial slates ... They are freshly painted or whitewashed, look very well and fit into the landscape.

Neil Gunn. But suppose there hadn't been resettlement in 1920s Portnalong.

Could it happen now?

I hae ma doots.

Elsewhere in Skye, after all, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) is presently objecting to Staffin Community Trust plans to build six affordable, and badly-needed, homes on the basis that they'd spoil views of the hills that rise behind them.

Back now to wild land ... by way of Edwin Landseer.

Two months ago the National Galleries secured the £4 million it took to keep Landseer's *Monarch of the Glen* in Scotland.

On the Galleries' fundraising website, the painting was nowhere said to be great art.

Because it isn't.

Instead the *Monarch of the Glen* – this stag with its backdrop of bare and treeless hills – was described as 'a romantic emblem'.

Which it is.

As are the 42 Wild Land Areas SNH has now surveyed and, so to speak, pegged out.

Like *Monarch of the Glen*, they're reflective not so much of what is *there* as of how what's there is seen, perceived, imagined, thought about.

Which is why, though both exist on maps, a Wild Land Area's nothing like, for instance, a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

An SSSI delineates a habitat, a geological formation, a plant assemblage – something with objective, quantifiable reality.

A Wild Land Area, in contrast, is a matter of opinion.

Your secluded solitude may be to me Frank Fraser Darling's devastation – somewhere deeply, deeply scarred by what's been done to it.

I don't say one perception is superior to the other.

I do say both are valid.

Back in the mid-1980s, I became the first employee of what was then the newly set up Scottish Crofters Union – now the Scottish Crofting Federation.

My mentor was the SCU's founding father, the late Angus Macleod, raised at Calbost in the Lewis district known as Pairc ... a vast peninsula in the south-east quarter of the island ... a locality whose history Angus knew as no-one now, I think, could know it.

Pairc, like many other places in the islands, has a local history society, Comunn Eachdraich na Pairc, which, in 1991, organised a bit of an excursion to a spot called Steimreway.

Steimreway was cleared in 1857 – one of three dozen or so communities obliterated to make way for a sheep farm.

Later Steimreway was one of the numerous localities which, some twenty years into the last century, were 'raided' by ex-servicemen who, on their return from the Great War, were looking to get the 'homes for heroes' they'd been promised by their country's politicians.

As I've already indicated, when touching on the Uist and Harris machairs, many such raids were successful.

But the raid on Steimreway, in 1921, was not.

Because the authorities of the time refused pleas for facilities like a school or, for that matter, an access road, the township was again abandoned.

Well, courtesy of Comunn Eachdraich na Pairc, Angus Macleod came there by sea, with lots of others, old and young, on a July Saturday ... itself now more than quarter of a century ago.

Here's an extract from a letter Angus sent me not long after:

When we were [in Steimreway] on the 'day out', it was a nice, warm summer's day and the children were playing on a green, sloping hill on the eastern side of the old village. As I watched the dozen or so ... noisy, boisterous children playing on the hill, I could not help reflecting on the community that had lived there peacefully for generations. Since I am familiar with the names of all the families who were there in 1857, and with the names of all the families who were there in 1921 as well, I saw in my mind's eye how Steimreway should be. A vibrant crofting community with its own carefree children. What a mad world landlordism imposed on our Highland people! What tragedy, what hardship!

In his book *Feral*, a rewilding manifesto, published in 2013, environmentalist and activist George Monbiot, describes the let-down he experienced on quitting urban Britain for Mid-Wales:

Like a battery chicken released from its cage, at first I ventured into the mountains tentatively, not quite believing that I could step out of my front door and walk where I would for as far as I wanted and seldom encounter a road or a house. But as I began to explore these great expanses ... my wonder and excitement gave way to disappointment ... to despair. The near absence of human life, I found, was matched by a near-absence of wildlife. The fragmented ecosystems in the city from which I had come were richer in life, richer in structure, richer in interest. In mid-Wales, I found, the woods were scarce and, in most cases, dying, as they possessed no understorey. The range of flowering plants on the open land was pitiful. Birds of any kind were rare ... Insects were scarce to be seen. I have walked those mountains for five years now, and with the exception of a few small corners, found no point of engagement with them ... [They] look like a land in perpetual winter.

George Monbiot, a bit like Fraser Darling long ago, is scathing too about the Highlands; about our almost sterile grouse moors; our desperately impoverished wild land.

But none of this, he writes, is irreversible. And about that he is right.

A couple of years ago, for the first time for ages, I visited Glen Feshie – in the western Cairngorms.

It was here, it's said, that Landseer came to paint his 'Monarch of the Glen'.

Then, and for a century and a half thereafter, Glen Feshie was one of Scotland's foremost sporting properties.

Given over to the high – the far too high – deer numbers that sporting estate managements habitually maintain.

Which meant, as was so evident back in the 1980s, that twentieth-century Glen Feshie became grimly emblematic of the environmental degradation that results from making blood sports the dominant land use in our hill country.

The deer that swarmed in Glen Feshie, for decade after decade, ate out all its scots pine seedlings.

And so the place's native pinewoods were condemned to a slow death ... there being scarcely a tree in the whole glen that was less than a century old.

Well, that changed, and changed radically, some ten years back when Danish retail magnate Anders Polvsen bought Glen Feshie and enforced a drastic deer cull.

A cull for which he got ... still gets ... a lot of stick from fellow lairds.

But on Glen Feshie's pinewoods the impact's been far-reaching.

In a way that, if I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't have believed.

In no more than a decade, the pinewood's clearly, very clearly, made a comeback.

Both the glen floor and the hillsides are beginning to be covered with young trees.

Well, this sort of thing's the start, I reckon, of the 'rehabilitation' that Frank Fraser Darling called for ... the start of what's now called 'rewilding'.

And there have, of course, been other moves in much the same direction.

Involving the resurgence of once endangered species ... pine martens, for example ... as well as the return of birds and mammals not seen here for some time.

Ospreys, red kites and sea eagles ... beaver and wild boar.

With, maybe, down the track, the lynx, the wolf, the bear.

None of which, I'm certain, is in any way incompatible with making a reality of what Angus MacLeod imagined when on that 'day out' in Steimreway ... restoring life, community, to places where so many homes were emptied, so many people driven out.

That's what was done in Portnalong, and on the Uist and Harris machairs, in the opening decades of last century.

That's what, if folk press for it, can surely now be done again.

For most of what's still – just about! – my working life, I've had jobs or occupations that have taken me here, there and everywhere across the northern half of Scotland.

Time was when passing through deserted landscapes, I'd picture, or attempt to, how those landscapes used to be.

When full of homes ... their rigs all cultivated ... their cattle on the outfield or at the summer sheilings.

Now, instead of trying to visualise what was, I try – being optimistic – to think of what might be.

Away into the future.

When the Highlands have been put right ecologically.

And socially and culturally as well.