

# STRAVAIG #8

Rivers and Forests



Part Two

Poems

Art

Essays

## A LANDSCAPE LOST

James Fenton

*"... Let us give thanks for the things of the north...*

*For winds and rain that scour endless miles of rippling heather,  
for an elemental wildness that knows little of cities and towns,  
for an understanding that in stark harshness blinding beauty there abounds  
for those who walk and seek to find ..."*

*The Things of the North, Rennie McOwan*

*"... how still the moorlands lie,  
Sleep-locked beneath the awakening sky!  
The film of morn is silver-grey  
On the young heather, and away,  
Dim distant, set in ribs of hill,  
Green glens are shining ...  
The antique home of quietness ...  
But when the even brings surcease,  
Grant me the happy moorland peace;  
That in my heart's depth ever lie  
That ancient land of heath and sky ..."*

*Leap in Smoke, John Buchan*

*"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."*

*From Braemar down Glenshee to Perth (1853), Circuit Journeys, Lord Cockburn*

Have you noticed that trees are the answer to all our environmental problems? By growing and planting them we provide a focus for community engagement, we put

right the damaging woodland destruction of our ancestors, we protect ourselves from damaging floods, we prevent landslides onto our roads and railways, we benefit wildlife, we offset climate change through the carbon the trees store, we provide essential rural jobs, we produce a sustainable and sweet-smelling fuel, and timber for our needs, we provide places for recreation, we can hide unsightly development, and we add to the aesthetics of the landscape<sup>1</sup>. The list goes on and on ...



*Trees undeniably hold an aesthetic appeal which perhaps blinds us to their actual place in the ecology of the Highlands (Silver birch, Kincaig).*

We demean mere scrub, preferring instead our trees to be man-sized (if that is a phrase we are still allowed to use)! We are impressed by the way they tower over us, either tall and straight soaring up to the clouds, or with branches bent and twisted into impossible shapes; by their colours in the autumn, by their flush of bright green spring growth, their solid grandeur of summer; we are impressed by the sheer longevity of some, thousands of years, outlasting even the Roman Empire, and by their variety of profile, the skinny Lombardy, the triangular trees of Christmas, the delicate, white-barked birch, the solid oak, the majestic beech ...

And we like the way they add a touch of homeliness to a bleak, windswept landscape, bringing a sense of shelter and refuge to an

otherwise hostile environment – a clue perhaps as to why they have us in our sway: an atavistic memory of when trees were indeed our home, when we, in our early years, swung from branch to branch and tree to tree as children still do today.

We are so obsessed with them that every place now has its own community woodland or tree nursery, every landowner is out planting trees and creating new native woodlands, and, indeed, trees are so important to us that the Scottish Government wants to cover 25% of the country with them: we are told that Scotland has the lowest tree cover of any country in Europe, surely justification enough for all this action? Especially when we witness the continual destruction of the great rainforest of Amazonia, so that when we plant trees in Scotland we feel we are doing our bit to save the planet.

After this panegyric what can be said against them?

But, but, but... Are we in Scotland not getting a bit carried away by all this fervour? And historically, what role have trees actually played in our lives and culture? And why, by covering Scotland with trees do we want to make the place the same as everywhere else in Europe? After all, one of the aims of the European Landscape Convention, of which Scotland is a signatory, is to prevent the general homogenisation of landscapes, to fight against our tendency to make everywhere look the same, to make everywhere fit in with our own human preferences, now that we can, rather than accepting what we have inherited from nature and previous generations.

For has Scotland not always been (at least for the past several thousand years during which our culture developed) an open, bleak, wind-swept, largely treeless landscape, infested with peat bogs and with barren muir? Has this general barrenness not shaped our

personalities and cultures? Provided the location for the various wars and uprisings, the wind-blasted Culloden Muir, for example? Providing the backdrop for the clans to raise cattle and fight each other, and for the hardy farmer to make a meagre living from the poor soils?



*Wooded Norway, an inspiration for Scotland but there are reasons why the ecology is different in the two countries (tree-line woodland, central Norway).*

And surely, unlike the wooded Norway, from whence we have imported timber over the centuries and where buildings are universally of wood, has the building culture of Scotland not been that of stone: from the Neolithic Skara Brae, through the Pictish brochs, Highland castles and black houses to the improvement houses, east coast fishing ports and Edinburgh's New Town? And over most of history were not the houses of the common people built of turf, not wood? Was wood not so rare and valuable that, down the Long Island, roof joists formed the dowry of those getting married?

No, the culture of woods and trees is, to us, an alien culture – with the possible exception of Strathspey where native woods held out longest. At least it was: I fear that history is being rewritten, and we are now being told that Scottish trees and woods have always been important to us, although it is hard to see how this could have been the case when trees, even hundreds of years ago, only comprised about 4% of our landscape. In other words, and this is worth stating strongly, 96% of our country was open land, a

land of peat bog, open moor, heather and grass. This change of culture has been rapid: in my youth it was common to see cars heading south back to England with a sprig of heather in their bonnet, a symbol of Scotland. We do not see this nowadays because heather has been stigmatised as representing the land of the rich elite (guilt by association), land where grouse and deer are shot and land which properly ought to be trees: trees of that new Scottish symbol, the Caledonian or Scots pine. Although we are never told that this pine could just as well be called the Vladivostok pine for it is one of the commonest trees in Eurasia, spreading from Scotland to the far eastern shores of Russia.



Nowadays whole hillside of heather are ploughed up to plant trees (Dava Moor, Moray) in 2018).

At the risk of bringing facts into an emotional debate, the last time there was significant woodland cover, as exemplified by the ancient trees at the base of our peat bogs, was over 4,000 years ago. Even the Ancient Wood of Caledon, as promulgated by the Romans is now seen as myth, and certainly an oft repeated myth; so, at least, the Historiographer Royal of Scotland tells us<sup>ii</sup>.

But it makes a grand story: Once upon a time there was a great forest stretching from coast to coast across all the marches of Scotland. And then one day we humans came along, and we cut down all the trees, and we brought in sheep who ate the ones which remained, and we allowed deer numbers to increase way above what they ought to be so that no trees can now survive. And so we must go out into the world and restore this once great forest, we must cover our land

once again with trees to restore it to its former glory ...

This makes planting trees almost a moral imperative, and is in tune with what we are being told is happening in other parts of the world. Scotland is no different to Brazil where coastal and inland rainforest has been cut down and the right thing to do is to replant. Indeed, conservationists in Scotland are reinforcing the comparison by calling our remaining woodland fragments 'Scotland's rainforest'. Except that 'forest' seems to me to be an exaggeration: however, 'Scotland's rainwoods' does not have the same ring to it!

The only problem with this story is that there is no evidence to support it! Even a cursory look at the excellent maps produced by General Roy and his team 1747-52<sup>iii</sup> shows that our Highland woods must have disappeared way before the sheep came in, and, whatever Highland politicians would have us believe, in a period when Tom Devine tells us much of the Highlands were uninhabited. And also during a period when wolves were present, an important point because conservationists are always telling us that deer numbers are now so high because there are now no wolves to eat them. If we only brought back the wolf, so their story goes, then deer numbers would fall and the trees would come back. Except that the woods disappeared during the 10,000 year period when both wolves and deer were present: so how could their presence change the situation? Most unlikely.

To reiterate, Tom Devine states: "Settlement in the western Highlands and Islands was mainly confined to very limited areas because of the challenging constraints of geology, climate and geography. Therefore, when modern visitors contemplate hills and glens which are empty of people, they should not assume they were inhabited in the past. Or that their present silence and loneliness were necessarily the consequence of later clearance and emigration."<sup>iv</sup>

And Haldane states: “When cross-country driving in Scotland on an appreciable scale first began [post 1700], and for many years thereafter, a great part of the Highland and upland areas of the country was common land, or at the least land which, while nominally owned by the local chieftain, was in fact unused and uncared for.”<sup>v</sup>

Thus the trees disappeared even from places where there were no people and where the land was unused. This suggests natural causes for their disappearance<sup>vi</sup>, which was in fact realised 150 years ago by that great Scottish geologist, James Geikie, who concluded: “As it can be shown that the destruction of our ancient forests has not been primarily due to man...”<sup>vii</sup>. And indeed, modern research tells us that this is to be expected after an Ice Age. After the glaciers retreat, plants recolonise the land until eventually forest becomes common; but thereafter millennia of rainfall causes the nutrients to be washed out of the soil, the forests decline and moorland becomes prominent, a process which occurred even during interglacials when humans were not present. Indeed, there is even a name for the phase of woodland regression we find ourselves in: the oligocratic phase. Why is this not widely known? Perhaps because it does not fit in with our certainty, a belief if ever there were one, that us humans must have destroyed the forest: after all, our destructive powers are well known.

I blame Frank Fraser Darling for all this, for he it was who seeded the idea in people’s minds that it was people who got rid of the forest which should naturally clothe the Highlands, and thus it is a degraded landscape<sup>viii</sup>. This notion was in tune with the period, being put forward at a time when our modern environmental consciousness was just emerging, including the realisation of our generally malign influence on all things natural.

But why not, just for moment, put aside

everything you know, including the fact that trees must always be the top plant, and just imagine that, instead of being a degraded landscape, the open, unwooded landscape of the Highlands is one of the most natural remaining in Europe? Would this not make it especially special? Would this not make it a thing of value, something precious to be safeguarded at all costs? Would we then be so cavalier in trying to transform it into something different?

We perceive landscapes, not objectively by what our eyes are showing us, but through the filter of what we know. If we ‘know’ that the Highland landscape is degraded, then that is what we will see – and we will want to act to put right the sins of our forefathers in order to restore it to its natural glory. However, if instead we ‘know’ that it is one of the most natural remaining in Europe, then we damage it at our peril and will be nervous even about touching it. It is essential, therefore, to get our story right: we must not be cavalier, we must resist the temptation just to get on and do something and take time to research the history of the landscape, and, difficult though it is in the times in which we live, to base our actions on evidence. Just because everybody is saying something does not make it true!

There was once a time, times I can just remember, when you could traverse the watershed of this once great land of ours from east to west and all you could see were untrammelled views of untamed open hills and moors to distant horizons in all directions, no plantation, no fence, no track, no building in sight. Those days are long gone, but if you have more than a moment to spare and are prepared to get out of your car, to put on your boots and to stravaig beyond the bounds of the road into a distant pathless glen, you just might come across the old Scotland, a throw-back in time to when the Highlands really were wild, when the land was left to itself (and not having to fulfil the Protestant work ethic), a time when behind a

rock there may hide a fleeing clansman, beside the burn there might be the lone shieling in its small island of green, or coming down the glen a great herd of cattle headed for the markets far south in the Lowlands. You might meet unexpectedly an antlered stag with his proud head held high (if that is, the conservationists have allowed any to remain alive). But the glimpse may only be fleeting, soon, like a will o' the wisp, vanishing away into dreams and imagination.

The picture may linger long in the image portrayed to the tourists by our august institutions, the image we also like to imagine to ourselves, the image of the unspoilt hill, glen and loch; but it is just that – imaginary – the Scotland of the past, not the reality of the landscape which is there before our eyes, over-designed, over-managed, compartmentalised, ploughed, dug-up, planted, levelled, filled with roads and tracks and things, and tall fences running miles and miles and miles over the hills, the rivers dammed, the burns piped, and the hills topped with lines of turbines. Lord Cockburn would be dismayed at what he saw for, writing way back in 1838 about the Rest and Be Thankful, he said: "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." Is this still true today?

No, we have cut the landscape up into blocks and, only if you are lucky and search hard

enough will you find a small corner of open hill, the ancient Scotland, but now a fenced-off block, an island in its own land. The integrity of the landscape has been lost because we did not value what we had; or, as is our fate, we only know what we value when it becomes rare and under threat, generally when it is too late. Our hills and mountains are not allowed to be themselves, not allowed to be wild: we have to manage everything because we know better. Even the rewilders want to transform it to fit in with their imagination, to force it to follow the path of Norway where the tree is king. Perhaps they have been parasitised by trees (is this too extreme?), taken over by the insidious tree goddess which resides in us all.

The dismaying truth is that the Highlands have followed the same course as other parts of the world: not under their own volition, but their fate annexed by us, designed by us, used by us. They have been tamed, their wildness has evaporated.



One of the most natural landscapes remaining in Europe, (Ben Alligin, Wester Ross).

## Reference

<sup>i</sup> Although often stated, many of these benefits are questionable: there is little evidence that our ancestors destroyed a once great forest in Scotland; the most damaging floods are caused by exceptional rainfall on saturated ground when trees will not make much difference to rates of water run-off; landslides can be observed in Scotland on both wooded and unwooded slopes; most trees in the uplands are planted on moorland plant communities of high biodiversity value in their own right, whose value will be lost; trees planted on upland soils can exacerbate climate change by oxidising soil carbon and reducing the albedo (reflectivity) of the landscape; native woods are often impenetrable to walkers except along paths, and also a good habitat for midges; and it is a matter of judgement whether trees or open hill land are more aesthetically pleasing.

<sup>ii</sup> “Let us begin with the Great Wood of Caledon. It is, in every sense of the word, a myth.” Smout, T.C. 2000. *Nature contested*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, page 37.

<sup>iii</sup> National Library of Scotland 2019. The Roy Maps of the Scottish Highlands 1747-1752. <https://maps.nls.uk/geo/explore/>

<sup>iv</sup> Devine, T. 2018. *The Scottish Clearances: a history of the dispossessed*. Penguin Random House (Allen Lane).

<sup>v</sup> Haldane, A.R.B. 1952. *The Drove Roads of Scotland*. Thomas Nelson & Sons, Edinburgh.

<sup>vi</sup> See my recent 2019 paper *Woodland or Open Ground: scenarios for the persistence of woodland in the presence of grazing* which explains how the unwooded landscape of the Highlands can be explained by natural processes. Download from [https://www.fenton.scot/woodland history and ecology.htm](https://www.fenton.scot/woodland%20history%20and%20ecology.htm)

<sup>vii</sup> Geikie, J. 1867 [read in 1866]. On the buried forests and peat mosses of Scotland, and the changes of climate which they indicate. *Transactions of the Royal Society, Edinburgh*. Vol. XXIV, Part II, 363-384.

<sup>viii</sup> “In short, the Highlands are a devastated countryside ...” Fraser Darling, F. 1955. *West Highland Survey: an essay in human ecology*. Oxford University Press, page 192.