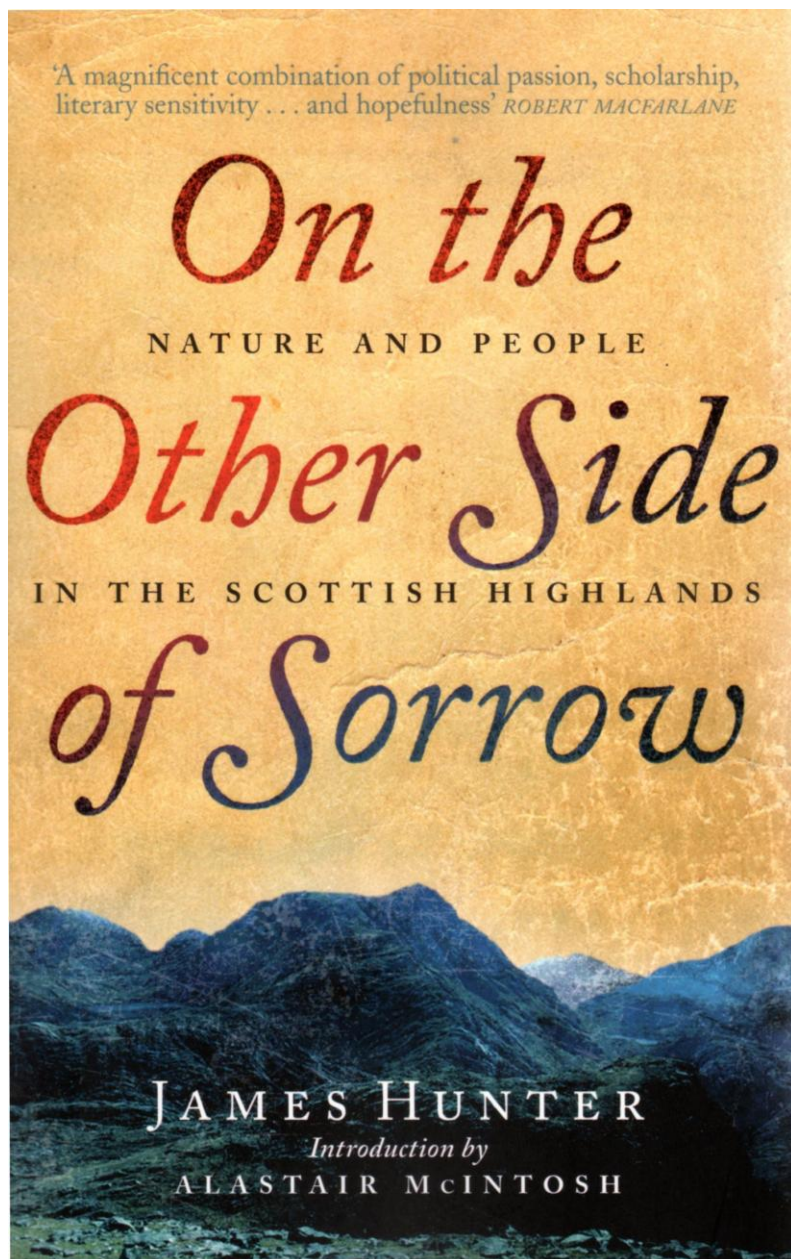


A note from Alastair McIntosh: The following pages are extracts from my *Foreword* to this 2014 paperback edition of James Hunter's provocative and influential book. I hope they might whet the reader's appetite. The book can be bought from bookshops or online, preferably directly from the publisher, Birlinn Ltd, Edinburgh, at:

<http://www.birlinn.co.uk/On-the-Other-Side-of-Sorrow.html>



This selection of pages is extracted from the uncorrected proofs.
For the definitive version that may have minor edits or page
number variations please refer to the print edition.

FOREWORD

*Alastair McIntosh*¹

YOU HOLD IN your hands a book that took shape two decades ago, a book that broke new ground in Scottish environmental writing, a book that has probably influenced the Scotland in which we now live and yet, having a slow burning fuse, a book that is only today making it into paperback.

I imagine that one word sums up why James Hunter has asked me to write this foreword: enthusiasm. Every time I have met him in recent years I have pressed, or rather, harangued him with the question: 'When is *that book* coming out in paperback?' At last, the good offices of Hugh Andrew at Birlinn Ltd have made it possible. Thank God for visionary, indeed, missionary publishers! My task here is to persuade potential readers that even after such a long lapse of time it will be to their pleasure and edification to grant Hunter's analysis a critical hearing.

The re-release of any scholarly study after nearly twenty years is a venture fraught with difficulty. Enduring strengths stand out, but so do the cracks. It requires a certain strength and humility from an author. Hunter did consider undertaking a revision of the text but I, for one, argued otherwise. This is more than just a book of history, and history that in parts has moved on with the passage of time. It is also a book whose leaves are archaeology in their own right. How? Because it was written at a time of seismic shift in social and environmental consciousness, for the late 1980s and early 1990s were a period of transformation, not least in

FOREWORD

Scotland. As a product of that era this book reflects the levels of those tides.

Let me start by situating *On the Other Side of Sorrow* within its political history. I will then briefly outline each chapter, including touching on alternative points of view and areas where the scholarship might have moved on or be disputed. Finally, I'll close with a reflection on why Hunter's vision for the future of Highland communities burns no less brightly today.

THE POLITICAL BACKDROP

We need to start by casting our minds back to the Scotland of the 1990s. 1989 saw the establishment of the cross-party Scottish Constitutional Convention that steered the path towards devolution. Its chair, the Episcopalian environmental theologian Canon Kenyon Wright missed no chance to combine ecological awareness with the emerging vision for a newly resurgent nation. In that same year, and a year to the month before she was deposed as prime minister, Mrs Thatcher made global headlines at the United Nations. She told its General Assembly that climate change represented, '... a new factor in human affairs ... comparable in its implications to the discovery of how to split the atom ... its results could be even more far-reaching.' In a similar address to the Royal Society during the preceding year she had rocked the scientific and political establishments by warning: 'we have unwittingly begun a massive experiment with the system of this planet itself,' concluding that money spent on the environment is, 'money well and necessarily spent because the health of the economy and the health of our environment are totally dependent upon each other.'

It is hard now to believe what this shift in consciousness stirred. I was teaching at Edinburgh University at the time and the Educational Policy Committee, under the principalship of Sir David Smith had, by November 1990, begun an environmental initiative with the aim of ensuring that 'all undergraduates, at some

FOREWORD

time in their course, should be exposed to teaching about the wider and more fundamental issues of society's relationship to the environment, including complex social, economic and ethical questions . . .'

The previous month had seen the Historiographer Royal in Scotland, Christopher Smout, deliver a ground-breaking paper as the Raleigh Lecture in British History at the University of Glasgow. Titled *The Highlands and the Roots of Green Consciousness, 1750–1990*, Smout wrote in a preface for a later version published by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH):

There is also a new sense abroad, or perhaps the recovery of a very old sense, that the Earth is in stewardship, not in ownership. If we abuse it, it will destroy us; if we cherish it, it will continue to support us. The stark obviousness of that choice between the black of neglect and the green of cherishing is itself a cause for hope.

As Kenyon Wright kept telling cross-party Scottish politicians, we were living in a time of *kairos* – a moment of transformation in consciousness and the ordering of the world. What was happening in Scotland was a part of a bigger shift, and at the global level national environment ministers were preparing for the biggest environmental conference ever to have taken place – the 1992 Earth Summit of the United Nations in Rio. More than a hundred world leaders would come together to agree measures that would lead to the Kyoto Protocols on constraining greenhouse gas emissions and to establish, as the first point in a list of twenty-seven other Principles, that, 'Human beings are at the centre of concern for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.'

The then Scottish Office was already a step ahead, establishing SNH under the Natural Heritage (Scotland) Act 1991. From the

FOREWORD

outset James Hunter served on the new organisation's North Regional Board. Here the word 'sustainability' had been used for the first time in a piece of British parliamentary legislation. Specifically, the act required that 'anything done . . . is undertaken in a manner which is sustainable.' These were 'just words,' for sure, but words that indicated a shift in consciousness and ironically, after the dominant policies of the Thatcher years, a welcome release from a one-eyed obsession with economic prosperity and a new awareness of material growth's long term downsides.

Such, then, was the saturated solution of environmental politics out of which James Hunter's *On the Other Side of Sorrow* crystallised. And there was more. Whether it was *Runrig*, Catriona Montgomery, Angus Peter Campbell or many others, the poets were on the rise. Their voices were exercising the bardic function of speaking to the soul of the people. Iain Crichton Smith from Lewis was by now in his elder years and had taught Hunter English at Oban High School in the 1960s. His remarkable essay collection, *Towards the Human* (Macdonald Publishers, 1986), included no fewer than four reflections on the work of Hugh MacDiarmid; he who, in a poem called 'Good-bye Twilight', had issued the forthright challenge:

Out of your melancholy moping, your impotence, Gaels,
(You stir the heart, you think? . . . but surely
One of the heart's main functions is to supply the brain!)

In *How It Is* (Arizona UP, 2007) the Apache scholar, Viola Cordova described 'the 'fog' that rises between the Native American and the European world' resulting in 'a clash of realities' that, too often, results in the native 'seeking oblivion in alcohol, drugs and suicide.' Spiritually worse: 'Still another response is to go through the fog to the reality that it represents – the white world, committing oneself to an endless denial of what once was.'

FOREWORD

While MacDiarmid's prodding might seem harsh, Scotland of the 1970s to the 1990s was awakening from just such an 'endless denial' and 'impotence'. Heart and head were starting to reconnect and seeking real-world traction through the 'hand' set to the land.

July 1991 saw the fledgling launch of the Eigg Trust for land reform, and though it took six years to attain its goal, community ownership was brought about on Eigg in June 1997 with James Hunter later being elected, and graciously accepting, to serve as its chair. The Assynt Crofters, setting their land trust in motion in 1992, achieved their goal well before Eigg. Other mini revolutions slipped through almost unnoticed, for example, Borve and Annishader on Skye in 1993, and in all of these Hunter was active either directly, as a communicator, or in advocacy behind the scenes.

On the Other Side of Sorrow is therefore both a flame that came out of this welter of *kairos* moments and as fuel that fed the fire. For me, as one who was involved at the time in both Eigg's land reform and in the campaign to stop the proposed Harris superquarry, the book helped to legitimise a bardic politics: a politics that works at the 'inner' poetic level of the psyche and not just with more prosaic 'outer' considerations. I cannot presume that Hunter would have seen the Harris superquarry exactly as I did. What I can say is that his invocation of poetry in reaching to 'the other side of sorrow' in social and environmental issues moved me, moved me on, and helped me better to understand myself. In that I know that I was not alone and I remain very grateful.

HUNTER'S STRUCTURE AND THEMES

The *Introduction* opens with the Gaelic poetry of Duncan Ban MacIntyre and the recognition given to it by Christopher Smout, who was, at the time, the vice-chairman of SNH. In today's devolved Scotland it might seem slightly anachronous to place such weight on the utterances of an establishment-sanctioned historiographer, but in the 1990s, as Britain was emerging from Thatcherism,

FOREWORD

Chapter 4 – ‘Oh for the Craggs that are Wild and Majestic!’ – presses to the nub of Highland Romanticism as manifested in MacPherson’s *Ossian*, circa 1760. A lot of scholarly water has passed under this bridge in recent decades and Michael Newton’s magisterial *Warriors of the Word* (Birlinn 2009) probably summarises a fair appraisal: namely, ‘Macpherson’s *Ossian* is not the direct translation he claimed it to be, but neither is it the ‘forgery’ which it is still reported to be by the uninformed.’

The nerve that MacPherson hit was that the cold reason of Enlightenment thought and with it, industrial anomie, threatened the very existence of romance in the European psyche. MacPherson’s Highlands were, as Hunter puts it, ‘irredeemably cheerless, gloomy, desolate, even haunted’ – like the wasteland looming within the spectator’s own heart. Onto this screen the repressed southern soul could liberate its inner Braveheart and try, says Hunter, ‘at least vicariously – to make good. Here was nobility. Here was courage. Here were men with whom it was a real thrill to identify.’ As such, the Ossianic Highlander became our equivalent of (and, Hunter argues, the prototype for) *The Last of the Mohicans*.

According to this point of view MacPherson thereby, ‘began the process of providing modern Scotland, and not least Lowland Scotland, with the slightly bizarre self-image which the country has kept polished ever since . . . in kilts, in pipe bands and in cabers.’ Sir Walter Scott further projected onto the same screen with *The Lady of the Lake* (1810) and such lines as: ‘So wondrous wild, the whole might seem/ The scenery of a fairy dream.’ Here, says Hunter, we catch Romanticism red handed: rearranging Highland nature into just what it says on the box: *a fairy dream*, divorced from reality. Here too, we see the debut of what would evolve into the ‘Celtic Twilight’ school of writers, transcendently representing the Highlands ‘as a place of spiritual, even religious, significance.’

Hunter’s motivation is both laudable and explicit. He is concerned with real people in real places and dismayed by the sorry

FOREWORD

observation that, ‘as interest grew in landscapes of the Highland type, so the people who lived among such landscapes tend to drop more and more from view.’ Accordingly he pillories such other-worldly Twilight romanticisers as Fiona Macleod (a.k.a. William Sharp), Alasdair Alpin MacGregor and Mary Ethel Muir Donaldson, wondering ‘if they, their publishers and their readers might have been more than slightly off their heads.’

But is this entirely fair? And I ask so as a ‘critical friend’ of Hunter’s on two points. First, is it fair towards the pre First World War founding vision of Twilightism? Originally the ‘Celtic Twilight’ was a nickname for the Irish Literary Revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which jumped the Irish Sea and became attached also to Scotland’s Celtic Revival. The term derived from W.B. Yeats’ eponymous book of 1893: a deceptively unsophisticated work (as befits a later-to-be recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature); a work that, in its expanded 1902 edition, summoned the Irish to reject the ‘spiritual poverty’ of an emerging modernism ‘that has cast out imaginative tradition,’ and to re-awaken the same ‘by making old songs live again.’ Why? Because, as Yeats quotes an anonymous source, ‘the imagination is the man himself.’

Yeats’ ‘twilight’, then, is a metaphor for the realm between the spiritual and the material worlds. It pictures those ‘tissue thin’ places (as Iona’s George MacLeod called them) of the heart’s geography where Heaven touches Earth. Here is a refocusing of the Romantic and pre-Raphaelite enchantment with the sublime or subliminal as that which is below or which gets underneath (*sub*) the threshold (*limen*) of ordinary conscious experience. It is, for sure, the door to the murky underworld of the personal and collective unconscious, but also, to the transpersonal realm of superconscious experience where, as St Paul put it so clearly (arch-Twilightist that he was!), we mortals see ‘through a glass, darkly’ (1 Corinthians 13:12).

The motive force for so doing in an Anglo-American cultural milieu is perhaps best expressed in T.S. Eliot’s essay, ‘The

FOREWORD

Metaphysical Poets' (*TLS*, 1921). Starting with the early modernism of the seventeenth century, Eliot said, the poetry of the English-language revealed 'a dissociation of sensibility . . . from which we have never recovered.' At its worst, this break-down in the ability to *feel* exposed 'a dazzling disregard of the soul.'

Which brings me to the second of my two points of fairness. It is true that populist writers may have succumbed to whimsy and superstition (though in William Sharp's case, spiritedly warning those of 'narrow lives' to beware the perils of 'a shrunken soul'). But what about more formidable and indigenous Hebridean figures who receive a wedge of latter-day criticism for having resourced the Twilight: tradition carriers such as Alexander Carmichael of Lismore and the Rev Kenneth Macleod of Eigg? Both, at least in the eyes of Professor Donald Meek, were pivotal to what he excoriates as: 'a 'project' in today's terms . . . even a willing conspiracy . . . [to] embrace helpful theories about 'Spiritual Celts'.'

And yet, the richness of scholarly point and counterpoint! In the same volume from the Islands Book Trust (IBT) out of which those words are taken – *The Life & Legacy of Alexander Carmichael* (2008) – Calum MacNeil of Barra, who is descended from one of Carmichael's sources, states: 'I personally have no difficulty accepting Alexander Carmichael's works, warts and all . . .' When I spent an evening with him in October 2013 my strong sense was that he did not want to see debate about arguable 'warts' of Carmichael's reconstructions of some of the more fragmentary material detracting from the enduring importance of his vast treasure of testimony. In the same IBT volume Canon Angus MacQueen (born on South Uist in 1923) holds the last word on the last page and describes how, as he turns the pages of Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica* (1900 onwards): 'I realise how sensitive his approach to our prayer life was, as if he were eavesdropping on the private life of those old folk who included their God in every passing moment of the day.' Neither should we overlook the gravity of Colonsay-born Professor Donald Mackinnon whose lecture to the

FOREWORD

Gaelic Society of Glasgow, *The Hymns of the Gael*, gave the appraisal: 'By far the most valuable collection of Catholic hymns known to me is that made by Mr. Alexander Carmichael . . . from whom a work of great value is expected shortly . . . a number [being] of rare literary beauty as well as of religious value.'

As for Kenneth Macleod of Eigg, both Donald MacKinnon and one of his successors to the chair of Celtic at Edinburgh University, James Carmichael Watson, considered him to be the greatest interpreter of Hebridean Gaelic tradition of the first half of the twentieth century. Such gravity dwarfs the attack made in Hugh MacDiarmid's 1939 satirical poem, 'The Stone Called Saxagonus', depicting 'the whole Celtic Twilight business' as characterised by 'the Orpheus Choir, Rev. Kenneth MacLeod, and all the rest!' In a similar vein is Sorley MacLean's satire, 'Éisgead VII'. This scorned Macleod's *The Road to the Isles* as being 'about 'clarsachs' and the Isle of Barra,/ about Blue Men and Catholics.' But time seems to have softened the Rassay bard's sour moment. A later essay, 'Aspects of Gaelic Poetry' (1947), maintained the earlier disdain for Macleod's English-language works but graciously and perhaps even, a shade apologetically, acknowledged: 'Everyone who knows Gaelic knows that, writing in his own language, the Rev. Dr. Kenneth MacLeod has expressed profoundly and delicately certain aspects of Hebridean life which are all but gone forever.'

The issue here, as John Kerrigan describes it an endnote to *Modern Irish and Scottish Poetry* (Cambridge UP, 2011), is that during the hard-bitten interwar years 'rejecting the Celtic Twilight was almost a convention in itself.' My question to James Hunter would be: does that convention still need to be sustained? And more widely, to what extent has the literary caricaturing of Twilightism itself been 'a project' that has given succour mainly to materialistic modernity on the one hand? And here's the irony of ironies (and this in the Frankfurt School's sense of the term): to the *authoritarian* appropriation of Highland religion on the other?

FOREWORD

After all, any living spiritual tradition must be allowed to *breathe*. Both Carmichael and Macleod were, from out of their own traditions, fulfilling aspects of the bardic function – the one with his restorative editing and the other with his murmuring old tales and wistful poetry. Both sought to have re-membered that which has been dis-membered; which brings us, ‘warts and all’, back to *Ossian*. For who can not be moved by the spirit of eternal return inherent in such passages as MacPherson’s rendition of the hero’s death croon?

Why does Ossian sing? Soon shall he lie in the narrow house,
and no bard shall raise his fame! Roll on, ye dark-brown
years; ye bring no joy on your course! Let the tomb open to
Ossian, for his strength has failed. The sons of song are gone
to rest. My voice remains, like a blast, that roars, lonely, on a
sea-surrounded rock, after the winds are laid. The dark moss
whistles there; the distant mariner sees the waving trees!

There’s a quality here that the Greeks called *parrhesía* – fearless speech from a place of truth you’d die for. A sense of *Wha’s like us? Damn few, and they’re a’ deid!* And yet, that very utterance reveals its own contradiction. *Because we’re still here!* The Ossianic spirit (even echoes of Scott) touches on something rare, largely aspirational, often over-inflated but *real*. To miss it is to lose the essence – the *esse* – the state of *being* itself as the Greek root has it. Thus MacDiarmid’s reproach: ‘He canna Scotland see wha yet/ Canna see the Infinite,/ And Scotland in true scale to it.’

And so, back round to James Hunter’s deconstruction of Neil Gunn. I wonder: would Hunter still be quite so reductionist today? I suspect not, and I suspect that he’ll be having a wry smile at himself. Why so? Because even if he had wanted to, he couldn’t have plunged in all the way back then. Every ‘distant mariner’ who pushes out a boat experiences a sense of transgression. Ben

FOREWORD

Okri says: 'All true artists suspect that if the world really knew what they were doing they would be punished.' To have advanced a poetic historiography such as Hunter did with *On the Other Side of Sorrow* may not have been new ground for the literary critic in 1995, but it was for the professional historian with a reputation worth not losing.

So it is that I end my rereading of Chapter 4 and move into the next, both chapters expressing unease that Highland environmentalism 'remains shot through with notions which owe much more to romanticism and the Celtic Twilight.' However, as I contribute my own remarks a compelling image comes to mind: one that applies not just to the James Hunter of twenty years ago but also to such passionate, instructive and iconoclastic Celtic scholars as Professor Donald Meek and the former Dominican priest, Gilbert Márkus. That image comes from how they'd launch a new ship in the heyday of the Clyde. How they'd set it off to the crack of a bottle of champagne but with heavy chains attached to dampen its passage down the slipway and prevent the vessel from crashing into the opposite bank.

Do I discern some dull notes in Hunter's critique of Romanticism and the Celtic Twilight? As from a sea-surrounded rock, perhaps. But only the clanking of scholarly chains.

Chapter 5 – 'Without the Heartbreak of the Tale' – sees Hunter building on his concern that the authentic poetic voice must remain keened to social, political and ecological realities. The Highland psyche, he argues, citing Professor Jackson, is not characterised by 'mysticism or sentimentality.' Rather, what we see revealed in the work of Norman MacCaig, or in Sorley MacLean's 'Hallaig', is the Highlander's 'astonishing power of imagination,' and this as applied to 'naturalist realism.'

That's a fair point with MacCaig. But what about MacLean when in high register? Is not 'Hallaig' a deeply mystical poem?

FOREWORD

Had he been writing today his main example would undoubtedly have been land reform as the *kairos* shift of the past generation; this as now documented in his recent book, *From the Low Tide of the Sea to the Highest Mountain Tops* (IBT, 2012). Only when a community is in control of its own place can community of place fully flourish. Only then, can we approach those international goals set out by the UN at Rio for long-term sustainability with the Earth.

Such has been James Hunter's life vision as expressed so richly in the volume that you are holding. He and I might quibble over Romanticism and the Twilight. We might pick out alternative nuances in some of the more controversial verse. Our chains might clank to differing degrees of scholarly drag. But at the end of the day, the poetry sweeps us beyond the limitations of human reason. Beyond the ego's rigid control and through to eternal return. As Sorley MacLean suggests in those immortal lines with which Hunter concludes: we are transported to a place of the heart, a place from where . . .

. . . beyond hardship, wrong, tyranny, distress,
beyond misery, despair, hatred, treachery,
beyond guilt and defilement; watchful,
heroic, the Cuillin is seen
rising on the other side of sorrow.

This new paperback release of "On the Other Side of Sorrow" by James Hunter can be purchased in bookshops and online, including: <http://www.birlinn.co.uk/On-the-Other-Side-of-Sorrow.html>