

People in a Landscape

An analysis by Marshall Anderson

People In a Landscape—The New Highlanders, published by *Mainstream* represents the final outcome, in soft-back book form, of an extravagant and excessively indulgent propagandist project staged as part of the first Highland Festival in 1996. This attractive package of photographs by Craig Mackay with an introductory text by Magnus Linklater and supported by interviews with the New Highlanders will, at a penny short of £10, sell well to the many fans of the Scottish Highlands from home and abroad. To understand the book, however, one must turn away from its alluring glossiness for a moment and turn back the pages of history.

It was the Rt. Hon William Ross who, in March 1965, on the occasion of moving the Highland Development Bill through Parliament, said: "For 200 years the Highlander has been the man on Scotland's conscience." The resulting Highlands and Islands Development Act, therefore, was some kind of delayed palliative for the acts of genocide perpetrated by the State in the aftermath of Culloden and the greed-driven desires condoned by the State to reap vast profits from the land by displacing people in favour of sheep. Guilt, however, was a limp excuse for the Highlands and Islands Development Board (HIDB) to initiate economic development on a massive scale throughout its lifespan from 1965 to '90.

In the 1960s the Highlands, with a population of 299,000 was perceived as a wilderness zone ripe for colonisation and exploitation. The continuing emigration of its indigenous people had to be replaced by an immigration policy and the apathetic remaining highlanders, psychologically bruised by 200 years of cultural battering, had to be shown how to improve and regenerate their valuable resources by entrepreneurial Englishmen and women who would be offered generous cash incentives to settle and develop industries. Between 1965 and 1988 an estimated total of £422,176 in financial assistance was handed out by HIDB creating thousands of new jobs. This figure, taken from the Highlands and Islands—*A Generation of Progress*, edited by Alistair Hetherington and published by "Aberdeen University Press" (1990) does not take into consideration concealed costs such as administration and further investments via other government agencies, nor does it take into account the alleged millions lost in such schemes as the aluminium smelter at Invergordon and the Wiggins Teape pulp mill at Corpach.

One of the more outspoken critics of Highland development is Iain Thomson whose comments in *A Generation of Progress* reveal the kind of philosophy and attitude that was prevalent at the time: "A labour force was also at hand—as one propaganda leaflet put it 'most locals are used to handling small boats.'" Thomson's "propaganda leaflets" were not so readily available on the home front. HIDB's advertising campaign concentrated south of Hadrian's Wall. Thomson continues with respect to fish farming: "Yet deep down some felt that another valuable resource had been plucked from under their noses by entrepreneurial outsiders enjoying privileged contacts and considerable support from the taxpayer." Any rancour was probably best swallowed and the tongue best clenched between angry teeth, for, as Hetherington says in his introductory essay: "The Highlands and Islands are providing food, holidays, timber and craft products for the whole of the UK, as well as strategic bases for offshore oil and the Royal Navy, Army and RAF." This statement is now out of date: instead of reading "the whole of the UK," it should read the whole of Europe.

With this in mind a further concentrated series of investments by various government agencies combined with detailed commissions, reports and feasibility studies focused on this region. Some of the ensuing schemes were, unfortunately, destined to become expensive failures as exemplified by Highland Craftpoint engineered by David Pirnie who had con-

ducted a year-long feasibility study in 1978 endorsing the idea that training was required to raise standards within an industry that was turning over £500,000 per year. During 79/80 Highland Craftpoint gobbled £61,345 in funding from the Scottish Development Agency and £123,230 from HIDB. A gravy train had been set in motion that would continue to nourish a generation of bureaucrats. This level of funding (85/86 SDA—£147,600, HIDB—£533,187) was not sustainable and in an attempt to broaden its remit and spread its expenditure to the whole of Scotland the agency dropped its Highland tag in 87 becoming Craftpoint. Scotland's craftworkers were truly astonished when Ian Lang, then Secretary of State, pulled the plug on it in 1990, for Craftpoint had provided a valuable resource and training facility through well-equipped workshops and a specialist library. Craftpoint's closure indicated that governments are quite prepared to sacrifice investments on a disproportionate scale in order to drive yet another non-sustainable vision.

Ian Lang recognised the link between arts, crafts and tourism so he initiated the Scottish Tourism Co-ordinating Group who promised in their Development Strategy to meet "the prime objective of increasing arts tourism in Scotland" for it had been identified that: "Arts and cultural tourists spend more per trip than average tourists, partly because they stay longer." More, obviously, had to be done to encourage these big spenders to come and buy 'art product'. This philosophy has, in part, encouraged a culture of commercialism within the Highland and Islands arts community with the majority of artists working in traditional ways and aspiring to sell their work to a burgeoning middle-class home market, and tourists. Any commentary upon Highland life is accordingly historic—leading to Romantic imagery. There appears to be no radical polemic and no debate around the development of art and its conceptual language and how this may reflect upon current issues.

Against this backdrop of top heavy investment and a squandering of public resources condoned by a concentrated political will and strong-arm cultural muscle, the notion of an Inverness Festival was discussed at committee level and chaired by Lady Cowan, the wife of Sir Robert Cowan the fifth and final chairman of HIDB. Lady Cowan and her team of stalwarts representing various vested interests believed it was their duty to import Culture. In themselves the Festival Committee had little clout but the concept was taken up and driven forward on the crest of yet another feasibility study, commissioned this time from Burntisland-based Bonar Keenlyside Ltd. Surprisingly this document convinced no one for everyone was already convinced that such an event was more than possible. The feasibility study therefore further constituted a flagrant waste of public money.

A year long festival-cum-celebration called Hi Lite, marking the end of the HIDB appeared to have no real budget to mount events but did have a lot of cash to produce an extraordinary mountain of 1.5 million print units announcing events that would mostly have gone on regardless of its umbrella tactic to incorporate everything within its logo. In 1995 the first Highland Festival with Ian Ritchie in the post as Director trumpeted into view being propped up by £19,225 from the Scottish Arts Council and £10,000 from the Scottish Tourist Board.

There was a confusing array of philosophies and expectations at play with regard to the Festival itself and also underpinning the planning of its events. These are best illustrated by a 24 hour project which finally culminated in its quasi catalogue, *People In A Landscape*.

In order to establish itself, in part at least, as a people's festival a project based, I am told on a community photographic project in Glasgow, and called 24 Hours in the Life of the Highlands and Islands was

planned to focus on Saturday 30th March 1996 with an intention "to involve everyone." "The entire population of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland irrespective of experience, skill, age or status" was described as the project's Client Group in a 6-page brief. The rhetoric herein was strongly advocating an open event: "To encourage anyone who has an interest in the arts to 'have a go' within the stated 24 hour period." It continued with the statement of intent: "To publish and promote selected fruits of the whole experience in a book" thereby contradicting its democratic language with a suggestion that elitist values would be maintained through a selection team of four chosen celebrities: Harriet Buchan, Richard Demarco, Archie Fisher and Magnus Linklater, the latter further contracted to write the introduction to the book/catalogue. From the outset then, this adventurous large scale endeavour was flawed as it sought to make an open gesture emphasising the notion that anyone could be an artist while maintaining an overriding belief in the principles of selection. With its top-heavy level of staffing and the inclusion of media personalities (including Robbie Coltrane whose job it was to set The Day in motion) the event was destined to become an over-extravagant waste of money, swallowing £92,000 of resources.

On the next day, Sunday, everyone who had made something was requested to deliver it to the nearest of 6 collection points. It was then felt necessary to helicopter the four judges plus Gordon Brown, the exhibition co-ordinator, round the places in one day to make their selection of which works they deemed good enough to be framed and exhibited in six entirely different venues throughout the Highlands and Islands. I was told they got a ridiculously cheap deal on the chopper—£600. But to date no figures are available to provide details on other costs such as individual fees and expenses, accommodation and the like. Gordon Brown, Director/owner of Brown's Gallery in Tain was awarded the contract to frame the works at a cost of £16,000. Such was the enormity of the task within the condensed 'time frame' that Brown farmed out some of the work to his close friend, Craig Macay's business, Pictili, up in Brora.

The gravy train mentality and an uncontrollable lust to spend money was evidently being perpetrated in an area where the precedent to do so had been so obviously set from the halcyon days of HIDB onwards. Fundamentally such extravagances stick in the gullets of ordinary Scots whose personal backgrounds are scarred by memories of stringent economies and poverty. Alastair MacDonald, the new Director of the Highland Festival, says he was "appalled" at the grossness of the 24 Hour Project's budget but qualified his sentiments by saying that the management team had done well to raise so much cash through sponsorship. Surely such a statement further endorses a habit of wastage. Money was spent for the sake of spending. MacDonald, however, decided to pull in the reins on a project he had inherited from his predecessor, Ian Ritchie, dismissed from the post for his unsympathetic performance. MacDonald cut the book's budget by 40% to £17,000 but was obliged to proceed with its planned outline.

Photographer, Craig Mackay, whose estimated fee for the work was £5,000, has produced a series of excellent portraits to accompany Marietta Little's short interviews with those Highland residents selected from the 24 Hour Project. There is another blatant contradiction here: if the people were selected to appear in the book on the strength of their artwork, much of it produced by semi-professional artists and obviously taking longer than 24 hours to make (hinting at disingenuous desires to muscle in on an exhibition opportunity), why is it the artwork has been reduced to such a small visual fragment permitting the photography to become the major illustrative component? Surely the cult of the personality and the pho-

CRAIG MACKAY *Sorcha Monk*

tographer's ego have been allowed to overwhelm the original concept of the book, "highlighting the beauty, quality and diversity of talent and character of the whole area." Obviously the artwork in itself was not strong enough to endorse the project and not therefore strong enough to sell the Highlands and Islands, so personalities were called upon to do both. Consequently the book has become a showcase for the photographic mastery of Craig Mackay who has treated his task with a wide variety of techniques employing medium and large format cameras loaded with film stock donated by Fugie. This simple book has been spoilt, however, by over-indulgent designing. Photographic overlays have been done unnecessarily, again emphasising that money has been further wasted designing for the sake of designing.

Alastair MacDonald is of the opinion that *People In A Landscape* is informative because it shows what life is really like in the Highlands. The somewhat anodyne introductory text by Magnus Linklater typifies the viewpoint of an outsider who has been hired to give an uncontroversial impression supporting the State's ideal image which is fed to potential settlers, tourists and developers. The truth is underplayed and any opportunity to reveal what life is really like is lost. There are social ailments in the Highlands and Islands community, such as Anglophobia, that are taboo and not accorded space here. Linklater only hints at community unrest and ignores the kind of social problems that arise from the type of colonisation programme that continually gathers momentum throughout the region. Children not born into Highland and Islands communities have a hard time settling into schools where historically bullying has gone unchecked. As communities expand urban ills pervade. Alcohol and other drug use is more prevalent among the young and domestic theft, once unknown, is becoming more commonplace. Currently the Highlands and Islands are being sold on the quality of life, the scenery and the friendliness of the people, but the more the region becomes populated the more these alluring assets are tainted and eroded.

Linklater's text begins on a note of incredulity: "It is hard to put a finger on it, to explain just what has happened over the past 20 or 30 years to transform the picture", but as I have shown, and it is no secret, the investment since 1965 has been disproportionate per capita. The one-time editor of the *Scotsman* does go on to pull the kind of statistics out of his hat that he should have access to. He informs us that the current population is 373,000 and that the number "who were born in England has increased over the past decade from 9.5% to 11.9% of the total population while the proportion of Scots has dropped from 86.4% to 83.9%. That is an influx of nearly 11,000 English people." In order to allay fears and accusations that these "white settlers" are taking a livelihood out of the mouths of locals, Linklater informs us that "if anything, the incomers are creating work not grabbing other people's." This may be due to the following factors: incomers from the south have money to invest in the purchase and development of land and property thereby creating work in the building and tourism sectors. Many of these properties are small hotels, guest houses and B & Bs. When many of these amenities appear on the market they are invariably bought by the English who have similarly moved into the arts and crafts industry, opening galleries and shops which sell locally produced products to the rising population of middle-class New Highlanders and, of course, tourists.

Linklater does not try to assess just when an incomer becomes recognised statistically as a native but if the New Highlanders are considered to be locals then it follows that if they employ themselves before employing more indigenous natives they cannot be accused of grabbing other people's work. If there is any discrimination in the jobs market Linklater ducks the question and continues on a more mundane level best suited to his current role as chairman of the Scottish Arts Council.

Linklater continues by making an assessment of the remarkable cultural renaissance throughout the Highlands and Islands saying: "The evidence suggests that this is essentially a native phenomenon from which everyone, including outsiders, have benefited." He states quite correctly that "the arts have thrived on the back of economic improvement, drawing on a deep well of tradition." The resurgence of interest in history and language is not just a native one for the New Highlanders have "acquired a genuine devotion to their adopted homeland." Having then laid the foundation Linklater proceeds by describing the tide of entries that flowed into the 24 Hour Project. Craig Mackay suggested to me that the greater majority came from incomers and this is borne out in *People In A Landscape*. Out of 39 profiles the majority are of new Highlanders. The "native phenomenon" may be a psychological response based on a perceived threat from the army of incomers which threatens to subsume the locals altogether. The majority of people working in the Highland and Islands service sector now speak with English accents. Only in the *Gaidhealtachd*, where Gaelic is the first language and where Gaelic is a prerequisite of any job, can the influx of foreign "white settlers" be checked and the local workforce protected fully. Linklater devotes a paragraph to the *Feisean* Movement, a purely Gaelic expression bent upon strengthening the true native culture. There is a sense that this door is closed to non-Gaelic speaking Highland and Islanders but is not entirely locked. Anyone can participate as long as they speak Gaelic and indeed many New Highlanders do endeavour to learn the native language. There is a suggestion in this book, however, that such open events as the 24 Hour Project and its follow-up attract the participation of new Highlanders while the truer native renaissance is more exclusive.

Through the 24 Hour Project the first Highland Festival had set a crude precedent that its second Director, Alastair MacDonald, a theatre designer, would have to follow. Vociferously critical of the 24 Hour Project and its extravagances, MacDonald gained the help of his brother-in-law, Gordon Davidson, whose personal photo-montage technique was applied on a grand scale to create the *Big Picture/An Dealabh Mòr*. The result of this £60,000 public relations exercise can be seen touring the Highlands and Islands later this year after the installation has appeared at the Edinburgh Festival. I doubt if it will have much impact outside of its area of origin for it comprises of 25 photo-montages from 14 separate areas where the community created paste-ups were over-seen by one, or sometimes two, locally-based artists. All of the colour photos used are pertinent to the localised human experience. The project's selling point is perhaps its scale: 8-foot high, free standing letters spelling out *An MOR* and *The BIG* were covered on one face with laser copies of the photo-montages, stood in a circle redolent of Neolithic stones. This was accompanied by "a specially commissioned soundscape by Andy Thornburn", a musician who lives in Eventon, Easter Ross.

The success of the 24 Hour Project and the *Big Picture* lies in the indelible mock-utopian Highland image that both large scale community actions offer to future (and present) settlers, tourists and developers alike. Developers, who are neither Highlanders nor Islanders, require the confidence that such a rosy community image instils. The improvements they provide to roads and public services, including shopping malls, are not for the indigenous population alone (who are left to pay the bill through taxes and tolls) but for the greater majority of incomers and tourists. This small paperback volume of *People In A Landscape* is, therefore, representative of a greater picture, and one that demands more incisive scrutiny.