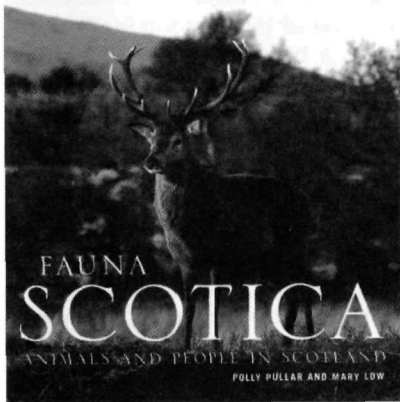


Book Reviews



FAUNA SCOTICA
Animals and people in Scotland
Polly Pullar & Mary Low
Birlinn Limited, 2012, 290 pages
Hbk £30, ISBN 978 1 84158 561 1

This book is more than just a study of natural nature. It also looks at the human relationship to nature. It sets nature wild and free alongside human nature and thereby explores the fauna of Scotland through the lens of human ecology; indeed, a very humanised ecology, because Mary Low's acclaimed Celtic scholarship, her skill in folklore, richly complements the flowing narrative and vivid images of Polly Pullar and other photographic contributors.

The work is divided into 10 sections organised according to habitats. It includes the expected with chapters on mountain, bog and moor, lochs and rivers, the sea, islands and skerries, farm and croft, about town; but also chapters

on wild work which covers themes like working dogs, and, enticingly, "Creatures of the Mind". As Pullar says in her introduction, this is a study that aims to approach animals not just physically and economically, but also "at the level of feeling, imagination and belief."

For example, the two pages devoted to the mountain hare describe its ecology, provide an insight into the lore of hare shooting (no longer an enterprise to be encouraged), and a concise summary of the hare's meaning in Scots folklore. In 1662 when Isobel Gowdie confessed to changing into a hare as part of her alleged witchcraft, the spell by which she claimed to restore herself to human form was:

Hare, hare, God send thee care!
I am in a hare's likeness just now,
But I shall be a woman even now –
Hare, hare, God send thee care.

Similarly thought-provoking is the section on the sacred goose. Does the notion that the wild goose is a Celtic symbol of the Holy Spirit authentically come from tradition, or has it been invented by the likes of Lord George Macleod of the Iona Community? Well, I once put that question to Ron Fergusson, Macleod's biographer, who had in turn once posed it to old George. "Where did you get it from?" Ron had asked. "I've no idea!" said George. "I probably invented it!" *Fauna Scotica* hints, however, that George's intuition may have been sourced from deeper wellheads of the traditions in which he was culturally immersed; and recently, in reading the Chinese poetry of Wu Wei, I was struck by the translator's comment in the Penguin Classics edition (p. 92) that "there was a myth that wild geese – and fish – could carry messages."

I wrote this review sitting in Stornoway library, and as I worked a local Gaelic activist came up. He wished to remain anonymous and said "Just call me Will-o-the-Wisp". He said what impressed him about this book was that it gives names in English, Latin, Scots and Gaelic, and that while the English and Latin usually have just one name, the more vernacular languages have many. For example, the (Blue) mountain hare, *Lepus timidus*, in Scots can be whiddie baudrons, bawtie, cutty, donie, fuddie, lang lugs, maukin or pussy, and in Gaelic, *maigheach bhàn* or *bocaire fasaich*. If one goes to the Gaelic dictionaries, further names can be found including regional variations for the hare at different stages of development.

This is a book that honours not just the animals, with a splendour of photography that would grace any coffee table, but also their human connections. I long for more wildlife writing and praise Polly Pullar, Mary Low, and Birlinn Limited on their achievement.

Alastair McIntosh