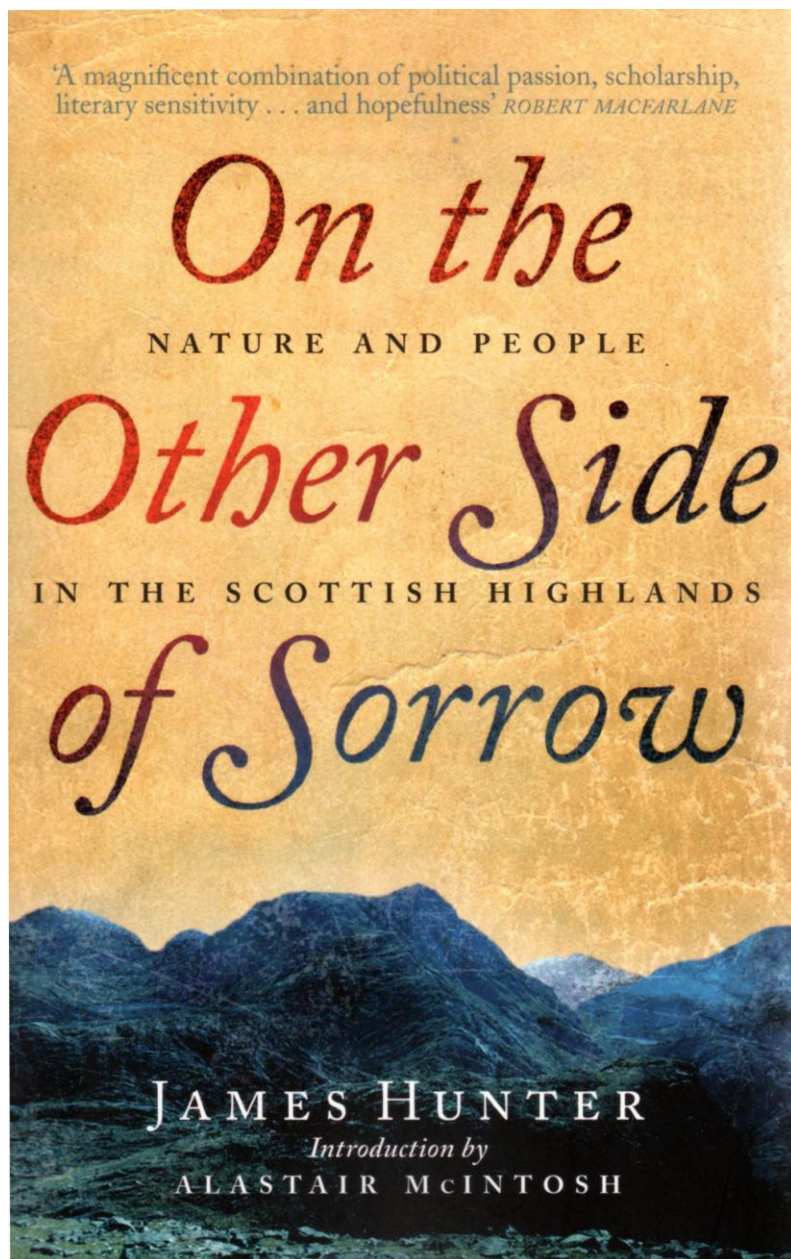


**A note from Alastair McIntosh:** The following pages are from my *Foreword* to this 2014 paperback edition of James Hunter's provocative and influential book. I hope they might whet the reader's appetite. The book can be bought from bookshops or online, preferably directly from the publisher, Birlinn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

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



This is the uncorrected proof text of my Foreword to the paperback relaunch edition of James Hunter's book of Highland psychohistory, "On the Other Side of Sorrow", published in July 2014 by Birlinn Ltd, Edinburgh. Changes made to the final print version are copy edits only - e.g. correcting the spelling of Raasay. The single footnote is an acknowledgment for critical feedback from my friend Dr Iain MacKinnon of Camuscross, Isle of Skye.

## FOREWORD

*Alastair McIntosh*<sup>1</sup>

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

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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

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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

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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.'

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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,

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Smout signified clout, and that, as much from the source of his patronage as from the acclaimed social sensitivity of his wider scholarship.

'It is from roots like these,' the St Andrews professor concluded after outlining MacIntyre's nature poetry, 'that an indigenous Scottish green consciousness could perhaps be traced.' Hunter picks up this lead. He juxtaposes this eighteenth century poet's 'deep reverence for mountains' alongside 'the almost unimaginable scale' of the superquarry that was being planned at Lingerbay, at the heart of the South Lewis, Harris and North Uist National Scenic Area.

The battle was to become the longest-running public inquiry ever to have taken place in Scottish planning history. For Hunter it pressed the underlying question: can people and nature coexist in mutually beneficial ways? Should the answer be negative, he believed, then 'environmentalists and Highlanders . . . are destined to remain forever locked in combat.' To tackle that question would mean taking the Hebridean scenic route and like so much of Highland history, that meant taking it all back to Culloden and the crucial century that followed the Jacobite rising of 1745.

At this early stage a fissure in the book reveals itself. On the one side, Hunter credits Gaels – whether defined linguistically or in wider cultural and bioregional senses – with a level of environmental sensitivity such as could produce a nature poem of the stature of MacIntyre's 'Ben Dorain'. Other examples in translation are drawn especially from *A Celtic Miscellany* (Routledge, 1951; later, Penguin Classics), this being the magnificent collection that Professor Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson published just after he took up the chair in Celtic at Edinburgh University. On the other side of the fissure that same sensitivity appears to have been lost, trampled upon or appropriated and distorted as the environment became increasingly controlled by non-native 'environmentalists'. These operated from within a social reference frame that took its bearings from 'elsewhere', increasingly driving a wedge between the people

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and their place and further marginalising the former from meaningful agency towards their own ancestral territory.

It is this perceived rift between ‘environmentalists’ and the indigenous claim to place that *On the Other Side of Sorrow* attempts to unravel. Nature readily becomes a proxy battleground for wider issues of cultural change, demographic shift, social cohesion, religious transition, identity psychology, social class politics and north–south economic inequalities. James Hunter could see that such debates have long and convoluted roots and in this book, he was not afraid to broach ground where angels feared to tread.

*Chapter 1* – ‘Everyone Who Ever Mattered is Dead and Gone’ – explores the psychohistory (the psychological backdrop) of the indigenous relationship to nature. The land, the context of life itself that had once been so integral to the people’s being had, with the Clearances, been stripped from their possession. As Hunter cites the eighteenth century North Uist poet, Iain MacCodrum:

Look around you  
and see the nobility  
without pity to poor folk,  
without kindness to friends  
they are of the opinion  
that you do not belong to the soil . . .

That last line reveals a damning alienation of nothing less than an ancient people’s humanity. Where to look to find comparisons? England during the enclosures? Wales, or Ireland? Too close to the bone. British history is rarely taught with a critique of landed power, of ‘internal colonisation’ of the British Isles or of the radical movements that attempted popular resistance.

Instead, and perhaps fittingly in a more and more globalised world, Hunter turns to the writing of the black Caribbean



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psychotherapist, Frantz Fanon, to whose work on French-colonised Algeria he was first exposed when taking an undergraduate course in African history at Aberdeen University, 1967-71. He tells me, 'I've always felt that I learned more about the Highland past from studying African history than from taking courses in British or Scottish history' (pers. com. 2013).

Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* was originally published in French in 1961 as *Les Damnés de la Terre*. To speak of 'the Damned' reveals the spiritual psychopathology that we have to work with, for a people who are cut off from their connection to Providence can come, quite literally, to take on victim-blaming syndromes of presuming themselves to be *godforsaken*. As an inscription etched on the windowpane of Croick Church put it as eighteen evicted families awaited the emigrant ship in 1845: 'The people of Glen Calvie, the sinful generation.' Scant comfort for the oppressed, but succour for the oppressor's sense 'manifest destiny' – the presumption of a God-given mandate to dominate.

And the human consequences? Hunter quotes the Canadian writer Hugh MacLennan: 'In a deserted Highland glen you feel that everyone who ever mattered is dead and gone.' Then, in preparation for the coming chapters, he warns: 'Emotions of the sort revealed by Hugh MacLennan seem to make historians terribly uneasy . . . [because] most academically-inclined historians of Scotland . . . tend to eschew both folk traditions and imaginative literature . . . to focus on what seems self-evidently 'factual'.'

*Chapter 2* – 'The Glory of Great Hills is Unspoiled' – examines early medieval poetry from the Irish-Scots continuum; poetry that has an overwhelming sense of God's presence in nature. At a time when some scholars question whether there ever was a 'Celtic environmentalism' it is instructive to be reminded of the rich historical sources from which Hunter draws as well as the following

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observation from Professor Jackson's *Studies in Early Celtic Nature Poetry* (Cambridge UP, 1935):

The hermits . . . were 'Simple Lifers' who really did live the simple life, and that in its simplest form. They had known and felt what they described [and] sought spiritual purity in nature . . . Yet the ultimate significance of the hermit's relationship with nature is something that transcends both nature and hermit alike. The woodland birds might sing to him around his cell, but through it all, rarely expressed, always implicit, is the understanding that bird and hermit are joining together in an act of worship; to him the very existence of nature was a song of praise in which he himself took part . . . It was from this harmony with nature, this all-perceiving contemplation of it, that the Irish hermits reached to a more perfect unison with God.

However, in highlighting the tradition's eco-spiritual material Hunter sounds a note of caution. He quotes a magical passage where Neil Gunn, on a trip from Skye to Eigg in 1937, described the clouds as 'pure white puffs in the distant blue, airy as meadow-land dreams.' But remarks:

It is remarkably easy, when trying to turn any such scene into words, to resort to the language of the Celtic Twilight – a literary school this book will get around in time to criticising rather harshly. Twilight authors – always more at home with shadow than with substance – were inclined to attach a mystical significance to the effects produced by light on cloud and water. In truth, all such phenomena can be explained without resorting to the supernatural. Their origins are mostly to be found in the extraordinary translucence of an atmosphere which, especially when the wind blows from the west or

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from the north, is almost wholly free of smoke, dust, fumes and other debris of that kind.

I will question that comment later and whether or not the *Twilight* justifies its ill reputation. For now, what I most valued on first reading this chapter was its opening to a poetic historiography (a way of studying history); its deployment of psychohistory; and a tentative stretching out to what Iain Crichton Smith, in the following passage from *Towards the Human*, describes (with my emphasis) as ‘the feeling intelligence’:

For the poet in Scotland there awaits logic, scholarship, metaphysics, but there also awaits, if he has the patience of the feeling intelligence, the *living quick of life itself*. Perhaps he should choose the latter more in the future, if his tangled languages, his education, his claustrophobia, will allow him.

In invoking poetry whilst keeping *Twilightism* at arm’s length, was Hunter avoiding trite shallows, or was he holding back from the risks of depth? I will come back to that question later for it reflects upon Hunter’s era, and not just his own situation within it.

*Chapter 3* – ‘The Hind is in the Forest as She Ought to Be’ – moves to early modern nature poetry. Hunter majors on Duncan Ban MacIntyre as a Gael who ‘discerned, in outline anyway, just what it means to think about the world ecologically,’ and did so in a manner that was ‘strictly naturalistic.’ In contrast, the Romanticism of the eighteenth century produced Wordsworth, for whom nature ‘is essentially a spiritual concept . . . to be experienced emotionally.’

In this Hunter holds that ‘the causes of disagreement between environmentalists and Highlanders’ boils down to ‘two quite different perspectives on the Highlands and their future.’ In so doing, ‘modern environmental thinking . . . owes no small debt to

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eighteenth-century Edinburgh's approach to the Highlands . . . one which tended either to ignore the Highlanders of the time or to be desperately pessimistic about their future prospects.'

'Edinburgh' here codifies the North British outreach of English Romantic thought. While Hunter understates the possible political implications of his analysis these will not escape the present-day reader. The core question is this. To what extent are popular constructs of Scotland (and of the Highlands in particular) the inventions of 'southern' minds – be these wholly English or, perhaps more subversively, of the Anglicised Scot of a certain dominating social class?

In discussing Sir Walter Scott's repetitive imagery of darkness and solitude linked to death, Murray Pittock (who was the first professor of Scottish literature at an English university – Manchester), concludes as follows in his contribution to *English Romanticism and the Celtic World* (Cambridge UP 2003).

That death is, at least on one level, the death Scotland itself: and hence, in . . . the Scottish image and the Scottish tourist industry lies a paradox of death-in-life and life-in-death, a country created in its uncreation, victorious in defeat, popular in its depopulation and visited by tourists as its land is cleared. In these paradoxes lies the point and counterpoint of most Scottish cultural criticism since 1900. Such is Scott's legacy: but one, I trust this essay has shown, in deep debt and relationship to and with the major influences on English Romanticism.

Hunter's concern, then, is with how far the Romantic view of Scotland reflects and sustains a cultural and political death. How far the Wordsworthian 'spiritual concept' fires the pot not to the delectable point of triple distillation, but destructively, beyond the angels' share, to that of evaporation.

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*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

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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

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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

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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 Rassy 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?



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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

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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?

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Here in an abandoned clearance village the poet reveals nothing less than ‘the Sabbath of the dead’ where ‘the dead have been seen alive.’ Here, in the word’s full sense of ‘unveiling’ is an *apocalyptic* vision; a *parousia* or condition of drawing ‘alongside the essence’ where time itself is redeemed; where ‘Time, the deer is in the wood of Hallaig’ – *Tha tìm, am fiadh, an Coille Hallaig* – and this in a Gaelic ontological context where *am fiadh* means both ‘the wild’ and ‘the deer’, and the latter, the ‘cattle of the faeries’, the *sìth*.

Since Hunter wrote *On the Other Side of Sorrow* there has been an explosion in scholarship from Scots and Irish universities about the function of faerie in pre-modern Celtic shamanic worldviews. To John MacInnes, now retired from the School of Scottish Studies, the *sìthean*, the ubiquitous faerie hill, becomes ‘a metaphor of the imagination’ and that, in a culture where the imaginal realm can underpin reality itself. After composing poetry or music Hebridean bards of his acquaintance would make statements like – *Bha mi ‘s a’ Chnoc o chunnaic mi thu* – ‘I was in the Hill since I saw you’ – leading to MacInnes’ startling but very Yeatsian conclusion: ‘From this shadowy realm comes the creative power of mankind.’

In ‘Hallaig’, as MacInnes exegises it, Sorley MacLean succeeded in articulating a vision that is ‘wholly Gaelic’ yet ‘equally palpable’ in its ‘Romantic sensibility’; this by fusing ‘disparate elements of two cultures in an utterly new statement where . . . both the Gaelic sense of landscape, idealised in terms of society, and the Romantic sense of communion with Nature, merge in a single vision, a unified sensibility’ (*Dùthchas Nan Gàidheal*, Birlinn, 2006).

While Hunter privileged the clear light of imagination over the ‘shadowy realm’ of twilight, we today, with the benefit of hindsight, might ask whether the distinction between the imaginal and the mystical, or the Gaelic and the Romantic, is quite so clear cut. That point made, Hunter’s insistence that poetry must keep step with social and ecological reality remains pivotal because without it, the land as the basis for life itself continues to be pulled from

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under our feet. As *Chapter 5* progresses Hunter therefore moves to the Palestinian scholar, Edward Said, who called for a ‘culture of resistance’ by which oppressed peoples might ‘reclaim, rename and reinhabit the land’ and this, with ‘an almost magically inspired, quasi-alchemical redevelopment of the native language.’

Here I smile, for has not Hunter, wily narrator that he is, side-stepped Walter Scott’s ‘fairy dream’ and yet led us all the same, without the whimsy, towards a magical inspiration of alchemical transformation? The difference this time round is that we have political traction. This time, as Said makes explicit and as modern Scotland is showing, it is ‘with the land reappropriated by its people’ and the people themselves journeying towards a new-found ‘decolonised identity.’

If I am not making the mistake of overestimating one from whom I have learned so much since he wrote *The Making of the Crofting Community* (John Donald, 1976), Hunter himself here steps in to the bardic function of salving the people’s soul. And so we come full circle round to practical application on the ground. Hunter closes this chapter by squaring up to the modern Scottish land question. He sets his shoulder to the wheel of Angus MacLeod’s vision of Stiomrabhagh (Steinreway), an evocative clearance village in South Lochs on Lewis. A stalwart of the Free Church (Angus would have liked that to be remembered), the tradition bearer described how, one day on a community historical outing:

I saw in my mind’s eye how Steinreway 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!

‘Ease’ as he was widely known was very much the founding father of the Scottish Crofters’ Union in 1985. And here is where we see the circle closing. For its first five years the director of that body

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(now the Scottish Crofting Federation) was James Hunter. So the Great Wheel turns and with MacDiarmid again: 'A Scottish poet maun assume/ The burden o' his people's doom,/ And dee to brak' their livin' tomb.'

*Chapter 6* – 'The Highlands are a Devastated Countryside' – looks to the future, arguing that if we do not grasp the thistle and bridge the gap between indigenous Highlanders and environmentalists from elsewhere then the people themselves, like Africans in imposed game reserves, will turn against their environment. He notes that if present demographic trends continue, 'very few such communities will consist of native Highlanders.' How, then, can we best work the social alchemy of reconnecting people and nature? And how can we do so while circumventing what he rejects as the 'exclusivist, reactionary and inadmissibly pessimistic' voices of some contemporary Gaelic poetry of the 1990s 'in favour of something more constructive'?

Hunter concedes that his concern for the incomer as well as the indigenous, 'may be thought to sit a little bit uneasily in a book which began by stressing the importance of our Highland culture and by citing Frantz Fanon . . . but there is no point in regenerating our culture if we are simply going to use that culture to fuel the flames of racial intolerance and antipathy.'

Is the tension racial, or is it more about social class and world-views? At what point do poetic paeans for cultural loss become 'racist', as distinct from being critiques of unequal power relationships, clashes of differing cultural values and the social infusions intrinsic to the speed of traffic up and down the A9? Here is ground where angels fear to tread. Yet, tread we are forced to do. A decade ago I was invited by Aberdeen University to give a series of extra-mural lectures on the theme of people and place in a number of West Highland villages. I presumed that my audiences would comprise a mixture of incomers and indigenous and spoke

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accordingly, emphasising the virtues, founded on mutual respect and humanity, of hospitality for the short term and fostership for permanence. However, at two of these locations on successive nights I was stopped half way through and instructed: 'Are you aware that, apart from so-and-so (who had come to unlock the hall), we're all incomers here?'

For me it brought home with a bang Hunter's identification of a rift between 'environmentalist' and indigenous voices. Although once an incomer myself to Lewis as a child I was left feeling bewildered, disappointed and displaced. I was told that the indigenous residents were more concerned with 'their church' and I wondered how such a division could have come about. It felt as if the guests had taken over the guest house, and I felt lonely. Like Catriona Montgomery of Skye whose poetry Hunter quotes in this final chapter, I too could have written a lament for a lost culture on either of those nights. In so doing I would have wrestled with how to express my feelings.

I think of a friend on a Hebridean island who can trace his ancestors back to Culloden. He had been disrespected by a rowdy subgroup of incomers (an embarrassment to other incomers), and had been left embittered. He said he'd decided not to contribute any more to island cultural events aimed at integration. 'I'd rather go down with the whole ship,' he exclaimed beneath his breath, 'than see it stay afloat with those buggers on board.'

I know where my sympathies lie; but how best to address it, and is it too late? Like Hunter, I can only say that it is in watching the young, a more integrated generation, that I find hope. It is a joy to see incomer children becoming, if not genetically native, then certainly culturally indigenous.

One thing is for sure. Addressing cultural loss as well as seeking integration is imperative not just for rural areas, but also for the kind of folk, mainly of Irish or Highland stock, amongst whom I live here in Govan in Glasgow; those for whom the evacuation of

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context and meaning in their lies often results in Viola Cordova's description of seeking 'oblivion in alcohol, drugs and suicide.'

I speak out of urgency. A couple of years ago there was a stabbing on the street right outside our front door. Some months ago I held an old woman's hand on a neighbouring street as she died in a sectarian road rage attack. Last week (as I write) an exquisitely tender musician called Joe, born in Govan's now-demolished 'Wine Alley', died from an overdose. He once told me that he could only make sense of his life in terms of God and the Devil and as I sat looking at the faces at his funeral, contemplating their psychohistory, I found myself thinking of the Devil at the start of the book of Job in the Bible. There he was, walking 'up and down' upon the face of the Earth in long straight lines: and I thought: 'Aye, right: the long straight lines of a lawyer's pen on the map!'

For that's the truth of Britain today. The poor get done for Bedroom Tax while the rich build upon their erstwhile ancestral lands. I believe it would not be blasphemous to adapt slightly the translation of the Biblical passage with which Hunter opened his seminal 1976 book on crofting history: 'Woe unto you who add bedroom unto bedroom and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land' (Isaiah 5:8).

Can we bear witness to these social realities? Can we do so without, on the one hand, stirring up hatred for others who generally intend no ill; indeed, quite the contrary? And without, on the other hand, stirring up the self-hatred of the sell-out such as Viola Cordova described as 'committing oneself to an endless denial of what once was'?

### HUNTER'S GREAT VISION

These are immense questions of our times, of a world far beyond the Scottish Highlands, and why James Hunter's *On the Other Side of Sorrow* made such an impact on me. His conclusion is that if we are to retain our humanity we have to do what we have to do, but

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in ways that rise like a human mountain above ‘strife and bitterness . . . racial intolerance and antipathy.’ If Gael and incomer fail to find common ground and make common cause on the ground upon which they stand then, cautions Hunter: ‘We shall have paid our earlier oppressors the ultimate compliment of adopting their bigoted, aggressive jingoistic outlook on the world.’ We have to become bigger than the smallness with which we are sometimes confronted, including the smallness within ourselves. But we’re amongst the world’s lucky ones. We have a culture with that vision and from they to whom much has been given, much will be expected.

My French wife Vèrène Nicolas and I choose to live in Govan because I am a founding director of the GalGael Trust – the ‘Gal’ being the stranger and the ‘Gael’ the heartland people. Best known for building traditional wooden boats and these, as metaphors for the journey of life, GalGael was started by Gehan and the late Colin Macleod. Her people are from England and Egypt. His, from Ireland and Gravir in South Lochs. As folks mainly from the housing schemes built the vision that became the GalGael in the 1990s we factored in ideas such as Hunter expresses in this book. We saw amongst ourselves that there is something of the stranger and something of the heartland people in us all. We pay heed to Hunter’s old English teacher, Iain Crichton Smith, and from time to time at our gatherings remind ourselves of what it’s all about, by reading aloud these lines from his searching humanitarian essay, *Real People in a Real Place*:

Sometimes when I walk the streets of Glasgow I see old women passing by, bowed down with shopping bags, and I ask myself: ‘What force made this woman what she is? What is her history?’ It is the holiness of the person we have lost, the holiness of life itself, the inexplicable mystery and wonder of it, its strangeness, its tenderness.



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If people and place are ever to achieve ‘sustainability’ such is the human depth at which we have to meet one another. There may or may not be a United Kingdom in the future but there must, as Colin Macleod used to emphasise, be a ‘united kindred’. We do not achieve this by turning our backs on tradition. We achieve it, as T.S. Eliot said in his 1921 essay, by honouring the fact that, ‘Not only the best, but the most individual parts [of a poet’s] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.’

For here, ‘Tradition is a matter of much wider significance’ than merely the blind following of what has been handed down from previous generations. ‘It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour.’ Often, often, from a sour soil God brings forth sweet flowers. And we? The gardeners.

In *A Single Ray of the Sun* John Carey, an Irish–American medievalist at the University of Cork, speaks of an ‘imaginative reconciliation’ between the old gods of ‘faerie’ and the new God of Christianity in the Celtic world. Similarly, *On the Other Side of Sorrow* is a book that calls us to an imaginative reconciliation between old and new expressions of our culture. The penultimate poem that Hunter quotes is Derick Thomson’s ‘The Norsemen Coming Ashore at Ness’. Here Professor Thomson reminds us that the incomer, indeed, the invader fused and became the indigenous. The Gael became Gal became Gael again and until it turned tabloid very recently the subtitle of *The Stornoway Gazette* used to be, *Guth Nan Imse-Gall* (‘Land of the Strangers’). The ‘gall’ within us all must learn how to re-indigenise if we are to find belonging and ‘rest’ (as the Psalmist put it) in the land.

Hunter concludes this book: ‘Can we define the term “Highlander” in such a way that the issue of a person’s ancestry becomes of much less importance than the fact that such a person lives in, works in, is committed to, this quite amazing tract of territory?’ He points to Gaelic-medium schooling as one way forward.

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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.