

PERCEPTIONS
FOOD FACTORY, PLAYGROUND OR MUSEUM?
Scotland's Countryside Today and Tomorrow

Scotland contains some of the most sparsely populated landscapes in Europe. It is also one of the most highly urbanised countries; only a very small proportion of Scots live in rural communities. The political power lies with its towns and cities.

So what kind of future lies ahead? Is the countryside to be just a highly mechanised food factory? – a playground for the urban masses? – or an agglomeration of protected (and, arguably, fossilised) historical and ecological zones?

Views of rural Scotland, imposed from outwith, are nothing new. Previously despised as an abhorrent wilderness, sparsely inhabited by a wild and dangerous race, those same qualities of landscape and culture were to become fashionable during the 19th century as '*Caledonia, Stern and Wild*' – as much of a stereotype as its predecessor had been. Queen Victoria played no little part in bringing this about, but rural Scots, exiled abroad or in Scotland's own cities, shared the blame; as did the perpetrators of Kailyaird literature, with their patronising, sentimentalised portrayal of rural life.

Other stereotypes were at work in the field of literature. The noble rustic stereotypes planted (unfairly, perhaps) around the world of Robert Burns, or the historical ones around Sir Walter Scott.

The reality of rural Scotland differed, and still differs, from all of these. Up until the mid 19th century, only upper, and upper-middle class citizens could take their leisure in the countryside. Glasgow's 18th century tobacco lords and textile magnates were quick to buy their way into landed property and the social cachet which its possession brought. Their grand country houses were surrounded by landscaped grounds, just as were those of country gentry. During the 19th century, the coming of the railways began to bring a degree of democratisation to countryside access, though it was principally the middle classes who benefited. The 20th century, however, opened it up to almost everyone.

Several factors were at work. Cheap rail travel was already available, but during the 20th century, access to cars and motorbikes brought the masses within reach of the countryside. Higher real incomes and longer holidays provided the means, and the opportunity, to spend time there. The 1930s, in particular, saw a boom in outdoor activity – walking, climbing, cycling, camping, hostelling, caravanning – all of these were pursued with unprecedented levels of participation and enthusiasm. Self-build holiday

villages, some with a political dimension, sprang up on coasts and on upland edges accessible from roads and railways. An example is this **holiday camp** at **Seton Sands, East Lothian**. The exiled urbanised masses had returned to the land, and the urban playground had arrived. The **car park** at **New Lanark** gives some idea of the scale of this invasion.



© East Lothian Museums Service via SCRAN



© New Lanark Conservation Trust via SCRAN

Another view of the countryside was also coming to the fore, with a growing awareness of the fragility of Scotland's historical, scenic and ecological wealth.



In the mid 1930s, **Percy Unna, President of the Scottish Mountaineering Club** (seen here centre) was instrumental in bringing the Dalness estate, Argyll, into the ownership of the recently formed National Trust for Scotland. Further funds, raised through Unna, enabled the Trust to acquire other properties. He died in 1950.

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Through time, the Trust took on some of the most environmentally sensitive places in Scotland:



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Ben Lawers, Perthshire, with its arctic-alpine vegetation;



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St Kilda, that most isolated of abandoned communities,



© National Trust for Scotland via SCRAN

or fragments of Scots pine forest in **Torridon, Wester Ross**. The Trust also took a hand in saving Scotland's built heritage – from the grandeur of Culzean Castle and its grounds to the 'Little Houses' of Dunkeld and elsewhere.

Other historical and archaeological sites came into the care of the then Ministry of Works, now Historic Scotland. Further, more extensive powers followed, as protection for the natural and historic environment; Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI's), National Nature Reserves (NNR's), Local Nature Reserves and Areas of Great Landscape Value (AGLV's), with a state quango, Scottish Natural Heritage, at the helm. Scheduling, listing and conservation areas, run by Historic Scotland and local planning authorities, gave protection to the built environment. Other, voluntary bodies, such as the Scottish Wildlife Trust contribute to the conservation and care of the natural environment as does the Scottish Civic Trust to the built environment.

Is there, then, room for these conflicting tendencies towards playground or museum – not to mention farming, still the real business of the countryside?

There has to be. The countryside *will* have a future, but for that to be a balanced and sustainable one all the parties concerned will need to approach their task with open-mindedness, consideration, care, moderation and commitment. And the better Scotland's people understand their countryside, the more democratic their decisions will be.

To find out more:

Smout, T.C. *Nature, Landscape and People Since the Second World War*
Edinburgh, 2001

Holmes, G. and Crofts, R. (editors) *Scotland's Environment: The Future*,
Edinburgh, 2000

Perceptions of Scotland's countryside – THEN and NOW

1. Think of Scotland. What comes to mind? Rugged hills and rolling glens, whisky drinkers and tartan-clad bagpipers, four-legged haggis and toffee-coloured highland cows?

Consider what significance such images have to Scotland and why they might have come to represent the country?

How realistic are these stereotypical images? Are they sentimentalised? Overly romantic? Where do you think these images have come from? What purpose do they have?

2. Queen Victoria's visit to Scotland in the 19th century and a trend in Romanticism led to an increasing interest in Scotland as a leisure and holiday destination. Since then, Scotland has become more and more popular with tourists.

What do you think were the positive effects of this trend?

Could you foresee any negative side-effects of this interest in the landscapes of Scotland?

3. **If you were given the job of marketing Scotland to tourists, how would you represent it? What features would you focus on? Try to think beyond the stereotypes.**

Looking at Scotland's Countryside

As you go through the countryside you can look for evidence of the ways in which it is used.

One way of focusing your thoughts is to drive along a major road and ask what is close to the road and what is far away and perhaps invisible from the road.

- **What is there to do** with leisure such as places to stay? Are these places where you might want to stay for a few days, or are they staging posts on the way to another part of the country? What countryside activities are you encouraged to do?
- **Can you see** industrial-scale farm buildings which show that farming is taking place on a large scale?
- **Are there indications** of the conservation of history and nature, such as preserved buildings or nature reserves?
- **What is there** which just encourages you to get through the countryside as quickly as you can, such as filling stations and the road itself?