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REVIEW OF ‘LAIRDS, LAND AND SUSTAINABILITY – SCOTTISH PERSPECTIVES ON UPLAND MANAGEMENT’ (2013) EDITED BY JAYNE GLASS, MARTIN F PRICE, CHARLES WARREN AND ALISTER SCOTT

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In 2013, the House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee began its enquiry into land reform in Scotland by commissioning a controversial briefing paper from Jim Hunter, Peter Peacock, Andy Wightman and Michael Foxley entitled ‘432:50 – Towards a comprehensive land reform agenda for Scotland’. The authors (2013, p. 5) argued that “Scotland has the most concentrated pattern of private land ownership in the developed world. The degree of concentration is evident from the fact that a mere 432 landowners account for half of all Scotland’s privately owned land – such land (since not much more than 10 per cent of Scotland is in public ownership) accounting, in turn, for the bulk of the country.” In due course, in its final report (2015, p. 17), the Committee went even further, claiming that “Concentrated land ownership has a negative impact on attempts to create a more socially just Scotland.”

Land reform is of course primarily a devolved matter, as a result of which the Scottish Affairs Committee focused almost exclusively on the impact on rural land of UK-wide taxation and agricultural subsidies. In Scotland itself, the Land Reform Review Group, established by the Scottish Government in 2012, proposed a more comprehensive set of reforms covering both urban and rural land in its 2014 final report. These included recommendations to improve the quality of information about rural land ownership in Scotland and set an upper limit on the total amount of land that any individual or single beneficial interest could own in Scotland.

Among the many responses to the LRRG’s early call¹ for evidence was a highly professional 266 page submission from Scottish Land and Estates, the representative body of private landowners and land-based businesses in rural Scotland. At the core of the Scottish Land and Estates evidence (2014, p. 41) came the counter argument to the views articulated by Jim Hunter and colleagues, namely that “a modern land reform debate should focus on the best use of land and what the desired outcomes of land management should be and, then, how best those outcomes can be delivered to provide a range of primary and secondary outcomes, rather than simply on who owns the land.”

Is the purpose of land reform in Scotland then primarily one of promoting ‘better’ (or in today’s parlance ‘more sustainable’) land management practices, irrespective of how land is owned, or is it that of creating more equitable patterns of ownership, which proponents often argue will lead to improved management? This schism lies at the heart of the current debate around rural land reform in Scotland and helps explain the sharp differences between radicals and gradualists. For if traditional lairds can be trusted to embrace sustainable management practices and (slightly parodying the title of the LRRG final report) manage ‘the land of Scotland in the common good’ rather than just in their own private interests, why should we concern ourselves with getting rid of them? It is this question that makes the recent book on ‘Lairds, Land and Sustainability’ edited by

Jayne Glass and her colleagues such an interesting contribution to the land reform debate in Scotland.

The book brings together a series of nine chapters, variously written by a combination of seven different authors, which together provide a thorough account of current management practices in upland Scotland - pursued not only by private estates but by the increasingly important community and NGO (non-governmental) sectors.

The first two chapters provide a valuable foundation for the book, clearly setting out key concepts on upland land management and explaining how such areas can be viewed as a set of ecosystem services. Despite extensive private land ownership, uplands generate very significant public goods that belong to the wider community. The essential proposition of the authors is thus that upland areas require improved policy-making and decision-making to facilitate sustainable management and environmental governance. This requires joined up management involving dialogue and sharing between resource users and managers. In this context, the second chapter controversially suggests that “at its best, (private) estate management provides an exemplar of integrated, cross-sectoral management of the upland environment” (p. 37). Meanwhile, public policy towards the Scottish uplands is split between different agencies with different priorities, while the Scottish Government’s own focus on sustainable economic growth seemingly conflicts with the more integrated frameworks that are deemed necessary to secure truly sustainable development.

The next three chapters of the book offer valuable insight into the operation of private landed estates in Scottish, drawing on a detailed survey of 84 landowners who between them owned some 1.8 million acres of rural Scotland. This highlights the immense variety of management practices and strategies pursued by different upland estates. Nevertheless, management traditions developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries remain highly powerful today, while recent land reform legislation has had remarkably little impact on upland estates, despite original fears among landowning interests that it would depress land values, reduce investment and employment and threaten natural heritage.

The subsequent case studies of twelve different estates demonstrate some commitment among private landowners to social and environment priorities, once financial survival is assured. While the case studies “indicate that resident and inherited landowners can contribute to the maintenance of resilient communities in the Scottish uplands” (p. 105), ‘bad apples’ certainly exist. Yet, no comment is offered by the authors on whether the ‘bad apples’ are prevalent enough to justify a radical land reform policy, although the largely sympathetic account of private landownership presented in this book makes one doubt whether this would be their position. That said, the detailed and very interesting ethnographic study of relations between private landowners and local communities, presented in the third of these chapters certainly reveals negative as well as positive aspects of private land management, while arguing that much depends “on individuals, their backgrounds, values and, at times, their confidence” (p. 125).

The book then moves on to look at the growth of community and NGO land ownership, before setting out a detailed tool by which to assess sustainable land management practices in the uplands. Community ownership is shown to have very considerable potential, but does not necessarily resolve all the conflicts of upland land management. The account of NGO ownership, evident in the work of the RSPB, National Trust for Scotland and John Muir Trust for example, might usefully have been extended to evaluate rather than merely report criticisms that its growth has reduced local accountability and sensitivity. The sustainability tool is particularly useful in moving debate on beyond traditional owner notions of ‘stewardship’ and ‘responsibility’ towards twelve

practical types of action that can be taken to achieve five identified principles of sustainability relevant to upland management.

How then does 'Lairds, Land and Sustainability' speak to current debates on rural land reform in Scotland? First and foremost, the book is based on detailed research and scholarship and the insights it provides certainly contributes to a policy arena that is often more characterised by heat than light. But the evidence presented in the book is complex and messy – there are, for example, plenty of well-intentioned private landowners who place significant importance on the well-being of their local communities, even though their relative significance is not necessarily clear. Conversely, community and NGO ownership, while having much potential, is not always a panacea.

Maybe this kind of mixed picture is precisely what might be expected from a theoretical approach that is strongly grounded in agency analysis, with much less attention paid to the social and economic structures that frame and indeed constrain agency behaviour. Nevertheless, those of radical persuasion who wish to overturn the prevalent social and economic structures of the Scottish uplands are unlikely to be persuaded by the authors' story of the potentially positive contribution of private landowners to upland sustainability. Yet, Scotland's pragmatic politicians may see the mixed and complex picture presented in this book as good reason to continue their hesitant approach to land reform and avoid any measures that might be portrayed as too radical.

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¹ Submissions of evidence to the LRRG are still available at <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/21013/07/2790/0>