

[Book Review]

*Scotland and Islandness:
Explorations in Community, Economy and Culture*

Scotland and Islandness: Explorations in Community, Economy and Culture. By Kathryn Burnett, Ray Burnett, Michael Danson, and Valentina Bold, eds. Oxford: Peter Lang Ltd., International Academic Publishers, 2021. 262 pages. \$70.95 (hardcover).

This volume is a timely and necessary addition to the field of island studies, bringing together contemporaneous issues within Scottish island discourse, such as sustainable development, land reform, Scottish government island policy, island entrepreneurship and cultural industries, youth out-migration, and language and identity. Aside from the field of island studies, this interdisciplinary book will be of interest to those working in Scottish and Celtic studies, regional studies, rural development, and ethnography, among others.

The inclusion of Scottish voices, and particularly chapters by Scottish island voices such as Rosie Alexander, Andrew Jennings, and Ray Burnett, is welcome in a discipline that at its core seeks to “understand islands on their own terms” (MacCall 1994; Grydehøj 2017). Further, the inclusion of Scottish Gaelic (Gàidhlig) rightfully elevates the visibility of the language to a wider interdisciplinary audience. Gàidhlig has, unfortunately, often been relegated to the position of a historical quirk within English-language Scottish academic discourse or ignored entirely.

Hugh Cheape’s chapter, “Gaelic Perspectives on Island Cultural Heritage in Scotland’s Hebrides,” offers a succinct overview of the historical and contemporary challenges to the Scottish Gaelic language before tracing the cultural history of the Hebrides through examples from Gàidhlig vocabulary. Of particular note is Cheape’s critique of the term *dùthchas*, which has become readily adopted by the media and academia as well as heritage organisations, to describe the almost spiritual connection between Hebridean people and the landscape in which they reside. Alternatively, Cheape offers *seanachas* as a way of describing Hebridean cosmology. *Seanachas* can be loosely translated as a shared oral tradition that encapsulates community knowledge and memory, and this offers much in the way of further research and discussion.

Michael Danson offers a comprehensive overview of the contemporary sustainable development issues in a Scottish island context in his chapter entitled “Regional and Island Economies of Peripheries and Margins: ‘Nordic and Celtic’ Comparisons.” Danson explores the intertwined challenges of demographic instability, economic fragility,

and geographical isolation, alongside a critique of the supposed advantages of islandness: namely, strong natural and cultural capital and a strong cultural identity. Danson states that these advantages are difficult to translate into sustainable development without greater levels of physical and digital connectivity between Scotland's islands and with the mainland to reduce regional inequalities. This chapter also points to Danson's previous work in this field, which serves as a useful reading list.

Rosie Alexander's chapter on young people's out-migration from Scottish islands delineates the complexity of migratory decision-making and patterns. Of particular note is the call to consider island *returners* in policy development, who have often been overlooked in favour of attracting new in-migrants. With the upcoming Scottish census in 2022, this chapter will act as a useful perspective from which to interpret and analyse emerging demographic trends. Further research on the impact of University of the Highlands and Islands campuses on the smaller Scottish islands is warranted to assess their impact on the decision for young people to remain or leave their island home.

Calum MacLeod's chapter on community land ownership is an excellent introduction to the historical, political, and economic underpinnings to the radical, and at times controversial, process whereby land, and the power of how to utilize it, is transferred from a private (often distant) owner to the communal ownership of people who live there. The case study of the West Harris Trust serves as a tentative demonstration of the potential for island communities to do development "on their own terms." It should be noted that not all community buyouts have been so smooth; for example, the Paicr Estate in Lewis had a protracted and difficult purchasing process.

Sindico and Crook's chapter on the Islands (Scotland) Act of 2018 is perhaps the most ground-breaking chapter in this volume. The Scottish government has undertaken to "island-proof" new policy and law and ensure that Scottish island voices are heard and empowered. Sindico and Crook detail the process of consultation in which they were involved and summarize the emerging themes and principles of the National Islands Plan. This emerging work will be of interest to all who are engaged in island studies policy at both a local and national level.

James Oliver's chapter, "Islandness: Articulating and Emplacing Relationality," deftly integrates the relationality of place and ontology of island studies to issue a call for an ethical and progressive re-centering of relations between people, place, and environment (246). This chapter could seem like a logical choice for an introductory chapter rather than the finale as its tone and language will be familiar to island scholars. However, Oliver brings together threads woven through previous chapters: that Scotland's islands cannot be regarded as monolithic but rather a complex multiplicity, and that they are relational and emplaced. This echoes the historical connectedness illustrated in Ray Burnett's chapter, which traces the mobility of Early Christian monk-scholars and their constructions of islandness.

This otherwise excellent volume would benefit from the inclusion of maps showing the island regions of Scotland as well as the Highlands, which are mentioned throughout

the book with little explication for non-Scottish readers. Further, a list of useful websites to non-academic sources of information for each chapter may have been useful for those unfamiliar with the Scottish context, e.g., the Community Land Scotland website at the end of MacLeod's chapter. One minor point of debate would be the assertion in the first chapter (3) that "Today the highlands and islands exist, operate and compete as an invigorated, confident and empowered region. Challenges do remain, however." The challenges listed, along with the impact of Brexit, a limited housing market, few job opportunities, and fears of cultural erosion due to tourism, render this statement somewhat at odds with the reviewer's experience of life in the Hebrides and Danson's conclusions in chapter 11.

Mealaibh ur naidheachd agus gur math a thèid leibh!

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References

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- McCall, Grant. 1994. "Nissology: A Proposal for Consideration." *Journal of the Pacific Society* 63, no. 17: 93–106.