

Mairi Stewart

*Voices of the Forest: A Social History of
Scottish Forestry in the Twentieth Century*

Edinburgh: John Donald, 2016. pp. 304

ISBN 190656664X

THIS ENGAGING study of Scotland's forestry industry highlights the tremendous power of oral testimony in capturing lived experience. Folklorists, ethnographers and social historians demonstrated the value of this primary source from the 1940s onwards but the establishment of the Scottish Oral History Centre at Strathclyde University in 1995 was an important landmark in the development of this often neglected area of historical studies. Subsequent work across academia, the media and archival centres has broadened the range of topics where oral testimony has been central in offering correctives to traditional orthodoxies and adding to our understanding of the past.

The roots of this publication lie in an oral history project for the 2007 'Highland year of culture'. Driven by the enthusiastic backing of Jim Hunter, Director of the UHI Centre for History, a team was assembled to broaden the area of investigation to other parts of rural Scotland but keep the focus on those who worked and lived in areas dependent on forestry. The 'felt experience' is evident in the care that has been taken to capture the stories of those 'last remnants of a once mighty race', a parting line to the author from one of the workers of the 'Knapdale squad' who was reflecting on changes to forestry in Argyllshire. Widening the scope of rural studies beyond the Highlands is welcome as it helps to highlight important similarities and differences raised by the question of 'rurality' in Scotland. The end result is a highly professional production, with photographs, maps and illustrations supplementing the narrative, itself generously supported by footnotes and text boxes focusing on specific issues raised in the chapters.

The book opens with reflections on the life of the Boreland Estate in Perthshire from harvesters, forwarders, hauliers, managers and timber merchants, with insights into the peculiarities of this older forest in relation

to the twenty-first century industry. This opening nicely sets the tone for the book with personal insights and candid commentary providing detail on the elements of continuity and change in the industry, interspersed with illustrations to contextualise the narrative.

Thereafter, the book adopts a broadly chronological approach. Chapter two, 'Forestry until the Eve of the Second World War', delves into the origins of State sponsored forestry production from the mid-nineteenth century through to the activities of Simon Joseph Fraser, the 14th Lord Lovat around the time of the First World War. The labours of 'the sawdust fusiliers', overseas troops stationed throughout rural Scotland, helped those keen to promote forestry as a means of boosting the economy and stemming the tide of rural depopulation. Landowners, timber merchants and the Forestry Commission, which was established in 1919, all vied for some role in these early postwar years of afforestation. It would be the foresters, however, some now benefiting from land settlement schemes on Forestry Commission land, who would pioneer the dramatic changes to the face of the Scottish countryside.

Chapter three, 'Forestry at War', begins with recollections from forestry workers mobilised in the Second World War, but the bulk of the chapter focuses on the various units created to increase domestic timber production. Soldiers from overseas territories again formed the bulk of the labour, but the chapter also brings forth experiences from the Women's Timber Corps (WTC). While conditions in the various forest camps scattered across the country were often challenging, the 'lumberjills' of the WTC found enjoyment and companionship through their involvement in many different aspects of timber production during a period of immense change.

The two decades following the end of the war form the basis for the next couple of chapters, signifying the importance of this period for economic, social and indeed cultural development across rural Scotland. Chapter four concentrates on 'working in the forest' with particular local skills perceptible in some of the reminiscences about the 'north-east tradition'. Expertise, craft and determination to endure the challenges of such labour-intensive work was clearly evident throughout the nation's woodland areas as they adjusted to the new rhythms of work dictated by growing economic demand, innovative methods and advances in technology. The integrated nature of the industry – from the 'road squads' making the forests accessible to timber merchants processing and selling the end product – also becomes more apparent as the scale of production increased considerably to meet demand from markets that were being created as part of 'a new focus for forestry'.

In chapter five, 'Living in the Forest', we get a sense of what it was like for the working families who regarded the forests as 'home'. The chapter is

particularly valuable for exploring a tension between itinerant versus settled notions of community and home in a rapidly changing world. The creation of 'forest villages', including the first purpose-built township at Ae, north of Dumfries, had mixed success in terms of withstanding the changing dynamics of rural development. While many men in the industry were accustomed to a single life in far-flung bothies, some of the new villages in which families were expected to live were also set up in fairly isolated locations. The recollections nevertheless vividly demonstrate that this remoteness, and limited access to amenities, contributed to a particular kind of community.

The remainder of the books charts what it was like to live and work through a period of dramatic adjustment stemming from the transformation in the organisation, culture and practises in the industry from the 1970s onwards. Chapter six's subtitle, 'Breaking down the old order', signifies the nature of these changes as 'the last bastions of the old colonial approach' were dismantled. Decimalisation, metrication, computerisation and bureaucratisation overlapped with a renewed focus on 'time and motion' as every aspect of forestry operations was scrutinized to establish piece rates, improve techniques and assess new equipment. Perhaps inevitably industrial relations suffered as a result, but the chapter also offers an insight into the sometime humorous interactions: 'Aye Charlie loon, it's an idea, it's an idea, it's nae a hellish good yin, but it's an idea.' The book is replete with examples of the industry's characters from recollections of working practice to relations between individuals and groups but it also highlights both the physical and psychological toll that were part of the evolving working experience.

In chapter seven, 'Plantation to Forest: the 1980s and 1990s', the focus turns to an industry adapting to a less state-oriented and more market-driven ethos that permeated so much of British society. The closure of the Corpach pulp and paper mill in 1980 devastated many within the Lochaber area and beyond, and though the wider industry would recover through investment, adaptation and sourcing new markets, there was a decisive break with the past typified with re-organisation of the industry in 1984. With the amalgamation of the old forests into a new district structure 'the intimate link between forester and forest was broken. The personal touch was gone.' It was clear that business decisions now outweighed social responsibilities, cultural aspects, and environmental considerations, nowhere more apparent than in the 'Battle for the Flow country'. The perceived blanket afforestation of Scottish uplands and the decline of native woodland prompted a desire for a more diverse approach, with greater appreciation of landscape aesthetics and more emphasis on leisure and recreational facilities.

The book ends with an examination of the Glenmore Estate near Aviemore

before broadening the scope to reflect on the elements of continuity and change in the industry among its communities. Fittingly, the 'voices of the forest' have the final say but the book offers much more than elegiac or celebratory story-telling. The forthright contributions throughout the text are framed by a robust historical analysis that draws from supplementary sources to offer important insights into a topic that remains of pressing social and environmental concern today, in addition to themes that resonate across time and place.

John A. Burnett
Edinburgh Napier University