

'We will beat the landlords and the scenic sentimentalists': Neil M. Gunn and Landscape Discourse in the 'Hydro' Debates

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In his introduction to *Imagined Country: Society, Culture and Environment* John Rennie Short suggests that 'there is nothing so social as our ideas about the physical environment'.^[1] Short takes issue with the received wisdom that the physical environment simply 'is' and that it is the job of the viewer, artist or writer to discover or express the ultimate truth that place may contain. In other words his focus is on the counter-proposition that human ideas about landscape are always already mediated by ideologies and aesthetic concerns that are themselves the product of discourse. Like all discourse, discourse about land has its own history; it is fluid, and it depends upon local conditions and cultural and historical difference:

Landscape has to be contextualised. The way in which people – anywhere, everywhere – understand and engage with their worlds will depend upon the specific time and place and historical conditions. [...] Even in the most scientific of western worlds, past and future will be mythologized. Sometimes the engagement will be very conscious – a way of laying down claims, of justifying and legitimising a particular place in the world – sometimes almost unconscious – part of the routine of everyday existence. Each individual holds many landscapes in tension. [...] The landscape is never inert, people engage with it, re-work it, appropriate and contest it. It is part of the way in which identities are created and disputed, whether as individual, group or nation state. Operating therefore at the junction of history and politics, social relations and cultural perceptions, landscape has to be [...] 'a concept of high tension'.^[2]

Landscape, in this formulation, is a concept always in flux and always able to be shaped, re-shaped and defined by speaking positions predicated on individual and national identity as well as social and cultural circumstance. It is, in effect, an object of discourse like any other. Yet, if Barbara Bender focuses on the idea of landscape as a discursive construct, Denis E. Cosgrove goes further still and posits the notion of landscape itself as a discourse. His account begins with the historical emergence of the term 'landscape' and links it to the simultaneous development of innovative methods of representation in the visual arts, which are themselves the product of changing social and cultural conditions:

Between the early fifteenth century and late nineteenth century [...] the idea of landscape came to denote the artistic and literary representation of the visible world, the scenery (literally that which is *seen*) which is viewed by a spectator. It implied a particular sensibility, a way of experiencing and expressing feelings towards the external world, natural and man-made, and an articulation of a human relationship with it. That sensibility was closely connected to a growing dependency on the faculty of sight as the medium through which truth was to be attained: 'seeing is believing'. Significant technical innovations for representing this truth included single-point perspective and the invention of aids to sight like the microscope, telescope and camera, whose origin and development [...] can be understood historically by reference to patterns of social and productive organisations we recognise as capitalist.[\[3\]](#)

It is argued that the term landscape must not be understood as denoting simply a view or vista. Rather, Cosgrove identifies the notion of landscape itself, the landscape idea, as a new way of perceiving, a new aesthetic, which is tied to and must be understood through technical innovations and social change. These innovations credit the human eye as a faculty capable of totalising the meaning of the viewed object:

Landscape is the area subtended to the eye and vision of an observer who will, at least in theory, paint it. It is to be composed for its aesthetic content and may excite a psychological response. Observed in this

painterly way, landscapes could be beautiful, sublime, monotonous or despoiled. They engage a subjective response in those who observed or experienced them. Landscape was therefore invested from outside with human meaning.[\[4\]](#)

The key point here is that the landscape idea – a way of constructing and mediating ‘reality’ – actually privileges the view of the outsider *and* the outsider’s experience and sensibility. Landscapes as vistas are constructed by a remote viewer for the ocular consumption of other viewers all of whom exist in a realm external to the viewed scene. Meaning is not totalised by the lives, experiences and sensibilities of anyone happening to appear within the viewer’s field of vision, rather it is constructed from without and imposed upon the scene by the viewer. A Scottish example of Cosgrove’s thinking is the popularity of reproductions of Sir Edwin Landseer’s paintings in the late nineteenth-century. These ‘pastiche[s] of the sublime’ actually helped to create a taste for, and perpetuate the image of, a picture of the Highlands that bore little relation to the material actualities of its real inhabitants’ lives.[\[5\]](#) Yet, as well as its sublime qualities, the paintings also exhibit what is presented as a commendable attention to detail. It is this very illusory realism, which is itself tied to the emergence of single-point perspective and other artistic innovations, that disguises the outsider’s outsider status. By ‘claiming realism, paintings of landscape and the idea of landscape [...] offer the illusion of affinity’ with the objects they depict.[\[6\]](#)

This conclusion begs the assumption of a differently-constructed notion of landscape for those assumed to have an ‘insider’ position:

[For those inside the scene] the composition of their landscape is much more integrated and inclusive with the diurnal course of life’s events – with birth, death, festival, tragedy – all the occurrences that lock together human time and place. For the insider there is no clear separation of self from scene, subject from object. [...] The insider does not enjoy the privilege of being able to walk away from the scene as we can walk away from a framed picture or from a tourist viewpoint. [...] For the insider the landscape is unmediated by aesthetic conventions and the collective coexists within the individual.[\[7\]](#)

This claim, that constructions of landscape by 'insiders' are essentially 'unmediated by aesthetic conventions' is perhaps worthy of being challenged. Yet, what Cosgrove urges is a useful contrast capable of drawing towards notions of belonging, and in extreme cases *völkishness*. It is communal work, myth, ritual, memory and history that tie the 'insider' to the land in a way that differently figures its interpretation. Cosgrove recounts the views of an outsider and an insider faced with a damaged landscape and cleared forest in Appalachia:

For the [outsider] the clearing was a chaotic and visually offensive scar of the prime majesty of the forest. For the [insider] it was a record of pioneering effort and a symbol of his family's and his nation's future. The place was invested with a personal and social meaning that had little to do with its visual form.[\[8\]](#)

In the discussion of the 'Hydro' debates that follows this perception of 'insideness' and 'outsideness' as a producer of differing discourse on the landscape of the Highlands will be closely examined. Since the late 1980s there has been a significant shift in the way Gunn's own *oeuvre* and his mode of writing has been received by critics. I broadly situate my own approach as a development of arguments first raised by Alastair McCleery, Margery Palmer McCulloch and Richard Price. All three critics explicitly and implicitly promote both the importance of Gunn's non-fiction writing as a means of understanding the novels, and his construction or articulation of an 'insider' mode of discourse.[\[9\]](#) In the case of the novel *Butcher's Broom*, for example, Price develops a persuasive thesis concerning Gunn's narrative point of view which is produced 'from the inside; it is history almost wholly from peasants' viewpoints filtered through Gunn's occasionally explicitly polemical narrator'.[\[10\]](#) In my view, such technique cannot be separated from Gunn's contribution to public debates. Just as his novels of the period were intended for a mass readership, so too is it important that his utterances on current affairs and Highland life did not appear in learned or literary periodicals but in the pages of the *Scots Magazine* and other popular or general-interest titles. The *Scots Magazine* was 'a magazine of rural and small town Scotland on the whole – as it is today – as opposed to an avant-garde magazine' and this is important precisely because it offered Gunn the chance to address his concerns to as wide an audience as possible.[\[11\]](#) Margery McCulloch argues further that Gunn's close association with the *Scots Magazine*

in the 1930s and 1940s, and his friendship with its new editor J. B. Salmond, produced

a number of penetrating articles on Scottish cultural life which have a close relationship with many of the themes being explored in his novels of the same period. In his periodical writing, as in his novels, Gunn was always concerned to relate literature to life.[\[12\]](#)

This authorial focus upon current affairs is important as Gunn, at his best, was not the fey mystic some believe.

But first it is necessary to establish the social backdrop to the debates, and anchor the discussion to the ways in which the Highlands were being interpreted in the inter-war years. The so-called 'hydro' debates were centred on a series of parliamentary bills aimed at the provision of hydro-electricity in the Highlands. These parliamentary debates were notorious for the strength of feeling they promoted both within the House of Commons and beyond, with a strong sense of frustration in many quarters at a succession of defeats and deadlocks that hindered progress. The debates began against a backdrop of severe economic depression and emigration, and concluded towards the end of 1944 within a wider social and political context focussed on national reconstruction. What the debates, and Gunn's contributions to them, reveal is that nothing less than the future image of the Highlands and Highland life was being established with various insiders and outsiders jostling for rhetorical supremacy. The following passage appears in Neil M. Gunn's article 'East to Buchan' written for the *Scots Magazine* in 1939 and describes the disused fishing boats in Fraserburgh harbour:

It was as if a fleet of them, like a school of enormous whales, had run themselves aground, become permanently stranded, and rotted. From some the planking was entirely gone, leaving the gaunt ribs for wind and salt spray to whistle through. They had all taken the ground head-on, some had slewed around, at least one had broken its back.[\[13\]](#)

The article in question is a curious piece of travel writing. It claims to be written with the intention of encouraging travellers to the Highlands to see the real place, to see the Highlands as a diverse collection of different kinds of scenery and not a mono-vista of magnificence. Gunn's simile of the abandoned fishing boats as like a skeletal school of beached whales is entirely in keeping with a contemporary discourse of Highland decline that constructed 'this old, heroic, northern land' as diseased, decaying or dying.[\[14\]](#) Events such as the evacuation of St Kilda in 1930 made clear the sheer difficulty of living, and making a living, in the Highlands and Islands. One fact that preoccupied Gunn, as a Highlander and a nationalist, was the knowledge that in the ten years to 1931 the population of England and Wales had grown by two million while in Scotland there was a net shrinkage of 40,000, or one percent, largely as a result of some 392,000 émigrés.[\[15\]](#) In the article '...and Then Rebuild It', also written in 1939, Gunn dryly quoted from James A. Bowie's *The Future of Scotland*: 'Unless heroic measures are taken, there is every indication that the Highlands will become the Sahara of Scotland'.[\[16\]](#) This new and grim realism began to be expressed as a critique of traditional, largely Romantic or Victorian, constructions of the majesty of the Highlands and Gunn himself had complained such hyperbole smacked of a 'lack of reality, of exact description, that flatters our vague emotions at the expense of our sight and insight'.[\[17\]](#) Indeed, in a 1937 article he had already gone a step further:

Ah! The romantic highlands, the aesthetic appeal of the glens, the bens and the heroes, the blue waves rolling by Barra and all the haunted isles; [...] Is it too much to hope that some day this sort of thing may stick in our gullets, that we shall be roused to make it an indictable offence? This parodying of great beauty by the sentimentalists who think factory work ungenteel should fill us, not with laughter, but with shame.[\[18\]](#)

In many circles the new emptiness of the Highlands was considered its best asset. If it was to have a future it would be either as a playground for the rich and landed classes or simply as a 'clean' space devoid of the smog and crime of the industrial heartlands. Gunn had already summarized this position in another piece of strange travel writing, 'Caithness and Sutherland', in 1935. Of the shooting and fishing economy that was to be encouraged he complained archly: 'After sheep, deer; and after deer; tourists. It is the ascending order of our age of

progress' [\[19\]](#) This rather embittered response can be explained by the lack of drive and imagination Gunn perceived in those charged with improving the lot of the Highlands. In another piece for the *Scots Magazine* in 1937 he appears almost to have been driven to despair:

The best that Inverness Town Council could suggest the other night at a public meeting was tourism as the solution of all our ills, and the Highlands no longer as a brain or a heart or a creative force but as 'a lung' – a lung freed from all the taint of industrialism, so that folk from south of the Highland line could clamber into its emptiness to breathe. Well, it is not enough. In the face of the realities of the situation I find it impossible, for example, to blame the Lochaber men who want work and believe they will find it in the proposed factories of the Caledonian Power Scheme. [\[20\]](#)

The Caledonian Power Scheme was also debated at length by Gunn in the one-act play *Hail, Caledonian!* which appeared in the *Scots Magazine* in May 1938. The play is an interesting dramatisation of the differing views on the proposed Hydro scheme offered by three Highlanders, an Irishman and an Englishman during a heated barroom debate. I make reference to it below and show how it connects to the rhetoric of the parliamentary debates.

The Independent Labour Party firebrand, and publisher of the Socialist journal *Forward*, Tom Johnston, was finally persuaded by Churchill to accept the position of Secretary of State for Scotland in the wartime coalition government in February 1941. [\[21\]](#) Johnston believed that the best means of improving the lot of the working people of Scotland in general, and the Highlanders in particular, lay in the expansion of Scotland's industrial capacity. His fallow years out of office in the mid to late 1930s saw him develop a great interest in the vast American Hydro-Electric schemes such as the works undertaken by the Tennessee Valley Authority. Indeed, Johnston's account of his involvement in Scotland's Hydro-electric programme opens with the following epigraph:

No longer do men look upon poverty as inevitable, nor think that drudgery, disease, filth, famine, floods, and physical exhaustion are visitations of the devil or punishment by a deity. Here is the

central fact with which statesmanship tomorrow must contend.[\[22\]](#)

Those words were written by David Lilienthal, the director of the Tennessee Valley Authority and are followed by a second, brief and rather mournful epigraph by one Wendell Wilkie billed as the 'chief opponent of the TVA': 'It doesn't matter what I think anymore. You can't tear those dams down.'[\[23\]](#) The point, it would seem, was for Johnston to begin his narrative with two interventions that fixed his account within a context of both discursive struggle and victory. But, the epigraphs also align these projects with a kind of post-enlightenment rationalism attributed to the ordinary citizen. Such technological improvement of the land becomes necessary because the citizen-subject is no longer willing or able to accept the misery and deprivation that would previously have been accepted as God's will. Yet, the problem was that the British House of Commons had an established track record of resisting the electrification of the Highlands.[\[24\]](#) No fewer than six different Bills had been brought before Parliament since 1929 seeking monopoly rights to Hydro-Electric development for the State. All were defeated.[\[25\]](#) The last of those was the Grampian Electricity Supply Order Bill of September 1941.[\[26\]](#)

Speaking in support of the Bill, the London-based Conservative MP for Streatham, David Robertson, sought to ameliorate concerns about the potential damage the scheme might cause in Glen Affric:

I have taken some moving pictures of it which many honourable members have seen, showing not only the parts which it is proposed to develop but of works which the same company have done among a similar chain of lochs in Perthshire. I submit that the amenities argument is destroyed by these pictures. [The] camera does not lie [...]. The pictures show crofter's house after crofter's house lying in a state of decay. [...] As a member of a Highland family, I can assure the Members that they do not all want to go away. [...] It is a cruel fate that people born in such a beautiful place should have to go away, and particularly cruel in the case of the Highland folk, who have great imaginative capacity, and who never lose sight of the glens among which they were born. Even when looking at a brick wall in Partick or

Philadelphia they never lose those precious engravings on their youthful minds. I have lived among exiles. I am the son of an exile, and I know something of their sadness [...].[\[27\]](#)

Robertson intervened at exactly this point in the debate because the weighing of beauty, often termed amenity, against utility was the focus of opposition to these local schemes. This quandary, the problem of valuing landscape aesthetically against land use practicalities, rears its head over and over again, for example in these words spoken by Sir Edward Keeling, Conservative MP for Twickenham: 'The [...] misconception is that the issue is one of beauty against utility. I am not opposing the Bill mainly because of its effect on amenities'.[\[28\]](#) Yet, the fact remains that the debates were notorious for English MPs regularly voting to defeat the Bills based on aesthetic considerations and for their collusion with (often Scottish Lowland) MPs representing coal-mining areas or other vested interests. A prominent example may be found in the words of Ian Campbell Hannah, the Conservative MP for the industrial and mining town of Bilston in the West Midlands:

Close by Glen Affric there is the most mysterious lake in all the world, and the Loch Ness Monster has been most patriotically re-appearing during the last few days. Nobody knows what the Loch Ness Monster is. It may have been a contemporary of St Columba or it may have been the ancestor of such an animal. But whether the Loch Ness Monster is a prehistoric animal, or whatever he may be he is one of the great problems of the present time. We have got to fire the American nation with the idea of solving this problem, and then dollars will flow into the Highlands as water flows over a mill stream. [But] we are not going to get that type of thing if we make Glen Affric a mass of concrete, billowing smoke, girders and that kind of thing.[\[29\]](#)

On one level, Hannah's rhetoric is purely comical and theatrical. Yet, the very act of making light of the whole Hydro issue appears at the very least patronisingly ironic, if not strategically belittling in its mirthful discussion of Scotland's famously watery denizen. What Hannah actually does is to advocate the status quo via the scenic route; he takes a long way round his own discussion to conjure up an image of a picturesque highland vista for visitors, and advocates no change and

no investment in the people who live there. We might begin to glean that what actually begins to divide the speakers into camps is not whether they were for or against the Hydro scheme, but rather whether they understood themselves to be speaking as 'insiders' or 'outsiders', to use Cosgrove's formulation.

It is environmental impact that David Kirkwood, ILP Member for the Dumbarton Burghs, clearly had in mind when he urged MPs to reject the Grampian Bill, and he has that much in common with Hannah. He cited Kinlochleven, the site of Scotland's first large Hydro scheme which was completed in 1906 and privately operated by British Aluminium:

I ask Members to go to Kinlochleven and see the wooden shanties two stories high. [...] There is no consideration given to amenities – the two great iron chimneys, two great heaps of dross, mud flung all over the place, pipes coming down the beautiful hillside, which is all denuded of plants, trees and every kind of vegetation. [...] Do you mean to tell me that the individuals behind this scheme are more interested in my native land than the people who are in it?[\[30\]](#)

Here, the passage concludes with an appeal to the authority of his own discourse as originating from 'inside'. Looking back at Robertson's speech above one can see similar claims to the authority of 'insideness' being made: 'I have lived among exiles. I am the son of an exile, and I know something of their sadness.' Yet, as both Robertson's and Kirkwood's speeches in this debate make clear, the question of preserving 'amenity' in the parliamentary debates meant something between conserving natural beauty and maintaining the landscape in its current form: those two things might be complimentary but they are not the same. In the 1943 debates the meaning of this word amenity was actually broadened, some might say cynically, as a way of forcing the whole project through.[\[31\]](#) This issue of how the perceived beauty of the Highland landscape was valued, and by whom, was one of the key targets of Gunn's 'Socratic method' of dramatising the debates in the form of a pub argument in *Hail, Caledonian!*[\[32\]](#) In the following extract Hector, a Highlander with rather conservative views, is in conversation with Ewan, a practically-minded Highland Socialist, and accuses him of wanting to destroy the natural beauty of the place. Pat, a plain-speaking Irishman who often sides with Ewan in the debates, makes a key intervention:

Hector:

You are prepared to turn the Highland into an industrial area with all the horrors of industrialism, you are prepared to destroy the beauties of your country, you are prepared to desecrate the glory that has been given to you – why? So that a big industrial combine may make profits. You would sell your land and your people into slavery, you would destroy a beauty you don't understand, to satisfy what you flatter yourself is a sense of reality. Thank God, some of us have a different conception of reality, a conception deep and strong enough to have appealed to the consciences of the majority –

Pat:

- Of Englishmen.[\[33\]](#)

That amenity was connected first and foremost with natural beauty in the minds of objectors to Hydro development is a topic with considerable roots. Indeed, one can go all the way back to the report submitted to the Board of Trade in 1921 by Sir John Snell's Water Power Resources Committee:

Even in regard to amenities, works required for the development of a water power scheme need not be harmful. In some cases, the works required may actually be the cause, direct or indirect, of an improvement in conditions. We submit there is nothing inherently unsightly about a dam. [...] Sometimes the land is swampy or otherwise of poor quality, and the permanent flooding of it would materially improve the aspect.[\[34\]](#)

It can be seen that the authors of the Snell report were somewhat defensive in their response to the 'amenity' question and that in an attempt to circumvent objectors they were obliged to couch their language in the rhetoric of improvement. Despite those attempts, and despite the subsequent best efforts of the advocates of Hydro-electrical development at the time of the Grampian Bill, the Highlands appeared doomed to continue to languish. Gunn's own response to the amenity question was partly elaborated in *Hail, Caledonian!* At the same time as Inverness town council were considering the preservation of an idealised

landscape in perpetuity for visitors, the Council was being openly mocked for the real squalor of Inverness itself:

Ewan [to Hector]:

You would have everyone's sympathy if you could make a out a case. But why be so vague [in your definition of amenity] that a Minister of the Government can make a joke about your needing a spate to clean out your sewage? That sort of amenity, he said, amidst the laughter of the Commons, that Inverness Town Council enjoy to- day – and that the promoters of the Bill wished to destroy![\[35\]](#)

Whatever the actual merits of the contested 'amenity' question, Johnston and other advocates of Hydro schemes saw their Parliamentary defeats as the machinations of vested interests, and the naïve doings of opponents of progress who wanted to keep the Highlands backward for their own selfish reasons.

Following hot on the heels of the defeat of the local Grampian scheme in September 1941, Johnston appointed a committee under Lord Cooper in October 1941, to investigate the feasibility of a massive scheme of Hydro-Electrical power generation in what would become known as the North of Scotland District. The report this committee produced in August 1942 literally changed the political and physical landscape of the Highlands. The Cooper report noted that the status quo was simply not an option. Its authors stated that a new sense of realism regarding the problems of Highland decline must be summoned and that the vexed question of amenity must be confronted head on. The amenity question, they said, 'had been used purely as a makeweight in an opposition truly founded upon other grounds' and that what was truly 'apprehended by the extremist advocates of amenity' was simply change rather than damage.[\[36\]](#) Furthermore, the Cooper Report brought into stark, unparliamentary language the real plight faced by the Highlands:

If it is desired to preserve the natural features of the Highlands unchanged in all time coming for the benefit of those holiday-makers who wish to contemplate them in their natural state during the comparatively brief season imposed by the climactic conditions, then the logical outcome of such an aesthetic policy

would be to condemn the greater part of the area into a national park and to sterilize it in perpetuity, providing a few 'reservations' in which the dwindling remnants of the native population could for a time continue to reside before they become extinct.[\[37\]](#)

Almost as soon as the report was published in December 1942 Johnston had brought forward a Bill, the Hydro-Electric Development (Scotland) Bill, which accepted the terms of the report as its own framing language. In other words, the report which had dismissed the 'amenity' question as a makeweight used by extremists and vested interests set the tone and limit of subsequent debate, both inside and outside parliament. When the Bill itself was published it was met with widespread opposition. Standing on the floor of Parliament at the Bill's second reading, in February 1943, Johnston chose to go on the offensive and selected the vexed issue of amenity as the ground on which he would fight:

There are people, of course, who regard any large-scale industry in the Highlands as anathema – something approaching the desecration of the Garden of Eden. [...] Everybody is for amenity these days, and I am glad of it. [...] But, occasionally, I could fain wish that some of the people who clamour for the preservation of amenities would remember there are amenities other than landscape ones. For the people who live in the grandeur and majesty of the Highlands, we could fain wish – some of us – that the definition of the word was widened and made more comprehensive. To some people, I gather, amenity means the provision of bathrooms in hotels marked by four stars in the automobile guidebooks, with a few poverty-stricken natives in squalor amid picturesque reservations, much as the disappearing red races live in some parts of America. [...] For my part, I should like to go from this place to offer some of the amenities of life to the peasant, his wife, his family. The amenities of civilization have largely passed by the class from which Robert Burns sprang. I will join with anybody in preventing [...] signs advertising somebody's beer or soap on the mountainside at Sligachan, but my idea of amenity is not that it should begin about the 12th August and last until the deer stalking and salmon fishing seasons are over. And the chief

amenity I should like to see carried into the life of the North of Scotland is the amenity of social security, the right to work and the amenity which derives from a useful day in the world. But there need be and there ought to be no disfigurement or desecration of our beautiful scenery, either by the Hydro works or by industries which we hope will be attracted to the Highlands.[\[38\]](#)

Firstly, and most importantly, Johnston's rhetoric actually amplifies the Cooper Report's point about the conditions of the Highlanders with its bald assertion that they are, as it were, deprived of agency and reduced to the status of 'picturesque' tableau or backdrop in the mind's eye of those to whom the Highlands is frequently, and increasingly, assumed to belong: the tourist. It is perfectly obvious that Johnston has in his sights speakers like Mr. Hannah of Bilston whose mocking 'concern' for the Highlands extends only to its preservation in perpetuity as a vista.

Johnston also invokes Burns in this case as a kind of exemplar of the potential of the ordinary Scot. But Burns had appeared elsewhere in the debates as a way of defeating the amenity argument. Another Labour member, Rev. Barr of Coatbridge, stood and reminded the House about the ill-founded fears a previous Hydro scheme in Galloway provoked:

[Barr cited the concerns about the] large numbers of lochs, rivers and streams that would be dried up. It was said the river beds would be dry, and that disease would break out; that the salmon fishing would be seriously impaired, that the amenities of the land of Robert Burns would be destroyed, that the beauty of the banks of the Doon would wither and die. The works were carried out, but river Doon still runs in ample flood as it falls into the firth of Clyde below Ayr, and 'The banks and braes O' Bonnie Doon still bloom sae fresh and fair.'[\[39\]](#)

What Rev. Barr was rather cleverly doing was to use Burns as an accepted authority on that landscape. Opponents of the Hydro are being invited to disagree not just with his opinion but with Burns' own description of the place. A

second example of the weight which skilful allusions could lend to the pro-Hydro camp can be seen in another part of Barr's speech:

Finally, let me say that depopulation is not beauty. There is no beauty in a deserted village. [...] There is no beauty for me in a deer forest. The Highland Clearances did not improve the beauty of the Highlands. Our Highland overlords made their glens a wilderness and they called it beauty, now they challenge us to disturb their beauty.[\[40\]](#)

Anyone in the House that day with an interest in Scottish nationalism will have had their ears pricked by that. Tacitus' purported record of the Caledonian King Calgacus' speech of defiance against the Roman war machine in the *Agricola* was a relatively recent discovery by nationalists who rallied to it as an emblem of their own native resistance. Calgacus was reported to have said 'To plunder, to slaughter, to steal – these things they misname Empire, they make a desolation and they call it peace.'[\[41\]](#) There is a very distinct echo of this in Barr's rousing last words and it is difficult to believe that it is purely coincidental. His rhetoric cleverly sides the advocates of the Hydro with the native resistance of the warriors of the Caledonian forests. To vote for the Hydro was to fight for freedom and against tyranny. Barr's use of the words 'wilderness' and 'beauty' are also clearly heavily loaded, here they have a negative connotation that one is invited to agree is disagreeable.

Johnston's stand, supported by Labour members and many Conservatives alike, against the advocates of amenity, effectively finished the job that the Cooper report had begun. Its opponents were rhetorically isolated as aesthetes, as ruin-bibbers, as enemies of the working man and of progress itself. To oppose the Hydro was to condemn the Highlanders to the sterile reservation doom the Cooper report had predicted. Later in the same debate Mr Pethick-Lawrence, the MP for Edinburgh East, stood and supported the Bill with the words 'We must accept the industrial development of the Highlands in order to preserve the Highlands'.[\[42\]](#) Those words hit home as a wonderfully economical summary of the debate and of the prevailing mood of the commons. Yet, there continued to be voices of dissent both inside and outside the debating chamber.

One vitriolic naysayer was the Liberal MP and Celticist Professor Gruffydd, who represented the University of Wales seat. Again, as with Johnston, it is worth looking in some detail at the tone and form of his speech:

What does 'preservation of the Highlands' mean? There was a time when 'preserving the Highlands' meant denuding them of men and women in order to place deer there instead. The words still, to my ear, bear a very sinister sound. [...] A deadlier method of destroying what remains of Highland life I cannot conceive. It is a method which will end forever the life and civilisation of the Highlands, and substitute for them not even the life and civilisation of the Connemara cabin; it will be the life and civilisation of the Dublin slum. [This Bill] will not bring back there these people who speak the Gaelic tongue and whose history, language and literature created a new romance for the whole of Europe during the nineteenth century. Almost the last pibroch has been played through the glens and almost the last coronach has lamented the sons who will no more return from their worldwide diaspora in lands beyond the sea. We can no longer rebuild the clachans of the Highlands; let us take heed lest we plant there instead the cities of the plain.[\[43\]](#)

His rhetoric alludes to Sodom and Gomorrah, of course, but what is of specific interest here is the speaker's attempt at displaying his 'insider' credentials. The use of the words 'pibroch', 'coronach' and 'clachans' in particular seem to be deployed in an attempt at self-authentication. Yet, what rings out from his contribution is the rather pessimistic view that nothing can be done, that Highland culture is doomed to disappear, and that it would be better to leave the Highlands to their empty fate rather than 'plant there instead' the 'Dublin slum' and the 'cities of the plain'. Gruffydd's solution is simply the rather fatalistic Celticism of the Twilight, and, it must be said, an inevitable if inadvertent collusion with the forces of conservatism that demand the maintenance of the status quo. But such interventions were becoming scarce as the debates developed. An earlier appeal to the Twilight had received a stinging rebuke from Malcolm MacMillan, Labour member for the Western Isles:

We must not base opposition to practical schemes of this kind on that sort of sentimental Celtic twilightism. I get people writing from places like Surrey up to me in the western isles [...] hoping that we shall have regard to the amenities, as though we ourselves were not completely cognisant of our duty to the preservation of the beauty spots of our country. That sentimental obstruction must be brushed aside. Most of those who indulge in it do not live in the Highlands, and would not live there, I fancy.[\[44\]](#)

Again, what this riposte foregrounds is the ‘insider’ status of the speaker as a source of authority that validates his opinion over those others from outside. Yet, it is also a response that emphasises the stark disjunction between practical measures for improvement and a whimsical or aesthetic interpretation of what the Highlands should be like. Indeed, it might plausibly be argued that such views held by Celticists like Gruffydd, and ascribed to the Twilight by its critics like Macmillan, partly account for Gunn’s attempts to rhetorically distance himself from it in the early part of his career, and may well account for his bemused and rather hurt response to Hugh MacDiarmid’s accusation that he was drowning in twilight mysticism himself.[\[45\]](#)

Despite initial hostility to the Bill, and indeed despite continued rumblings about the Bill and its rather draconian legal machinery outside parliament, it was eventually passed at its third reading, without even the necessity for a vote, on 27 May 1943. The resulting Act of Parliament created the North of Scotland Hydro-Electric Board which went on to create the assets of 11 vast Hydro-power schemes in Glen Affric, on the Tay, the Conon valley, the Isle of Harris, Foyers on the south shore of Loch Ness, Glen Garry, the Tummel, the Rivers Shin and Oykel, the lochs Lomond, Fyne, Awe and Etive, Storr on Skye, Glendoe as well as acquiring the earlier Galloway, Lanark, Kinlochleven and Lochaber schemes originally operated by private firms. The board also undertook the erection of electrical transmission lines throughout the Highlands so that power could be conveyed from one district to the next, to the lowlands and ultimately to the national grid. All of these massive constructional schemes changed the landscape – lochans were flooded to create huge reservoirs, the levels of existing lochs were raised by damming to create heads of water powerful enough to drive turbines, rivers were diverted through tunnels and tailraces. Some

projects proceeded with very little objection, but others like that around Pitlochry, and what was originally debated as the Grampian scheme in Glen Affric, continued to cause great controversy and the opposition to the works was noisy and well-orchestrated. What is clear is that a certain amount of legitimate concern and grievance from Highlanders affected by the constructional schemes was dismissed by Johnston in his memoir as 'streams of vituperation from the letters-to-the-editor-brigade'.[\[46\]](#) This was too harsh, as was his childish and dismissive joke about traditional Highland reluctance to accept the artifacts and methods of modernity such as General Wade's roads, hedges, winnowing machinery and the potato.[\[47\]](#) Such humour reinforces the rhetorical positioning of Johnston's vision as one of post-enlightenment rationalism, but ironically it also reinforces his own non-Highland, outsider status. Johnston simply rearticulates traditional prejudices about Highland backwardness in established tone and language. It is the rhetoric of forced improvement so familiar to Highlanders from the time of the clearances, and put into the mouth of Mr. Falcon, the Laird's factor, by Gunn in *Butcher's Broom*:

'It is intolerable that we should have to contemplate trouble from them. Are we not bettering the estate, are we not civilizing the people, rousing them out of their sloth, aren't we going to make this instead of a peat bog a great productive area for feeding England with wool and mutton? Isn't his lordship putting his own money against the governments to construct roads and bridges?

[...] Do you expect us to wipe their – their noses?'[\[48\]](#)

But, for all that, there was, perhaps, a narrative of genuine improvement that could be explained persuasively by a writer in tune with Highland sensibilities. Gunn, as has been shown, had been an outspoken advocate of the Hydro schemes as early as the mid 1930s. His travel book *Off in A Boat* of 1938, for example, contained the following impressions following a visit to Fort William:

How great the change [since the defeat at Glencoe]! Though hardly yet a suggestion of what will be when the Highlands develop their natural industries through water power. [We] will beat the landlords and the scenic sentimentalists. And if it does not go well with the workers after that, the workers will fight. There will never again be a repetition of the defeatism of the

Clearances. The folk will come into their own. God hurry the merry day![\[49\]](#)

This is a very early intervention along the lines of the debates of the 1940s in which many advocates of the Hydro schemes saw agitation for such improvements as striking a blow against the aesthetic valuations of the Highlands detrimental to Highlanders themselves, and as a blow against tyranny and oppression. Another example, more directly relevant to the Hydro debates of the 1940s, can be found in his novel *The Serpent*, published in 1943. In this extract a Highland autodidact, known as the Philosopher, is conversing with an elderly shepherd. The men are discussing the familiar theme of Highland economic decline and depopulation, its causes and possible solutions:

'If you ask any man what is the reason for the decline in our land, he will tell you that folk will not live on porridge and milk as they used to do; in short, he'll tell you that the causes are economic. It's the same with rabbits. Too many of them, not enough grass, liver disease. It will be time enough for man to despise the rabbit's economics when he arranges his own in a more intelligent way.'

'And do you think the resources are here?'

'We have hardly touched them yet. What do you think all these big fellows are trying to get hold of Highland Hydro-electric power for? The machine is finding out our land. The machine has taken away, the machine will give, blessed be the machine!'

As the Philosopher smiled the Shepherd did not quite know what to make of him. The Philosopher always excited his mind, for about him there still lingered a memory of strange deeds, of the coils of the serpent in mystery and prophecy.[\[50\]](#)

The Philosopher alludes to a typically Lawrentian construction of mechanised modernity, yet his tone is to a degree sarcastic and ironic. Tom is a man who has already discovered the value and strategic application of 'his intellectual power, his searching gift for humour' and does not spare these talents when holding forth on political subjects.[\[51\]](#) He does not actually fear that all will become slaves to the machine's endlessly turning gears. Rather, he believes that the conditions of modernity afford new opportunities, a new way of ordering Highland

affairs so that Highland life will, as he says, ‘come back, but not in the old way’.[\[52\]](#) In July 1943 Gunn contributed an article to *SMT Magazine* on the contemporary prospects of the Black Isle district where he was then residing:

The vicissitudes of Cromarty itself have been sufficiently dramatic to make the suggestion in the recent Cooper Report on Hydro-Electricity in the Highlands, that Cromarty should again become an important port, quite in character with its past history.[\[53\]](#)

Nevertheless, it is perhaps easier to make such points through the discourse of a fictional character such as Tom the Philosopher. Indeed, he, at times, actually gets very close to, and serves as a sort of exemplar for, the kind of action Gunn himself advocated as a way of solving the problems of the Highlands:

I should like to see new energy and new impetus provided by the Highlanders themselves, by those who derive from the old traditions, the old race, so that what was distinctive and fine in our culture, our ways of life and behaviour, might continue. But vital statistics show that this will have to be done soon or it will be too late. Emigration is a remorseless way of getting rid of the best. And a dwindling population adds ever new ruins to the old ruins in the glens.[\[54\]](#)

In yet another link Gunn refers to a culture he feels he shares in, it is ‘ours’, though whether he feels this potential extends beyond his Glen, the Highlands or indeed Scotland is not directly addressed. However, he did use his own literary fame and position as a recognised spokesperson for the Highlands, as an accepted voice of the ‘insider’, to massage ongoing concerns about the construction schemes which continued well into the 1950s and 1960s. In February 1956, for example, a photograph of his smiling visage appeared in an article in *Scottish Field* above the legend ‘Neil Gunn lives in Cannich [...] at the foot of Glen Affric, where a Hydro-electric scheme has made many changes in the glen’.[\[55\]](#) In this article Gunn averred:

This Glen had its evictions like the rest, the old bitter story of depopulation and decay. But a few weeks ago a class room had

to be added to the school [...] A study of what has taken place in all its ramifications, from the production of electric light and power to the creation of a new community, from old discussion about destroying the beauty of the Highlands, to new discussions about starting up a general merchant's shop, would be potent enough to provide ample material for the presentation of a social thesis by any studious Scot.

[It] has been happening on such a scale that districts here and there have been affected by these two sources of employment alone, the generating of electricity and the growing of trees, within which lies the possibility of many types of new light industries suitable to the glens, not to mention part-time employment for crofters. But already, whether direct employment is given or not, at least over a vast and ever increasing area electric light and power have cast a rare brightness upon what are called the amenities of life – more colloquially, the elimination of drudgery and dirt.[\[56\]](#)

Of particular interest here is the repetition of the enlightenment of the Hydro works having resulted in a 'rare brightness upon what are called the amenities of life', which has, it is claimed resulted in increased standards of living and opportunity. Here we see that the meaning of the term amenity has completed its transition from the realm of aesthetics and now fully resides in the realm of utility. While, as has been argued, the Hydro works may be seen as a sort of post-enlightenment rationalism in the rhetoric of Johnston and his associates, the projects were interpreted during the debates as a quite literally illuminating:

I wish [opponents] to see some of these beautiful stretches of country and valleys in the Highlands of Scotland. You would say that you had never seen country so beautiful, but suddenly there would come to your mind the fact that something was lacking – people. [...] Spread the light. Do not ask whether it will pay. [...] Give the people light and they will come back.[\[57\]](#)

Those words formed part of the speech in support of the Bill made by Willie Henderson, the notorious Red Clydesider and Communist MP for Fife West.

What is interesting about these debates is just how closely the speakers got the rhetoric of enlightenment rationalism and electrical illumination to fit together. Amongst the other examples that could be cited, is one from Gunn in 1950, and is from a more whimsical piece he wrote for the *Glasgow Herald* under the title 'Giants and Distant Bells'. As in his last example he is writing about the Glen Cannich scheme, one of the more vexed projects which continued to cause anxiety throughout its construction phase:

[T]he first glimpse of the electric lights on and around the high dam wall, designed to trap the waters of Loch Mullardoch, had, I must confess, a something in keeping with the daily scene. It was giant's work. Human beings looked like pygmies and some of them seemed to be wandering around with that peculiar [motion] which, in our ignorance, we associate with ants. [We later saw] across the water a nest of lights and a black hole: the beginning of a tunnel through the mountains. On the Affric side we had stopped and watched the little electric train as it disappeared into the earth. [...] Somewhere in the core of the mountains the two black holes would meet with the accuracy for which ants and bees and a few insects who operate upon caterpillars have long been famous.[\[58\]](#)

Yet, there is also something more in the arc of Gunn's similes. Gunn is impressed not just by the mind-boggling scale of the project which reduces human beings first to pygmy and then ant scale. On the contrary, the projects make humans look as industrious, organized and demanding of themselves as ants are. This reduction in scale actually brings about an ennobling that impresses because of its proximity to the communal behaviour of insects and its similarity to natural cooperation. Elsewhere in the same piece Gunn also makes a case for the lamps and giant scale 'fitting' with folk mythology relating to fairies and giants. Gunn 'domesticates' the Hydro project, he integrates this sublime vista with traditional ways of apprehending place through the eyes of his Highlanders. It is a way of bringing these iconic landscapes of modernity, the insider position and his own nationalist rhetoric together.

NOTES

[1] John Rennie Short, *Imagined Country: Society, Culture and Environment* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. xviii.

[2] Barbara Bender, 'Introduction: Landscape Meaning and Action' in *Landscape: Politics and Perspectives* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1993), 1-17, p.1. Bender quotes the phrase 'a concept of high tension' from F. Inglis, 'Nation and Community: A Landscape and its Morality', *The Sociological Review* 25 (1977): 489-513.

[3] Denis E. Cosgrove, [1984] *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, 2nd edn, (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), p. 9. The quotation is taken from the new introduction to the 1998 paperback edition.

[4] Ibid., p. 17.

[5] Ibid., pp. 232-3. Much the same point about Landseer was made in Professor Murdo MacDonald's plenary address to the delegates of the University of Stirling's *The Lie of the Land: Scottish Landscape and Culture* conference on 28th July 2006. To the best of my knowledge, Professor MacDonald's comments on this topic have not yet appeared in print. Gunn, too, was sensitive to such nuanced views of cultural representations of the Highlands. In the serial novel *The Poaching at Grianan* the narration describes the aftermath of a shooting incident as 'a scene not unlike a Landseer composition seen in a nightmare.' Neil M. Gunn, *The Poaching at Grianan* (Merchiston Publishing: Edinburgh, 2005), p. 126. The novel was originally published in *Scots Magazine* between September 1929 and May 1930 in issues 11.6 to 13.2.

[6] Ibid., p. 27.

[7] Ibid., p. 19.

[8] Ibid.

[9] For Gunn's journalism and occasional pieces see Alastair McCleery, ed., *Landscape and Light: Essays by Neil M. Gunn* (Aberdeen University Press: Aberdeen, 1987) and Margery McCulloch, ed., *The Man Who Came Back: Essays and Short Stories by Neil M. Gunn* (Polygon: Edinburgh, 1991). Richard Price's book-length study is also invaluable: *The Fabulous Matter of Fact: The Poetics of Neil M. Gunn* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 1991).

[10] Richard Price, 'Whose History, Which Novel?', in *Scottish Literary Journal* 24.2 (November 1997): 85 -102, p.101.

[11] Margery Palmer McCulloch, 'Scottish Renaissance Periodicals: Work in Progress Revisited', in Alastair McCleery, ed., *Scottish Literary Periodicals*

(Merchiston Publishing: Edinburgh, 1998), pp. 29-53, p. 43.

[12] Margery McCulloch, 'Neil M Gunn: Tradition and the Essence of Nationalism', in *Cencrastus* 26 (Summer 1987): 29-33, p. 29.

[13] Neil M. Gunn, 'East to Buchan' in *Landscape and Light*, pp. 35-9 (p.38). The piece originally appeared in *Scots Magazine* 31 (1939).

[14] Ibid., p. 39.

[15] Neil M Gunn, '...and then Rebuild It', in *Landscape and Light*, pp.152-7, p.153. First published in *Scots Magazine* 32 (Dec 1939): 173-8.

[16] Gunn, '...and then Rebuild It', p. 155.

[17] Neil M. Gunn, 'Caithness and Sutherland' in *Landscape and Light*, pp. 25-34. Originally published in G. S. Moncrieff, ed., *Scottish Country* (Edinburgh: Wishart Books, 1935), pp. 59-76.

[18] 'A Visitor from Denmark', in *Landscape and Light*, pp.170-4 (p.174).

Originally in *Scots Magazine* 27 (May 1937): 96-101.

[19] Gunn, 'Caithness and Sutherland', p. 34

[20] Neil M. Gunn, "Gentlemen – The Tourist!": The New Highland Toast', *Scots Magazine* 26.6 (March 1937): 410-5, p. 415.

[21] Johnston's own account of events leading to this appointment is described in detail in his memoir *Memories* (London: Collins, 1952).

[22] Johnston, *Memories*, p. 174.

[23] Ibid., p. 174.

[24] Johnston's biographer makes the point that he imagined Hydro-electric development would bring about 'a renaissance in the heart of "Scotia"' and that his personal enthusiasm for 'the Hydro' 'did much to relieve the frustrations of a Scottish public anxious about delays and hiccups in [the] previous attempts to electrify the Highlands.' See Graham Walter's *Thomas Johnston* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p.158.

[25] The source for the comment about the six defeated schemes is Johnston's own speech introducing the 2nd Reading of the Hydro-Electric (Development) Scotland Bill on the 24th February 1943. See *Parliamentary Proceedings*, Volume 387/34, column 180.

[26] It would be fair to allow that several of the six Bills referred to small-scale, often single-glen, proposals that might be considered as purely 'local' affairs. Nonetheless, such was the law surrounding electrical generation that an Act of Parliament was required for projects whereby generation was carried out by the State rather than by private firms if and when the intention was to supply the 'national grid'. Scotland had had private Hydro-electrical generating plants in

operation since at least 1906 (see Wood, 2002, p.49). Scotland's first large-scale Hydro plant, completed in 1906, was at Kinlochleven and operated by British Aluminium.

[27] From the 2nd Reading Debate of the 'Grampian Electricity Supply Order Confirmation Bill', *Parliamentary Papers*, 1940-1, 10th September 1941, Volume 374, Columns 244-5.

[28] Ibid., column 235.

[29] Ibid., column 250.

[30] Ibid.

[31] The *Oxford English Dictionary* actually makes clear that the 1950s were indeed the point at which a change in usage for this word appears to have occurred. The original and principal meaning of the word referred to a given thing's 'quality of being pleasant or agreeable' and was also usable in relation to a person's 'niceness' of manner. By the late 1950s the usage had changed to one referring to principally material and practical considerations which is how the term tends to be used today. In other words, the term amenity actually shifts in usage from 'niceness' or 'loveliness' through 'desirability' to 'usefulness' or 'well-provided-for'. Though the *OED* does not mention these debates specifically, it is clear that they formed part of the public discourse which was actively reforming this word's usage.

[32] This play, and others by Gunn, are discussed briefly in Richard Price, 'Choosing a Play: A Critical Survey of Neil M. Gunn's Drama', *Studies in Scottish Literature* 29 (1996): 95-117. The article is [available online](#).

[33] Neil M. Gunn, *Hail, Caledonian!*, in *Scots Magazine*, 29.2 (May 1938): 113-122, p. 115. It is revealed later that Ewan is employed by British Aluminium, the private company who operated Scotland's first, large-scale, Hydro-electric plant (p.118).

[34] Sir John Snell, 'Report of the Water Power Resources Committee to the Board of Trade' in *Parliamentary Reports*, 1921, 37-8.

[35] Gunn, *Hail, Caledonian!*, p. 121.

[36] Rt. Hon. Lord Cooper, *Report of the Committee on Hydro-Electrical Development in Scotland*, December 1942, p.32.

[37] Ibid., p.34.

[38] From the 2nd Reading debate of the Hydro-Electric (Development) Scotland Bill on the 24th February 1943. See *Parliamentary Proceedings*, Volume 387/34, columns 184 and 187-9.

[39] Ibid., column 211.

[40] Ibid., column 212. Gunn's own awareness of Calgacus is evident from the speeches of Tomas the drover in the 1934 novel *Butcher's Broom* (Souvenir Press: London, 1977), p. 106.

[41] Cornelius Tacitus, *The Agricola and The Germania*, trans. By H. Mattingly (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1948), p.81. Most nationalists were fond of using the word 'desert' rather than 'desolation'. Modern translations tend to use the latter.

[42] 2nd Reading debate of the Hydro-Electric (Development) Scotland Bill, column 196.

[43] 3rd Reading debate of the Hydro-Electric (Development) Scotland Bill, 27th May 1942, *Parliamentary Proceedings*, 389/71, columns 1775-80.

[44] 2nd Reading Debate of the Hydro-Electric Development (Scotland) Bill, columns 246-7.

[45] Neil M. Gunn to C. M. Grieve, 3rd December 1937, regarding the unfavourable reception of *Highland River*, in *Neil Gunn: Selected Letters*, ed. by J B Pick, (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1987), p. 54.

[46] Johnston, *Memories*, p. 174.

[47] Ibid., p. 177.

[48] *Butcher's Broom*, p. 169.

[49] Neil M. Gunn, *Off in a Boat: A Hebridean Voyage* [1938], (House of Lochar: Colansay, 1998), p. 323.

[50] Neil M. Gunn, *The Serpent* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1943), p. 173.

[51] Ibid., p. 23.

[52] Ibid., p. 173.

[53] Neil M. Gunn, 'Round the Black Isle', *SMT Magazine* 32.1 (July 1943): 20-2, p. 22.

[54] Gunn, 'Belief in Ourselves', p. 161.

[55] Neil M. Gunn, 'Living in Scotland Today', *Scottish Field* 104 (February 1956): 51-3, p. 51.

[56] Ibid., pp. 52-3, 54.

[57] 1st Committee Reading day, 5th May 1943, Hydro Electric Development (Scotland Bill), *Parliamentary Proceedings*, 389/61, columns 220-1.

[58] Neil M. Gunn, 'Giants and Distant Bells', *Glasgow Herald*, 18 February 1950, p. 3.