

Book Reviews

***Standing on the Edge of Being: Scotland 1850 to COP 26.* Richard D. Oram. Edinburgh: John Donald, 2024. 432 pp., illus. Hardback and e-book. ISBN: 9780859767187. £75.00.**

This eagerly awaited new book by Richard Oram, *Standing on the Edge of Being*, completes his trilogy devoted to the environmental history of Scotland from the early Middle Ages to the present. With their singular chronological breadth and empirical depth, these volumes have no obvious analogue or precedent. They are all the more remarkable for being the work of a single author rather than the collective collaboration of a large team of scholars. Oram's interdisciplinary approach is also a signal achievement, combining not just traditional manuscript and printed sources but also material evidence drawn from paleoecology, climate science, archeology, and architecture. Equally crucial is the pedagogical ambition behind the engaging narrative and vivid prose style, which aims to make these books accessible to a wide audience beyond the academic world. Each of the three volumes is lavishly illustrated with many dozens of color photographs that provide rich visual evidence to support the argument. While Oram's books should preferably be read in sequence and his argument understood as a whole, given the limited space at my disposal, I will confine my review to the third volume.

Divided into fourteen chapters with an introduction and a conclusion, *Standing on the Edge of Being* covers an astonishingly broad range of topics from coal mining, hydropower, and public health to agriculture, forestry, and biodiversity. The people that populate Oram's narrative include not just politicians, scientists, and foresters but also many kinds of non-human agents, such as beavers, eagles, peat moss, and Sitka spruce. Climate change frames the book in a double sense. Oram chooses 1850 as his departure point in part because the middle of the nineteenth century marked the official end of the Little Ice Age (the focus of the second volume of the trilogy), but also because this was the moment when Britain's fossil fuel economy began to raise atmospheric carbon levels beyond the pattern of natural variability in the Holocene epoch.

The main narrative thread of the book explores how industrial society reshaped Scotland's environment and how this transformation in turn provoked defensive action to preserve the natural world from environmental damage. Already in the second half of the nineteenth century, the environmental cost of economic development was beginning to attract public attention, including the abatement of smoke pollution from coal burning and the urgent need for public investment in potable water. A growing appreciation of the value of wildlife also encouraged limited preservationist efforts, including the founding of the Royal Society for the Preservation of Birds.

From these humble beginnings, Oram traces a seesaw movement between the forces of economic development and ecological awareness into the present age. Rather than a Whig story of triumphant environmental consciousness, the picture that emerges is one of high ambitions frequently followed by failure or unintended consequences. Take the ironic case of the cleansing of the Tay and Forth estuaries. By stopping the discharge of organic waste residues, environmental regulators improved water quality and restored old habitats for birds. Yet by curtailing untreated

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wastewater, they inadvertently caused the collapse of migratory bird populations which had flourished thanks to the effluent. Such ironies abound in Oram's account: 'the environmental impacts of remediation and reintroduction do not follow a smooth, linear progression from "bad" to "good"' (315).

As a scholar of the historical environment, Oram's instincts are commendably sober and perspicacious, steering clear of both apocalyptic declensionism and sentimental pastoralism. He eagerly debunks commonplace myths of Scotland's history, including the widespread nostalgia for rural idylls and imaginary states of wilderness, while stressing instead the long history of complex anthropogenic and ecological factors behind landscape change. Such a fundamentally historical vision of the natural world also highlights the danger of shifting baselines which tempt the public into accepting degraded environmental conditions as the normal state of affairs. A third important feature of Oram's approach is his keen appreciation of the tensions between rural livelihoods and preservationist sensibilities, recognizing the difficult trade-offs between defending economic opportunity and the health of the land. Too often, the Scottish countryside has served as a laboratory for grandiose economic ambitions which more often than not have failed to deliver on their promise. By way of a short parable, consider the fate of the nuclear research station at Dounreay on the north coast of Caithness. Hailed as a landmark of power generation in the 1960s, it promised to revive the economy of nearby Thurso while securing the energy needs of future generations. At present, Dounreay remains the largest local employer, but only because decontamination of the two decommissioned reactors will go on until 2300.

Throughout the book, Oram adopts an uncompromisingly Scottish perspective. The economic, environmental, and political condition of Britain south of the border features mainly in so far as it impinges on Scottish affairs. Yet, Oram's environmental framework endows his findings with a significance that will make them useful far beyond Scottish shores. While Oram's historical archive and ecological evidence may be geographically limited, the main themes of the book – energy, development, climate, ecology, pollution, and biodiversity – are of universal concern.

Such a framing is most obvious at the start and end of the book, where Oram places his national history directly within a planetary context. Climate change and the threat to biodiversity now embroil Scotland in a drama with existential consequence for mankind. The planetary emergency also gives fresh meaning to the narrative. Oram's critique of sentimental myths of the wilderness, his insistence that ecosystems carry dense layers of historical significance, his concern with rural livelihood and ecological health, and his warning about the threat of shifting baselines, all carry weighty lessons for anyone interested in reshaping human relations with the Earth. In this spirit, let me end with one more parable from Oram's book. Once dismissed as a useless wasteland fit only for forest planting, the blanket bog of Caithness Flow Country, the first peatland World Heritage Site, now beckons as a haven for biodiversity and a vaunted sink for carbon. We cannot ever hope to restore nature to some imaginary primeval state, but we can repair ecological processes so that they will flourish in new and ever changing forms.

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