





West Coast of Scotland



INTRODUCTION

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TO THE CASUAL OUTSIDER, the Highlands of north-west Scotland are a magnificent wilderness. Bens and glens wrapped in heather and tradition. Rivers that run with plaid. Scenes of untouched nature, pure and wild, which left Lowland Scots proud and more alien visitors awed. But it was all a delusion. A romantic idyll of the sublime and picturesque carefully cultured by a Victorian nobility that adored the landscape but did precious little to protect it. What they did protect was game, and with the spread of deer forest and grouse moor the postcard country became sterilised of its ecological richness. The loss of such natural resources came at a cost for those that lived scattered amid the mountains. For those communities the land had long had an intrinsic value and an enduring purpose; woods were cut and planted, ores were mined, gentle slopes were farmed, seas were fished. This utilitarian world of profit and subsistence conflicted with the mystical notion of the Highlands as heritage, a place for idle amusement and preservation. Tugged by the twin tensions of use and delight, the Highlands remained beautiful but largely abandoned. A moribund landscape with precious little money and precious few people. But that was fine: after all, less people meant more beauty. Perfect for shooters, anglers, walkers and climbers, and ideal for the passing tourist trade. Beautiful, but dead.

It was to this scene that Frank Fraser Darling arrived in the 1930s, a young, compulsive and charismatic ecologist who blended hard science with romantic tradition. His doctoral studies at the University of Edinburgh on the genetic make-up of Blackface sheep had instilled in him a love of wild places and passion for scientific endeavour, but it also introduced him to the depredations imposed on the Scottish landscape. He described

how ‘two centuries of extractive sheep farming in the Highland hills have reduced a rich natural resource to a state of desolation.’ This was a theme to which he would return to again and again. The Highlands, he would argue, had once been a rich natural system – almost a living thing in its own right. And an essential part of that system was man. The traditional ecology of the Highlands was one in which people were bound to their habitat just like any other animal, and the habitat was bound to them. The trouble was, after centuries of land clearances the Highlands were empty. Not just empty of life – devoid of mammal predators and birds of prey – but empty of people.

The importance of people in the affairs of Scotland’s natural world was a notion that seemed to grow gently on Fraser Darling. His early years, much of it narrated in *Island Years*, were spent in the wilderness studying the social life of red deer, seabirds and grey seals. In their social orderliness he saw human qualities, none more so than among the grey seals of North Rona. On this remote speck of Hebridean gneiss a hundred miles west of Orkney – surely one of the barest places in Scotland – he built a research station to observe their sea behaviour. His station, on the edge of the vast and cacophonous summer breeding colony, was a set of timber huts enclosed in a tumbled-down sheep pen. In this small stone enclosure he lived for a year with his wife Bobbie and their nine-year old son Alasdair, delighting in the wildness of the place, especially the savage beauty of the Atlantic breakers that pounded the rockbound shores. But special reverence was given to the grey seals, ‘the people of the sea’. He noted reverently how the Gaels had ‘invested them with a half-veiled but occasionally irruptive humanity.’ That apparent human nature was most expressive in the seal pups, for ‘there is no creature born, even among the greater apes, which resembles a human baby in its ways and cries than a baby grey seal.’ Decades later, Fraser Darling’s powerful evocation would find a very practical application. In the late 1970’s, when grey seals were blamed for falling fish stocks and fishermen in Orkney successfully petitioned the government to sanction a cull, environmental groups like Greenpeace stirred popular dissent with the emotive imagery of the all-too-

human helpless seal pup. The approach worked; Downing Street received 14,000 letters in protest and announced a halt to the cull. By the end of that decade the much-hunted grey seal had been embraced as a treasured part of our natural heritage, our very first environmental icon, a powerful eco-symbol. It is a designation that must have sat uncomfortably with the man that first brought them to the world's attention. 'Sentiment,' Fraser Darling maintained, 'is a dangerous basis for conservation.'

Fraser Darling knew these dangers all too well. His ability to evoke human qualities in the species he was studying, though making his writings exceptionally popular, gained him little respect from his academic peers. Moreover, although he spent much of his time toiling in the remote outposts of Scotland, living amongst the wildlife that he was observing, his science was deemed intuitive at best, and not empirical enough for the mainstream ecological science. Quite simply, he had gone native. And yet it was his hands-on determination to demonstrate in a real and pragmatic way that Highland ecosystems were undernourished and needed careful tending that led to his most telling and enduring legacy. The seeds of that legacy would be sown at Tanera Mòr, in the Summer Isles. Fraser Darling went there in 1939 to prove that it was possible to croft. Official wisdom saw crofting as unable to provide more than a subsistence livelihood. But Fraser Darling laid the blame for this on two centuries of sheep farming and deer forest which had stripped the soils of their vitality. He set about renourishing the land with seaweed, industrial slag and manure.

After four years of hard work, the island farmstead blossomed. Cows thrived, sheep prospered, and the quality of the grasslands round about were restored. Corn, potatoes, swedes, cabbages, kale, carrots, cauliflower, broccoli, lettuce and onions sprouted from the supposedly barren ground. His efforts, magnificently chronicled in *Island Farm*, quickly gained him a reputation and he began to focus his attention on the wider ills that bedeviled the Highlands. At the end of his Summer Isles 'experiment', Fraser Darling was eager to extend his ecological regeneration to a bigger problem – the depopulation and economic decline in the West Highlands.

In 1947 he was commissioned by the government's Scottish Office in

Edinburgh to write a formal report on his assessment of the fertility and future of the western Highlands. He delivered it three years later – *The West Highland Survey: an essay in human ecology* made for depressing reading. The Highlands were a devastated countryside, he wrote, a ‘wet desert’. It was an ecosystem dominated by bottlenecks – log jams of nutrition in which the natural cycles had stalled. They had stalled because the food chain was full of missing links. Entire species had disappeared. The loss of trees had led to the loss of woodland ants which once processed leaf litter; earthworms were absent too, impoverishing the soil further. A crumbly, fertile mould had been transformed into a dense rubbery peat which locked away its nutrition. Not only that, but once naked hills were cloaked in strong, woody heather (too thick for its own seeds to reach the earth) and riddled with the burrows of rabbits, whose populations had exploded as their natural predators were exterminated. For Fraser Darling, Scotland had become a desolate nation, a shadow of its former self, paying the price for past human want. Its sterile landscape was a direct consequence of human exploitation and mismanagement. The majestic Highlands had been systematically asset-stripped. Little wonder they were empty. What they needed, more than anything, was people.

It is said that Fraser Darling never received any sort of acknowledgement from the Scottish Office that the West Highland Survey report had arrived, let alone been read. Its message – that there could be no cure unless the misuse of the land over the previous two centuries was reversed by fewer sheep, more cattle and the regeneration of its forests – fell on deaf ears. In a political context that was becoming dominated by agricultural subsidies and a drive for hydroelectric transformation of Highland glens, it was heresy. In a scientific context in which humans were largely ignored in ecological studies, it was folly. The report was quietly shelved, its publication delayed for five years. When it did see the light of day, none of its recommendations were implemented. It was as if the report and its contents had never happened. And yet, of course, it had. The ‘human ecology’ that Frank Fraser Darling first explored in the highlands of Scotland soon found root in a more fertile environment in North

America, where a stronger environmental consciousness was growing. His emphasis on the totality of the relationship between man and the natural environment gained academic credibility and political momentum. The unorthodox views of a pseudo-academic ‘crank’ gradually shifted to the environmental mainstream and began to influence a new generation of conservationists, many of them back in Scotland.

In early 2010, when BBC television produced the landmark series *Making Scotland’s Landscape*, it was infused with the ideas of Frank Fraser Darling. Most Scots believed that their Highlands were a natural wilderness. What they did not grasp was the fact it was entirely man made. Our grand industrial heritage came with a heavy environmental price: deforestation and the subsequent loss of native wildlife. In the ancient past we were stewards of the landscape, but modernity has detached us from it. *Island Years* and *Island Farm* are a remarkable portrait of a family adapting to isolation and the extremes of nature, in a land shaped by an unceasing and intimate relationship with its people.

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