Correspondence

I write to congratulate you on the first issue of Arc. The articles and reviews are consistently provoking and stimulating, and I look forward to many more issues of the same calibre.

I also write to make some comments on Richard Barcham's review of recent books by James Hunter and Ian Carter. Although the general tenor of the review agrees with my own feelings on these books, I must strongly disagree with several points of content and emphasis.

"Scottish history and sentimental writers have always been vigorous bedfellows". (All quotations are taken from the review in question). This may be true for a certain strand of historical writing, but this strand is hardly representative of the many serious works on the subject. There has always been a school of writing in Scottish history that is anything but sentimental. Alexander MacKenzie's The Highland Clerances (1883), Henry Gray Graham's Social Life of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century (1899), and Isobel Grant's Everyday Life on an Old Highland Farm (1924) are but three examples of bold, incisive, didactic, history that totally belies the clan and tartan imagery of Barcham's "sentimental writers".

"The croft is a tested adaptation to the raw climate and thin soils of the area". As James Hunter makes perfectly clear, the crofting system is anything but an environmental adaptation to the Highlands and Islands. Crofting was an economic imposition by a ruling local elite designed to create a supply of cheap labour. This labour force was totally dependent on a series of capitalist industries which drained the area of its wealth and culture.

"Emigration was...encouraged by...burning the crofters' houses". Much of the literature which supports this assertion was produced by propagandists for the crofters' cause in the 1880s. Immoral as the clearances undoubtedly were, excavation by Dr. Fairhurst of this department at Rosal in Sutherland failed to produce archaeological evidence of actual burnings and so Barcham's assertion must be regarded as unproven.

"...the north-east, a fertile but secretive place". The news that the north-east of Scotland is a secretive place will surely come as a great shock to all who recognise the city of Aberdeen and its environs as a meeting place
of the many cultures of the Scottish Highlands and Lowlands. It may also come as a surprise to a southern audience that Aberdeenshire has for long been a centre of dissemination of learning: for three hundred years, the county possessed three universities while the sum of universities in England was but two...

"Nothing much happened in Aberdeenshire and Kincardineshire between 1840 and 1914". The population of Aberdeen city rose from 60,000 to 160,000. The herring fishing industry was born, prospered, and had begun to die. The linen, whaling, quarrying, and ship-building industries proceeded through similar cycles of inflation and depression, while the mainstay of the area, agriculture, was also subject to the vicissitudes of an imposed economic system. Ramsey Macdonald was born not far away. Lewis Grassic Gibbon wrote The Scots Quair. James Clerk Maxwell taught physics at King's College. In short, Barcham's comment is crass in its ignorance.

I hesitate to accuse Arc of being guilty of southern chauvinism, but my overwhelming impression after reading this review is that, to Mr. Barcham, the north of Scotland is a land of unknown and unfathomable mysteries which he has but glimpsed with the help of Hunter and Carter. To many of your readers, Grampian and Highland Regions are more than the objects of quaint anthropological study: those readers are entitled to expect more.

These comments are not offered in a spirit of negation: they are offered in the hope that Arc will continue to print contributions of wide regional interest. But you will capture many more readers from outwith the deep south if such contributions are informed!

Sincerely

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During my years of living and working in northern Scotland, when I was examining the "unknown and unfathomable mysteries" of its archaeology; I was often impressed by the fact that several otherwise equable Scottish people would quickly lose their tempers if I displayed any knowledge of Scottish history and culture. Since they had assembled a myth of English
indifference to their past, it was clearly very inconvenient for them that someone from the south was treating it with respect. David Fraser also wonders how I dare have opinions about an area 400 miles from where I write. I doubt that such chauvinism has any purpose other than ensuring its own continuation.

In brief, I do not say that all historians of Scotland are sentimentalists. This could hardly be true of Henry Gray Graham who declares in Social Life of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century that "... the unemployed were divided into the two classes, those who lazily kept their hands in their pockets and those who put their hands in other people's pockets". Nevertheless I do maintain that the following words from Isobel Grant's Everyday Life on an Old Highland Farm are typical of much Scottish history writing "... It is important to remember how much of poetry and romance and love of nature, of old clan ideals and old working songs, of the sense of history and of the pride of birth have passed away from the highlands". Alexander Mackenzie's collection The Highland Clearances makes stimulating reading. Indeed he occupies many pages with descriptions of burning crofts which Mr. Fraser dismisses as propaganda and yet defines as "bold, incisive, didactic history".

It is perfectly clear when I write about the croft as a tested adaptation to the physical characteristics of north-western Scotland that I am referring to the current position of crofting which is practised by 10,000 families in the Highlands and Islands. I then remark that crofting had been the result of displacing the population in order to satisfy a demand for labour.

I fail to be surprised when reminded that Horace Fairhurst found no archaeological evidence for the burning of the Rosal buildings. As he writes much of the evidence for burning the Sutherland settlements comes from the trial of Patrick Sellar in 1816, neither prosecution nor defence at this trial suggested that Rosal was one of the ares of croft-burning.

My own impression that north-eastern Scotland is a secretive place is based, perhaps unfairly, on the day when I was taken for an Excise-man by a Moray farmer! More seriously, I cannot allow Mr. Fraser's claim that Aberdeenshire possessed three universities for three hundred years in contrast to Oxford and Cambridge (founded in the 13th century). The facts are these: King's College, Aberdeen was founded in 1495 and Marischal College, Aberdeen in 1593. University College, London was established in 1826 and in 1860 the
two Aberdeen colleges were amalgamated to form Aberdeen university.

My remark about the lack of events in north-eastern Scotland between 1840 and 1914 was intended as an ironic comment upon Ian Carter's failure to order his narrative in terms of chronological sequence. Moreover, within the context of High Victorian capitalism, there is little enough that is remarkable in the industrial cycle of north-eastern Scotland. Mr. Fraser neatly paraphrases my points about the agricultural sector, but he reveals a remarkable ignorance of Scottish historical personalities. Ramsay Macdonald was born in Lossiemouth, 70 miles from Aberdeen and left when he was 18; but the fact of his birth as as little to do with the history of north-eastern Scotland as Margaret Thatcher's birth has with the history of pre-war Lincolnshire. Lewis Grassic Gibbon (1901-35) published nothing until 1928 and wrote his entire oeuvre in Hammersmith and Welwyn Garden City. James Clerk Maxwell taught at Marischal College from 1856 to 1860 when he was sacked. He was appointed to the first chair of experimental physics at Cambridge University in 1871 and his greatest achievement was the development of the Cavendish Laboratory.

Finally, if I had really been seeking the consolations of quaintness from Scottish history, I would not have turned to Hunter's and Carter's work which I repeat marks a new rigour in Scottish historical studies. Perhaps Mr. Fraser can tell me where to look for "objects of quaint anthropological study".

Sincerely
Richard Barcham.