

Highland rural settlement studies: a critical history

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ABSTRACT

Historic period rural settlement in the Scottish Highlands has, over the past few decades, become an increasing focus of archaeological concern in academic, governmental, developer-funded-archaeological, and amateur contexts alike. Despite this, there have been no reviews of the theoretical underpinnings of the subject. Below, I discuss changing theoretical concerns within rural settlement studies from about 1850 to the present and end with a discussion of the active role archaeologists of rural settlement and landscape can take in writing the social history of the Highlands in the recent past.

INTRODUCTION

Rural settlement studies in Scotland have a long and varied history, with substantive beginnings in the mid-19th century. At times, and especially in the late 19th century, such studies were prominent in mainstream archaeology and played a key role in theoretical discussion within the subject. Despite this, reviews of the subject have been few and limited (eg Morrison 2000). None has discussed the theoretical constructs governing past analysis. More often the reader is provided with a descriptive list of previously published works or field projects and the emphasis is firmly upon work of the last 40 to 50 years. Fairhurst's (1960, 67) statement in 1960 that only a small literature existed on the ruins of deserted settlements in Scotland is true. However, a large corpus of related literature, ethnographic in scope or largely written in abstraction from the material remains themselves, did exist. It is my aim here to consider the ways in which rural settlement studies have been carried out. That is, to consider the various and changing theoretical underpinnings of past work in the subject. It is also

my aim to explore in depth the extensive pre-1960 literature, which has previously been discussed only in a very cursory manner.

Highland rural settlement studies are discussed here in terms of three distinct approaches. The first is referred to as *Rural Settlement Studies as Ethnology* – work undertaken largely in the second half of the 19th century and characterized by the analysis of Highland rural settlement for the provision of ethnological analogy. Such studies were intended to provide analogies in writing prehistory and to put that discipline on a more scientific footing. The 19th-century Highlands and Islands were seen to be characterized by the direct survival of the past into the present in material and social terms. This, naturally, characterized the material and social environment of the Highlands and Islands, and the Western Isles in particular, as static over millennia.

The second main approach is referred to below as *Rural Settlement Studies as Folk-life* – beginning in the early decades of the 20th century and continuing to the present. These studies are informed by the theoretical

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structure of the ethnological approach, with the important injection of a degree of historicity. Since the 1920s, documentary sources have increasingly been employed in a consideration of rural settlement that allows there to have been some degree of change and plays down the direct links to prehistory. However, this transformation has not been complete and such studies still often maintain a view of rural settlement and society as largely static.

The third approach discussed is referred to as *Rural Settlement Studies as Historical Archaeology*. This encompasses a tradition prominent from the 1950s to the present. 'Historical' here not only refers to the fact that the material in question is from a period also covered by documentary sources, but carries the added connotation that the view of settlement and society as static, or ahistorical, is rejected. Archaeology as a term is used not just to suggest the analysis of material culture, common to all approaches, but the nature of that analysis. It is with this approach that the empirical aspect of rural settlement studies is brought in line with mainstream modern archaeological practice (in that it is characterized by scientific, that is methodologically coherent, survey and excavation, previously largely lacking).

These divisions are to some extent arbitrary. The first approach to some extent encompasses work undertaken in a chronologically distinct phase. However, there are clear theoretical links between the ethnological and folk-life approaches. The folk-life and historical archaeology approaches have run in parallel over the last 50 or so years. Their mutual interest and, to some extent, compatibility, is underlined by the fact that papers relating to both schools occur in the same journals, *Folk Life* for example, and the works of one are referenced in those of the other. The collaboration of professional and amateur archaeologists and the staff of the Highland Folk Park in Newtonmore on a recent project further emphasizes the fact that the distinct theoretical approaches outlined in this paper are not also

reflected by divisions maintained in the practice of rural settlement archaeology (cf Lelong & Wood 2000).

However, from an analytical perspective these divisions *are* necessary to achieve, in general, clarity in tracing the history of the subject, and, in particular, in following the themes of the rise of historicity and the modern archaeological approach. These themes largely set the agenda for any current archaeological consideration of Highland rural settlement and landscape.

The paper concludes with a discussion of the relationship between history and archaeology within rural settlement studies and an account of the few recent theoretically informed works. These are discussed in order to set the agenda for future theoretically informed approaches to rural settlement and landscape. Recent archaeological studies of rural settlement have largely been empirical, primarily excavation or survey reports or syntheses of these. Use of documentary sources by archaeologists has been limited to consideration of empirical questions. Where the social aspects of the period in question are considered, accounts of documentary historians are pasted into the archaeological report. As such, archaeologists have not played an active role in *constructing* the recent history of the Highlands. The influence of different documentary historians outside narrowly defined academic circles is a subject for discussion, which is to say that the extent to which their histories are accepted by others is undefined. However, my point is that archaeologists have, on the whole, uncritically accepted narratives created and defined in another disciplinary context without reference to the relevant archaeological material they apparently wish to elucidate.

As we shall see, this has begun to change and there is a minority of archaeological studies that attempts to write new histories of the Highlands. However, I will suggest below that these studies portray Highland society as normative, which is to say that belief and

understanding of the world is portrayed as universal and uniform. I will argue that it is necessary for us to overcome this problem and to explore the dynamic nature of Highland society in the recent past and the material environments from and through which social relationships were contested. The concern of archaeology with the material world and the possibilities this allows for a consideration of routine social practice gives archaeology a potentially prominent role in considering the diverse and often conflicting social relationships that may have existed in the past and the conditions from which society was contested.

RURAL SETTLEMENT STUDIES AS ETHNOLOGY

The first studies of Highland rural settlement and landscape of the 18th and 19th centuries are contemporary travellers' accounts and other eyewitness descriptions. The earliest substantial account of this type was Martin Martin's *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* published in 1695 (Martin 1994). This was followed in the 18th century by a series of similar accounts including, most famously, those of Captain Burt, Thomas Pennant, Dr Johnson, and James Boswell (Levi 1990; Simmons 1998a; 1998b). This tradition continued into the 19th century, with the publication of the journals of Dorothy Wordsworth and Lord Teignmouth, for example (Teignmouth 1836; Thin 1981).

The accounts were written by individuals with varied backgrounds. Some were English (Johnson, Pennant, Wordsworth & Teignmouth), but others were Scots, Lowland and Highland (Boswell and Martin, respectively). Most of their accounts were the result of flying tours of the region, while others were written with indigenous insight (Martin). Most were travel journals, but not all. Burt's contribution came as a series of *Letters from A Gentleman in the North of Scotland to his Friend in London*, as the original title ran. He

was stationed in Inverness in the period between 1715 and 1745.

These accounts contain, amongst much else, descriptions of settlement and landscape in the Highlands and Islands. The journals are not simply descriptive, however, but frequently pejorative. Thus Pennant's description of the houses of Islay:

A set of people worn down by poverty: their habitations scenes of misery, made of loose stones; without chimneys, without doors, excepting the faggot opposed to the wind at one or other of the apertures, permitting the smoke to escape through the other, in order to prevent the pains of suffocation. The furniture perfectly corresponds: a pothook hangs from the middle of the roof, with a pot pendant over a grateless fire, filled with fare that may rather be called a permission to exist, than a support of vigorous life (Pennant, in Simmons 1998b, 217).

Such morally loaded descriptions are also found in the works of the later, 19th century ethnological approach to rural settlement. However, earlier accounts like Pennant's are not analytical in the sense that the later work is. Further, the context of rural settlement as evidence of the survival of prehistoric social and material traits into the present, the major theoretical underpinning of that later work, is not manifest in the travellers' accounts. So, while the travellers' accounts may show the beginnings of some important assumptions that informed later thinking on Highland settlement and society, the conceptual and methodological backgrounds of the approaches of the two periods to rural settlement and landscape were also distinct. As such, I will move on to the beginnings of academic discourse on the subject.

The flurry of work on Highland rural settlement from the mid to late 19th century can be understood not so much as reflecting an interest in the recent past of the Highlands for its own sake, but as being related to the study of prehistory. Contemporary theory stressed that an understanding of the distant

past could better be achieved through ethnological analogy. For instance, J Y Simpson in his 'Address on Archaeology' to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1860 stated:

In our archaeological inquiries into the probable uses and import of all doubtful articles in our museums or elsewhere. . . [1]et us, like the geologists, try always, when working with such problems, to understand the past by reasoning from the present. Let us study backwards from the known to the unknown. In this way we can easily come to understand, for example, how our ancestors made those single-tree canoes, which have been found so often in Scotland, by observing how the Red Indian, partly by fire and partly by hatchet, makes his analogous canoe at the present day (Simpson 1862a, 31).

It was not just that the material culture of such societies as the 'Red Indian' showed superficial resemblances to that of past societies in Scotland. The connection was seen to run deeper than this:

there are in reality two kinds of antiquity, both of which claim and challenge our attention. One of these kinds of antiquity consists in the study of the habits and works of our distant predecessors and forefathers, who lived on this earth, and perhaps in this segment of it, many ages ago. The other kind of antiquity consists of the study of those archaic human habits and works which may, in some corners of the world, be found still prevailing among our fellow-men – or even among our fellow-countrymen – down to the present hour, in despite of all the blessings of human advancement, and the progress of human knowledge (Simpson 1862a, 32–3).

The material culture of some contemporary societies – and other aspects of those societies' culture, as Simpson goes on to explain – is not just superficially similar to that of some past societies. The two are intimately linked, as the former is the survival of the latter into the present. It *is* the past, in the present.

This close alignment between prehistoric archaeology and ethnography was generally

prevalent in western Europe and the United States in the 1860s and 1870s, and was promoted by the shared commitment of these two disciplines to an evolutionary approach (Trigger 1989, 110).

Archaic habits and works were seen to persist to their greatest extent in the Western Isles. So it was that from the late 1850s until the turn of the century, a series of archaeological and ethnographic studies was carried out in the Outer Hebrides with a view to understanding and recording aspects of the supposed archaic society then inhabiting the area. Such studies continued in cases into the early 20th century (eg MacKenzie 1904; Curwen 1938), and sometimes explicitly subscribed to a theoretical approach like that outlined by Simpson, introduced above (eg Curwen 1938, 261). The work of this period often focused on shieling (summer pasture) sites, especially the beehive structures of the Outer Hebrides, as most reminiscent of older, prehistoric forms. This focus included excavations, as on St Kilda (Muir 1860). Particularly notable is the work of Captain (or Commander) F W L Thomas (1860; 1868). As an example, I will discuss his paper 'On the Primitive Dwellings and Hypogaea of the Outer Hebrides' (1868).

Thomas's study of Hebridean dwellings explicitly follows Simpson's suggestion that prehistorians should work backwards from the known to the unknown. For Thomas, in walking into a Hebridean house 'we appear to reach backward to the Stone period almost at once' (Thomas 1868, 154). To illustrate this point, he goes on to describe a number of blackhouses, providing annotated plans and drawings from photographs. These houses are seen as recent examples of 'a very old style' (ibid, 156) and specific features, such as the thickness of the walls, are drawn on as being of great archaic importance, as being evident in recent and ancient forms of dwelling alike (ibid, 157–8). Perhaps most interesting in this context, however, is his discussion of shieling structures. Describing the experience of

entering one such structure that was inhabited at the time of his visit, he says:

The situation was delightful to an archaeologist, for he found himself almost introduced to the Stone period: the dwelling of moor-stones and turf, without one morsel of wood or iron, no other tool required than a wooden spade; baskets of bent, docks, or straw; straw or hair ropes for an unwilling cow; and a very few years before the present time, both cooking and milk vessels made on the spot from the first clay that could be found (Thomas 1868, 162).

The interesting aspect of his discussion of shieling structures is the context in which they are placed. Certain architectural traits, most notably the corbelled stone roofing giving rise to the term beehive, are seen to be common to these structures and other, older ones. Such perceived formal similarities between the beehive shieling and *Pict's houses* (ie wheelhouses) and *hypogea* (ie souterrains) are taken to demonstrate the survival of the past into the present. This assumption allows Thomas to use information gathered on the use of space in the shieling to aid interpretation on the use of space in the Pict's house. For instance, it allows him to calculate the number of people who could have slept in the latter with reference to the number in the former, related to floor space. Also significant is the fact that Thomas notes that while *hypogea* existed in the Lowlands and in continental Europe, in the form of *eirdehouses*, beehive dwellings did not (Thomas 1868, 187–9). It is no surprise, then, that his interpretation of these *hypogea* is based on examples from the Hebrides. It is there that the principles governing their construction and use are seen to survive and, thus, to be accessible to the archaeologist.

An evolutionary interpretation of the archaeological record was not the only accepted theoretical framework at the time (Trigger 1989, 102–3). From the 1830s on, the doctrine of degenerationism became increasingly popular. In an extreme form, this held that humanity originally existed in a state far

superior to modern savages. Generally, it questioned the unilinear evolutionary scheme considered above. The study of Scottish Highland/Island rural settlement still played a role within this different context. Particularly significant is Arthur Mitchell's *The Past in the Present: What is Civilisation?* (1880). Mitchell was prominent in the Scottish archaeological community being, in 1880, Professor of Ancient History to the Royal Scottish Academy and Secretary of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. In *The Past in the Present*, Mitchell aims to question the linear evolutionary approach adopted by many of his contemporaries (Mitchell 1880, v–vi). He argues at length that the study of contemporary 'primitive' societies rather evidences evolutionary degenerationism. In this context, he uses the term 'neo-archaic objects' to separate primitive material culture of the present from that of the past. However, as the quotations below make clear, there was still seen to be a concrete link between past and present. Mitchell was not interested in severing that link, but in discussing how it might best be understood. A second main thread in Mitchell's argument is that while contemporary primitive societies produce material culture that is at first glance simple and uncivilized, it is in fact not a product of people of low intelligence. Further, it need not be less effective than modern equivalents in accomplishing those tasks necessary to procure a living.

In one sense, then, Mitchell breaks the investigative link between ethnography and archaeology – contemporary primitive societies are not necessarily directly equivalent to those in the past. Direct comparisons between the two are problematic. In another sense he re-affirms that link. Ethnological studies can warn against certain assumptions about past societies. Primitive material culture does not necessarily imply inferior intellect, neither need it be less effective in its role than modern, civilized equivalents. The final point he argues is that rude and high forms of material culture can occur in the same period and in the same

nation. The nation can be civilized while not all of its parts seem to be so. This again provides a warning to the prehistorian, in that uncivilized material culture may come from a civilized society. So, while direct comparison between prehistoric and neo-archaic societies is problematic, ethnological studies have value in indirect comparison, most notably in refining the archaeologist's general assumptions about 'primitive' societies.

Mitchell draws on several case studies to illustrate his points. Most of these concern the customs and material culture of the Scottish Highlands and Islands in the 19th century. He draws on personal experience and on many of the studies noted above. A whole chapter is devoted to the description of 'The Black Houses and the Beehive Houses of the Hebrides' (Mitchell 1880, 48–72). The Hebridean blackhouse is discussed with reference to the fact that, although it is of rude construction, the intelligence and relative capacity of culture of its builders are not displayed in the primitive nature of the architecture. The inhabitants of the blackhouse are aware of more sophisticated building techniques, but do not subscribe to them (Mitchell 1880, 54–5). This is a puzzle to Mitchell, but, for him, the situation is worth discussing as it demonstrates the problems in equating primitive architecture with inferior intellect.

Beehive houses of the Outer Hebrides are of interest to Mitchell in illustrating another of his points. His discussion draws on the perceived architectural link between them and the wheelhouse (Mitchell 1880, 58–72). The 19th-century beehive dwelling is seen to be a degenerate form of the wheelhouse (to which Mitchell applies the term beehive house also). He describes the wheelhouse at Meall na Uamh, Huishinish, South Uist in these terms:

[it] exhibits the same architectural style and knowledge as the simpler beehive houses which have been noticed. But it is vastly more pretentious – altogether a larger conception, and designed for a larger purpose. It is a handsome

building and involves much clever planning. It may have been the palace or reception-hall of an ancient chief (Mitchell 1880, 69).

This example is explicitly linked to then contemporary beehive houses in the following terms:

The handsome beehive building, which I have just described, is . . . believed to be older than any of which I have spoken. In other words, as this kind of dwelling passed out of use, it appears to have undergone a degradation or debasement. . . . If it is unlikely that we shall ever again have one of these simple beehive houses built in Scotland, it is infinitely more unlikely that we shall ever have one of the size and complicated design of that at Meall na Uamh (Mitchell 1880, 70).

Whether the rural settlement of the 19th-century Scottish Highlands was studied in terms of a linear evolutionary scheme or with reference to degenerationism and other agendas, this period of study is characterized by the fact that the material was not studied for itself. Throughout, the aim was to place the study of prehistory on a more secure footing. In this light, such settlements were not historically situated and, as a result, their study in relation to cartographic or documentary material and to their proper historical context was hampered. That this was the dominant approach can be seen by its prevalence in the pages of these *Proceedings*, where many of the papers mentioned above were published. Aspects of this line of thought are also evident in at least one major historical work of the period (Skene 1880, ch 10, esp 393–4). However, empirical study of Highland and Island rural settlement was begun. The published accounts of this period of study provide us with a record of these settlements in use and in this sense they are invaluable. They are also useful as expressions of one set of contemporary perceptions of Highland rural society.

As we shall see below, the ahistorical nature of these studies formed a major part of

their legacy to the 20th century. There is, however, another defining characteristic of the 19th-century work that is worth considering as a basic structuring theme of subsequent studies. This is its holistic approach. Studies of material culture other than settlement and of other, non-material, aspects of society accompanied the work discussed above. The majority of these other studies took place within the theoretical frameworks already outlined.

In the 19th century, folklore and superstition in Scotland were viewed by many as remnants of an older way of life (Gazin-Schwartz 2001, 269). J Y Simpson, who defined the agenda for studying the past in the present, penned 'Notes on some Scottish Magical Charm-Stones, or Curing-Stones' (1862b). In this, magical charms are related to their various functions in a timeless and cross-cultural manner. These charms exist in the present as they did in the past and their function in the present can be taken as a guide to their function in the past. Arthur Mitchell and others also wrote of Scottish superstitions (eg Mitchell 1862; Stewart 1888). These were of interest primarily as relics of antiquity (Mitchell 1862, 288).

There were other studies relating to movable material culture. In these, many forms of material were considered, including querns, pottery (*craggans*), lamps (*crusies*), and fishing weights (*impstones*) (eg McGregor 1880; MacAdam 1881; Goudie 1888).

Perhaps the two key works here are Mitchell's *The Past in the Present* (discussed above) and G L Gomme's introductory address to the Glasgow Archaeological Society, 'Archaic Types of Society in Scotland' (1890). Mitchell's book discusses a wide range of material and other characteristics of Highland/Island society in relation to the survival of archaic social and material forms into the late 19th century. This is also the agenda of Gomme's paper. It is clear from these two works that it is not just settlement studies, but also related material culture and social analyses, that were carried out within the 'past in the present'

framework. Gomme's paper deals with the survival of archaic social organization in both Highland and Lowland Scotland. In his analysis of the Highlands (Gomme 1890, 157–64), he considers that the archaic nature of society there is to be seen in kin-based, communal forms of social organization as well as in material culture. He makes explicit the links between settlement, other forms of material culture, tradition and superstition, and social organization.

RURAL SETTLEMENT STUDIES AS FOLK-LIFE

As has been suggested, aspects of the ethnological approach to rural settlement studies, dominant in the late 19th century, formed the basis of the successive approach, the works of which can be referred to as folk-life studies. The essential feature of the late 19th-century approach that informed folk-life studies was its holistic nature. There was also the partial legacy of a lack of historical contextualization. Both themes can be seen in Iorwerth Peate's introduction to the first volume of the journal *Folk Life* (Peate 1963). This journal was established by the Society for Folk Life Studies in the early 1960s and is concerned with the British Isles as a whole. However, papers on the Highlands were published regularly in its early years (eg Cregeen 1965; Dunbar 1965; Storrie 1967; Fenton 1968; 1974) and the agenda of the Society and its journal are therefore relevant. Peate explained that:

The Society aims to further the study of *traditional* ways of life in Great Britain and Ireland and to provide a common meeting point for the many people and institutions engaged with the *varied aspects* of folk-life (Peate 1963, 4; my emphasis).

The subject of study is traditional ways of life. The use of the word traditional implies some lack of historicity, 'Tradition is the factor which maintains the link between those habits [of living] in present and past times' (Peate

1938, 321). The holistic nature of intended study is captured in the reference to its varied aspects. Peate had outlined the pre-1939 fragmentation of published folk-life studies throughout archaeological, anthropological, and other journals as a result of their wide-ranging focus and lack of an appropriate, consolidated outlet (Peate 1963, 3).

Although the basis of Highland folk-life studies lay in part in the preceding period, there were also changes in theory and practice. Despite the focus on traditional ways of life, a limited degree of historicity was in fact restored, but only with regard to the transition from traditional to modern society. This came from, and resulted in, the coupling of a consideration of this traditional material and cultural life with the study of relevant historical documents. The folk-life approach grew from early works like Isabel Grant's *Every-Day Life on an old Highland Farm, 1769–1782* (1924), based on the account book of a Strathspey tacksman. However, historic specificity and the consideration of change in many folk-life studies are largely confined to the period of agricultural Improvement, when the traditional way of life began to disappear. Pre-Improvement society is static, whereas Improvement brings movement and change.

In terms of changing practice, folk-life studies are not usually accompanied by a programme of fieldwork, whereas excavation and analysis of particular structures had been important within the previous tradition. The reasons for this change are unclear. However, the emphasis on a wide range of cultural topics and reliance on documentary and oral history no doubt contributed to the lack of field study. Added to this, no doubt, is a general lack of archaeological training and experience amongst folk-life scholars.

Looking at the holistic nature of study first, this is clearly evident from the contents pages of perhaps the folk-life approach's two best-known works, Grant's *Highland Folk Ways* (1995, rev edn) and Alexander Fenton's

Scottish Country Life (1999, rev edn). *Highland Folk Ways* contains much information on house architecture and settlement morphology (ch 3 & 7). This analysis of the fabric of settlement is complemented by discussion on farmland and the wider landscape (ch 3 & 5). Consideration of material culture does not end there. There is a chapter on the movable objects within the house (ch 8), as well as information on the material aspects of craft, economy, transport and much else throughout the book. This concern with the material is placed within the context of a consideration of other aspects of culture. For instance there are chapters on: 'The People Who Lived on the Land' (6); 'The People's Daily Round and Common Tasks' (9); 'Food, Physic and Clothing' (14); 'Sports and Festivals' (15); and 'Seasons and Great Occasions' (16).

Scottish Country Life likewise contains sections on house architecture and landscape organization (ch 1 & 11). The rest of this book is more concerned with the practicalities and economy of farming than is Grant's, which has a wider cultural scope. Thus, *Scottish Country Life* contains chapters on: 'Tilling the Soil' (2); the harvesting and processing of grain (3 & 4 & 5); the various crops cultivated (6 & 8); the pastoral economy (7 & 9); food, fuel and transport (10 & 12 & 13 respectively); and the organization of the farming community (14).

The holistic cultural approach originated with the diverse studies of the 19th century and coalesced in the major folk-life studies of the 20th century. The result of this approach was that any consideration of Highland rural settlement and landscape placed that material within a rich social and cultural context.

A difference between the 'ethnology' and 'folk-life' approaches to study, however, was in their consideration of historicity. Folk-life studies of the 20th century introduced a consideration of the specific historical context of the material and societies in question, where the earlier, ethnological studies had been formulated around the concept of the past in the

present. The timeless nature of Highland rural society, where the past and present merged seamlessly, was replaced by an historic past. Change became an issue where continuity had often previously been argued or assumed. However, as suggested above, this theoretical reorientation was largely confined to considerations of the period of agricultural Improvement.

Isabel Grant's earliest substantive study is an analysis of a tacksman's account book (Grant 1924). This source provides the basis for a discussion of the changing material, social and economic structure of a specific region in the late 18th century. This stands in contrast to the assumed unchanging nature of Highland society that had informed earlier studies:

The historical value of the Account Book is greatly enhanced by the date at which it was written. William Mackintosh of Balnespick [its author] happened to live through the most crucial time in the whole history of the Highlands, for by 1769 not only had the new system of agriculture...which we speak of as the 'Agricultural Revolution', begun to permeate the wilder and more backward uplands of Badenoch, but the whole social, political and mental life of the people was being rapidly changed (Grant 1924, 3).

The approach was historical and admitted the changes that had occurred in Highland society in the recent past. This philosophy is evident elsewhere. For instance, Grant later gave an account of the stages of development of the interior of Highland houses, especially concerning the placing of the hearth (Grant 1995, 160–3). The use of space within Highland houses of the recent past was considered to have gone through changes. It was not simply a story of the continuity of the prehistoric past into the present. Fenton (1999, ch 11) draws more explicit links between agricultural Improvement and the changing layout of the house, although his analysis is not limited to the Highlands alone. In fact, it

is probably the restoration of a degree of historicity to the subject that allowed the widening of the geographic sphere of study. Nineteenth-century writers largely concerned themselves with the far north and west of Scotland as the area in which past material and social organization had survived most notably. The introduction of a more historical basis was accompanied by a consideration of other Highland areas (eg Martin 1987; Grant 1995) and of Scotland as a whole (Fenton 1999). However, some late-19th-century studies had begun to consider archaic survivals outside of the north and west (eg Gomme 1890).

Having said all this, the difference between 19th-century studies and folk-life studies in theoretical terms is not necessarily that great. Nineteenth-century students of rural society and its material culture saw the subject of their study as the unchanging continuity of aspects of the past into the present. However, the fact that they confined the geographical extent of their studies to the far north-west, where archaic survivals were at their greatest, suggests they recognized change as having taken place throughout the rest of the country. They did not look at other areas, on the whole, because they were of little use in providing information for analogy with prehistory. They perceived both traditional and modern society within Scotland, but they were seen as almost mutually exclusive.

With folk-life studies the split between traditional and modern is maintained. However, the relationship between the two is now more chronological than spatial. Modern, Improved society and material culture replaced its traditional counterpart in time. Folk-life conceptions of the traditional and the modern do have much in common with those of the 19th century, despite the differences already outlined. In folk-life studies the explicit statement that the present under consideration can be related directly to prehistory is not made. However, the lack of consideration of change in material culture and society outside

of the period of Improvement, by implication suggests that traditional culture and society was unchanging. Grant's *Highland Folk Ways* is 'a picture of this [Highland folk] life, within the period for which we have records and traditions' (Grant 1995, xiii). The records in question, however, are largely used in considerations of political and social phenomena (eg ch 2, 'The Clans') that are kept apart from the material and social aspects of everyday life. This consideration of the clans traces their history back to the 12th century (Grant 1995, 15). Alongside this, a chronological framework for each of the various chapters on aspects of everyday life is absent. We are simply presented with statements such as, 'The actual cultivation of the land was done by groups' (Grant 1995, 44). I suggest that this encourages the reader to graft the temporal framework of a (much-simplified) political and social history onto a consideration of everyday practice and its associated material culture. Material and social life in the Highlands becomes static over the period from at least the 12th to the 18th centuries. It is worth noting here the assertion by Peate that rural populations are characterized by immobility and primitiveness, and that modern conditions have affected rapid transformations of the countryside (Peate 1938, 321).

The description of pre-Improvement Highland society and material culture as traditional can be seen as part of the process of characterizing it as unchanging, in opposition to the fluid modern world. This idea of the traditional in Highland and especially Gaelic society carries with it notions of an authentic, whole, and socially cohesive society (MacDonald 1997, 3–6) that perhaps form the basis of the attractiveness and popularity of folk-life accounts. This popularity is despite academic condemnations of key folk-life works (eg Evans 1961). The success of these studies should perhaps be understood within a wider context of the appropriation of stereotyped aspects of the Scottish (and especially Highland) rural past in the creation of modern identities, not

least the national (cf Creed & Ching 1997, 24–6 on this process in general):

there is clearly a national consciousness about rural lifestyle in Scotland. . . derived more from a contaminated and romantic viewpoint of 'ye olde Scotland' than from any academic debate (MacKay 1993, 50).

This may be generally true. However, the use of the word 'contaminated' is unwarranted and is presumably intended to underline the *reality* of recent academic discourse on the subject. It is to this recent academic discourse that we now turn.

RURAL SETTLEMENT STUDIES AS HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

In 1960 Horace Fairhurst made some important observations regarding the antiquity of the main characteristics of 18th-century rural settlement and landscape (Fairhurst 1960). He gave a general descriptive account of the *clachan* (his term for nucleated deserted settlement of the 18th and 19th centuries) and its Lowland equivalent, the *fermtoun*. He noted some basic aspects of settlement morphology and house construction of regional or chronological importance. Of more significance, however, is his observation of a lacuna in Scottish settlement history between the Iron Age and the 18th century. Fairhurst recognized that this lacuna had previously been disguised:

In the absence of documentary proof. . . it must be admitted that we are largely projecting into a more distant past the conditions prevailing in the early 18th century (Fairhurst 1960, 73).

Pre-Improvement settlement form had been viewed as static in time and the projection of 18th-century material culture characteristics into earlier periods as unproblematic. Fairhurst problematized the history of rural settlement prior to the 18th century.

The four decades subsequent to Fairhurst's 1960 paper have seen a number of general studies on the problem, that is our lack of

knowledge, of rural settlement prior to the 18th century (eg Fairhurst 1967; 1971; Laing 1969; Dunbar 1971; Morrison 1977; Yeoman 1991; 1995, ch 8). The period in question has become known, in terms of settlement studies, as the Invisible Centuries (Yeoman 1991) or 'a prolonged dark age' (Fairhurst 1967, 158). Further, the acronym MoLRS (Medieval or Later Rural Settlement) has become enshrined in the literature as a general term for post-Iron Age rural settlement, underlining the acceptance of the problem (eg Hingley 1993a; it could also be argued that the term MoLRS has become something of a euphemism and that, while it recognizes our lack of knowledge of medieval settlement, it conveniently merges the medieval with the later and allows us to side-step the issue: Olivia Lelong, pers comm).

It has become accepted that archaeological excavation and survey are important techniques for dealing with the problem of our lack of knowledge of pre-18th-century settlement and landscape (eg Fairhurst 1960; 1968; 1969; Fairhurst & Petrie 1964; Dixon 1993). Despite Fairhurst's (1968, 135) statement that recently deserted settlements were not 'antiquities' in the normal sense, he clearly still considered them a subject for archaeological research.

Survey and excavation in the Highlands and Islands have not only given us an understanding of individual sites, but are now beginning to elucidate some general characteristics of settlement in the period between the Iron Age and the 18th century (eg Crawford 1983; RCAHMS 1990, 12–13, *passim*; Barrett & Downes 1993; 1994; 1996; Caldwell & Ewart 1993; Armit 1997; Branigan 1997; James 1998; Sharples & Parker Pearson 1999; Caldwell, McWee & Ruckley 2000). The work of some historical geographers and historians has also begun to explore aspects of the character of pre-18th-century settlement with some success, largely through documentary and cartographic sources (eg Dodgshon 1977; 1993; Smout 1996; see Bangor-Jones 1993, 36–7 for a brief overview).

Having said all this, the identification of medieval settlement and landscapes remains problematic. Perhaps one reason for this is the fact that most of these projects have been characterized by a vague methodology. They concentrate on locating the missing settlement through excavation of a visible deserted site, perhaps of relatively recent date, usually fairly randomly selected, in the hope that earlier material *may* be recovered. Promisingly, discussion has recently begun to focus on the development of more rigorous methodologies for locating medieval settlement (eg Banks 1996; Banks & Atkinson 2000).

The detailed results of all of these wide-ranging projects and studies is not of real concern here. Rather, they are of interest in showing the increasing concern with the changing nature of Highland, and Lowland, rural settlement. In both ethnological and folk-life studies this historicity had been absent in different ways. The idea that settlement and landscapes of the 18th and 19th centuries can be taken as representative of the end point in a continuum is now seriously challenged.

Recognition of this new past has had ramifications for the ways in which we approach the subject of rural settlement. Some of these – the need to establish the nature of medieval settlement and to construct methodologies in order to do so – we have just seen. There are also ramifications for the ways in which we view the relevant archaeological resource. Management and preservation issues in relation to sites and landscapes are increasingly under discussion as their significance in writing the history of the period is realized (eg Bangor-Jones 1993; Hingley 1993a; 1993b; 2000; Mackay 1993; Swanson 1993; Turner 2000). Such cultural resource management issues are clearly significant and deserve continuing discussion. However, I will say no more on the subject as here I want to concentrate on describing recent MoLRS fieldwork and on relating the growth of such fieldwork to the theoretical concern of historicity.

In 1993, Donnie MacKay noted that there had been few rural settlement excavations in Scotland and that most fieldwork had been survey orientated (MacKay 1993, 43). At the time, this was generally true. Apart from Fairhurst's well-known work at Lix and Rosal and that of the Stewarts at Lianach there had been little significant excavation (Fairhurst 1968; 1969; Stewart & Stewart 1988). This situation is beginning to change, however. Excavation of rural settlement sites of the 18th and 19th centuries and exploration for and excavation of pre-18th-century settlement have become accepted archaeological pursuits.

These concerns are now often included in the designs of wider-ranging landscape projects. Indeed, it has been argued that the landscape context is essential for a proper understanding of MoLRS sites (Atkinson 1995). Landscape specific projects include for example, the Dunbeath project, looking at the archaeology and history of a single estate in Caithness through time (Morrison 1996). Work around Loch Olabhat in North Uist (eg Armit 1997) has provided some valuable insights. SEARCH (Sheffield Environmental & Archaeological Research Campaign in the Hebrides) has conducted excavations on sites in the Western Isles dating from the Neolithic through to the 19th century (Branigan & Foster 1995; Gilbertson, Kent & Gratton 1996; Branigan 1997; Sharples & Parker Pearson 1999; Symonds 2000). The Ben Lawers Historic Landscape Project likewise has a wide chronological remit within a specific landscape, the north side of Loch Tay (Atkinson 2000). Geographically adjacent to Loch Tay, the Rannoch Archaeological Project has a similar remit (MacGregor 2000). The Loch Borralie area in northern Sutherland is a landscape rich in archaeological remains of varying character from a wide variety of periods from the Neolithic. It too forms the focus of a recently conceived landscape project that aims to record and contextualize the archaeology of past human interaction in a specific landscape that includes medieval and

more recent settlement (Lelong & MacGregor 2001).

Site-specific research projects are also in progress. For example, there is the excavation of an immediately pre-Improvement settlement at Easter Raitts, near Kingussie, Strathspey (Lelong & Wood 2000). Work there in recent years has targeted a number of different dwellings, outhouses and other features.

Excavation of rural settlement sites is now also a concern in the context of developer-funded rescue archaeology, where fieldwork is executed by commercial archaeology units (eg McCullagh & Tipping 1998; MacGregor, Lelong & Johnston-Smith 1999).

However, this said, the majority of MoLRS fieldwork continues to be survey-orientated. All of the above projects involve or have involved some form of survey, whether geophysical, standing building, topographic, landscape, settlement or other, alongside the excavation work. There has also been an increasing number of specifically survey-orientated projects.

Highland rural settlement made its first appearance in the Inventories of the Royal Commission with the Argyll volumes (RCAHMS 1971; 1975; 1980; 1982; 1984; 1992). In these, descriptive text, sometimes with accompanying plan surveys or photographs, is provided for one or two well-preserved examples. The volume for north-east Perth focused on understanding archaeological landscapes in that area (RCAHMS 1990). Surveys of multi-period landscapes included potential historic period settlements and field systems. Amongst these were the new Pitcarmick-type buildings, examples of which have since been excavated, producing radiocarbon dates in the mid to late first millennium AD (RCAHMS 1990, 12–13, *passim*; Barrett & Downes 1993; 1994; 1996). The landscape-oriented approach adopted, in the north-east Perth volume, and discussed in brief above, shows a wider interest in landscape studies in archaeology in general. Its

potential for addressing the problems of pre-18th-century settlement is significant if the case of the Pitcarmick-type building is anything to go by. The Afforestation Land Survey of RCAHMS has also provided several useful recent surveys including areas of rural settlement (see Dixon 1993).

Surveys of MoLRS sites have also been conducted by a wide variety of other archaeological groups, both professional and amateur (eg Gailey 1962; Shepherd & Ralston 1981; MacDonald & Scott Wood 1995; 1996; 1998; 1999; Johnstone & Scott Wood 1996; MacDonald 1999). Most of these surveys have concentrated on single settlement sites.

Therefore, considering excavation and survey together, there seems to have been something of an explosion in rural-settlement-related fieldwork in recent years. This may be due to a number of factors. As already outlined, the intellectual shift involving the problematization of pre-Improvement settlement history has provided a specific aim for much recent excavation and survey (eg Fairhurst 1960; Fairhurst & Petrie 1964). More prosaic influences have also been significant, and I have already mentioned the excavation of rural settlement sites in a developer-funded context. The impetus of development to rural settlement fieldwork seems straightforward, but it is important to realize that the inclusion of rural settlement sites, especially those of the last few hundred years, within the remit of developer-funded archaeology itself requires the recognition of such sites *as* archaeology. The fact that RCAHMS only began to include such sites and landscapes in its inventories fairly recently (1971 for the Highlands) underlines the fact that their acceptance as archaeology is a recent phenomenon. In the tradition of the 19th century such material found its archaeological role in providing analogy for prehistoric studies. The study of rural settlement within folk-life studies likewise separated the topic from traditional archaeological concerns. Rural settlement was for folk-life scholars and too recent and familiar for

archaeologists. Rural settlement was not archaeology. The legacy of the 19th century to folk-life studies included a tendency to extrapolate 18th-century material conditions back into the past. The lack of field survey within folk-life studies can be understood as partly a result of this.

The problematization of pre-18th-century settlement by scholars such as Horace Fairhurst from the 1950s played a key role in bringing rural settlement into the archaeological mainstream. The separation of the history of past settlement from tradition (folk-life) and the appreciation that documents relevant to the study of that history were few made this an archaeological problem. The subject has no doubt also benefited from the general extension of archaeological concern to include recent material culture, such as yesterday's refuse and beer can design (Shanks & Tilley 1987; Rathje & Murphy 1992).

Other reasons for the increase in fieldwork concerning rural settlement might be suggested. Upstanding structures are common on such sites and are perhaps assumed to be easy to understand as houses, barns, tool sheds, and many other seemingly unproblematic spaces. This perhaps partly explains the popularity of deserted townships in the training of students in survey technique.

Most of all, the upsurge in fieldwork concerning rural settlement and landscape in recent decades can be seen to represent increasing interest in a historically situated archaeological account of the rural past of the Highlands. As we have seen, *this* past has become an important concern in several spheres other than archaeological fieldwork, whether driven by development or research. It has produced debate over the management of the relevant archaeological resource (eg papers in Hingley 1993a) and stimulated increasing academic interest (perhaps seen most notably in recent conferences and within collections of papers on the subject: eg Morrison 1980; Atkinson, Banks & MacGregor 2000).

However, despite the restoration of forms of historicity with folk-life and recent archaeological work on rural settlement, I would suggest that the material culture in question is yet to be used to anything near its full potential in writing the medieval and later history of the Highlands. Certain essential factors, to be discussed immediately below, within recent approaches to the subject have limited the potential contribution of archaeologists to discussion of recent Highland society. This potential contribution is at least as significant as that of the documentary historian, who has traditionally defined the research agenda for and history of the period in question.

ARCHAEOLOGY, DOCUMENTS, AND THE WRITING OF SOCIAL HISTORY

Despite the restoration of historicity to the subject and the recent upsurge of interest in rural settlement, there has been almost no attempt to construct the recent social history of the Highlands from an archaeological perspective. The archaeology of rural settlement is largely an empirical exercise. This can be understood through a consideration of the relationship of history and archaeology in rural settlement studies and I will concentrate here on those studies relating to the 18th and 19th centuries.

Even the most recent of RCAHMS inventories simply gives a physical description as the entry for an individual site, although there is some synthesis of this material in the introductions to the volumes (eg RCAHMS 1990, 11–13, 95–171). A typical entry will categorize the structure or site, as a township or shieling for example. It will note the relationship of the archaeology to the local topography and the spatial inter-relationships of the archaeological elements of the site. It will give the dimensions of the various structures, a description of construction techniques and fabric, and much more. Surveys carried out by organizations other than RCAHMS are usually equally empirically orientated (eg MacDonald & Scott

Wood 1999), as are many excavation reports (eg Fairhurst 1968; 1969; MacGregor, Lelong & Johnston-Smith 1999, 17–44).

Admittedly, the character of these works is often the result of a strict remit not of the excavator's or surveyor's design. For instance, the excavations and survey at Tigh Vechtican, Arrochar, were undertaken by a commercial archaeological field unit (GUARD) on behalf of Argyll and Bute Council (the developer) under terms of reference supplied by West of Scotland Archaeology Service (MacGregor, Lelong & Johnston-Smith 1999, 5). The main aim was to establish and define the nature of the archaeological resource on the site in order to produce recommendations for mitigation during any subsequent development (*ibid.*, 6). In such circumstances, it is easy to understand why the report is largely confined to empirical statements. It is equally easy to understand why such an approach has been followed in a context where the prime objective is to teach students survey technique (see MacDonald & Scott Wood 1995; 1996; 1998; 1999; Johnstone & Scott Wood 1996; MacDonald 1999).

However, most empirical accounts do contain some historical component. This often takes the form of a brief chronological narrative detailing the main documentary and cartographic sources available that relate to the site (eg RCAHMS 1990, 95, *passim*; Johnstone & Scott Wood 1996, 27; MacGregor, Lelong & Johnston-Smith 1999, 8–17). This account is nearly always physically separated within the written report from that of the archaeology itself. The role of historical narratives within such reports is largely to refine our empirical understanding of the material culture. Documents can be used to date changes in the character of settlement or landscape, to flesh out the archaeological bones by suggesting the potential functions of the various structures on a site or by giving information on past material culture (organic materials, for example) now largely invisible archaeologically; or to suggest the existence of other missing aspects of a site such as its medieval

antecedents (eg Gailey 1962; Fairhurst 1968; 1969). Here, archaeological and documentary research are pursued together, but still largely apart, to further our empirical understanding. Most reference to the social aspects of a site or landscape is with this agenda in mind. The evidence given in the trial of Patrick Sellar, the notorious Sutherland factor, is used in the Rosal excavation report to suggest where the wood for the couples in the houses came from (Fairhurst 1968, 146).

It would be unfair to maintain that there has been absolutely no critical use of the archaeology of this period in discussing key social issues, such as Clearance (eg Fairhurst 1968, 142–3). However, such discussion is literally confined to half a dozen or so pages out of the hundreds of the combined reports. Further, where any account is given of the social history of a site or area it has largely been a case of lifting the traditional documentary historical narrative (of Improvement or Clearance, for example) and pasting it onto the empirical archaeological account.

To take one example, Fairhurst's account of the clearance of the township of Rosal is almost entirely concerned with defining the extent of the brutality of Patrick Sellar during this episode (1968, 142–3). The archaeology only enters the picture as a possible means of assessing whether or not Sellar had the houses burnt, as some sources suggest, or whether, by contrast, the tenants moved out 'in an orderly fashion' (Fairhurst 1968, 143). It can be questioned whether archaeology is the appropriate means of addressing this question. More important here is the complete lack of an attempt to use the archaeology to write the inhabitants of Rosal into the story. For Fairhurst, consideration of Clearance involves recapitulating a well-known historical debate. Sellar's actions regarding Rosal are clearly relevant – this is, after all, a deserted settlement – but the story of Rosal in this period should be so much more than a narrative of his actions.

The result of this type of approach is that the role of archaeology in *producing* the history of the Highlands, in terms of rural society in the more recent centuries, has been an extremely limited one. Archaeological research largely becomes an exercise in the illustration of narratives defined by documentary historians, such as the traditional account of Improvement. One main role of archaeology in this situation is to fill in the gaps where documentary evidence is lacking (a role most easily seen in the case of medieval rural settlement studies – although because the medieval period does constitute an obvious and large gap in knowledge, it is one area with huge potential for an active social archaeology). Another is to confirm document-based hypotheses. Such roles are clear from the manner in which material culture is used within largely documentary-based research (eg Bil 1990; Stewart 1990). Archaeology here primarily maps and illustrates. As such, archaeological rural settlement studies tend to maintain a traditional historical account. In the case of Improvement, this often means uncritically accepting the views of the Improvers themselves (MacKay 1993, 46). This account of Improvement has come under scrutiny from documentary historians in recent years who have increasingly focused on the question of overt resistance to Improvement and Clearance (see Harvey 1990 for an overview).

Empirical archaeological research and the combination of documentary and material culture resources in the manner described have been useful. Such studies have laid the foundation of a basic understanding of settlement and landscape in physical and chronological terms that is essential to any social archaeology. Potentially important historical contexts for aspects of material culture have been defined (eg the link between geometric settlement morphology and Improvement: Gailey 1960, 104; 1962a, 162–3). However, such work has remained very superficial in terms of writing social history (MacKay 1988, 111).

A small minority within the subject has recently addressed the significant problem of the passive nature of archaeology in the construction of recent Highland history. The two discussions relevant here are both concerned with assessing the cognitive aspects of past landscapes (see Knapp & Ashmore 1999 for a range of similar studies). Donnie MacKay (1988, 111–12) outlined this approach as a concern in rural settlement studies. He writes:

Clearance settlement archaeology, for want of a better title, is about people, and the effect that the various social processes at work in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries have had. Archaeology should not merely be restricted to classification. . .we should elaborate on our evidence to consider the implications of social and ideological factors in creating our historical landscapes. . .Field survey. . .with the help of documentary and folklore sources and an awareness of the social processes at work throughout the period, give us the opportunity to relate archaeology to the ideological and cultural factors which were transforming the lifestyle of much of the Scottish Highlands (MacKay 1988, 111).

The importance of the approach outlined by MacKay is its emphasis on considering how people perceived their material surroundings. He goes on to outline how we might see this perception as mediated through folklore and religious belief, for example (Gazin-Schwartz 2001 is a recent statement of this perspective and extends discussion to movable material culture).

However, this approach does have its problems. Material culture is separated from transformative ideological and social processes. There is a danger here of, again, uncritically lifting narratives constructed in the discipline of documentary history and applying them to the archaeology. Again, history and archaeology are separate.

In understanding the archaeological data by pasting separately constructed historical narratives on top of them, the potential of

material culture as a resource in the construction and reconstruction of society is ignored. Material things are seen to change as a consequence of change in ideology and culture. There is no scope for seeing change in material culture as intended to create social change, for seeing the material environment as active in the creation and maintenance of social relationships.

This first criticism relates directly to a second. The construction of cognitive landscapes in the approach outlined by MacKay is the construction of normative and largely static perceptions of landscape. We are met with statements of how the association of fairies and dwarfs with landscape features and times of the day impinged on travel, for example (MacKay 1988, 112). The assumption is that everyone held the same ideas about their physical surroundings and this caused everyone to act in the same way. There is no discussion of how such concepts might be mobilized, questioned, or refuted in different social contexts or by different people. Everyone is duped into believing the norm. For MacKay, ideology is apparently directly translatable as belief. There is no social component, in the sense of the dynamics of interpersonal relationships.

Olivia Lelong has recently put forward a more concrete study of such cognitive landscapes (2000). In this, she discusses the Sutherland Clearances and the attendant relocation of tenants of the Sutherland estates from the inland straths to the coastal strip. With this physical dislocation came a cognitive dislocation. Tenants, their families and others were uprooted from a landscape they knew intimately and which played a role in structuring their understanding of the world. This was a landscape of fields and agriculture, of mountains and rivers, that bore the physical marks of past human activity and within which their daily practices were embedded. Physical relocation to the coast confronted these people with a landscape that was dominated by a new element, the sea. This was fluid, bearing no

physical trace of past activity that they could understand. It was strange. People did not have the necessary experience of interacting with this new landscape that was required in order to extract a decent living from it. Some learnt to adapt while others protested at this enforced physical and cognitive relocation through emigration.

Lelong's paper is different from MacKay's in that she considers how people interacted with their material environment and how this structured their perception of their world. She is less concerned with symbolism and more interested in daily practice and routine. Her account is to some degree still normative, however, in that different perspectives made possible within these daily routines are not considered. An assessment of differing daily routines within a given settlement or group of settlements within the landscape is of course difficult due to the limited excavation and survey data available. It is vital, therefore, that those recording rural settlements and landscapes in the Highlands take on board the potential contribution of their work to the social history of the region and rethink their fieldwork strategies.

I have explored the significance of such an archaeology of the routine for our understanding of Highland society in detail elsewhere (Dalglish 2001; forthcoming). Case studies from the southern Highland mainland show that variation within the archaeology of Improvement relates to the complex and contingent ways in which people related to each other through time. For example, with Improvement, the organization of space within the house came to vary widely for different groups. Generally speaking, smallholders and labourers lived within single-space houses, focused on a central hearth. The house of the middling tenant showed more subdivision of space and might contain one or more fireplaces set in its walls. However, much activity in such houses still took place within one space, the 'kitchen'. The houses of the substantial tenantry were highly subdivided and most rooms

were serviced by an individual fireplace set in the wall.

The daily experiences of these groups, living as they did within quite distinct spaces, emphasized the family or the individual to different degrees. Routine domestic activities in the home of the labourer or smallholder occurred in the near-constant presence of others. In the house of the substantial tenant, people were separated from one another through the spatial organization of their routine lives. This variation in domestic space can be related to more abstract historical issues, such as differing and competing concepts of landholding. On the one hand, daily experience of the world as part of a family was and is connected to hereditary concepts of landholding. Daily experience emphasizing the autonomous individual is related to individualistic concepts of landholding as embedded in the lease system and in modern commercial farming.

The reasons that different people lived different domestic lives can thus be understood with reference to what Improvement meant for them in terms of tenurial security. The well-off tenant farmer had good reason to adhere to the individualistic mode of life that underlay his position as a favoured leaseholder. The now-dispossessed labourer had equally good reason to counter their dispossession with a hereditary claim to the land and an emphasis on familial interaction and solidity.

Such histories, focusing on the divergent social relations of various groups and individuals, are naturally complex and can be done no justice in the space available here. The labourer and substantial tenant of the southern Highlands are in many ways extremes within a much more complex network of social interaction. The point I want to emphasize is that in practising rural settlement archaeology, with its significant potential for our understanding of past everyday social interaction, we are well positioned to move beyond normative understandings of the past.

Even with cases of Clearance, where large numbers of previously differentiated people were similarly and more uniformly affected by Improvement, we should be open to the diverse historical experiences of different people and different groups of people. Pre-clearance settlement on Waternish, Skye, as recently surveyed, shows complex patterning, with isolated farmsteads around the fringes of townships otherwise populated by clusters of buildings which themselves vary in size (RCAHMS 1993, 9). How did the inhabitants of these different parts of the township interact in daily life and why were some of them separated in space? How does the patterning of this pre-clearance routine environment relate to later interaction within and between crofting townships? Were previous relationships recreated or denied, and why? While such pre- and post-clearance societies should not be characterized as divisive, they should equally not be characterized as culturally homogeneous and devoid of internal politics.

CONCLUSION

Through this paper, I have traced two themes, the development of historicity and of the modern archaeological approach in Highland rural settlement studies. These two themes underlie any current study of Highland rural settlement.

The rise of historicity has given the discipline of archaeology a key role in writing the history of the Highlands and Islands in the historic period. It is now clear that material culture, settlement and landscape were not static prior to the period of agricultural Improvement as had previously been assumed. Some evidence of their changing nature has been documented in recent years. I have argued above that this assumption of stasis has discernible roots in the theoretical assumptions of the *Rural Settlement Studies as Ethnology* and *Folk-life* approaches. Most notable here is the distinction drawn between

traditional and modern society and the characterization of the former as conservative, homogeneous and unchanging. For some, these theoretical orientations allowed the assumption that, in the case of traditional societies, the past and the present merge into one and are directly translatable into each other.

It is now recognized that there are fundamental gaps in our knowledge of historic society and its material world in the Highlands and Islands. With the introduction of the modern archaeological approach, archaeology as a discipline has given itself a significant role in future research. Currently, this is especially clear in the case of medieval rural settlement, where archaeological fieldwork is perhaps the best line of approach to the problem (although historical geography has also proven the usefulness of a re-assessment of known cartographic and, to some extent, documentary sources).

The role of archaeology in relation to the historic period should not, however, be confined to filling in gaps left by documentary historians. Some recent studies, like Lelong's, have begun to develop new approaches that allow archaeologists to say something new about well-documented periods and processes, such as Clearance. In these studies, archaeologists have a basic role in building our understanding of Highland society, as we can construct possible environments in which people would have learnt and renegotiated their understanding of and role in the social and physical world. With such different understandings of the world in mind, archaeologists can begin to assess how people in the past may have perceived and approached historical episodes like Clearance.

In general, I agree that this concern with practical understandings of the world, learnt in everyday, routine life, is a strength in archaeology and gives the discipline a significant role in relation to historical periods. However, a re-assessment of the theoretical assumptions of this 'archaeology of the routine' in a Scottish context is needed. The

construction of homogeneous, normative routine environments, from which all people approach society at large with the same understanding of the world, does not allow for social difference, misunderstanding and conflict (traditionally, such difference and conflict has only been discussed in the case of tenant–landlord relationships: for a discussion of this tendency see, eg Carter 1981; MacDonald 1997, 69–75; Macinnes 1998, 180–4). In many historical narratives, a Highland people is described which is a homogeneous entity (MacDonald 1997, 69–75; cf DalGLISH forthcoming, ch 7 in relation to narratives of Improvement in the Highlands). Some recent history is challenging this assumption and the received fact that the said Highland people was conservative, traditional and passive with regard to social change (eg Devine 1999; MacKillop 1999).

In adopting an active role in the construction of the recent history of Highland and Island society, archaeologists should take account of the increasingly evident complexity and diversity of that society. As suggested above, some recent historical research has done just that. The archaeological concern with the material and routine world allows a further, and in some ways unique, opportunity for the consideration of social diversity and the ways in which people constructed, accepted or sought to change their social world. The study of routine social practice can take into account different and competing practical understandings of the world (cf Barrett 1994 for a substantive example of the archaeology of routine and Bloch 1989 for an anthropological perspective). It can consider the structured possibilities for social action, and ask why certain actions were taken in relation to contingent historical circumstance. The study of different past understandings and of the negotiation of social relations between different groups is important as pursuing these issues allows us to understand how some relationships have come to be taken for granted, to understand how those modern assumptions upon which inequality is based

came into being and were maintained (in relation to historical archaeology, these issues have been more regularly and coherently explored outside of Scotland and outside of Britain (see, for example, papers in Leone & Potter 1999)). A critique of modern assumptions is perhaps most relevant to the archaeology and history of the past few centuries. Thus, an archaeological analysis of Highland, and wider Scottish, rural settlement is well placed to inform us on key social issues in the Scotland we inhabit now, providing that analysis aims to actively and critically explore social interaction in the past.

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