

**The Royal Society of Edinburgh
RSE @ Lochaber
Kinlochleven High School**

***For the Benefit of Mankind:
Industrialisation, Environment and the
Politics of Highland Development***

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Report by Kate Kennedy

The contests and debates around economic diversification (in particular industrial schemes) in the Highlands during the late 19th and 20th Centuries are evident in some form in current discussions over the current and future course of development in the area. Focusing on aluminium production in the Highlands, this lecture explored this subject in relation to the economic, environmental and social ramifications of industrial development in peripheralised regions. It also examined the collective and individual motivations of those involved.

History matters, both in contemporary debates and more fundamentally in relation to self-comprehension, as well as in relation to the human interaction with the planet and other species. Whilst history is referred to regularly in contemporary debates, it tends to be used as little more than rhetoric. Views of history are dominated by out-of-date perceptions and the mistaken views of personalities and 'great men'. Dr Perchard argued that the prevalence of "persistent, unremittingly dismal historical narratives" has exercised, over the decades, a powerful influence on the way that much government policy towards the Highlands has developed. The craft of history is not just about facts relating to specific events in the past, but also to the study of change over time, the social context of events, interpretation and how actions, ideals and notions can impact on the world around us. Viewing history merely as a series of facts ignores the interpretation and selection of sources by the historian.

In 1897, Lord Kelvin, British Aluminium's first scientific advisor, addressed workers at the Company's factory in Greenock, stating "that magnificent piece of work at the aluminium factory [at Foyers near Loch Ness] was the beginning of something that would transform the whole social economy of areas such as the Highlands". For a natural philosopher such as Lord Kelvin, the modern techniques of aluminium production represented a triumph of science and the height of intellectual revolution arising from post-Enlightenment thought; this was the epitome of the second industrial revolution. He considered such developments to have the potential to aid human progress on a global scale. Dr Perchard commented that whilst Kelvin's views on harnessing the water power at the Falls of Foyers may not sit well with modern audiences, his biographers observed that his remarks did have a powerful logic. In the words of two of Lord Kelvin's biographers: "The pestilence, poverty and over-population, accompanying the industrial development of Glasgow, had as their counterpart the depopulation and decline of the Highland economy. The advancement of science and science-based industry that was transforming Glasgow into a healthier and more prestigious second city of Empire would equally bring economic and human salvation to the vast region of the Highlands".

Lord Kelvin's views were also shared and endorsed by many local residents and influential people in the Highlands. Indeed, British Aluminium (BA) went out of their way to court support from figures such as Cameron of Lochail and Lord Lovat, who were considered to have a progressive outlook on economic diversification. Dr Perchard suggested that to

understand why such a strong level of support existed for the 'Company', it is necessary to consider the local and regional conditions of the time. Contemporary accounts paint the picture of a "desolate area with few opportunities beyond those employed in poorly-paid agricultural labour or trade and cottage industries". Furthermore, emigration records for the Highlands indicate that between 1861 and 1911, 17% of people from the most economically active age brackets left the country. However, in the area around Foyers the population grew by 28%. As such, BA contributed positively to the region through providing employment and retaining a valuable workforce. In addition to these real benefits, British Aluminium had a carefully orchestrated public relations campaign; today this would be referred to as corporate social responsibility. These connections were facilitated in part by the Highland solicitor, Charles Innes, the uncle of William Murray Morrison, BA's eventual Managing Director. Innes was also the Conservative and Unionist agent in the area and thus close to a number of important landowners.

In contrast to Lord Kelvin's grand vision, some Victorians were outraged by BA's development at Loch Ness. The campaign against the scheme was spearheaded in the London *Times* by the National Trust for Places of Historic Interest and Natural Beauty. It was supported by a number of important benefactors to the organisation. Indeed, the Editor of a popular Victorian travel guide series referred to BA's developments as "the greatest outrage on nature perpetrated in the present Century". The voices of opposition emanating from the early environmental movement hinged on the effects of the aesthetics of landscape in an area that had become beloved amongst artists and poets. The harnessing of the water power for the good of mankind represented not only the spoliation of nature but also potential moral degradation; "with the influx of alien labour that would drink, fight, desecrate the land and disappear when the work was finished". Dr Perchard stated that "by and large the focus of the criticism of the Foyers scheme was on the grounds of aesthetics and this allowed BA, who did know of the potential damage that these plants could cause, to avoid some difficult questions about ecological and social impacts. BA were also able to get round various other objections because they had acquired all of the land around the Foyers water catchment area and enlisted the support of relevant backers, thus limiting the action of critics. There were, however, tensions in the later history of the Company which related to its impact on local environment and human and animal health, particularly concerning Fluorosis in sheep and cattle in Fort William and wide-scale defoliation on Forestry Commission land. This brought BA into contest with local environmental groups, and debates over balancing these impacts with employment opportunities and regional development ensued from the 1940s onwards. Dr Perchard commented that "ultimately it was the backroom deals that were done that managed to suppress many of these concerns". The fact that economic development was a priority for much of the 20th Century, and not the environment, is summed up by a remark by an official speaking about the Corpach pulp and paper mill in the 1960s; "although there would be much environmental damage, it was containable within the political equation of Highland development". The calculation was that in a peripheralised area, the risks to human health and the natural environment had to be considered against the threat of a potential loss of an employer such as BA to the region.

Despite these less favourable impacts, the Company continued to be a valuable investor in the region. By 1920, BA were employing nearly 300 people at Foyers and Kinlochleven and paying £170,000 in wages (roughly £5.3 million today). By the late 1930s, BA were the largest single employer in Argyll and one of the largest across the whole of the Highlands. The Company also provided crofting leave, allowing workers to continue in previous lifestyles during the harvest and fishing seasons. They also contributed one fifth and one twentieth of the rates to Inverness-shire and Argyll. The Company continued to retain people in the region and also enticed incomers, which was especially significant given a further 13.8% reduction of the Highland population through emigration between 1921 and 1930. BA also invested heavily in infrastructure and amenities, and leading figures such as William Murray

Morrison sat on Government committees which lobbied the Government for better investment in Highland transport and accommodation. Whilst these efforts were largely driven by company interest, they were also well-intentioned and once again displayed a company willing to support the region when others would not. Dr Perchard stated “that BA managed to maintain a high visibility in the west Highlands, despite state intervention and the growth in public services, the contraction of the workforces at the Highland smelters and openings offered by alternative employment opportunities, owed much to their deep entrenchment in local civic society and the collective memory of the region. The endurance of the deep-seated loyalty to BA illustrates the effectiveness of the Company’s inculcation of its role as a social benefactor, interwoven with Highland history”.

British Aluminium’s pursuit of cordial relations with the likes of Locheil, Lovat and Mackintosh, alongside their courting of elements of the Highland development lobby (notably Dr Lachlan Grant), were vital to their reputation in the region. William Murray Morrison, in particular, cultivated a sound working relationship with Locheil. He was at pains to impress upon the Chieftain of the Clan Cameron the degree of personal commitment he had to the developments, declaring in a letter, “I have the enormous personal reward of knowing that the foundation has been laid for a lasting and far-reaching benefit to the Highlands of Scotland.” Dr Perchard commented that “Locheil’s support for the Company was primarily motivated by his desire to support economic diversification for the region... but he was also infuriated by what he saw as the further abrogation of responsibility by central government...BA recognised that the frustrations of Locheil and others with the government in Edinburgh and London could be harnessed for the Company’s advantage”.

In a similar vein to his entreaties to Locheil, Morrison’s careful choice of message to figures such as Dr Lachlan Grant, BA’s medical officer and co-founder of the Highland Development League, played to the latter’s commitment to regional development and his appreciation of what he perceived to be the socially ameliorative effects of ‘paternalism’. “As Grant made clear in his public utterances, British Aluminium fitted the model of the social enterprise, and was worthy of his support and indeed participation in their mission. This included the physician also providing public lectures on social improvement in Kinlochleven”. Dr Perchard described Grant as a man of political and social complexity, but above all someone who was passionate about Highland development. “The advantages of personal contact with Grant were certainly not lost on William Murray Morrison. Writing to him in January 1935, Morrison declared: ‘It is a most pleasing recollection in my career that I have also been able to do some practical and lasting good to my beloved Highlands’”. Grant corresponded with Morrison over a number of years, and became a robust defender of British Aluminium. He publicly admonished critics of housing conditions in Kinlochleven, and roundly dismissed suggestions that the manufacture of aluminium was affecting the health of workers and local communities around the smelters, in spite of evidence to the contrary. Dr Perchard suggested that “almost certainly Grant would have been affected to some degree by the fact that BA employed him as a consulting physician. Yet his guiding principle in all of this was undoubtedly well-intentioned: that of supporting a Company who had showed themselves committed to the Highlands, at a time when the Government was, for advocates of Highland regeneration, guilty of neglect. Morrison was sincere to some degree in his correspondence with Grant, but it was equally tempered by his audience. Given Grant’s prominence as a long-standing and vocal advocate of Highland development, it is highly unlikely that Morrison was not carefully composing his message when he wrote in a 1935 letter: ‘My feeling is that as more and more attention is drawn to these matters and development in other directions, we shall gradually restore better conditions in our native land, and you are doing your best in this that connection’”. Grant extolled the Company’s virtues on many occasions, reporting in 1936 that he had observed a clean bill of health amongst employees at Kinlochleven.

Dr Perchard commented, “though British Aluminium did not actively seek to court labour and trade unions, then, especially after 1945, it was careful to seek to incorporate them both

formally through the machinery of collective bargaining and informally through social contacts with trade union officials". BA was, however, at best, grudgingly tolerant of trade unions and the power of labour. The 1910 strike at Kinlochleven in support of trade union recognition attracted unwanted attention and the later 1936 strike, opposing a rise in rents and changes to working conditions, resulted in a major 'social drama' in the Company's history. Dr Perchard noted that from around 1945 to the mid 1970s, relations with labour and trade unions remained on an essentially cordial basis, reliant on informal contracts as much as on the formal machinery. "From the trade unions' perspective, BA provided valuable employment in an economy where jobs of this type were scarce. With the collapse of a number of large industrial schemes in the Highlands during the 1970s and 1980s, the imperative of holding on to jobs, especially relatively skilled and reasonably paid ones, in the region became the priority of trade unions. Moreover, as trade unionists observed, British Aluminium was one of only a few employers in the region who recognised trade unions". The quandary faced by the trade unions, and employees, was vividly illustrated by discussions over improvements to health and safety within the west Highland smelters in the 1970s. Initially, the plant trade unions lobbied for and backed Health and Safety Executive demands for extensive capital investment to improve the atmosphere in the furnace rooms. When BA threatened to close the Highland plants, the trade unions withdrew their support for HSE action. "Fortuitously, Lochaber was modernised after 1975, but this episode illustrated how industrial relations and occupational health and safety in the Highland plants were overshadowed by the politics of regional economic development"

In conclusion, Dr Perchard considered that it was BA's ability to garner support over time amongst figures such as Locheil, Lord Lovat and Lachlan Grant, spanning the political spectrum, which set them apart from those who failed to understand the subtleties of the politics of the region. "This reveals much about the complexities of development in peripheral regions, and the contests to balance social, economic and environmental considerations. It also reveals how we got to where we are and the importance of aluminium in the story of development of the Highlands, while drawing distinctions with the past. In the future direction of this region, as with others, an understanding of the past is critical".

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