

In Search of Scotland

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We arrive at Glasgow Airport on a Wednesday evening. During the landing, the lights in the cabin are dimmed. We look through the small windows, trying to catch a glimpse of the landscape, but the sun has set and I see nothing but darkness. I am longing to see the Scottish landscape. In preparation for this trip I've been reading *In Search of Scotland*. H.V. Morton (1892 - 1979) toured through Scotland in 1929 and wrote this passionate and humorous travel report. He is fascinated by the landscape and his elaborate descriptions, especially about the Highlands, confirm the mental image I already have of the Scottish landscape as wild, unmediated and with its own distinct character.

'There is in Scottish landscape, even in lyrical woodlands, something which is most dramatic and definite. A wood is much the same the world over. I know woods in Italy which might be in Sussex. But the Schotchness of these little brakes beside the road along Deeside is such that I feel that the pine-trees rule them. It's when they sigh. If a man were taken up blindfolded and shot from the other end of the world to open his eyes on Deeside, he would say at once: 'I am in Scotland!'¹

Coming from the gate the first thing I see is *The Highland Experience*; a ceiling to floor photo of Loch Lomond with Ben Lomond in the background. A green carpet mimicking a meadow and artificial birds singing, try to evoke the experience of a stroll along the banks of Loch Lomond. A Highland cow looks me in the eye and tries to lure me on a cruise. The diorama shows only Loch Lomond but, as the title suggests, is representing the larger Highland landscape.

'A man can go out from Glasgow and climb [Ben Lomond] and see Scotland; he can see his own country lying for miles in a chain of dim blue monsters. Where the eye fails him the mind can carry on, leaping in imagination from peak to peak across the Grampians, leaping from far Ben Nevis to the peaks of the Western Isles, and back across the sea to Cairn Gorm and over Scotland to those guardian ranges of the east which sometimes lie at the edge of the sea painted in the blue of heaven. What a spiritual adventure is Ben Lomond on the doorstep of Glasgow?'ⁱⁱ

The following day we rent a car and plan to drive up to Loch Lomond and Ben Lomond. We drive out of Glasgow and at just a stone's throw away from the city, with the first mountain in sight, we already are in complete awe of the landscape. The reality of the mountains, the water, the views

and the trees correspond with my mental image; I see – just like Morton did almost a century ago - a wild, romantic landscape.

We make a stop in Luss with a lot of other tourists, mostly from Scotland. In 2006 newspaper *The Scotsman* did a ballot where Scots could choose their favourite national icon. The landscape and especially the Highlands were mentioned the most. 'When we define ourselves, we look back for markers of identity [and there the] seductive power of Highlandism on the Scottish imagination ... shows no sign of waning ... Apparently for many modern Scots, as for their Victorian ancestors, their hearts are still in the Highlands.'ⁱⁱⁱ Dutch landscape architect Adriaan Geuze once wrote about how for the Dutch our manmade landscape is the soul of our culture and that without our flat land, we would be mentally orphaned. Like the Swiss would be impotent without their mountains and the Italians without their food.^{iv} Apparently, for the Scots the same is true of the Highlands.

We drive around Loch Lomond. Every turn reveals a new panorama. We park just off the road to wander along the Loch and find a spot, where a rock lies half on land, half in the water. We climb it and take photos. When we look closer at it we see structures and patterns, revealing the volcanic origin and representing the geological processes that over time shaped this rock and this landscape.

'The fascination of these mountains is, I think, the mystery of something which can be seen, approached, touched, but never understood. We look at volcanic rocks, we trace with our fingers the ice-scratches of glaciers that in remote times smoothed, polished, and rounded them. We have a dim perception of the inconceivable eruption which flung them up out of the bowels of the earth... And we stand on them, climb them, and pretend that we have conquered them, knowing all the time that they are as remote from conquest or understanding as the mountains of the moon.'^v

The next evening we give a presentation for the Land Works project at A + DS. We talk about the differences between Dutch and Scottish landscape: how a big part of the Netherlands lies beneath sea-level and how men and minds have created our land, taking it from the sea, protecting it by dunes and dikes, resulting in a completely planned and largely constructed, flat landscape. We talk about how we see the Scottish landscape as wild and natural, untouched. And of the sublime experience this can evoke. A landscape architect in the audience remarks that our countries are more similar than we think. That for all these areas, there are also plans and reports and drawings. At that moment I notice that I've romanticised the Scottish landscape. I saw a landscape not flat nor straight, and from my Dutch point of view immediately labelled this as a sublime wilderness. But apparently this wilderness is not without plan and the sublime is carefully maintained.

The day after we wander through the Glasgow grid. The landscape on which Glasgow was built reveals itself nowadays mostly in steep streets like Dalhousie street. Along the way I look at small parks, gardens and squares. They look nice and well kept, but to me don't seem to be typical Glaswegian or Scottish. A current research project on which I'm working is about the representation of landscapes on a smaller scale; how to capture the spirit and 'sublimeness' of a landscape within the confined area of a park, square or garden? Like the NOMA garden by Polyform Arkitekt in Copenhagen which is not a miniature, but an abstract representation of Nordic landscapes. Or the Teardrop Park by Michael van Valkenburgh Associates where the atmosphere of the nearby Catskills is transported into Manhattan. If we could capture the essence of the Scottish landscape and invite it into the orderly city, using good design and the tool of representation, what magical places this could produce!

Eelco Hooftman, director of Scottish landscape architecture firm Gross.Max and Dutch by origin, wrote 'I left my homeland in search of the wild romance of the sublime'.^{vi} This wild romance can easily be found in the Scottish landscape. In 1929 Morton found it on his tour, as you can tell from the lyrical landscape descriptions mentioned in this text. In 2015 I found it at a simple rock at Loch Lomond. Perhaps the challenge for Scotland lies in representing some of this wild romance of the sublime into the orderly world of the city; as an invite to city dwellers to visit the landscape and as an assertion to the Highlandism of the Scots.

ⁱ H.V. Morton, *In Search of Scotland*, London 1929, p. 139

ⁱⁱ H.V. Morton, *In Search of Scotland*, London 1929, p. 243

ⁱⁱⁱ A. Blaikie, *The Scots Imagination and Modern Memory*, Edinburgh 2010, p. 136

^{iv} West 8, *Mosaics*, Gent 2007, p. 6

^v H.V. Morton, *In Search of Scotland*, London 1929, p. 209

^{vi} E. Hooftman in *Best Private Plots*, St. Pölten 2007, p. 28