On the Edge of Enlightenment: The Historiographical Place of the Scottish Highlands in the Enlightenment

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When considering Scotland's place in the Enlightenment, the nation's economic growth, its investments in universities and education, and its place as Europe's centre for scientific and medical research loom large—as do the writings and ideas of thinkers such as Frances Hutcheson, Adam Smith, James Hutton, Thomas Reid, and David Hume.[1] However, these developments, while impressive, hardly encapsulate all of the changes Scotland experienced during the Age of Enlightenment of the eighteenth-century. The Scottish Highlands, for instance, underwent immense changes during the Age of Enlightenment, as the region—which had been economically, socially, and culturally distinct from the rest of Scotland since the Middle Ages—was increasingly integrated into the rest of Scotland and the British Empire through the commercialization of estates, the spread of the market economy, and the breakdown of the traditional clan system—resulting in widespread emigration from the Highlands to the Lowlands or overseas colonies.[2] Although these changes occurred in the same period as the Enlightenment, historians have debated since the 1950s whether the Scottish Highlands have a place in the Enlightenment. Early, economics-focused histories of the region attributed the changes which took place in the eighteenth-century Highlands to 'inevitable' and external economic forces that existed outside of the Enlightenment, while more recent studies have considered the changes to have been a part of a planned process of development, guided by the intellectual theories of the Enlightenment.

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[1] Bruce P. Lenman, *Enlightenment and Change: Scotland 1746-1832* (Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 242-243.
[2] T.M. Devine, *Clanship to Crofters' War: The Social Transformation of the Scottish Highlands* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 52.

Meanwhile, other works, without considering the agency of the Highlanders, acknowledged the impact of the Enlightenment on the Highlands but rejected the impact of the Highlands on the Enlightenment. However, the scholarly trend toward holistic approaches to source material and methodology has led modern historians to argue the Scottish Highlands influenced the Enlightenment as much as the Enlightenment influenced the Highlands. This paper will thus analyse the historiographical changes that occurred between 1956 and 2013 to show the impact that scholarly trends and approaches to source material have had on the establishment of a connection between the eighteenth-century Highlands and the Enlightenment.

Academic interest in the eighteenth-century Scottish Highlands began with the publication of Malcolm Gray's *The Highland Economy, 1750-1850* in 1956.[3] At the time of this work's publication, few historians had attempted to conduct thorough studies of the eighteenth-century Highlands, as the prevailing view amongst historians was that the region was a social, political, and economic backwater.[4] Such historians likely held a similar view about the Highlands to the one Hugh Trevor-Roper expressed in 1965 about the history of pre-Columbian Americas and Africa before colonialism: "at present there is none [history], or very little."[5] Gray thus set out to challenge this view by providing a 280-page economic history of the region, in which he covered the drastic changes that occurred following the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745, notably addressing the introduction of sheep and kelp farming and the increase in cattle and fish production—provoked by demands from the Lowlands.[6] Gray's work was chiefly economic and statistical; thus, Gray relied solely on Forfeited Estate Papers, Government reports, and family records—with a

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[3] James Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1976), 2.
[4] Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community*, 9.
[5] Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Rise of Christian Europe* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), 9.
[6] Malcolm Gray, *The Highland Economy 1750-1850* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1957), 83, 180, 222, 232.

smattering of accounts from tourists to the region. With few sources that speak to the minds of the Highlanders, Gray consequently attributed the changes which occurred in the Highlands to uncontrollable, external forces that he calls "the total impact of the powerful individualism and economic rationale of industrial civilization on the weaker, semi-communal traditionalism of the recalcitrant fringe."[7] From this perspective, Gray also alleged that the chiefs and landlords who enacted "improvement" policies, raised rents, and evicted tenants were not to blame for the mass emigrations known as the Highland Clearances, and he derided historians who did place blame on such men.[8] As such, Gray's work offered little insight into the role of the Highlands in the Enlightenment, save for it existing as an "archaic" region on which the forces of modernity were "inevitably" exerted.[9]

While *The Highland Economy* revitalized some interest in the neglected history of the eighteenth-century Highlands, the 1963 publication of journalist John Prebble's *The Highland Clearances*—a bestselling book which presented an emotionally charged history of the Highlands and Islands of the eighteenth and nineteenth century that emphasized the role of chiefs and landlords in clearing the crofts "of men, women, and children, using police and soldiers where necessary"—provoked a lasting interest in the topic.[10] Nevertheless, Gray's harsh view of the eighteenth-century Highlands as a medieval time-capsule transformed by the civilizing forces of the British economy dominated much of the work produced on the topic during the 1960s and early 1970s. This is especially true for R.H. Campbell's *Scotland Since 1707: The Rise of an Industrial Society*, published in 1965. Campbell's work sought to provide a general economic overview of

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[7] Gray, *The Highland Economy*, 246.
[8] Gray, 18.
[9] Gray, 193.
[10] John Prebble, *The Highland Clearances* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 8; The Newsroom. "Sir Tom Devine: Revisiting the nation's historic bestseller." *The Scotsman*. February 28, 2019. https://www.scotsman.com/news/sir-tom-devine-revisiting-nations-historic-bestseller-274511 (accessed March 8, 2023).

Scotland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but Campbell devoted many pages to the situation in the Highlands of the eighteenth-century, including several subchapters on the region.[11] This was a generous inclusion—relative to other works on Scottish history published in the 1960s. Yet Campbell, perhaps due to his reliance on printed sources and statistical documents, offered few new perspectives on the eighteenth-century Highlands, and instead aligned himself with scholars like Malcolm Gray who viewed the Highlands as a region wherein antiquated "custom" prevailed and "strategy rather than economy dominated Highland life."[12] Subsequently, Campbell argued that, as sweeping socio-economic changes affected the region, the inhabitants of the Highlands—whether chiefs, landlords, tacksmen, or cottars—became "the victims of economic forces over which they had little control," and that agrarian change, when enacted, was more about increasing rents than "enlightened" improvement.[13] Yet most landlords, according to Campbell, were reluctant to induce change in the region, and often modified 'improvement' schemes to reflect this.[14] Common Highlanders and tacksmen, meanwhile, had "neither the capital nor the requisite technical skill" to adjust to change and therefore "adopted the simple remedy" of emigration.[15]

In the 1970s, more focused studies on the eighteenth-century Highlands, notably A.J. Youngson's *After the Forty-Five: The Economic Impact on the Scottish Highlands*, maintained many of the views expressed by Gray and Campbell about the sordid state of the Highlands prior to the sweeping changes to the region's society and economy. Youngson insisted, for instance, that resistance to change in the Highlands did little but perpetuate "starvation and stagnation."[16]

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[11] R.H. Campbell, *Scotland Since 1707: The Rise of an Industrial Society* (New York, Barnes and Noble, 1965), 34, 128, 220.
[12] Campbell, *Scotland Since 1707*, 13.
[13] Campbell, 14, 32-33.
[14] Campbell, 14.
[15] Campbell, 13, 133, 163.
[16] A.J. Youngson, *After the Forty-Five: The Economic Impact on the Scottish Highlands* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973), 190.

However, Youngson differed from his predecessors in his analysis of the social and economic theories of Adam Smith and David Hume, and 'enlightened' personalities who influenced the changes taking place in the Highlands — especially James Anderson, John Knox, and David Loch; he refuted the "inevitability" of change and instead investigated its carefully planned implementation.[17] Nevertheless, Youngson attributed little to the Highlanders themselves, as the 'improvers' he studied, as well as the tourists—Dr. Samuel Johnson, Thomas Pennant, and James Watt—from whose accounts he drew information about the conditions of the Highlands led Youngson to contend that change was fostered by Lowlanders and resisted by conservative Highlanders.[18]

In 1976, James Hunter, a historian with Highland roots, refuted Youngson's connection between the Enlightenment and the Highlands with *The Making of the Crofting Community*. Hunter's work, which aimed to tell the history of crofting "from the crofting community's point of view," and "deal with the exploitation of man by man," ultimately argued that chiefs and landlords commercialized their estates not because of their adoption of 'enlightened' economic ideals, but because the expensive tastes they acquired from moving "in two cultural universes" (i.e., between that of the clan and that of the court) during their visits to Paris or Edinburgh motivated them to attempt to increase the profit margin of their estates.[19] Notably, Hunter's work was greatly sympathetic to common Highlanders and deeply critical of their chiefs and landlords and of callous economic histories of the region, like Gray's *The Highland Economy*.[20] This view was greatly aided by Hunter's choice of sources, which included government documents and Gaelic sources which earlier historians neglected. However, despite taking a more sympathetic

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[17] Youngson, *After the Forty-Five*, 36-37, 84.
[18] Youngson, 54-60.
[19] Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community*, 38-42.
[20] Hunter, 2-3.

view, Hunter still presented the Highlands and Islands of the early eighteenth century as a region inhabited by a stagnant society and people who were incapable of adjusting to change.[21]

Nevertheless, *The Making of the Crofting Community* quickly became a classic and was subsequently republished in 1982, 1987, 1997, 2000, and 2010, sparking immense scholarly interest in Highland history. Scholars around the world picked up the topic, with Canadian historian J.M. Bumsted publishing *The People's Clearance: Highland Emigration to British North America, 1770-1815* in 1982. Seeking to undermine the "tone of patronizing compassion" adopted by Hunter and Prebble, Bumsted examined the emigrants' perspectives on the eighteenth-century Highlands and argued that, before 1815, most Highlanders—led by their tacksmen—chose to leave the region to avoid policies of "modernization and improvement"—an action which, according to Bumsted, piqued most landlords, as they feared the depopulation of the Highlands would hinder the commercialization of the region by depleting its workforce.[22] However, such policies of "modernization and improvement," Bumsted claimed, developed independently of "the revolution in economic thinking" emanating from the minds of Adam Smith, David Hume, and James Steuart.[23] Instead, the ideas of 'improvers' such as John Knox and James Anderson were implicated in the Highlands as an attempt to protect and support Britain's mercantilist framework through internal colonization.[24] The adoption of improvement policies by lairds, Bumsted contended, was motivated by profit, as the policies rationalized actions which "landlords pragmatically had been taking independently of one another" for decades.[25]

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[21] Hunter, 38, 46-47.
[22] J.M. Bumsted, *The People's Clearance; Highland Emigration to British North America 1770-1815* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1982), ix, 209.
[23] Bumsted, *The People's Clearance*, 45.
[24] Bumsted, 45-47.
[25] Bumsted, 47.

A more comprehensive analysis of 'improvement' policies was to arrive in the form of Australian historian Eric Richards' *A History of the Highland Clearances*—a massive two-volume work published between 1982 and 1985. The first volume, *Agrarian Transformation and the Evictions 1746-1886*, provided a descriptive survey of the history of the Highlands from the early eighteenth to the late nineteenth century. Notably, Richards tied the changes (land consolidation and commercialization) which occurred in the eighteenth-century Highlands to those simultaneously occurring across Europe due to the agricultural revolution and population growth in places such as Denmark, Prussia, and of course, Lowland Scotland.[26] This challenged the view held by previous historians, such as James Hunter, who viewed the situation in the Highlands as an isolated event.[27] Beyond economics, Richards also linked the Highlands to the Enlightenment phenomenon of travel writing, as he demonstrated that the writings of Daniel Defoe and Edmund Burt on Highland Scotland brought the region into the wider British consciousness and stimulated the desire to 'improve' the conditions of the region.[28] This is explored deeper in Richards's second volume, in which Richards directly linked the changes of the eighteenth-century Highlands to the Enlightenment by alleging that Samuel Johnson, Adam Smith, George Dempster, and Sir John Sinclair's theories and writings about the Highlands worked to ensure that Enlightenment ideals were foundational to the changes and 'improvements' carried out in the Highlands, as Johnson wrote the travel accounts which provoked interest in the region's poverty, Smith theorized the ideas on property and commercialization that the landlords adopted, Dempster advocated for positive change and 'improvement', and Sinclair provided statistical surveys of the region's

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[26] Eric Richards, *A History of the Highland Clearances: Agrarian Transformation and the Evictions 1746-1886* (London: Routledge, 1982), 8-21, 32.
[27] Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community*, 32, 40.
[28] Richards, *Agrarian Transformation and the Evictions*, 46-51.

economy which supported scientific agriculture.[29] Significantly, Richards, by considering the larger context of the changes which occurred in the Highlands, aided in the establishment of the idea that economic change in the eighteenth-century Highlands was closely linked to ideological change, an idea which drew the history of Highland Scotland further into the history of the Enlightenment.[30]

While the Clearances dominated the focus of most historians in this decade, there were also works such as Peter Womack's *Improvement and Romance: Constructing the Myth of the Highlands*, which examined eighteenth-century intellectual and literary developments to demonstrate how Scots and English imaginings and misconceptions of the Highlands (first as an unsightly, unproductive landscape, then as a highly romanticized, unrealistic one) and the Highlanders (first as "uncouth savages," then as chivalric warriors) led to harmful improvement schemes and Highlandism—the appropriation of Gaelic cultural symbols by Scots in the creation of their national identity.[31] However, as a literary scholar, Womack was chiefly concerned with printed literary sources, and as such there is little assessment of the socio-economic impact of the literary mythologizing he discusses.

By the 1990s, few historians contended that there was "very little" history to be found in researching eighteenth-century Scottish Highlands, as historians had continued to write extensively on the topic since the 1960s. Historians seeking to uncover new arguments and present new evidence thus resolved to adjust their methodologies. In *Clanship to Crofters' War*, for instance, T.M. Devine expanded his study to include the early seventeenth century, rather than just

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[29] Eric Richards, *A History of the Highland Clearances: Emigration, Protest, Reasons* (London: Routledge, 1985), 14.

[30] Richards, *Emigration, Protests, Reasons*, 14-19.

[31] Peter Womack, *Improvement and Romance: Constructing the Myth of the Highlands* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 25.

focusing on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. With this approach, Devine was able to demonstrate that, while external forces such as the demands of the British state and economy provoked the economic transformation of the eighteenth-century Highlands, internal forces—notably, the adoption of Enlightenment ideas, "current amongst their class elsewhere in Britain," of individualism, progress, and 'modernity' by chiefs and landlords—provoked social changes within the region (i.e., the destruction of the clan system and the oppression of Gaelic traditions and language) and were well underway by the eighteenth century.[32] Other works, such as Allan I. Macinnes's *Clanship, Commerce and the House of Stuart, 1603–1788*, which aimed to provide a "Gaelic perspective" on the topic, used an inter-disciplinary approach, drawing on elements on social anthropology, archaeology, sociology, and geography to support Macinnes' thesis that the shift to commercial land management in the Highlands began in the early seventeenth century, and that social change in the region was instigated by state-sponsored efforts designed to realign the loyalty of clan members. This thesis, while it presented the Highlands as an adaptive region and thus undercut the view that the Highlands were "monolithic, static and undeveloped prior to the 'Forty-Five," also suggested that the changes experienced in the region had less to do with the Enlightenment and more to do with the longstanding cultural conflict between Gaels and Scots.[33]

The publication of Robert A. Dodgshon's *From Chiefs to Landlords* in 1998 complemented these works. For instance, by beginning his study in the sixteenth century and following developments into the nineteenth century, Dodgshon was better able to demonstrate how Highlander-led developments were commonplace prior to the eighteenth-century, as the harshness

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[32] Devine, *Clanship to Crofters' War*, 43-45.

[33] Allan I. Macinnes, *Clanship, Commerce and the House of Stuart, 1603-1788* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1996), 386.

of the region demanded dynamism from its residents.[34] However, the rapid capitalization of estates and the increased impact of market forces that the Highlands witnessed in the eighteenth-century, Dodgshon contended, were not a part of this pattern of dynamism because the changes were linked instead to ideological changes amongst chiefs fostered by state-led initiatives begun in the Middle Ages.[35] The Scottish crown's crackdown on feuding, forced reduction of chiefs' households, and laws like the 1609 Statutes of Iona (which required chiefs to have their sons educated in Anglo-Protestant schools) hampered the paternalistic responsibilities of a clan chief and slashed the institutional framework of the clan system by the eighteenth century.[36] These developments, coupled with price hikes and population growth, primed clan chiefs to be more amenable to adopting Enlightened economic ideas and consequently commercialize their estates.[37]

Each of these books, it should be noted, utilized a broad array of Gaelic sources: Devine used the sources as evidence for a Gaelic evangelical revival in the eighteenth century, Macinnes used them to demonstrate how Gaels were "othered" by the state, and Dodgshon used Gaelic sources and social anthropology to craft an intricate explanation of the clanship system and how it operated through a system of exchange centred around feasting and feuding—which solved the problem of "describing a clan," which Hunter argued in 1976 "was not, and is not, easy."[38] Such demonstrations of the importance of using Gaelic sources to study the eighteenth-century Highlands, as well as a broader shift amongst academics towards writing histories which demonstrated how individuals, groups, or cultures *experienced* institutional developments, provoked a change in academic attitudes towards the usefulness of Gaelic sources. By the turn of

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[34] Robert A. Dodgshon, *From Chiefs to Landlords: Social and Economic Change in the Western Highlands & Islands*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 12-15.
[35] Dodgshon, *From Chiefs to Landlords*, 233.
[36] Dodgshon, 10-107, 113-115, 237.
[37] Dodgshon, 236-239.
[38] Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community*, 38.

the century, historians largely rejected the views of Eric Richards and J.M. Bumsted—who argued that Gaelic sources, especially poems, are unreliable because, according to Bumsted, Gaelic poetry "tended to hyperbole and exaggeration."[39] This was due, in no small part, to the work of Allan Macinnes in *Clanship, Commerce and the House of Stuart*, which demonstrated the importance of vernacular Gaelic poetry in ordering society (by bolstering or disgracing reputations), sustaining values, and communicating information throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[40]

This change in attitudes, in turn, provoked investigations into underexplored histories of the eighteenth-century Highlands. Andrew MacKillop's *More Fruitful than the Soil: Army, Empire and the Scottish Highlands, 1715-1815* (2000), for instance, used a combination of government documents, estate papers, Gaelic poetry, and tenant petitions and memorials in order to examine the neglected history of recruiting in the region in a way that, unlike regimental and military histories of the region which "tended to concentrate on the operational histories of their respective regiments, devoting only a few pages in the opening chapter to the actual process of obtaining men," considered the political, economic, and social reasons for recruiting and the impact of recruiting on Highland society and culture.[41] With *More Fruitful than the Soil*, MacKillop demonstrated how, in the eighteenth century, the 'Enlightened' belief in the 'natural' progression of society from feudal militarism to commercialism drew attention to the previously neglected Highlands as a place in need of 'improvement' and underpinned the eighteenth-century image of the Gaels in the eighteenth-century as a "hardy and industrious race, fit for serving the public in war."[42] This image, MacKillop contended, led to the creation of the crofting system; according to

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[39] Richards, *Emigration, Protest, Reasons*, 288; Bumsted, *The People's Clearance*, xiv.
[40] Macinnes, *Clanship, Commerce and the House of Stuart*, 19-21, 74, 349-352, 425.
[41] Andrew MacKillop, *More Fruitful Than the Soil: Army, Empire and the Scottish Highlands*, 1715-1815 (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2000), 23.
[42] MacKillop, *More Fruitful Than the Soil*, 175.

MacKillop, the state implemented crofts—which provided a tenant with enough land to subsist but not enough to make a profit—because it believed crofting would work to "civilize" the Highlands by replacing the traditional multi-tenant farms and promoting non-agricultural employment whilst still maintaining the "martial spirit" of the Gael and providing him with a land-base from which he could be mobilized for Britain's wars.[43] This link between the Enlightenment and the creation of the crofting system had been previously unexplored, not only because of James Hunter's predominating contention that crofting had developed gradually as a result of social, demographic, and economic pressures beginning in the 1790s, but also because few had investigated the eighteenth-century Highlands through the lens of military recruitment.[44]

Just as it took a refreshing take on the old subdiscipline of military history to draw the history of the eighteenth-century Highlands closer into the history of the Scottish Enlightenment, it was a relatively new subdiscipline, environmental history, that helped fully incorporate the Highlands into the history of the Enlightenment. Released in 2013 into an age dominated by environmental discourses and climate action, Fredrik Albritton Jonsson's *Enlightenment's Frontier: The Scottish Highlands and the Origins of Environmentalism* manages to connect the social history of the Highlands and the intellectual history of the Enlightenment by exploring how Europe's intellectuals idealized the Highlands as a "Canada at home"—a place of untapped, boundless opportunity that could serve as a "laboratory for the Enlightenment."[45] To illustrate this, Jonsson charts the work of several societies that adopted and implemented Enlightenment ideas into their practices, including the Select Society of Edinburgh, the British Fisheries Society, the Board of Annexed Estates, the British Wool Society, the Highland Society of Scotland, and the

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[43] MacKillop, 80-85.

[44] Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community*, 33.

[45] Fredrik Albritton Jonsson, *Enlightenment's Frontier: The Scottish Highlands and the Origins of Environmentalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 2, 29, 46.

Board of Agriculture.[46] As Jonsson noted, an intellectual debate about resource control between men like James Anderson, who sought to alleviate suffering in the Highlands and preserve Highland culture (to the military's benefit) by improving the region's self-sufficiency through the introduction of fishing villages, sheep breeds, and timber cultivation, and men like Adam Smith, who believed that the commercialization of the Highlands should go unimpeded—regardless of the effects on the inhabitants—underpinned the work of these societies and thus deeply impacted the changes taking place in the Highlands.[47]

Scholarship on the connection between the Scottish Highlands and the Enlightenment has expanded greatly since the mid-twentieth century, and so too has the scholarly vision of the eighteenth-century Highlands. Undoubtedly, the transformation of this vision is owed to the changing ways by which history is written. The earliest histories of the eighteenth-century Highlands, like those of Malcolm Gray and R.H. Campbell, were callous and seemingly unsympathetic, relying as they did largely on statistical data and numerical records. More recent works, such as MacKillop's *More Fruitful than the Soil*, combined estate records, Gaelic poetry, government documents, and statistics in order to demonstrate that the history of the Highlands was not wholly separate from the history of the rest of Scotland, that of the British Empire, or even that of Europe and its Enlightenment. Furthermore, as historians' values have changed, so too have their interests and their areas of research. The importance of personalities and ideologies in provoking change, for instance, is what led Eric Richards to develop a cogent connection between the Highlands and the Enlightenment, while Fredrik Albritton Jonsson's quest to study the environmentalism of the past in order to gain lessons for the future resulted in the first major work that explicitly studied the Highlands from the perspective of the Enlightenment — even featuring

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[46] Jonsson, *Enlightenment's Frontier*, 93-95.
[47] Jonsson, 3.

the intellectual movement in its title — and shows the region's link to developments in science, economics, politics, and ecology. With such a solid foundation of works on the topic, subsequent historians are well-equipped to further investigate the connection between the Scottish Highlands and the Enlightenment.

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