Preface

The moment that this book began can be clearly pinpointed. It was July 1992 and I was on a hiking holiday with a good friend in northern Scotland when we stumbled upon Loch an Alltan Fheàrna in Sutherland. The water table had fallen dramatically because of the unusual dry weather, exposing part of the lakebed. These conditions revealed the remains of tree trunks and stumps normally concealed by the water of the loch. It was clear evidence that once a massive forest had flourished at this location where no trees can be found today. My curiosity was awakened and I wanted to find out what had happened to these lost Scottish forests.

A couple of years later I spent six months in the Department of History at the University of Hull in England as part of a student exchange programme. It was here that I discussed the problem of the lost Scottish forests with Professor Donald Woodward, who advised me to contact Professor Chris Smout in St. Andrews if I wished to study Scottish woodland history. I followed this advice up and contacted Professor Smout, who invited me over for a discussion of what I wanted to do. My initial idea was to make a study of the ancient forests of Scotland but Professor Smout suggested I look at the recent past and to make a study of the Forestry Commission. It was this suggestion that put me on the course that would ultimately result in this book.

Most of the research for this book was undertaken at the University of Stirling in Scotland as part of my PhD studies. Initially the idea was to focus on the conflicts between the Forestry Commission and environmentalists over the creation of monoculture forestry plantations. Conservationists believed that forestry plantations were devastating the landscape and the surviving native woodlands. During the initial research and learning more about the Scottish environment and the background of British forestry policy it became clear that environmental factors were crucial in explaining the nature of modern forestry plantations. In addition, while interviewing retired foresters, it became clear that many of them disliked the monoculture plantations. They were quick to point out that these plantations were the only type of forest that would survive on the land available for forestry. In fact, it seemed that many foresters were very ecologically minded and that the narrative of narrow-minded foresters who only wanted to create monoculture plantations was too simplistic. What emerged was a story of discussion, self-doubt, experimentation and adaptation within the forestry community that was worth telling. That story highlighted that the appearance of modern Scottish forest plantations is not so much the result of the foresters’ lack of interest in nature conservation and landscape preservation but the social, economic and political pressures that underpinned
their creation as well as the Scottish physical environment. Although others have studied the Forestry Commission in Scotland, I hope that this book will contribute to a better understanding of Scotland’s forests by approaching the topic from a different perspective.

Many people have provided intellectual support for this project over the years and I would like to offer all of them my heartfelt thanks. I am particularly grateful to my mentors at the University of Stirling Fiona Watson and George Peden for their time, encouragement and critical comments that have shaped large parts of this book. I am also grateful to Chris Smout for his support and the many stimulating discussions we have had over the years. This book is very much inspired and shaped by these discussions and his work on Scottish forest history in general.

During my time at Stirling I was also fortunate to meet the late John Matthews\(^1\), emeritus Professor of Forestry at the University of Aberdeen, who taught me how to look at forests and woodlands and their development from a forester’s perspective. The meetings and field trips of the Native Woodland Discussion Group were equally inspiring and introduced me to the management problems of the native woodlands of Scotland. Equally important were the annual meetings of the Scottish Woodland History Discussion group that helped to place forests and forestry in an historical context that not only covered recent history but also the deep past.

I also would acknowledge with great pleasure the help provided by the following people: Michael Phillips and Graham Tuley for providing insights into Scottish forestry that cannot be found in books or archives and for a very pleasant and interesting afternoon on the Black Isle. Mrs. Diana Stewart of the APRS for sending me photocopies of early annual reports. The staff of the Forestry Commission Library at Alice Holt near Farnham for providing me with a full run of Forestry Commission annual reports between 1949 and 1980, John Dargavel of The Australian National University in Canberra for providing comments on Mark Anderson and forestry at the University of Edinburgh during the 1950s and for the many inspiring discussions we have had over the years. Michael Osborn for his kind permission to consult the archives of the Royal Scottish Forestry Society, and the staff of the Highland Council Archive who allowed me to consult the Novar Papers while in the process of being catalogued. Also, Hugh Insley, Andy Little and Douglas Clark for providing me with the names and addresses of retired foresters and officers of the Forestry Commission, and André Bontenbal for an unforgettable motorbike odyssey around Scotland that enabled me to interview some foresters in remote corners of the Highlands.

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\(^1\) Professor John D. Matthews passed away on 25 May 2005.
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A number of colleagues have read and commented on drafts of the book or individual chapters, have discussed the issues with me, and corrected the text. I am particularly indebted to the following individuals: John Dargavel and two anonymous referees for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this book. Richard Oram generously shared his knowledge of medieval and early modern texts related to forestry. Richard Tipping for commenting on the section that explores the deep history of the Scottish woodlands and for making sure that my use of technical terminology used in the first chapter is correct. James Beattie for reading and commenting on the introductory chapter, making sure that the book gets off on a good start and for correcting some other parts of the text. Cath Knight for bringing a fresh and critical outsider look to several chapters of the book. Jill Payne for the lightening fast reading and commenting on chapter four and ten and Gwenda Morgan for casting her eye over chapter three. Finally I would like to thank Erin Gill for finding some time in her busy schedule to critically read a draft chapter. As with any publication, the remaining faults of this book are entirely mine.

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Above all I want to thank my wife, Justine and the rest of my family who gave me loving encouragement and for their patience during the long process that it took to get this book finished. And last but not least I like to thank my father for his unconditional support over the years. It was his interest in history, science and technology that aroused my interest in the past and the world we live in. I hope that he will enjoy reading this book.

K. Jan Oosthoek
Brisbane
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