

## It's a sleeper hit

Review by IAN CAMPBELL

An Abridged History  
BY Andrew Drummond  
Polygon, £9.99

THIS IS A CLEVER BOOK. AND that is meant as a compliment to a historical novel that takes a what-if scenario (the unsuccessful proposal in the 1890s to build a railway from Garve to Ullapool) and makes a readable, often very funny, consistently interesting story of the building of a railway across hostile and midge-infested territory, through the eyes of its imaginary chief engineer, Alexander Auchmuty Seth Kininmonth. Like Stevenson's MacKellar in *The Master of Ballantrae*, Kininmonth as narrator is an original: pawky, prickly, a curious mixture of the practical and the helpless, vain, unsure of himself - a natural narrator for a grotesque scheme such as this, projecting an expensive line from one tiny station through uninhabited Highland bog with almost no traffic potential.

One interesting feature of the book is that it is not grotesque. The history of the railways of the Highlands is accurately picked up and reflected in Kininmonth's account, which traces the influence of remote landowners with tremendous power, the unwillingness of the promoters to listen to the professional engineers, the hopelessly optimistic estimates of progress and completion, the appalling territory alternating between solid rock and shifting bog, the need for extensive bridging of difficult waters, and the challenge of the weather.

Anyone familiar with the building of the lines to Strome Ferry and Kyle of Lochalsh, to Oban and Fort William, over the Slochd to Inverness and up to Wick and Thurso, will recognise that Andrew Drummond has done his homework. Reality was just as painfully slow as on this fantasy line to Ullapool. Indeed Drummond has pushed his researches further, into the short-lived branch lines near Tweedsmuir connected with reservoir construction, and into the tunnel from Scotland Street to Waverley Station in Edinburgh, which still exists - and which features in the narrative.

But the comic inventiveness of *An Abridged History* goes beyond this, to envisage an end-of-the-world cult which tries to make a new Utopia in Ullapool - "the Citadel of the Elect" - and fails miserably. The book swoops in and out of its narrator's experience, looking forward, picking up scraps of the past, with more than a touch of the *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* in its approach, a nod to Alasdair Gray, and a mischievous sense of humour in debunking people's ideas of the Highlands as Paradise. One trip to the latrine with Mr Kininmonth in a cloud of midges and clegs would cure the reader of that delusion.

The narrator's clumsy attempts at wooing the local women, his rather pathetic pride in his engineering accomplishments, his simple failure to match the combined malice of nature, the weather and his fellow human beings, makes for a richly comic story.

He makes good points, too: the Highland railways were built to open out the country and bring prosperity to an area of miserable poverty still depressed from wholesale clearance: if the Ullapool line had been built, it might have done that. There's a deft allusion to Edinburgh's current debate about railways and light railways. The story even swoops forward to 1954 to envision a Scotland - privatised railways still a nightmare in the future - with the Ullapool line built (finished 1895), double-tracked in 1911, and its average speed raised in 1912 to 76 miles per hour. By 1932, railways had reached Skye, the Highlands "traversed by huge clean locomotives driven by humming dynamos".

Fantasy indeed. From the sepia cover to the mock advertisements at the back of the book, the joke is carried out with style and the writing never falters, even when its subjects are at their most ridiculous.

This is a compact, clever fantasy on a Scotland which might have been but perhaps fortunately never was.

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