

Snow and midges

If Queen Victoria's primary contribution to nineteenth-century Scottish culture was a sentimental "Balmorality" view of the Highlands, then it is a contribution Andrew Drummond has taken great delight in demolishing. *The Abridged History* is his first work of fiction, an ambitiously planned and beautifully executed novel which punctures the over-inflated Victorian ambition that lay in the hearts of so many of Her Majesty's subjects, even those who were forced to spend a night sleeping under the stars. Sleeping rough is a common motif of the novel; scarcely a page goes by without a description of hard roads, cold sheds, dirty tunnel floors and empty barns. It is 1893, and our narrator is Alexander Auchmuty Kininmonth, a respectable, God-fearing railway engineer with grand schemes to build Scotland's greatest ever railway, the North-West line from Garve to Ullapool. It is surprising to

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Bluebell Books
9, Wimpole Street, London W1G 9SR
255p, 37 bl&wh. photographs.
Price £11.99 + £2.50 p&p

LESLEY MCDOWELL

Andrew Drummond

THE ABRIDGED HISTORY
326pp. Polygon. Paperback, £9.99.
1 904598 09 9

find him unprotected from the elements as often as he is. But there is a picaresque quality to his story that harks back to the generation before Victoria, to Smollett, Sterne and Fielding. A tendency to wander diverts Kininmonth's career plans from any clear path and into the highways and byways of wherever.

The plan of the Great North-West of Scotland Railway Company is doomed from the start, as anyone who has ever travelled the road from Garve to Ullapool would know. The workers are plagued by midges in summer ("if there is one creature calculated to turn the gentlest human being into a reckless destroyer of natural life it must be the Ross-shire Midge") and gales and snow in winter. Kininmonth records in his journal the agonizing slowness of the railway's progress as well as the poor living conditions; soon he is forced to live in an empty train carriage, frozen to the bone and lashed by the rain. His private thoughts, meanwhile, in spite of the difficulties around him, reflect his sense of his own importance (references to "other Men of Science" beside himself) and his ambition to be lauded by future generations as the greatest railway engineer who ever lived.

Sitting oddly beside this lack of modesty is a shyness with women and a naivety about the world in general which leads him into his first adventure when the Garve-Ullapool line is abandoned due to lack of funds (science has not defeated nature after all). Two workmen, James and John Finlay, are followers of an itinerant preacher, Mr Rinck, who has dreams of taking over Ullapool and creating a new "Citadel" there, dedicated to God. Kininmonth is drawn to these three after his disappointment with the railway company and he warms to the strange tale of the Finlays, whose recent ancestors were abandoned on an island off the coast of Australia by an unscrupulous ship's captain.

It is only one of the picaresque elements of this novel – soon, the Finlays, Rinck and Kininmonth will find themselves hiding out in a tunnel under Edinburgh's Waverley Station – but there is a political element to it too. Not only do we see the grimmer side of life in the Highlands, but we are made aware of the dangerous aspects of Scotland's great emigration during the nineteenth century. Andrew Drummond tells the Finlays' story with a touch of humour, but the risk that desperate families undertook in the search for a better life is emphasized by the plain language of their own account and set against the melodramatic reactions of our rather hapless narrator.

Kininmonth is an attractive creation, for all his faults, and soon he returns to Ullapool, where Rinck's religious plans are put into action. In a marvellous scene on the pier, Kininmonth, astride a runaway horse and having set fire to his clothes, is thrown into the sea; it is a comic moment worthy of anything by Smollett or Sterne.