

NIACE

THE NATIONAL ORGANISATION
FOR ADULT LEARNING

**Popular education
and
social
movements
in Scotland today**

Published by NIACE: The National Institute of Adult
Continuing Education, Leicester, 1999.

edited by Jim Crowther, Ian Martin and Mae Shaw

16 Liberation theology in Scottish community empowerment

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This chapter argues the case for a distinctively Scottish liberation theology. This is needed as urgently in many parts of Scotland today as it is among the exploited and oppressed peoples of Latin America and Africa. It is first necessary, however, to 'decolonise the soul' by distinguishing spirituality from hegemonic forms of institutionalised religion. In addition, historical analysis is required to expose the active collusion in Scotland's history between authoritarian religion and the growth of capitalist exploitation and expropriation. Reference is made to the successful campaign to return the Island of Eigg to community ownership in order to illustrate how a recovered and redeemed spirituality can, in the author's view, be part of the dynamic of empowerment in Scottish communities.

Betwixt torme and tawse

Over the past seven years my work in such areas as land reform, environmental protection and urban renewal has richly drawn on spiritual understandings of community empowerment for authentic human development. Bringing spirituality into popular education requires a little justification before proceeding to elaboration. In this paper I want to discuss some of the theory behind it and conclude with a practical example from the Isle of Eigg. My focus here is on Christian theology, mainly because the history and construction of Scottish communities, like the wider Western world, has been primarily Christian. However, I would not want this to detract from the importance of understanding other spiritualities, including shared understanding between established non-Christian faiths and newly recovered nature religions. These, however, go mostly beyond the scope of this chapter.

Because spirituality and religion overlap so much, many people confuse them. That is unfortunate because a lot of us in Scotland have suffered bad experiences of 'religion'. The very word can turn on the cringe factor. Too easily it brings to mind the fearsome school 'dominie' whose instruction was through tawse-armed domination as whole chapters of the Book of Daniel and chunks of the 1647 Westminster Shorter Catechism got belted into our memories. Most Scottish teachers were not like this, but enough were to taint the milk of youthful spiritual awareness. The spiritual abuse of children is like any other form of child abuse: it leaves traces, neurotic symptoms, which replicate themselves long after the original traumatic event has passed. These

can pass on down the generations. Such traces must be recognised and healed if we are to become capable of understanding authentic human and community development as being, at its fullest and most empowering, spiritual development.

In *The Final Cut*, their album about the Falklands and nuclear war, Pink Floyd graphically capture the mindset that cauterises the soul. They show how this creates a violated heart, surging with blocked emotion and impervious to its own capacity further to perpetuate violation of community. This is part of what psychotherapist Alice Miller calls 'soul murder'. In books like *For Your Own Good: The Origins of Violence in Child Rearing* (1983), she persuasively argues that much of British and Germanic culture has been emotionally crippled by a punitive 'poisonous pedagogy' that denies children their basic need for unconditional love. Where this has been perpetrated under the guise of 'religious instruction', it is important that we recognise it to have been a travesty of the teachings of Jesus, whose primary purpose was to communicate the 'good news' of cosmic unconditional love. The crippled croakings of the 'cold and religious' are, instead, a diluted successor of Old Testament passages that allow women's hands to be cut off in punishment, boys to be stoned to death for crimes like gluttony, genocide against one's enemies, and the sexual violation of women captured after battle and taken as 'booty' (see the Bible, *Deuteronomy* 20–25, *Numbers* 31 and *Judges* 21).

Too often Scottish Christianity has failed to distance itself from such 'Satanic verses' in the Bible. I believe this failing to be due to the degree to which organised religion in our nation (and elsewhere) retained, until very recently, a highly un-Christian condemnatory cutting edge. This had its origin in the use of religion for political control. Yet spiritual life does not have to be like that. We can find resplendent alternatives demonstrated, for instance, in the triple unit of community, nature and God that distinguishes Celtic spirituality. These derive from parts of Scotland – the far West – which remained substantially beyond the pale of that politicised spiritual manipulation which, elsewhere, inverted the cross to fashion a sword.

The birth of capitalism: spiritual and community strangulation

Political manipulation of the soul in Scotland has its roots in the extension of state control throughout the realm during the seventeenth century. Commencing with James VI and (especially in the Highlands) his 1609 Statutes of Iona, measures were introduced which advanced the Protestant religion, cultural and linguistic Anglicisation, and capitalism – particularly the transformation of clan chiefs into lairds or private landlords who then treated

the land not as the birthright of the extended clan family but as personal property to be rented and traded as a commodity. As in colonies around the world, evangelisation hand-in-hand with education was at the heart of this misappropriation that Paulo Freire calls 'cultural invasion'. Thus it was that in the Education Act of 1616, King James ordained that:

. . . the true [Protestant] religion be advanced and established in all parts of this kingdom, and that all his Majesty's subjects, especially the youth, be exercised and trained up in civility, godliness, knowledge and learning, that the vulgar English tongue be universally planted, and the Irish [Gaelic] language, which is one of the chief and principal causes of the continuance of barbarity and incivility among the inhabitants of the Isles and the Highlands, may be abolished and removed . . . [thus] in every parish . . . a school shall be established. (Meek, 1996)

James himself was a victim of early parental deprivation and abuse perpetrated by cruel uncles who brought him up after Elizabeth had executed his mother, Mary Queen of Scots. His policies for the Scottish Highlands and Ulster, as well as those he championed for inquisiting and burning 'witches', betray an understanding that to control the souls of individuals is to control the body politic of their communities.

The Swiss-based French theologian John Calvin (1509–64) unwittingly provided the perfect framework for religion to be twisted into underwriting the legitimacy of the newly emerging capitalism. First, Calvin provided an 'accommodation' that allowed for money to be loaned at interest, in contrast with the teachings of the medieval Catholic church; second, he asserted the doctrine of double-predestination. Today's Swiss banking industry stands as an enduring testimony to the consequences of the first. Those of the second are more subtle and complex. One of the Protestant reformer's great insights was that 'justification', the means of salvation, is by faith and not by such works as the buying of indulgences. However, his followers understood 'heaven' and 'hell' in caricatured, black and white ways, shaped by the fire and brimstone metaphor of the Book of Revelation. They grasped, in only too small a way, the significance of Christ's teaching on forgiveness. Their God was more as understood by Moses and Job than that of Jesus: he was transcendent, jealous, harshly 'loving' and otherworldly – a projection, perhaps, of the 'cold and religious' patriarchs themselves. They saw 'Him' in the absence of God's feminine face as revealed, for example, in *Proverbs* 8, where Sophia warns against the heresy of forgetting God's woman-wisdom nature by saying of Herself, 'Whoever finds me finds life . . . but those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death'.

Calvinism thus dealt in the 'double death' of both this world and Hell. 'Double predestination' would demarcate the 'chosen people' of the 'elect' from the 'damned' in a manner whereby it was pre-ordained who would go to

Heaven and who to Hell. Yes, justification is by faith – but, in Calvinism, that faith is God given. Thus Calvin surmised: ‘our salvation flows from God’s free mercy . . . freely offered to some while others are barred from access to it. Eternal life is foreordained for some, and eternal damnation for others’ (McGrath, 1995). Although modern Calvinists would say that Calvin’s thought can be understood in more complex and subtle ways, the popular effect on the Scottish psyche was to damage its noble objective of giving spiritual authority to the individual (as distinct from priests and bishops) and make for a religion that preys on fear, uncertainty and a self-righteous obsession with being ‘worthy’. As such, perfect conditions were created for breeding an authoritarianism of latter day Pharisees.

How did this spur the development of capitalism, both in Scotland and much of Protestant Europe? Sociologists like Max Weber have controversially suggested that such Reformation theologies created a ‘Protestant work ethic’. Those who prospered and had power believed that their success was the sign of being blessed by God. St Paul, after all, true to the conservative that he was, had stated that the ‘powers that be’ are there by the grace of God (*Romans* 13). To be in such manifest receipt of divine grace as to be prosperous and powerful therefore implied a good chance of being amongst the ‘elect’. Conversely, those who suffered were perhaps the wretched of the Earth – their human worth hopelessly undermined by sin.

Such theology is ‘victim blaming’ on a cosmic scale. The effect was to usurp the very life force of the poor and conform them to the creeds and greeds of the emerging modern capitalist economy. Under the 1712 Patronage Act, landlords gained the power to appoint clergy in the established church. Sycophantic Church of Scotland ministers could thereby be selected to persuade the people that their sufferings were due to their sin. This undercut resistance to the Highland Clearances and their earlier Lowland and Borders equivalent. The political consequences played straight into the hip pockets of the powers that be. A testimony to this hypothesis is scratched on the church windows of Glen Calvie. In 1845, 92 people, who had been evicted from their land, waited in the church yard for an emigrant ship to take them to America. The minister had given no succour. Scored into the church windows, some left their names, with a tragic little self-blaming inscription: ‘The people of Glen Calvie, the sinful generation’.

Many clergy resisted the attempts of the lords temporal to control the Lordship spiritual, especially those who in the 1843 ‘Disruption’ broke away to create the Free Church. But the Free Church’s need to assert narrowly strict scriptural legitimacy exposed it to the in-built psychological tendency for revolution to breed conservatism. Thus, the Rev Prof Donald MacLeod, a leading twentieth century Calvinist reformer in that church, says of Highland Presbyterianism: ‘I confess that it instilled a spirit of resignation which went far beyond Christian humility. I confess its guilty silence. Like the German

Christians under the Nazis, the clergy of the Highlands failed to open their mouths for the dumb. That is a guilt which I feel deeply.' (*Scotsman*, 24.05.95)

The Scottish Presbyterian churches of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, then, often portrayed this world as being deeply 'fallen'. The femininity of God, expressed through such figures as St Bride of the Isles, 'foster mother of Christ', paled to such insignificance that today, for instance, only a tiny handful of people on the Isle of Harris know that their island was once the heart of the parish of Kilbride, the church of Bride, and that the old Gaelic name for the Hebrides is *Innis Bhrighde*, the Isles of Bride. The consequence of having a rich tradition of spirituality suppressed in this way was to replace the excesses of an institutionally corrupt pre-Reformation Catholicism with a spiritual vacuum which, though in theory democratic and free, was open to abuse for the political colonisation of the soul of the people. An immanent ancient spirituality of *reverence* in this world was therefore damaged by a transcendent and life-displacing obsession with whether or not one would be 'saved in the next'. The church of a Jesus, who was tempted by the fruits of landlordism and insisted instead on justice for the poor and for the Earth (*Luke 4*), became enmeshed in institutional 'fall'. Only today are parts of it undergoing redemption.

Nowhere are the ambiguities of these aspects of the Scottish psyche captured with more influential and contemporary global relevance than in the thought of the Kirkcaldy born economist, Adam Smith, who is now claimed by both the political centre and the right. The 'invisible hand' of the market is Smith's secularised version of providence. Smith believed that self-interest both depended upon and would be to the benefit of the community. However, that community can be seen to have been, firstly, the *secular elect* of the ruling privileged class. The proof of this is in his 1776 masterwork *The Wealth of Nations* in which Smith was enthusiastic to justify slavery if it more efficiently served to concentrate wealth into the hands of the rich (see Smith, 1986).

Spirituality: the bedrock of community

Recognition of the need to decolonise the soul has led to fine work by people who found that soul was both all they possessed and everything they possessed when struggling for and with racial equality, women's rights, youth, the poor, ecology, housing, disability issues and in the peace movement (see Shields, 1991; Peavey, 1986; Macy, 1983; Hope *et al*, 1984). Behind many community activists is a strong, if silent, spirituality.

What, then, is spirituality? Whereas theology is concerned with the study of matters relating to God and religion is about the institutional expression of this, the word 'spirituality' has much less specific meanings that may not involve postulating 'God' at all. Some writers, like Paul Tillich, use 'spirituality' to mean our utmost or ultimate concerns. Others, like Walter Wink (1992), see

the spiritual as being the interior reality of outward forms such as persons, institutions and nations. For Wink, a spiritually engaged activism entails working to redeem the good but fallen nature of power in the world. This calls for a three-fold process of 'naming the powers' to find words with which to get a grip on them, 'unmasking the powers' to reveal how they oppress, then 'engaging the powers' to liberate their redeemed potential.

Here I shall use the word 'spirituality' to mean that which pertains to the nature, meaning and consequent articulation of our lives. Underlying this is inter-connectedness. It is about the expression of life abundant in all its meanings. It is becoming alive to the aliveness of life. It is the opposite of that inner death that comes from self-strangling selfishness and preoccupation with things morbid. It affirms a very here-and-now 'Heaven' and refutes the mindsets and behaviour that lead to a living 'Hell' – both being eternal in the present moment.

I often use the back of my hand as a metaphor for spiritual awareness. Normally we are only aware of ourselves as separate entities, like the nails on each finger. But as we enter into that wrestling-match engagement with love in the company of others – including all the 'bastards' of everyday encounters! – we move down the fingers and the psycho-spiritual distance between us reduces. Ultimately, the perspective of God consciousness is the view from the main body of the hand looking upwards. We can then see that each finger, each life, is part of the whole. We are, as *John 15* has it, all branches on the vine of life; 'members one of another' in the Body of Christ, as *Romans 12:5* says. To be syncretistic, we are all parts of the 'Body of Islam' expressions of the 'Buddha nature', offspring of the Goddess, or, as the Hindus say, *Tat tvam asi* ('That thou art'), meaning that individual soul (*Atman*) is ultimately at one with universal soul (*Brahman*).

Spirituality, then, is about what we most profoundly *are* together; it is about that deep poetic upwelling that our nation's bards have always understood and which is, quite simply, a matter of being and becoming ourselves. 'Justification' is by faith in the underlying goodness – redeemability – of what we have been fashioned to be by a God-cum-Goddess in whose image we are *both* male and female (*Genesis 1:27*). The doctrine of original sin can thus be seen to liberate, because it allows acceptance of the truth, as Gandhi put it, that 'all life entails violence' – and it invites a presumption of forgiveness, which is to say, deep *acceptance* of self and others *as we are*. But such a recognition of original sin must be counterpointed by an understanding of original blessing – a recognition that, as Gandhi also understood, we can minimise the violence that we personally exert in life. This is achieved by trusting one another to come into the empowerment of the goodness that also resides within us. Such letting go of various uptightnesses, our hang-ups and neurotic obsessions, frees the energy previously consumed by inner demons and demonisations. At the level of society, it transforms the cesspool of 'shit' from something that stinks into a rich compost that grows community.

This happens by a community starting, quite simply, to face reality and stop living the idolatry of its own or others' lies. To become more spiritual is to get more real; to recognise and abandon, progressively, the onion layers of inauthentic living wrapped round us by dysfunctional childrearing, education for regimentation, industrial workplace behaviour modification, TV and advertising mores, and so on. Spiritual teachers capable of bridging East and West, like Kahlil Gibran and Anthony de Mello, point out that spirituality is simply about *presence*. It is about becoming fully aware of the 'sacrament of the present moment' as we walk, breathe and eat the fruits of nature's providence – sharing our human nature in community with others and with that community of the Earth by which we comprise a human ecology (see de Mello, 1994). It is about an economics of considering the lilies (*Matthew 7:28*), which is to say, trusting to the possibility of creating a pattern of community inter-relationships – social and ecological justice – that can connect us with a providential sense of grace and blessedness. This implies much more than any abstract, heady obedience to commandments on tablets of stone. We are divinely interconnected, like islands appearing above the sea. This makes mutual reverence the foundation rock of community, and love the mortar that builds upon it.

Liberation theology and the spirituality of community development

To place the spiritual at the centre of a concern, motivation and methodology for 'community development', 'sustainable development', 'third-world development', 'economic development', 'child development', or any other kind of 'development', may at first seem audacious. But perhaps it is not so when we look at what 'development' actually means.

'Development' is an abused word which, in our society, has come to be virtually synonymous with capitalist economic growth. However, the etymology derives from *de* (to undo) and the Old French *voloper* (to envelop, as in our word 'envelope'). To *develop* is therefore 'to unfold, to unroll, to unfurl'. The biological application, as in 'foetal development', accurately captures correct usage. Here the foetus develops in right relationship with its environment of the womb and the wider world that the parents move in. We can also see from this that *too little* development implies stunted growth – a condition of the poor; development in the *wrong place* means deformity – inequitable wealth distribution; and development *without limits* is a cancer that extracts life from the rest of the body or the planet.

Properly used, then, 'development' means 'a gradual unfolding; a fuller working out of the details of anything; growth from within'. Community development should therefore be about enabling a community to become more fully itself. Development ought, therefore, to be spirituality expressed socially.

Because spirituality is about becoming ourselves, I argue that the recovery of spirituality is central to authentic community development. From time to time there have been forerunners of this in history. These include the radical politics of the Diggers, Levellers, Ranters and early Quakers in seventeenth century England (Hill, 1994) as well as the Scottish Highland nineteenth century land reformers who achieved the 1886 Crofting Act (Hunter, 1976). The discovery that God had been misrepresented, and the 'good news' that 'he' is actually on the side of the poor lend legitimacy to aspirations for social and ecological justice. From legitimacy comes claim of right and, thus, the first step towards empowerment. In this respect, the liberation theology that I am about to describe has directly influenced people and processes leading to the re-establishment of our Scottish Parliament (see Mackie, 1995). It is a methodology of no small consequence.

Most modern liberation theology traces its roots to the post-Vatican II theology of Latin American priests who worked amongst the landless and urban poor, like Gustavo Gutierrez. Gutierrez was himself partly inspired by the educational work of the late Paulo Freire. Freire worked for part of his career with the World Council of Churches and, personally, I would see his work as expressing a theology of liberation in secular language (see Freire, 1972). Freire uses the word 'conscientisation' as a socially engaged expression of what, in spiritual reflection, is called 'presence'. Conscientisation is the process of becoming aware of the circumstances that cause oppression. This invites action, which is then further reflected upon. The continuous process of action and reflection is known as 'praxis'. Conscientisation therefore entails the sense of both consciousness (the *presence* that is reflective awareness) and conscience (the *presence* that spurs to action).

To subvert and transform attack by the often powerful 'cold and religious', it is useful to describe liberation theology from an impeccably scriptural perspective. To minimise any cringe factor I shall keep this down to as few textual references as possible. I also wish to reassert that most of what is said here is not exclusive to Christianity: it can be universally inclusive, as was Jesus' intention. Gutierrez (1974) defines 'to liberate' as 'to give life'. Jesus said we should be living not just any old life, but life abundant (*John* 10:10). This is not some transcendent pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die promise of deferred gratification, but a very practical concern. It starts with such outward necessities as having 'daily bread' (*Matthew* 6:11) in a this-worldly immanent realm of God that is 'all around' or 'within' (*Luke* 17:21), and from there it develops an inner life of living from more than just 'bread alone' (*Matthew* 4:4). But the sequence is important: before preaching, Jesus liked to see that the people were fed (*Mark* 8).

In launching his ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus placed primary emphasis on social and ecological justice (*Luke* 4:18–19). He did this by taking a reading from *Isaiah* 61, thereby linking Old Testament prophecy to

his mission. Consistent with the insight that 'God is love' (I *John* 4:8) and concerned not with self-interested tribalism but with the 'healing of the nations' (*Revelation* 22:2), Jesus' reading is intriguingly selective. I find it telling that he proclaims good news for the poor, liberty to captives, healing of the blind, freedom for the oppressed and, rather pleasingly in the King James version, succour for the broken hearted: but he misses out what Isaiah also said about enjoying the wealth of the nations and having the 'sons of the alien' placed in subservient service (*Isaiah* 61:5–6). That is, he omits the un-right-on bits, choosing instead to highlight what liberationists call 'God's preferential option for the poor' (as in *Luke* 6 and *Amos* 5).

The ecological, land rights and economic dimensions of Jesus' ministry, are incorporated where he concludes his *Luke* 4 'mission statement' by proclaiming, in verse 19, something translatable as the 'acceptable year of the Lord'. This refers to the 'Jubilee' cycle of seven and fifty years of *Leviticus* 25, which makes provision for the periodic returning of the land to a state of nature, redistributing the land so that it is not owned in perpetuity by anyone except God, and the cancellation of debts.

Liberation theology, in addition, understands God as being revealed through history. Not only does this free us from narrowly tribal constructs of God as expressed in barbaric parts of the Bible, it also affirms the importance of people understanding their place in human history. From this it derives a special concern to 'contextualise' biblical material in contemporary people's everyday lives. Thus, for example, the twentieth century 'Mothers of the Disappeared,' whose children were killed by the Argentinean junta, have been identified with the women who were powerless to do anything but bring their powerful presences to Jesus' cross. In such witness, brutal power lies named and unmasked – and so ready for later engagement.

The Isle of Eigg Trust: a case study in liberation

In my own community empowerment work I have applied aspects of liberation theology using a triple approach that I call Re-membering, Re-visioning and Re-claiming. I have used it, I think to modest effect, in urban contexts like Glasgow and in opposing the proposed superquarry on the Isle of Harris. Here I shall briefly use reform of the Scottish feudal land tenure system as an example.

In 1991 I was asked by a Scoraig crofter, Tom Forsyth, to become one of the founding trustees of the Isle of Eigg Trust. A process was started which, in 1997, led to the people of Eigg successfully bringing their land into community ownership after seven generations of landlordism. There are many reasons why Eigg succeeded, most of which had little to do with our influence. But what I think was very important initially was the emphasis we laid on Re-membering history. This was done in speeches, publications and through the wider mass media. We often integrated theological references to enhance

legitimacy, encourage reflection and aid discernment. For instance, on 25 October 1991 I gave an address on Eigg which resulted in a 73 per cent vote of confidence in our work being given in secret ballot by the community. At that time many did not feel free openly to air their support from fear of their laird. This speech (McIntosh, 1992) was widely circulated and it contains the phrase: ‘Can we, as in the words communicated by Moses, “proclaim the liberation of all the inhabitants of the land . . . a jubilee for you; each of you will return to his ancestral home. Land must not be sold in perpetuity, for the land belongs to me” (*Leviticus 25*)?’ In other words, I was trying, as has been done in Africa and Latin America, to create resonance with a deeper historical religious theme by linking the history of Eigg with that of the Exodus. The relevance of this puzzled many, but was poignant to some – especially the influential elderly.

Opening out history has the effect of freeing up blocked cultural energy. The effect is what I sometimes call cultural psychotherapy. Just as a traumatised individual can be helped on by remembering the original trauma, so a traumatised community can start to understand its dysfunctions if it can understand what made it the way it is. This was demonstrated brilliantly on Eigg one day when, charged with being an irresponsible community by their laird, a woman replied: ‘We have never had the chance to show that we can be responsible’.

But Re-remembering, rebuilding the ‘member’ or body of a community, generates only anger, disappointment and frustration unless there is also a vision around which it can galvanise. What made Eigg happen at the end of the day was not so much opposition to the laird and his antics – like his attempting to evict 12 per cent of the island’s population for no obvious reason – as Re-visioning. That vision was one of community: community with one another, with place or nature, and – for a few residents – with God. It was a Celtic spiritual vision and one that, as far as non-native incomers were concerned, saw belongingness redefined in accordance with the old Gaelic proverb that ‘the bonds of milk’ (ie nurture and fostership) are stronger than the bonds of blood (ie genetic lineage). When Keith Schellenberg, the laird, tried to whip up racist sentiment, virtually every indigenous household signed an open letter to say how much they resented such divisive tactics. The status of ‘belonging’ to a place thereby became less a matter of where a person was from as of how willing they were to cherish and be cherished by that place and its peoples.

The vision of a regenerated human ecology on Eigg went deeper than the mere grassroots – which is so often about TV culture, beer and spectator sport. It went right to the taproots of cultural values and spiritual belief. This showed, for instance, in young people starting to learn from their elders Gaelic place name meanings. It showed in women’s empowerment and interest in old legends about the ‘big women’ and ‘holy women’ of Eigg. And I remember, to take a rather pious example, being present as a small group of island women prayed in

their church, not for the success of the Isle of Eigg Trust as such, but for the 'right thing' to happen. That is, they put their faith in a process that was higher than any merely 'political' aspirations.

The fact that Eigg did finally 'happen' was a Re-claiming. Re-claiming involves the hard work of consensus building, managing the media, fundraising, politicking, recognising and reconciling conflict, and all the elements it takes to learn anew how to become fully a community. Many of the people doing this were not in the least overtly 'religious', yet I do believe there was a strong spirituality present as ordinary people developed extraordinary capabilities.

There are many who might think that the only theology involved was when three clergy from differing denominations jointly blessed the 12 June takeover celebrations at the second of the newly erected standing stones on Eigg. Others might say that the most inspired piece of 'ministry' was when the Scottish Office minister, Brian Wilson, stood in a marquee erected on the former laird's tennis court and declared 'game, set and match to the people of Eigg'. And still others might quip that the most valuable spirit on Eigg came out of the barrel of Talisker gifted from Skye. There is, of course, spirit and there is Spirit. In ways deeper than I can tell in a short piece like this, I believe that both were at work here – and I would certainly be recommending the Talisker too!

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