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Photograph: Damian Shields

AN ISLAND BEACON

On April 4, 1997 an 'island broker' informed the Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust that their offer to buy the land had been accepted. Alastair McIntosh recalls 25 years of 'The People's Republic of Eigg' and how it lit a fire under land reform in Scotland

IT was 1991, and the phone went in my office at the Centre for Human Ecology, then in Edinburgh University. John Harvey the leader of the Iona Community said that he was sending a crofter Tom Forsyth through to see me. "Give him some time," he said. "He's not a crank. He's not got any money, but has a vision to set up a trust to buy Eigg."

Tom arrived, a white-haired, bearded, prophetic figure who had done much to regenerate the Scoraig peninsula. He'd trained in silviculture at Edinburgh's Botanic Garden, and he likened the regeneration of human community to grafting new shoots to the living cambium of old growth from the taproot.

Eigg's playboy owner, its laird Keith Schellenberg, had said he liked to keep the island's "slightly rundown ... Hebridean feel". It sounds romantic, but a 1988 study by Shelter had found that two-thirds of the community lived in sub-standard housing, most had severe damp, some had no water supply, and no mains electricity. Under successive waves of landlordism, the population had fallen to just 60 from several hundred before the Highland Clearances.

To cut a long story short, in the summer of 1991 four of us established The Isle of Eigg Trust – Tom and me, Bob Harris a Lochwinnoch sheep farmer and community councillor, and for a short time, the artist Liz Lyon. We aimed to bring the island into ownership for the community. We were, as our critics rightly said, "a penniless trust". But symbolically, here was a Sword of Damocles hanging over landed power, a claim of right to what had once been taken from the people. It was ridiculous, yet perhaps "a trust in waiting".

I was not long back from four years in Papua New Guinea, involved with such village-based appropriate technologies as portable sawmills and small hydro systems. There, people say "land is life". They were incredulous that, in Scotland, most folks have none. The newly independent nation's constitution was shaped by liberation theology, theology that liberates theology to liberate humankind. It stressed empowerment, declaring the first goal to be "integral human development" by which every man and woman could be "... dynamically involved in the process of freeing himself or herself from every form of domination or oppression so that each ... will have the opportunity to develop as a whole person in relationship with others".

If such a heady vision was good for Pacific islanders, what about Hebridean ones? What about a re-emergent Scotland that, under Thatcherism, was fast rethinking its constitutional status and on the path to devolution, and even independence? The poet Hugh MacDiarmid described Eigg as "profuse with the little white Rose of Scotland", the one that smells so sharp and sweet and breaks the heart. Could something come to pass on Eigg to influence a nation? It seemed unlikely from a taproot so shaved down.

The islanders said that Eigg's stagnation wasn't that they lacked initiative. They'd just been worn down by the constant thwarting of a laird who welcomed neither change nor challenge. They couldn't openly support us, but we had the tacit blessing of key gatekeepers. On that slender basis, we drew up a manifesto that nodded to new homesteads, secure tenancies, renewable energy, woodland regeneration and cooperative businesses. The auld laird's Italianate lodge would become a Life Centre "to teach practical and craft skills to people seeking

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The Diary of Rupert St John-Fontaine (adviser at the Department of Social Affairs)

Gulf crisis as missing CalMac ferries are discovered and scuttled

MONDAY

THE discovery last week about the two missing CalMac ferries threatens to turn an embarrassment into a crisis. The two ferries, now five years behind schedule and almost three times over budget, have not been seen since the end of last year.

What's worse is that grainy footage exists of the two cursed ships lying offshore in the United Arab Emirates where they appear to have been turned into floating pleasure palaces. "How do we know they're actually our two Port Glasgow ferries," I ask Jenny Gilruth, the Transport Minister. "There's some graffiti on the starboard side which reads "Andy Ritchie is the King of Greenock," she replies. This seems to be a reference to a local football legend who played for Greenock Morton in the late 1970s. Which seems to be around the time when these two damnable ships started to be built.

It seems that a member of the United Arab Emirates royal family bought them as a job lot and had them converted into living quarters for several of his wives. I now face a race against time to spin the story in our favour. But in the meantime I must once more ask Colonel Yuri and his team for a final favour.

The Ukrainian former Spetsnaz Black Ops team have already proved invaluable in making some problems disappear. I befriended them at a Spectator bash a few years ago when I was an adviser at the UK Department of Social Affairs. In return for a couple of Scottish Government contracts in the wild west of the Edinburgh construction sector they dealt rather efficiently with Peter Murrell's Irish mafia kidnappers and the top civil servant who was threatening to expose Murdo Fraser as a Nationalist sleeper.

TUESDAY

I MEET Yuri and his two associates at one of the massage parlours they purchased around Edinburgh's Scotland Street on the proceeds of the Murrell job. Understandably, I was initially hesitant at their choice of rendezvous, given the historic connotations of the relaxation industry in these parts.

Yuri swears to me though, on the memory of the Black Virgin of the Caucasus, that he runs these facilities in a very morally upstanding manner. "Our executive stress advisers only offer zey're special relaxation services to selected clientele who have to prove zat zey are unmarried and have official doctor's certificate. Vich, ov course, ve can provide for a further consideration."

"Look Yuri," I tell him quietly. "We have a problem with two missing ferries which have ended up in the Persian Gulf. I don't quite know how they got there but, not to put too fine a point on it old chap, we need to make them disappear and rapidamente."

"Ah, Rupertski, Rupertski, do not vurry, you hav come to right people. My team ver highly-trained operatives in old Soviet Special Boat squadron and hav made bigger ships zan zese vuns disappear.

"Hey, Boris, you remember zat nuclear submarine zose rascally Iranian ayatollahs procured in 1984? Do not vurry about your missing ferries, by tomorrow evening zey vil go to zeyre final resting-place in the locker-room ov Davidski Jones.

"And in return perhaps your fine Scottish Top Minister, Nicolashka might look favourably on our bid for planning permission vor a luxury leadership and casino centre vith health spa and cabaret at the top ov your Calton Hill. Your esteemed and very fine Mr Tomaski Hunter is one ov our silent partners."

WEDNESDAY

I SPEND a very nervous day waiting for news of Colonel Yuri's operation in the Persian Gulf to scuttle the two stolen CalMac ferries. Finally, at just before midnight I receive the signal that the two vessels have been sunk and that no trace that they were even made in Port Glasgow exists.

Now, all I have to do is provide a suitable cover story for the press hounds. I immediately call Jenny Gilruth and advise her of my plan.

THURSDAY

THE Minister appears at a hastily-convened press conference to shut down all the rumours about the whereabouts of the CalMac ferries.

"After a thorough investigation involving our friends in the UAE we can refute all reports that the two ferries had been procured by them and turned into floating beauty parlours. Construction of these two vessels continues at Port Glasgow and we expect delivery of them in due course, despite delays caused by Covid-19; the Ukrainian crisis; rising fuel costs and the shortage of vital materials for the ships' navigation system. This was entirely due to the delay caused by the Ever Given cargo ship being stranded in the Suez Canal last year."

All I need now is to locate a couple of near-complete ferries and organise a professional paint job. I make a call to an old friend in the San Francisco Bay Area who has good contacts in the US Teamsters Union.

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some sense of balance in urban life"; a place where "bank managers would enrol to learn dry-stone dyking, admen would shear sheep, and lawyers muck out the byre".

It was Liz's brainwave to launch the trust on July 23 1991 in the Balmoral Hotel, right at the heart of what was then Edinburgh's journalistic nerve centre. Schellenberg was under a court order to sell.

He wrote: "I appreciate a lot of your 'woolly' sentiments'," duly accepted our invitation to turn up on the day, and promptly stole the show.

The media had little interest in our vision, though the West Highland Free Press did run a rather splendid cartoon of lawyers mucking out the byre. What they wanted was Schellenberg's take on such insubordination. So it was that the Daily Telegraph harumphed on about a group who "admit they would like to see the law on land ownership changed and *the concept of landlords abolished*".

Even The Observer was verging on the dismissive, and the TV coverage, bland and minimalist.

But Schellenberg had a sense of fun. He liked a sporting event provided that he won, and so he invited us to lunch, "in anticipation of you lot paying me a lot of money".

It was said he hoped to get £3 million. Fat chance of that from such a raggle-taggle people's revolutionary front of "drop-outs" playing "pure soap opera". For "Schelly", it was pass-the-popcorn time.

Far left: Bob Harris, Tom Forsyth, Alastair McIntosh and Liz Lyon at the launch of the Eigg Trust. Alastair with Eigg residents and driving forces behind the bid to buy the island, Camille Dressler and Maggie Fyffe, above. Former owner Keith Schellenberg in front of the Lodge, left

BUT if we were the revolutionary front, where were the people? The weeks that followed showed we'd opened up a crack in landlordism's shell. Schellenberg and other lairds were getting challenged to justify themselves. We were "a gadfly" as Tom called it, an irritation. They say that silence is the voice of complicity and our theatrical posturing – for that is all it was initially – was nevertheless challenging their mesmeric spell of consent.

What we still lacked, however, was Eigg's explicit mandate. That couldn't carry on. In October 1991, three months after the Edinburgh launch, we therefore held a public meeting. Everybody and their kids and dogs packed into the island's tea room. I spoke for the trustees, drawing legitimation from liberation theology and Paulo Freire of Brazil's "conscientisation", a process of raising consciousness through critical awareness.

The task was threefold. To remember what has been dismembered. To revision what our communities could be. And to re-claim what is needed to bring it about.

"Here is the vision we place before you tonight," the address concluded. That Eigg "could become a turning point in Scottish land ownership.... A place where these children playing around us now can more readily unfold lives which find wealth in the richness of human relationships, through the land and sea, in self-directed work and local self-determination, in songs of the old tongue, and in all that can derive from assuming full responsibility for community growth".

What might a future visitor hear from island children? That Eigg was owned by a German magnate, an English pop star, or a Saudi oil sheik? Or might they hear that it is owned by "us ... held in trust for people and nature"?

As we left the tea room, one of the oldest indigenous women walked up, looked me straight in the eyes, and said: "Just help us to get rid of that man."

The following day, a fisherman living in a caravan handed us £100 in cash, saying: "This is so that what you're doing might work out. Me and others like me need it to work out." But we weren't to tell. He had boat moorings and access to think about. "If Schelly finds out I gave you this, he'll make my life impossible."

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> *We've never had the chance to prove we were responsible people; we've never had the chance*

We offered the island power of veto over all our future decisions and to wind up if they didn't want us. The following week, the Residents' Association held a secret ballot. On a 100% turnout, the islanders voted 73% in favour of the trust. Like with retrospective planning permission, we'd got our explicit mandate.

THE next step was fully to democratise the trust. More and more, folks were finding their voices openly. Visiting journalists helped with their seasoned bullshit detectors and, often, a sharp eye for the underdog.

The London press would send someone in to do a hatchet job, briefed to tackle "a little spot of bother up-country". But the only place to stay was with the natives! And after being invited to the pow-wow, they'd go home and land the hatchet not quite where the editor had expected.

In February 1994, Lesley Riddoch ran a Speaking Out radio show from the island. She told me it was "the most difficult bit of radio I'd ever done". The turning point, was when Schellenberg got up and accused the assembled of never having been responsible.

Maggie Fyffe, soon to become the trust secretary, answered back: "In the past we've never had the chance to prove we were responsible people; we've never had the chance to do it."

Tom, Bob and I went back to Eigg in the early summer. We suggested we should now stand down as trustees and they hold elections. But as the meeting got underway, a woman disclosed that Shellenberg had called her up the night before. She was to tell them that if they had anything more to do with "that trust", he'd refuse consent for the old folks' sheltered housing.

By now, a wider sea change was taking place. In 1992 the Assynt Crofters Trust had been set up and quickly got their land. Eigg invited one of its leading lights, Alan Macrae, to come over and advise. "Go for gold!" he said; later adding: "It's not widely realised that Assynt got its inspiration from Eigg. That was the seed."

And the old folks' sheltered housing? They were consulted, and to paraphrase their answer: "Go for gold!"

The Isle of Eigg

Eigg lies 10 miles off the west coast of Scotland. It is a small island measuring only five miles by three miles but has abundant wildlife and history.

On the eve of the buyout in 1997 it was home to around 60 people. Today the population is around 110, with many who were children at the time having returned to the island to bring up their own new generation of Eigeach.

Of the eight new elected trustees, all but me and Lesley were local residents. We'd been explicitly invited to stand. Schellenberg's mood was shifting from avuncular to belligerent. This was now the French Revolution, "a communist and childish takeover" of "layabout publicity seekers" who got their ideas from "acid rock parties" and rolling their own cigarettes.

In October 1994, his lawyer served eviction notices on two island homes, comprising 12% of the population including the largest indigenous family. It was a Saturday, before the internet, and we had a trust meeting with no boat back until the Monday. Lesley, the journalist Maxwell MacLeod and I clubbed together £160 and hired a fishing boat. We got film off the island to the news desks, and on the Monday morning Eigg's latter-day Clearances were headline news in The Herald and Scotsman.

At last, the long-awaited surfers' wave had risen. The residents, in control and on a roll, launched Eigg's fundraising campaign, Let's Crack It! But £3 million for a target? We went for £15,000. That would be our opening offer. That was what was paid to Clanranald in 1828, when Eigg got ripped out of clan ownership to pay off gambling debts.

In 1995, Schellenberg sold the Isle of Eigg to Professor Maruma, a mysterious German "fire artist" who turned out to be a front for a consortium of holiday timeshare investors. Well, that could be Eigg Games! All along, our strategy was market spoiling. The natives were restless! Who'd want to buy? Eigg's consortium was sitting on a stranded asset.

Come 1997, and The Guardian was quoting the Scottish Office that for Scotland, "land reform has the potential to be the most radical issue, other than devolution".

A front-bench politician later told me that if pressed "to explain what it's all about", she pointed them to Eigg. Land reform had become a driving cause for devolution, for the legislation to be passed in 2004 would never have got through Westminster's House of Lairds.

A newly constituted Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust was set up, this a charitable company with limited liability. It enabled Highland Council and the Scottish Wildlife Trust to be partners with the residents. Let's Crack It! raised £600,000 from an incredible 10,000 donations. One day, a solicitor's letter came to me in Edinburgh. I passed it on to Maggie Fyffe; and to this day, she's the only one who knows the identity of the Mystery Woman ... who gave a further million.

TODAY, Eigg's population has doubled. New homes are being built to tackle a housing shortage, and some older ones upgraded to ecological standards. A plethora of small businesses thrive. Folks once unemployed are tax-payers. Residents are protected from energy price hikes while being almost exempt from bad domestic carbon karma, because they buy electricity from their self-managed "national grid" of hydro, wind and solar.

And across Scotland, there are over 400 land trusts, not one of which (to the best of my knowledge) has yet gone bust.

Eigg shows you might not live entirely from the land, but if you have the chance of living with the land, you get that "opportunity to develop as a whole person in relationship with others". The cambium joins up new shoots to the branch. From deep in the soil, deeper even than the grassroots, the taproot feeds new life.

"Stands Scotland where it did?" asked Shakespeare. No longer! In 2017, I was asked to write a foreword for Eigg's 20th-anniversary brochure. I thought back to those children at that first meeting in the tea room. And on the back cover, the editors had written: "The current island directors on the Trust were all children at the time of the buyout."

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