



URRAS DUAR CHAIS EIGEAN EIBÉ

20 years
(& counting) OF THE ISLE OF EIBÉ
HERITAGE TRUST

Foreword

IT was the evening of 25 October 1991. 36 Eigg residents, plus a gaggle of lively children, had packed into the unheated tearoom. We were there to give account of ourselves and it was the hardest speech I'd ever had to make.

Just three months previously, four of us had brazenly launched The Isle of Eigg Trust. The driving visionary was Tom Forsyth, a Scoraig crofter. He'd raised the legal fees by doing drystone dyking work across the land, sometimes sleeping rough in ditches. There was also Bob Harris, a Lochwinnoch sheep farmer. Liz Lyon, an artist, who stood down shortly after the trust was launched, and me, a lecturer in human ecology who'd learned about community empowerment growing up on Lewis and in Papua New Guinea.

We'd held the launch not on Eigg, but in Edinburgh's Balmoral Hotel. Not least, to ensure a house packed with journalists. The Daily Telegraph growled that we would actually "like to see the law on land ownership changed and the concept of landlords abolished". Cartoonists had a field day. After all, the trust's manifesto envisioned renewable energy, tenant-run housing and the laird's Italianate lodge being turned over to "a Life Centre ... where bank managers would enrol to learn dry-stone dyking, admin would shear sheep, and lawyers muck out the byre".

These were days of bleak cynicism. It was only just the end of Margaret Thatcher's reign. Land was for speculators, not communities. The residents of Eigg were feudal tenants to the laird, Keith Schellenberg. What we did in the tearoom that night, was to air a vision that, "when a future visitor asks your children who owns Eigg, they will reply, not a German factory magnate, English pop star, Saudi oil sheik or any other 'laird'; but simply, Us – held in trust for people and nature".

Amidst ample doubts and misgivings, the Eigg Residents' Association held a secret ballot. Our early consultations had been behind closed doors. Could they now openly back us, or should we shut up shop? Thirty-five of the 48 members gave the thumbs up, a 73% endorsement, and already the ripples were spreading. As the Assynt crofters leader Alan MacRae remarked at Eigg's 1997 celebrations, "It's not widely realised that Assynt got its inspiration from Eigg. That was the seed".

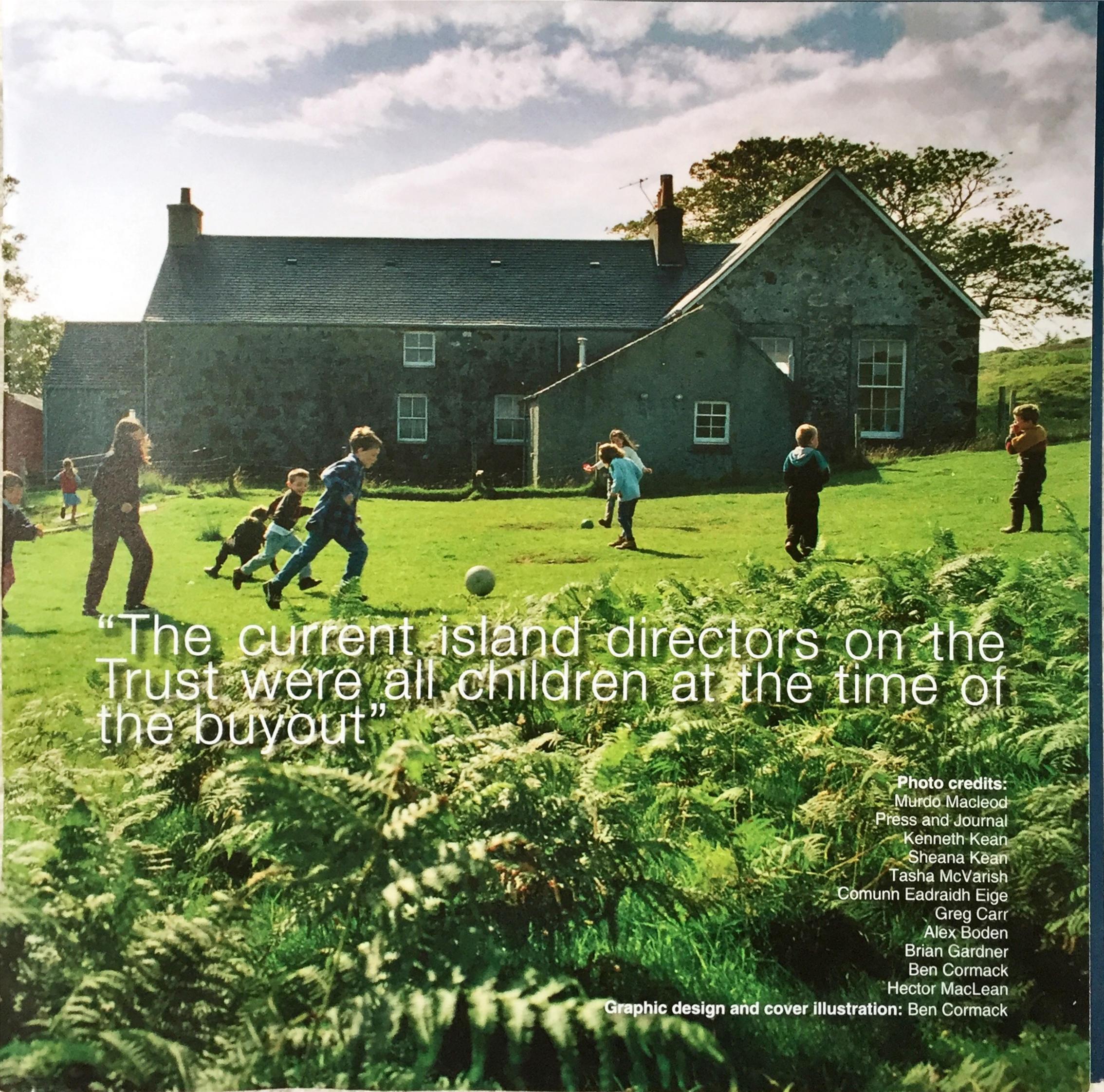
In February 1994, Lesley Riddoch took her BBC Speaking Out programme to Eigg. When Schellenberg said the islanders didn't know how to be responsible, Maggie Fyffe shouted back: "We've never had the chance to prove we were responsible." Community land tenure means learning how to be a community.

That summer, the islanders took over full control of the Trust and held elections to the board. Schellenberg retaliated with eviction letters, but that was grist to the mill. Eigg passed to Maruma, the spoof “fire artist”, and with a hole knocked in the value, because the natives were restless, the Trust raised £1.6 million. The new Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust was formed to incorporate the Scottish Wildlife Trust and Highland Council as partners, and the rest is history.

The people of Eigg have vastly exceeded the frail hopes we ventured in that early manifesto. They have created a pattern and example for how to live as a community of place, a beacon to the world. As for that gaggle of children, now with babes in arms, just go and ask them who now owns Eigg.

Alastair McIntosh, writer and activist





“The current island directors on the Trust were all children at the time of the buyout”

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