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### The Assynt Crofters' Trust

25th Anniversary Keynote Address

Alastair McIntosh, Stoer, 2 July 2018

Thank you, John Mackenzie, for your introduction, for it is in large measure your vision of more than a quarter of a century ago that brings us here today.

When the crofters' buyout happened 25 years ago the previous owner - Lord Edmund Hoyle Vestey, who'd sold on to a bankrupt Swedish investment company - remarked, "An interesting experiment – let's see."

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- Well, I got on to Companies' House, and looked at the Assynt Crofters' Trust accounts before coming here. It's been an interesting experiment, indeed.

Or use our contact form.

Far from running things into the sand, you've built up healthy foundation of reserves, and in 2016 alone, your Assynt Hydro on Loch Poll made £40,000.

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I hear it locally described not as the Assynt Hydro, but as "John's Hydro." Like it's "Calum's Road" on Raasay.

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For these are communities that have respect for folks.

In that manner, I want to honour my school classmate in Stornoway, the recently deceased Simon Fraser. He was also the legal brain behind your trust and the Eigg Trust.

Simon's father, Alasdair or "Doc Fraser" as we called him, was perhaps the first person who opened my eyes to the Highland Clearances.

He loved the Isle of Mull, and in our science classes at the Nicolson Institute, he'd tell us how the greed of landlordism had been ruthless to the glens of native people.

Note, that was in the science class. It was extra-curricular. When I asked another of our teachers why that was so, he said: "You see, it was not in the curriculum. And in any case, we were ashamed of it."

Because to colonise the land, the agents of the landed classes had to colonise the soul. They had to take power outwardly and inwardly. They did that by methods that the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, called "cultural invasion".

They brought upon us a legacy of self-blaming. It was our supposed "backwardness", even our "improvidence", they used to justify what they did.

In 1845, as eighteen evicted families huddled in Croic churchyard (in the east of Sutherland) waiting for the emigrant ship to come, one of them etched onto a windowpane, "The people of Glen Calvie, the sinful generation."

There you see the oppression that has been internalised. Hurt that knocks on down through generations within families. Psychologists call it "intergenerational trauma".

## Of Land and Soul

Now, if you are a visitor here today and perhaps unfamiliar with the culture of these parts, forgive me. I am going to build on yesterday's interdenominational service of thanksgiving,\* and speak of matters that are psychological to a spiritual depth.

On the way here, some of you might have come through Contin near Strathpeffer. My twice great grandfather, Murdo MacIennan, is buried in the churchyard there.

Best known in his time as a precentor, or leader of the Gaelic Psalms at general assemblies of the Free Church, Murdo was the elder who carried the Bible out of the established church at Contin, on the Sunday of the Disruption, May 1843.

Why such a dramatic move, and why was the new church that he was a small part of setting up called the *Free* Church of Scotland?

Because, in those days, the established or mainline Church of Scotland was controlled by landowners. The laird, and not the congregation, chose the

minister.

That left many texts within the Bible on which few sermons would have been preached.

Passages like in Psalm 24: “The Earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.”

Or from Isaiah 5: “Woe unto them that join field to field, till no space is left and you live alone in the land.”

I believe that Murdo MacLennan would have been proud of the 1997 report on “Public Questions, Religion and Morals” from the Free Church of Scotland, the church set up free of landed patronage.

Called *The Land Problem*, the 1997 report added strength of moral legitimacy to Scotland’s land reform legislation.

It helped to decolonise the soul, and drawing inspiration from the people of Assynt it concluded: “A Biblical perspective would suggest that rural land should cease to be treated as a commodity and should be regarded as a trust.”

Why was such a statement so required? Let me draw on my twice great grandfather’s story to bring it close to home.

Murdo’s grandparents had been cleared to make “a London brewer’s hundred square-mile deer forest” in Strathconon.

In *The History of the Working Classes in Scotland*, published in 1929, the former Secretary of State for Scotland, Tom Johnston, wrote that:

“The evictions of the Clan MacLennan from Strathconan by the Balfour trustees were carried out in a most barbarous manner, and to this day the spot is shewn where the dispossessed men and women crouched together, praying rather for a merciful death than that they should be driven farther from the strath of their birth.”

As the title of James Hunter’s recent book about the Sutherland Clearances has it, they were *Set Adrift Upon the World*.

In the case of the Isle of Lewis clearances, one of the descendants is scheduled to make a return appearance in Scotland this month.

Two lines of Donald Trump’s mother’s people were evicted, from Budhanish in the east and Kirkibost in the west, in the 1820s.

We are entitled to ask whether, even through to this day, we’re floating still on wreckage that was set adrift in the past.

### **Re-membering, Re-visioning, Re-Claiming**

But what of today and of the future?

It is one thing to re-member that which has been dis-membered, to understand the economic and the psychological history that has cast us on the shores where we and our communities have landed.

But how do we re-vision a future that gives life?

How can we re-claim the grounding that we need for healthy communities?

This brings us to the roots of modern Scottish land reform.

I vividly recall the front page of the *West Highland Free Press* exactly 26 years ago tomorrow, the third of July, 1992.

It ran a triple whammy of a headline.

The previous year, a gang of four of us - upstart would-be land reformers, who started with just £10 in the bank – had launched the original Isle of Eigg Trust.

I say, “the original”, because it was replaced by the new and more fit-for-purpose Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust in 1997 when the time came to take possession of the land.

My last act as, by then, an elected trustee of the resident community, was to sign consent for the transfer of the £1.6 million that the islanders had managed to raise in 10,000 donations that had come in from worldwide.

But back to that triple whammy headline of 1992. It read:

### **PARADISE LOST**

#### **Eigg back in the hands of Emperor Schellenberg: Bitter blow to trust community stewardship dream**

What had happened in those early days was that Keith Schellenberg the landlord had circumvented a court order to sell the “collector’s item”, as he called it, by buying it back through his own holding company.

He’d become the first man ever to have “sold and bought his own island”.

But that day in the *West Highland Free Press* there was also a light rising on the horizon.

The very same front page ran another headline, albeit just a single line, albeit in smaller print and lower down the page. It said:

#### **Assynt crofters forge ahead with estate buy-out bid**

And that’s what brings us gathered here today. The Eigg Trust, founded in 1991, may have been “the seed” of modern Scottish land reform, as the late Allan Macrae of Assynt so generously put it.

But Assynt got there first, and paved the way.

Perhaps more than than any other intervention, it was a visit by Allan to Eigg that convinced its people they could have a crack at cracking it.

Allan set in place a pattern and example by which new land trusts learn from older ones. A process that is held in place today by bodies such as Community Land Scotland and the Scottish Crofting Federation.

These share around the meaning of empowerment.

Of how to foster collaborative leadership.

Of how to recognise and to process conflict as something that is normal in communities.

Of how to be again, in the words of the Isle of Lewis poet, Iain Crichton Smith, “real people in a real place.”

### **Four Drivers of Land Reform**

It was amazing news last month when the Garbh Allt Community Initiative in east Sutherland succeeded in their 3,000 acre buyout.

Across Scotland, at the last count, there are now more than 400 community land holders. These control more half a million acres which is nearly 3% of the Scottish land surface.

My good friend Andy Wightman said, “the poor have no lawyers.” But in the Scotland of today, they have a government.

As I see it, land reform has four main drivers.

1. The provision of affordable housing – in the forms of social housing with secure tenure and housing plots at low cost. It eases the pressure on young families where the mortgage outlay on the cost of the plot can easily absorb a single minimum wage. By reducing that burden, community land frees up time for raising children in a wholesome way. As such, land reform will have positive long term effects on both physical and mental health.
2. The second driver is the freeing up of entrepreneurial opportunity – like the Assynt Crofters’ Trust has achieved with its sporting interests, paying wages and paying taxes to the Scottish nation as a whole.
3. Third is the release of ecological providence from agricultural land, woodlands regeneration, fishing, deer stalking and the harvesting of renewable energy.
4. And fourth but not last, this rekindling of community that derives from land reform restores the flow of inner life. It opens avenues for creative, psychological and spiritual growth.

I want to dwell on that latter point. It might seem like an optional add-on. But I would say the other three are hinged upon it.

### **Assembled in the Bones**

In 1993, Issie MacPhail, whose mother’s people hail from Assynt, wrote in *The Crofter* newspaper:

“For me [it] has been a revelation. For the whole of my life people have been explaining Vestey’s ‘badness’ to me: blocking development ... taking the mobile shop off the road ... concentrating economic activity in his own hands ... and so on....”

“Really, it is a bit like the end of colonial rule – gradually our imaginations are unchained. The rest takes a bit longer....”

Hah! The *understatement* of the woman!

“The rest takes a bit longer....”

I put it to you, friends, that that Issie’s “bit longer” is where we’re at in modern Scottish land reform today.

As the second generation, who now make up the directors of the Isle of Eigg Heritage trust put it to my wife, Vèrène, and me, during their 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations last year: “Our parents’ pioneered and built back up the infrastructure. Our generation wants to give back to the world.”

That world-sense, that sense of joining others in a historic process of decolonising both the land and the soul, has always been a driver of our land reform in Scotland.

Allan Macrae drew parallels between the history of the North Assynt estate, and that of Africans, Native Americans and Australian Aboriginal peoples.

“The land we stand on is in a sense the last stronghold of the native people,” he said.

“These lands really are the remnants of what the natives once possessed.”

Now, narratives like that can be used to exclude people.

But the vision of people like Allan, or Tom Forsyth of Scoraig in the early days of the Eigg Trust, or Maggie Fyffe of the Eigg Heritage Trust today, is not nationalist in any xenophobic narrow sense.

Rather, it is internationalist.

But to reach that point, we have to dig from where we stand into the realm of the creative, the psychological and the spiritual.

Consider this verse from “Old Highland Woman” by the great Assynt-associated poet, the self-described Zen-Calvinist, Norman McCaig.

“She has come here through centuries  
of Gaelic labour and loves  
and rainy funerals. Her people  
are assembled in her bones.  
She's their summation. Before her time  
has almost no meaning.”

“Her people are assembled in her bones.”

There you see how the people Allan Macrae called “the native people” feel about their identity and belonging.

There you see the spiritual depth of interconnection.

### **As Israelites Amongst You**

I want to end by grappling with the hardest issue.

When the Assynt Crofters' Trust was established in 1993, the crofters in these remote areas of Scotland were, to all intents and purposes, “the community”.

However, from around the 1990s onwards, the social mix changed radically. I'm not just talking about Assynt. I'm talking right across this north and western part of Scotland.

Ease of mobility, and the inequality of wealth elsewhere the UK, meant that new folks moved in.

Many brought and shared their gifts. For example, on Eigg it was a retired Oxbridge scientist, John Booth, who masterminded much of the electricity grid.

But in other places, the native people often found that their language was seen as backward. Their culture of generosity was not reciprocated. And their religion was pushed into a corner.

Sometimes the traditional crofters – understandably in my view – circled their wagons.

I could give you heartbreaking examples, including from this part of Scotland, but today is a day when we want to look forward more than backward.

Here in Assynt, we tread on holy ground.

Ground where people long have called on God's "provide-ence" – Providence.

Ground where – like I've seen in the little Catholic church on Eigg, or in Protestant churches in the Hebrides – they gather in small numbers, and they pray for the community.

Given that cultural backdrop, perhaps you will allow me – even if it is not your own way - to draw, in closing, on two scriptural texts.

In the first place, the final lines of Ezekiel chapter 47. They're very challenging.

"You are to allot it [the land] as an inheritance for yourselves and for the foreigners residing among you and who have children. You are to consider them as native-born Israelites; along with you they are to be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel.

"In whatever tribe a foreigner resides, there you are to give them their inheritance, declares the Sovereign Lord."

How's that, for an inclusive, multicultural sense of identity? What does that say, to any temptation, from whatever quarter, to join field to field?

But balance that, with this one. Bear with me. It's the Fifth Commandment, from Exodus 20. But listen to the text's full version.

"Honour your father and your mother, *so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.*"

The late Norman Macleod, a retired policeman and lobster fisherman of Leverburgh on the Isle of Harris, pointed out to me that the words in the original Hebrew don't just mean our immediate biological parents.

They're about a much bigger sense of peoplehood. They mean, the paternal and maternal ancestors of a place.

The text may be read to say to honour the indigenous people that are found here, so that our days may be long in the land.

Yes, you may settle in this place.

Yes, you may be fostered, and come to belong in this community.

Yes, you may be grafted to the living root, so that you blossom.

But honour what is found here - *so that you may live long in the land.*

So that you will have life, and help to give life; and not just any old life, but promised life abundantly.

"Who is my neighbour?"

Not the one who only comes to take without reciprocation.

Not the one who only comes to buy a bit of the view.

Not the one who only comes to gamble on the property prices.

My neighbour, your neighbour, is the one who comes, or long since came, to cherish and be cherished by this place and its peoples.

That's the deepest calling, of land reform in our times.

To cherish, and be cherished, by this place, and its peoples.

Thank you.

*\* The interdenominational Service of Thanksgiving to mark the 25th Anniversary of the Assynt Crofters' Trust was led by Murray Campbell, retired superintendent of the Fishermen's Mission in Lochinver, together with Iain Morrison of the ACT and John Mackenzie. The order of service carried a quotation that underscored how they saw the theology of Assynt's achievement: "Yea, the Lord shall give that which is good; and our land shall yield her increase. Righteousness shall go before him; and shall set us in the way of his steps" (Psalms 85:12-13).*

*Mr Morrison's sermon and John Mackenzie's prayer spoke to Assynt's history using metaphors of Exodus and entry to the Promised Land. I had also spoken to the theology on BBC Radio Scotland's "Thought for the Day" the previous Wednesday, 27 June – <https://goo.gl/L7dYu3>. Also, on Radio Scotland's "Sunday Morning With..." programme, 1 July, Mike Small of Bella Caledonia and the crofting historian Professor James Hunter were interviewed by Cathy Macdonald about the wider significance of what had happened at Assynt.*

New text box >>