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## The Political Theology of Modern Scottish Land Reform

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### Abstract

This paper gathers evidence that modern Scottish land reform was influenced by applied liberation theology from both grassroot community activists and institutional churches. Scotland's land tenure was feudal until the late twentieth century. Plutocratic ownership impacted the economics and psychology of community well-being. The 1990s produced a land reform movement culminating in the new Scottish Parliament's Abolition of Feudal Tenure etc. (Scotland) Act 2000 and the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003. These created a conditional 'community right to buy' and affirmed the freedom of 'right to roam'. Two percent of Scottish land is now in community ownership. Our research interviewed fifteen movers and shakers—both national theologians and local activists from the vanguard land trusts of Eigg, Assynt, and Gigha. We conclude that spirituality and religion can be subtle drivers of community empowerment. By inspiring, informing, and legitimising socio-political transformation, a 'Remnant' theology was factored into Scottish legislation of international significance.

### *Land, Theology, and Scottish Culture*

Modern Scotland retains one of the most highly concentrated patterns of land ownership in the world. This legacy, originating from early modernity's market commodification of land and subsequent 'clearances' of the

peasantry from it, is now the focus of land reform legislation. Google searches under 'land reform' consequently bring Scotland up right at the top, alongside the more ignominious case of Zimbabwe. But while the secular drivers of the Scottish movement are well recognised (Bryden and Geisler 2007), there is also a less visible but deep-rooted liberation theology. Scholars have explored this historically (Hunter 1974, 1976; Meek 1987), but its ongoing importance has been the subject of much more limited study (Mackie 1995; McIntosh 1999, 2000, 2001).

Here we will attempt some redress of this scholarly deficit by building from an empirical base. After setting the historical context of Scottish land tenure, we will place on the record a sampling of data from fifteen key informants. These were interviewed at McIntosh's request by Henneman while serving a postgraduate student internship at the Centre for Human Ecology.<sup>1</sup> The interviews took place late in 2007, nearly five years after the passing of the historic Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003. In addition, we will draw attention to official documents reflecting the contributions of Scottish churches to the legislative process.

In many faiths, land is a theological issue because it is nothing less than the terrestrial reality in which Creation and sustaining Providence—the provide-ence of the wherewithal for life—play out. As Janzen puts it in his entry under 'Land' in the authoritative *Anchor Bible Dictionary*: 'The land theme is so ubiquitous that it may have greater claim to be the central motif in the Old Testament than any other, including "covenant"' (1992: 146). Because the use of land in a social context involves power, and the dynamics of power is the stuff of politics, we shall assume land theology to be a subset of political theology. As we present our data, it will become apparent that for some activists theology was their prime motivating driver. For others, it came into play more iteratively or even retrospectively, as a consequence of action-reflection praxis. For only a small minority in our sample was it of little conscious consequence.

The 2001 census revealed Scotland to be a nation of five million people comprising forty-two percent who identify with the Church of Scotland

1. This study was part of a wider research programme held by Alastair McIntosh through Scotland's academically independent Centre for Human Ecology on the spirituality of community regeneration and its relationship to nature. It was funded by the conservation agency, WWF International—with special thanks to Jean-Paul Jeanrenaud. An overview of findings is published as a Schumacher Briefing (McIntosh 2008). A research report is published in the *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* (Henneman 2008). Rutger Henneman warmly acknowledges the supervision of his work by Dik Roth of the Law and Governance Group at Wageningen University. Alastair McIntosh equally thanks Bron Taylor for his encouragement and suggestions.

(the national church 'by law established'), sixteen percent Roman Catholic, seven percent other Christian, two percent other faiths, and thirty-three percent of either no religion or offering no response to the optional census question.<sup>2</sup> As such, Scotland's dominant religious expression continues to be Presbyterian—based on bottom-up rather than Episcopal top-down church governance.

This resonates with a widely held Scottish cultural view, often expressed in literature, that the community—comprising 'real people in a real place' (Smith 1986)—should take precedence over individuality. Constitutionally, Scotland has been a 'stateless nation' (McCrone 1992) since the union with England that created Great Britain as the United Kingdom in 1707 (Colley 1992; Lynch 1992). Popular dissatisfaction with this shotgun marriage led, in 1999, to the restoration of the Scottish Parliament under a devolved (or federal) settlement within the British state. This paved the way for action on land reform to tackle both the legal anachronism of feudalism and, more importantly, its residual patterns of proprietorial distribution. Such would become hailed as the new parliament's 'flagship legislation'.

#### *From Clan to Feudalism in Early Modernity*

Across much of Europe, feudalism was originally the governance structure by which militarised patriarchies used 'Christendom' to order, legitimise, and sanctify spoils colonised under *Jus ad bellum*—right of the force of war. Consistent with Lev. 25.23, God was deemed to stand at the apex of the 'feudal pyramid' (Gretton 1993; Wightman 1996: 5). Next came the sovereign as God's paramount feudal superior. The crown as the sovereign's executive arm then delegated land through layers of aristocratic superiors and vassals and all the way down to the tenantry at the rump. In return, dues of 'fealty' or submission to the crown flowed upwards, primarily as monetary tithes, agricultural produce, and military service.

Socially this was the root of a class-divided society that can be traced from at least Roman through to modern times (Kingston 1992). Inequality also sanctioned a presumption of the right to colonise the lands of 'uncivilised' peoples beyond Europe, justifying it as God-ordained 'manifest destiny' (Longley 2002). Feudalism had formally entered Scottish governance through Norman intermarriage in the twelfth century.

2. Scottish Government, *Analysis of Religion in the 2001 Census: Summary Report*. Online: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/02/20757/53570> (accessed 13 February 2009).

But Scotland then was not a consolidated nation. In the mountains and islands to the north and west, the clan—the extended family—remained the basic social unit (Newton 2000; MacInnes 2006). Land was not construed as a commodity. Rather, its value lay in the number of people it could support.



A typical 'big house' and associated buildings on a Scottish Highland estate. Note the whitewashed buildings, and the long straight lines that demarcate monocultural land use and encode the lines of a lawyer's pen.

The turning point for the clan system came in the late sixteenth century in what Hechter (1998) calls the 'internal colonisation' of the 'Celtic fringe'. King James VI used the sword and gallows, education for regimentation, and his own version of the Protestant religion to shift Highland Scotland from a tribal to an early-modern feudal basis of centralised governance (Withers 1988; MacInnes 1993). His Union of the Crowns with England in 1603 (making him James I of Great Britain) was followed by full parliamentary union in 1707. The period saw land become increasingly commoditised and a new British imperial world order taking root (Hill 1992). By the early nineteenth century, the indigenous social order had been largely destroyed. Sheep ranching (and later, sport) provided the 'modern' lairds (large-scale Scottish landlords) with a better return on capital than the peppercorn rents of tenants (Hunter

1976). The resultant Highland Clearances made way for agrarian 'improvement' and saw perhaps half a million people<sup>3</sup> forced out of their homelands by landlords—dispatched mainly to the towns or to the colonies on emigrant ships.

Scottish Highland history is distinctive because this expropriation of the peasantry, which had taken place much earlier elsewhere in Britain and Europe (Devine 1989), remains fresh in folk memory and was even captured on the photographic record (MacLean and Carrell 1986). In addition, ongoing large-scale private landlordism entails a parasitic transfer of wealth in the form of rent from the income-poor to the asset-rich. The passion to redress this set the stage for modern Scottish land reform.

#### *Rise of Modern Scottish Land Reform*

By 1995, just 608 private owners controlled fifty percent of Scotland's 19 million acres (8 million hectares) (Wightman 1996). Individual or family holdings extended in size up to the Duke of Buccleuch's 260,000 acres. In the Highlands alone, 4.5 million acres were managed substantially for 'recreational killing'—mainly deer, grouse, and salmon—with eighty-two percent of the proprietors being male and sixty-six percent absentee, their primary residence being elsewhere (Higgins, Wightman, and MacMillan 2002).

Alienation between owners and resident communities intensified after 1979 when Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party came to power with a new-right political agenda closely aligned to the conservative ideology of US President Ronald Reagan. The freeing up of currency transactions and the creation of land-based tax breaks turned Scotland into a haven for international speculators and sportsmen including the nouveau riche, heiresses, and playboys, oil-endowed sheiks, pop stars, and arms dealers. Feudal aristocracy's social mores, often backed by formal legal powers, allowed lairds to refuse security of tenure, summarily to evict tenants, block business developments, 'tax' profit on enterprises, influence who got jobs, and veto applications for planning permission. Not all lairds abused power, but even the *noblesse oblige* ethos of 'benign' landlordism arguably induces sycophancy around its injustice-based 'false generosity' (Freire 1972: 21). Set against such mores was a growing awareness that if village farmers could own their land in Norway, and if Latin Americans could rise up for land reform, why couldn't Scots?

3. This figure is astonishingly devoid of in-depth scholarship. Blamires (1996) extrapolates records and estimates 300,000–500,000 violent evictions. Numbers forced by economic exigency would have been much higher.

The turning point came in the early 1990s when abuses of landed power brought three Highland communities—Eigg, Assynt, and Gigha—to media attention.<sup>4</sup> Each was to go on to achieve their dream of community ownership in advance of the passing of the 2003 Act. As ‘patterns and examples’ of an alternative way, they dug the channels into which political process could flow after the restoration of Scotland’s parliament in 1999. Being a unicameral or single-chambered body, the new parliament could advance land reform without reference to the UK’s upper chamber, the House of Lords. This circumvented the hereditary aristocracy who would scarcely have sanctioned change.

As they form the basis of our research, let us briefly describe what happened in three vanguard land reform communities—each of them iconic because they charted the vision and paved the way for subsequent legislation.

#### *Isle of Eigg*

On the 7000 acre (3000 hectare) Isle of Eigg, Keith Schellenberg, an English car salesman with a penchant for exotic sports, had been forced through the courts by his ex-wife to place the island on the market. In July 1991 a group of four mainland-based Scots (including Alastair McIntosh) recognised that this presented an opportunity for consciousness-raising political theatre. They registered an initially penniless charity, The Isle of Eigg Trust, which laid out a challenge and a vision for bringing Eigg into community ownership. As resident islanders—then about sixty of them—progressively took over governance of the Trust, Schellenberg in 1994 issued eviction letters to tenants he perceived as ringleaders. The consequent publicity scared off potential buyers who sought a quiet retreat without restless natives.

Unable to attract the £3 million (\$5 million) that Eigg might have been worth prior to the Trust’s market spoiling, the island was sold on to Professor Maruma, a mysterious Teutonic ‘fire artist’. When he promptly went bankrupt after being exposed by the German press as a fraud fronting a consortium of holiday timeshare speculators, the Eigg Trust moved into high gear. It launched an international appeal with an initial target of just £15,000. This was the ‘firewater and beads’ price for which

4. For these communities’ official websites, see <http://www.isleofeigg.org/>, <http://www.assyntcrofters.co.uk/>, and <http://www.gigha.org.uk/>. Also see Andy Wightman’s website, <http://www.andywightman.com/>, the Scottish Community Land Network at <http://www.communityland.org.uk/>, the Caledonia Centre for Social Development at <http://www.aledonia.org.uk/>, the Community Land Unit at <http://www.hie.co.uk/CommunityLand.htm>, and Alastair McIntosh’s articles and an Eigg audio archive at <http://www.alastairmcintosh.com/contents-5-landreform.htm>.

the island had originally been sold out of clan tenure in 1828. As a symbolic stepping-stone it stimulated international publicity and kick-started a much more realistic fundraising campaign. An astonishing £1.6 million flooded in from 10,000 donations. In the absence of any better bid, Maruma's creditors conceded to the Trust, and the islanders assumed ownership on 12 June 1997 (Dressler 2007; McIntosh 2001).

### *Assynt*

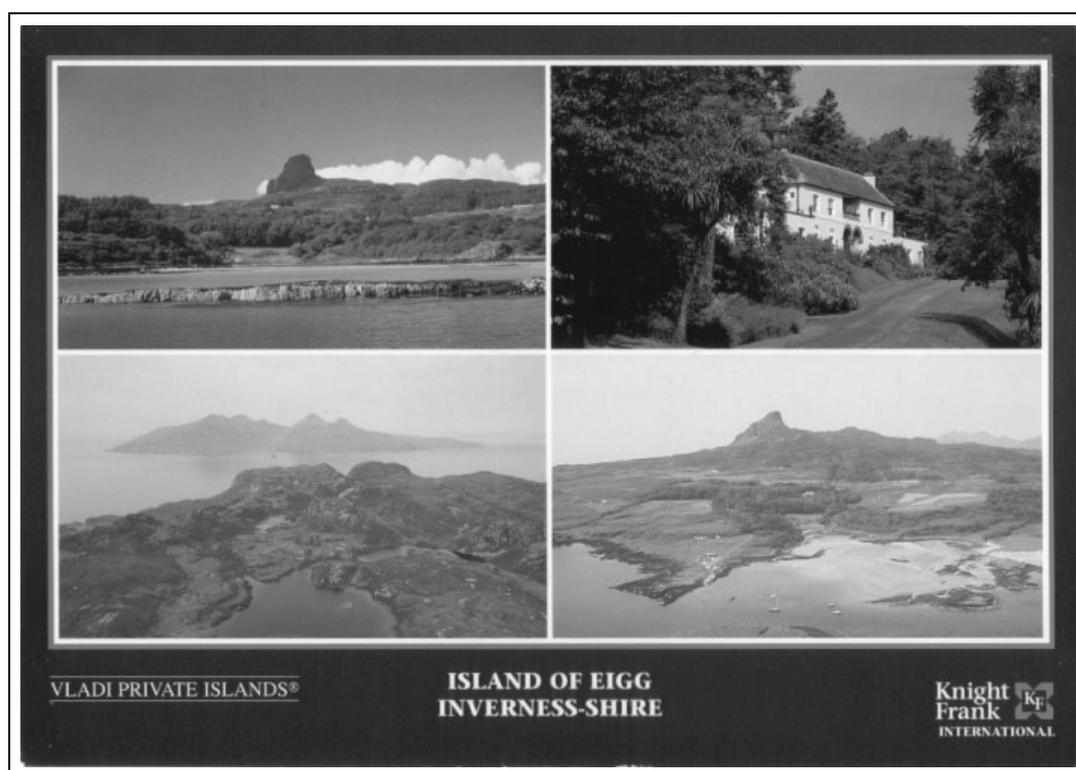
In 1992, the 21,300 acre (9000 hectare) North Lochinver Estate went into receivership after the bankruptcy of a Swedish investor, who had bought it for £1,080,000 from the locally infamous Vestey family. Liquidators split the estate into 7 lots without consulting the locals about the effect that such divided ownership would have on a tightly knit network of remote communities. The crofters (tenants of small-scale agricultural holdings), partly inspired by Eigg, set up their own land trust fully aware of what its market-spoiling impact might be. Within the year a deal was cut and £300,000 was raised in donations, grants, and loans. The Assynt Crofters Trust took control of their land on 1 February 1993 (MacAskill 1999). Their leadership subsequently advised the considerably more protracted Eigg campaign.

### *Isle of Gigha*

In 1992, the 3400 acre (1400 hectare) Isle of Gigha was repossessed by a Swiss Bank due to the bankruptcy of an English financier, Malcolm Potier, who had reputedly out-bid Mick Jagger to become the 'Baron of Gigha'. Later Potier was convicted in Australia for twice trying to arrange assassinations in what would have been tragic crimes of passion (Farquharson 2006).

To maximise the island's value, Potier's creditor sought to offer vacant possession by evicting tenants. '*E II R - Evicted - 18 III 92*' was chalked on a number of doors (i.e. 'eviction in the name of Queen Elizabeth II'). The Scottish Office Minister of State, Lord James Douglas-Hamilton, washed the Conservative government's hands of the issue. 'Land ownership is not a matter on which I have a locus to intervene', he told parliament in London. It is 'essentially a private matter... [over which] I do not wish to adopt the mantle of paternalism' (Hansard 1992).

After selling to a businessman, Gigha went back on the market in 2001. Following a fact-finding visit to Eigg, the islanders voted two-to-one to attempt their own community buyout. This succeeded in October 2001 upon raising £4 million—partly in loans that were repaid by selling off the laird's baronial mansion.



The estate agent's brochure produced for the Isle of Eigg while it was still privately owned in 1996. Note the name of one of the selling agents—Vladi Private Islands—owned by the Canadian-based Farhad Vladi.

### *The Politicisation of a Grassroots Movement*

These iconic cases (1) delineated the problem, (2) set out a potentially transformative vision, and (3) stimulated community empowerment. Much of it was influenced by Freirian educational pedagogy, which, at the time, was being widely communicated in Scotland through popular education (Kirkwood and Kirkwood 1989; Martin, Crowther, and Shaw 1999). In Freirian terms, land had become a 'generative theme'—a burning issue in people's minds. It was therefore a prime focus for 'conscientisation'—the raising of both conscience and consciousness as to the causes of oppression, and possible means for its resolution (Freire 1972).

Such conscientisation was greatly helped by the blunderbuss style of several prominent landowners. For example, in a debate with McIntosh on BBC national radio, Christopher Bourne-Arton, then a council member of Country Landowners' Association in England, told listeners: 'Don't forget you need an awful lot of money to run a Highland estate... You either own a Highland estate or you run three Ferraris, six racehorses and a couple of mistresses—I mean, the costs are much the same...'<sup>5</sup>

5. 'Dirty News', *BBC Radio 5*, 19 July 1994.

What *The Guardian* newspaper proclaimed as a 'Scottish land rights revolution' (MacAskill 1997) snowballed during the 1990s. By 1997, the Convener of the Scottish Landowners' Federation (SLF) was sounding the alarm. In a tone reminiscent of a colonial governor reacting to a little local difficulty upcountry, he wrote to his members saying:

I do not believe there has ever been another occasion upon which the private landowners in Scotland have needed to come together to meet the challenges which they face... Even acting fully within their legal rights, landowners and their managers have found themselves severely criticised by press and politicians... A great number of these issues were local in a UK context, but the overwhelming result of the Referendum for a Scottish Parliament raises their profile to an extent where legislative change is now easily conceivable.<sup>6</sup>

Shortly afterwards both the SLF and its English sister agency acted on public relations advice and dropped the word 'landowner' from their names. A one-time badge of prestige was now a cause for camouflage. No longer were the lairds dealing with a few upstart agitators. Land reform had hit a chord with the much wider debate over parliamentary devolution and was aligned to become its flagship policy. Donald Dewar, the leader of the Scottish Labour Party who, in 1999, would become the new parliament's First Minister, set the tenor for this when he said at a public lecture:

I wish to be absolutely clear that I regard this right [for communities to buy their land] as an essential prerequisite of land reform... It would do much to empower the people who work on and live on the land, giving them real rights, and a real say over their own destiny... Land reform is finally within our grasp. Every one of us has a part in making sure that it happens. I promise to play my part. I know that I can count on you to do yours (Dewar 1998).

Within months, the landowner's sporting magazine, *The Field*, signalled 'Cuba visited upon the Highlands' thanks to 'archaic socialist principles of the sixties' that the free market in land 'would treat as very burdensome' (Wigan 1999). A year later the tireless land campaigner Brian Wilson MP, who was Minister for Industry and Energy under the Blair government, served notice on the London Committee of the SLF that an 'irreversible shift' had taken place 'in public policy towards the issue of land ownership in Scotland'. Land reform, he said, had now become 'a litmus test by which the [new Scottish] Parliament and [its] Executive

6. Issued by Andrew Dingwall-Fordyce, Convener, on 25 September 1997 and passed to McIntosh by an anonymous landowner.

would be judged'.<sup>7</sup> The ball had now resolutely passed from grassroots activists to politicians and the drafters of parliamentary legislation.

### *Provisions of the Land Reform Acts*

From the outset, the politicians recognised that land reform would have to be a gradual but 'ongoing process' (LRPG 1999: 1). Nevertheless, legislation moved ahead swiftly during the parliament's first term, with cross-party support from all but the Scottish Conservative Party. The Abolition of Feudal Tenure etc. (Scotland) Act 2000 effected legal modernisation necessary for the main instrument, the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003.<sup>8</sup> This has three parts:

1. It provided for democratically accountable land trusts, normally incorporated as limited liability charitable companies, to register a 'community interest' in land and property specifically for the public benefit. If registered interests come on the market, the community has six months in which to exercise a pre-emptive 'right to buy' at government economic valuation. As such, registration serves as a community 'claim of right'. Even where land is unlikely to go on the market, registration can hang as a Damoclean sword that reins in bad landlordism by amplifying the community's voice.
2. The Act gave communities under crofting tenure an absolute right to buy at any time whether or not the landlord wishes to sell.
3. The Act legally affirmed the 'right to roam' by any non-motorised means over nearly all Scottish land, including overnight camping and freedom of the waterways, as long as the common-sense rules of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code are followed.<sup>9</sup>

As of 2009, some two hundred groups have been helped to achieve buy-outs by the Scottish Government's Community Land Unit. More than two percent of the nation's land—a third of a million acres—is now under such ownership.<sup>10</sup> Land reform has proven itself to be a popular

7. 15 June 2000, text of address supplied to McIntosh courtesy of Wilson's parliamentary office.

8. Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 is at [http://www.opsi.gov.uk/legislation/scotland/acts2003/asp\\_20030002\\_en\\_1](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/legislation/scotland/acts2003/asp_20030002_en_1).

9. Online: <http://www.outdooraccess-scotland.com/>.

10. Personal communication, McIntosh with John Watt of the Community Land Unit, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, 11 June 2007. We have been unable to procure more recent figures.

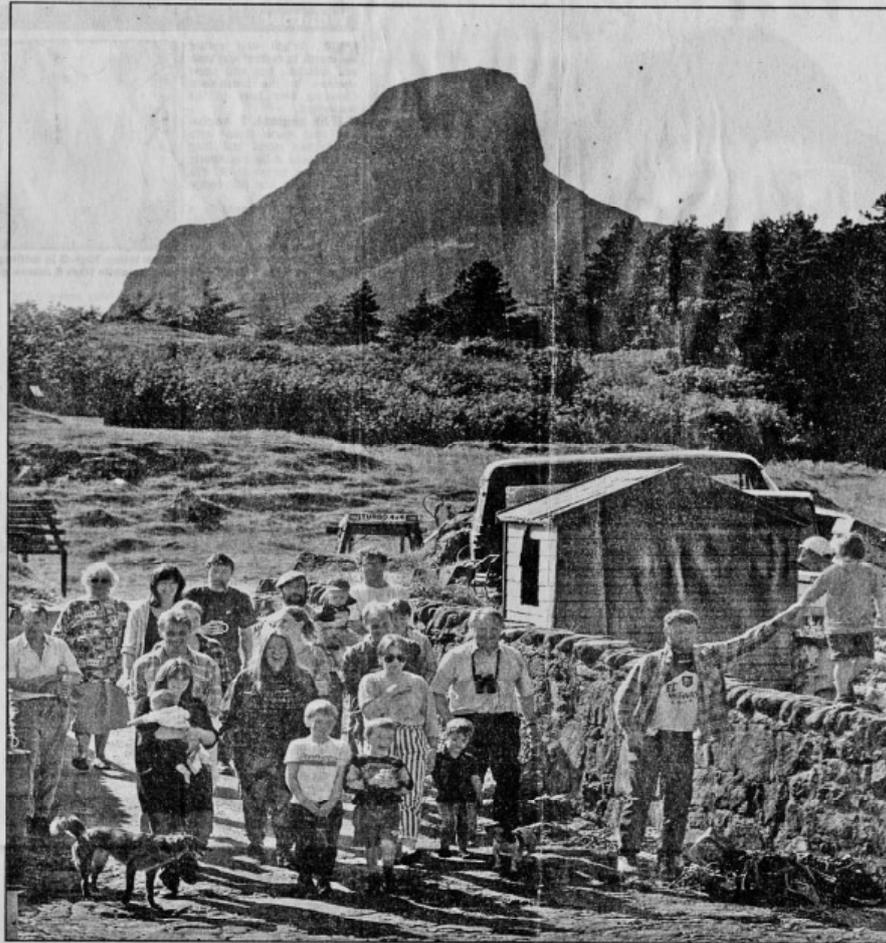
### The owners

#### Scotland's top 10 landowners

Forestry Comm'n	1.6m acres
Duke of Buccleuch	270,000
Scottish Office	260,000
National Trust	190,000
Alcan Highland Estates	135,000
Duke of Atholl	130,000
Capt Alwyn Farquharson	125,000
Duchess of Westminster	120,000
Earl of Seafield	105,000
Crown Estate	100,000

'Land reform has the potential to be the most radical issue, other than devolution, for Scotland'

— Scottish office



Home win... Residents of Eigg, dismissed as drunken and ungrateful by laird Keith Schellenberg, are now their own landlord PHOTOGRAPH: MURDO MACLEOD

# Scottish land rights revolution

**Ewen MacAskill on Labour plans to shake up ownership laws that are a source of misery for small Highland communities**

ONE of the best-known Scottish folk-songs, The Seven Men, recalls a dispute in the 1830s between a small community in the West Highlands who stood up to the landowner, the Nazi-sympathiser Lord Brocket, who took legal action against them. The rousing refrain goes: "To hell with your English lawyers, we want our Scottish land." Land ownership in Scotland is a source of anger and passion, some of it dating to the Highland Clearances but most of it more recent, watching year after year as huge estates passed from buyers in Surrey to Saudi Arabia, from Holland to companies based in the Cayman Islands, with no regard for the people who live on them. Hardly a month passes without some such outcry: the last few decades have seen rows ranging from Dr No, the absentee owner of the island of Raasay, through to Keith Schellenberg, the Laird of Eigg who dismissed the locals as drunken and ungrateful.

But the new Labour team at the Scottish Office is set to embark on a land crusade aimed at reforming the scourge of absentee and negligent landlords who have brought misery to such small communities in the Highlands and Islands. A Scottish Office source, revealing informal talks had already been held on tackling the issue, said: "Land reform has the potential to be the most radical issue, other than devolution, for Scotland." Law reforms could be introduced in the next Queen's Speech. Under a strict feudal system, "feudal superiors" retain substantial rights over their "vassals" and such powers have allowed landowners to block even minor developments sought by local communities. Legislation to empower local communities would radically alter the relationship with landowners. Discussions have also taken place on proposals to help local communities own their land. Plans produced by a Government quango, the High-

lands and Islands Development Board, during the Callaghan years are being looked at again. Another proposal being discussed is for money from the National Lottery to be diverted to the National Heritage Memorial Fund, which was set up under Attlee, to buy up land. Money from the fund was used two years ago to buy land for the local community in Skye from Ian Anderson, the singer in Jethro Tull. The new Scottish team is almost certain to defy Scottish landowners by establishing the first national park in Scotland, at Loch Lomond. While England and Wales have had national parks to protect the countryside, every attempt to establish them in Scotland since 1947 has been blocked. There has been little drive in the past either from Conservative governments, who tended to side with the landowners, or even from Labour ones, whose Scottish teams tended, to be drawn from the Central Belt of Scotland, with little interest in the Highlands, apart from the post-war one. But the new Scottish Office team of ministers includes Brian Wilson, former editor of the West Highland Free Press who has spent much of his adult life campaigning against landlordism, Sam

Gelbraith, who as a mountaineer has a passionate interest in the Scottish Highlands, and Lord Sewell, who has responsibility for the environment department and shares the passion of the other two for land reform. Hansard records Lord Sewell, in a debate last year, denouncing a Conservative minister for lack of ambition and called for the rights afforded to crofters on Crown estates to be transferred to those on private lands. In an article in the Glasgow Herald two years ago, Mr Wilson, in uncompromising mood, warned against trying to "reach consensus." "As in any society, land reform will only be carried through by those who know in their guts that there are historic wrongs to be righted." But there is no register of who owns what in Scotland. Mr Wilson argued: "I have never understood why a date could not be set by which all persons and companies claiming acreage above a certain minimum were required to produce title and fill in a form with details of ownership, both nominal and beneficial. That seems like a modest imposition, though the call to produce legal title to what they allegedly own would be an interesting challenge to some of our noblest families." The team is not united on

all issues. Mr Galbraith would like to see national parks extended beyond Loch Lomond to other mountain areas of Scotland, while Lord Sewell is less enthusiastic. But they are united in their crusading zeal over land. The ambition of the new team is to have begun the process of land reform, to make start on a rational and just system of ownership, before the end of the century and let the Scottish Parliament complete the work.

Portrayal by *The Guardian* of land reform agitation on the Isle of Eigg that contributed to the passing of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003.

and inexpensive political policy. Looking to the future, reformers would like to see land value taxation imposed on the remaining large private estates, its proceeds being used progressively to buy them out.

### *Our Research and Discernment Methodology*

In helping to bring about the above achievements, we consider that applied political theology played an important but subtle role. To explore this, we posed the research question: 'What has been the role of spirituality, religion, or theology in Scotland's modern land reform?'

By 'spirituality' we will here mean the *inner* animating flow of *that which gives life; the essence*.<sup>11</sup> In human affairs, spirituality may find an expression that is 'fallen'—falling short of its higher God-given vocation (Wink 1992, exegising Rom. 13.1). But ultimately, we understand it to be the power of love made manifest in the ongoing process of Creation.

By 'religion', we will mean the socialised and politicised outward organisation and expression of spirituality. In a Christian context, this usually means the churches, their creeds, and their practices, whether with or without state establishment.

And by 'theology', we mean either that which pertains to the study of God, or more generally, a catchall for the melding of all spiritual and/or religious factors in life. Thus, when we speak of 'land theology' in this paper we may mean, depending on context, the contributions of systematic theologies *and/or* the practical working through of religion or spirituality on the ground.

During late 2007, Henneman interviewed fifteen of the most prominent advocates. These were as selected by McIntosh on account of their theological contribution to the national debate or their direct involvement in one of the three 'iconic' buyouts.

Although he is a co-author of this paper, McIntosh was included in Henneman's interviews given his recognised role in Scottish land liberation theology (Mackie 1995; Fraser 2000; Gorringer 2003). As a campaigning academic, he offered an insider perspective. However, the downside of this, in common with much participant-observer methodology, is that readers must be mindful that he makes no claim to neutrality. Figure 1 provides an alphabetical list of our interviewees. It includes

11. Aristotle's *Metaphysics* defines 'essence' as 'the substantial reality' of any thing, beyond which it 'cannot be reduced to another definition which is fuller in expression' (Aristotle 2001: 988a: 30-35, 994b: 15-20; cf. Ferrier 1875: 249-52).

1. <b>Reverend Dr Graham Blount</b> (Church of Scotland), originating from Assynt and until 2009, Secretary of the Scottish Churches' Parliamentary Office.
2. <b>Camille Dressler</b> (Roman Catholic), a longstanding resident and author of Eigg's definitive history, trained in ethnography at the Sorbonne.
3. <b>Dr Alison Elliot</b> (Church of Scotland) who convened the 'Church and Nation' committee in 1998 when it considered land reform; became the church's first female Moderator (figurehead) in 2004.
4. <b>Tom Forsyth</b> (informally Quaker), a key figure in the regeneration of the West Highland crofting community of Scoraig and the founder of the original Isle of Eigg Trust.
5. <b>Reverend Dr Ian Fraser</b> (Church of Scotland), a theologian prominent in the ecumenical Iona Community and former WCC executive with expertise in liberation theology and base Christian communities.
6. <b>Maggie Fyffe, MBE</b> (no formal affiliation), Secretary of the Isle of Eigg Trust from 1994 and of its successor, the Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust, from 1997.
7. <b>John MacKenzie</b> (Free Church of Scotland), a leader of the Assynt Crofters Trust and a church elder, who contributed significantly to the land reform report to the 1997 General Assembly of the Free Church.
8. <b>Mairi MacKinnon (formerly Kirk)</b> (Roman Catholic), an Eigg resident, indigenous to the region, who helps to sustain the island's Catholic church.
9. <b>Reverend Professor Donald Macleod</b> (Free Church of Scotland), Principal of the Free Church College and an influential Calvinist theologian from the Isle of Lewis.
10. <b>Allan MacRae</b> (no formal affiliation), a leader of the Assynt Crofters' buyout, who often draws parallels between crofting and indigenous land struggles elsewhere in the world.
11. <b>Willie McSporrán MBE</b> (no formal affiliation), leader of the Isle of Gigha buyout.
12. <b>John Martin</b> (Church of Scotland), an elected director and a grassroots philosopher of the Isle of Gigha Trust.
13. <b>Dr Alastair McIntosh</b> (Quaker), a founding trustee of the original Isle of Eigg Trust in 1991, also elected by Eigg residents to serve from 1994 to 1997 until the new Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust took over.
14. <b>Professor Donald Meek</b> (a Baptist currently in membership of the Church of Scotland), head of the Department of Celtic and Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, from the Isle of Tiree.
15. <b>Reverend Professor Michael Northcott</b> (Episcopalian), Professor of Ethics in the School of Divinity at Edinburgh University and a leading environmental theologian.

religious affiliation (parenthetically) and professional titles or state honours relevant to their role.<sup>12</sup>

Our method and analysis used grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006), seeking to build up a picture from data ‘on the ground’ rather than by looking for evidence related to an *a priori* theory. Always in social research the problem is how to select what is of significance. In this, we have made use of what McIntosh has elsewhere called ‘discernment methodology’. This selects ‘indicative statements’—charged or meaningful passages—which are coded and categorised.<sup>13</sup> Discernment is a word germane to both Ignatian and Quaker spirituality. Etymologically, it means to *sift* and *separate*. It implies a sensitised and even a reverential commitment to seeking patterns of truth, holding objectivity alongside the compass of subjectivity. As such, it favours participative forms of inquiry—especially the empathy of seeking to understand from within, and not just from outside of, the worldview of informants.

The central categories that emerged, and around which we will now organise our data presentation, were:

1. Perceptions of the relevance of theology;
2. what theology says about the land;
3. how theology challenges landlordism;
4. the challenged but empowered community.

Below we take each of these in turn, weaving a narrative from the indicative statements. For clarity, we have sometimes made minor editorial changes to original quotations. This ought not to have caused distortion since we sent a draft of this paper to all participants, inviting them to give feedback and to check on their representation.

### *Interview Findings*

#### *Perceptions of the Relevance of Theology*

For some of the community-based informants, spirituality had been absolutely central to their involvement in land reform. It positively affected their motivation whether or not it had any effect on those they

12. Ironically, the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire—of which both McSparran and Fyffe were made Members (MBE) by the Queen on account of their community service—has the motto, ‘For God and the Empire’!

13. See application in People and Parliament Trust 1999: 7-8. Also forthcoming in the *Human Ecology Research Companion* [Ashgate, 2010]), to be edited jointly by Dr Lewis Williams of the University of Saskatchewan with McIntosh and the Woodland Cree elder, Dr Rose Roberts.

were trying to influence. Paraphrasing Psalm 127, for example, Tom Forsyth repeatedly emphasised, 'Except the Lord build the house they labour in vain who build it'. He continued, 'If it doesn't have that dimension, the spiritual dimension, whatever name you give it, it won't happen'. For his co-worker Alastair McIntosh: 'Land reform is about empowerment of the human spirit to give free expression to life...life as love made manifest. In other words, the realisation or the working out of incarnation. And incarnation is concerned with the body, with flesh, with the materiality of things'. As he saw it, theology plays a conscious or unconscious legitimising role because 'Scotland is a deep country... psychologically shaped by past religious cultures', which predisposes people towards spiritual receptivity.

While Forsyth and McIntosh both hold their Quaker Christianity as part of an overtly interfaith, panentheistic, and mystical framework, John Martin of the Isle of Gigha expressed similar views, but framed through a Church of Scotland lens. He considered the church to be integral to the bond between people and place.

The church at the present time has been weakened considerably through a lack of attendance [but it] is a very important part of the island life. It's crucial. I think it's important to thank your maker for what you have. If you take care of the land, it will take care of you. If you have a fishing boat and take care of it, it will take care of you. If you take care of the church and its people, the Lord will take care of us.

Mairi Mackinnon, a Roman Catholic from Eigg, held a similar position. She had long sought to instil values and vision into community reflection on land ownership.

The hand of the Lord is in all the processes. The buyout is part of that. No single human being can understand His will. But still, God acts through us... There is much in the past that gave the Church a bad name. But I believe in the pure religion, religion without all that that gave the Church a bad name.

Maggie Fyffe of Eigg, who had no specific religious affiliation, was more sceptical about theology. 'I would say there was no spirituality involved in the buy-out. The main reason for the buyout was to get rid of the landlord'. But she qualified this. 'Everyone has their own spirituality in a way, but we don't see it as a specific spirituality or religion', to which she added, laughingly: 'Perhaps there is a kind of ethos, something indefinable. After all we're a bunch of hippies: freedom, love and peace! We're anarchists!'

Her neighbour, Camille Dressler, is a Roman Catholic and made similar observations.

[It] depends on how you define spirituality... There is a kind of green consciousness... I would call it a mindset. If there is any spirituality on Eigg, I would say it is of a rather secular type... Spirituality as such belongs firmly to the private, personal sphere. And that is probably why people feel uncomfortable with the word spirituality... People here see themselves as no-nonsense, practical and down to earth, and that spirituality is perceived as something woolly, otherworldly, not something that they can easily admit to thinking about.

This brings us to a deep sense of ambivalence towards the perceived relevance of theology. Most informants demonstrated it. For example, in speaking of Assynt, John MacKenzie, a Free Church of Scotland elder, said trenchantly: 'Theology and spirituality had no influence whatsoever in bringing this about in my view'. However, he went on to affirm a resolute personal credo:

That's not to say that there is no theological component... I worship the God that called Abraham from Ur of the Caldees and who promised an area of land to Abraham and his successors...[he then summarised Hebrew land history]. There is a sense of empathy and ownership I suppose on the part of Israel with a specific area of land. Likewise the Highlander feels a sense of empathy with the land of his forefathers. And from my point of view, there is a direct connection between the ability to manage and own a particular area of land and one's genealogical identity.

The Reverend Professor Donald Macleod of the Free Church College held a similar position. 'Where there is spirituality it does tend to be politically disengaged you know, what we call pietistic, and it is very individual'. Professor Donald Meek, a Baptist currently in Church of Scotland membership, stated likewise, 'It is a problem that there is no metanarrative of the beauty of land. Nowadays land is seen in terms of law or money. There is no big frame of spirituality, and that's a pity'.<sup>14</sup>

Martin, MacKinnon, MacKenzie, Macleod, and Meek all broadly shared the view that materialism has forced the downgrading of a once communally expressed faith to a position where, as Macleod repeated, 'spirituality nowadays is very private'. They lament this individualisation, and yet, are paradoxically pushed into it by the secular social environments in which they find themselves. Their theology consequently has 'Remnant' characteristics; namely, it refers to the last of the faithful people of God. In one sense this is wistful. But biblical theology asserts that it is precisely through the Remnant that a God's-eye view on human development is sustained even when the human eye has lost sight of it.

14. 'That'll set them thinking!' he told McIntosh (personal communication, 4 June 2009).

God, in 'a sound of sheer silence', told Elijah on Mount Horeb to reject the despair of thinking he was the only one of the true faithful left. He was to go back down to the valley and 'gather' the Remnant. It numbered, unbeknown to him, fully 7000.<sup>15</sup>

Could a similar paradigm apply in a small way to contemporary Scottish land theology? A secular analysis might dismiss the testimonies just cited as relics of a bygone age. Perhaps they are. But a spiritually informed discernment methodology presses us to go deeper. If, as Gutiérrez (1983) and others have proposed, there is a greater intelligence behind history than just the hand of human agency—if there is a divine underpinning to our collective endeavours—then the voices reported in this study could be understood as Remnant seedcorn. After all, Scottish land theology does not emerge from nowhere. As Reverend Dr Graham Blount of the Church of Scotland put it, 'There is a relationship of people and land in part of Highland and, particularly, rural Scotland, that clearly and often quite explicitly has a spiritual dimension to it'. That dimension is well documented by both secular and religious scholars who recognise parallels between Scottish land agitation in the nineteenth century and Latin American liberation theology movements in the twentieth century (Hunter 1974, 1976; Meek 1987; Mackie 1995; McIntosh 1999, 2000, 2001).

Some land reform leaders felt that their cause was indeed touched by intercession. Willie McSporrán, who clearly felt some connection to Christianity although he was not a churchgoer, had lived through a time of abusive landlordism on Gigha. In his estimate:

It is difficult for me to say whether there was spirituality involved [but] there must have been... There must have been some hand that guided me, or the politicians to come to me... [But] I don't go to church. Only going to church is not a very Christian thing to do. For me, working for the community to serve the community is more of a Christian thing to do.

Allan MacRae of Assynt similarly observed how the land question had viscerally captured public imagination to the point where it could no longer be ignored by politicians. In him we see again the characteristic ambiguity around theology. On the one hand, he doubted its relevance. On the other, he appeared to embody it.

I think the important thing for us was that, once the politicians saw the support we were getting, then they had to go with the public mood. It influenced them! [But] what happened in Assynt, it may be radical in terms of Highland history, but not in terms of human history. You find indigenous people in many parts of the world fighting to reclaim their

15. 1 Kgs 19. See also, for example, Isa. 11.21-22.

lands, to hold on to their lands. It's a very basic thing. Oh aye! Very fundamental... Had the Church any role in that? To my mind, no... [But] when you read the Bible, you know, you realise how important the land is. It's very fundamental. We all, you see, we all come from the land. We all go back to the land. The land is pretty fundamental to man... What happened in Assynt was waiting to happen. And who is to say that God is not influencing that?

To the Episcopalian theologian, Michael Northcott, the evidence for theology influencing land reform was simply that 'a lot of church people are involved'. In contrast, Meek urged caution, in that 'the religious part today resides in intellectual thinkers. But not in the average crofter. There is a danger in that. Intellectuals are not in touch with reality'.

The Church of Scotland's Alison Elliot conceded that the national land reform debate contained 'very little theological content'. She nevertheless stressed that 'one of the things that surprises me is how little theology you needed to get people very excited':

I think the theology provided not a justification [for land reform], but it provided depth and a focus... In other words a lot of people are involved in land reform who would not have said they were religious in their commitment, but there was a deep sense of connectedness with the land, a sense that the land was something that was beyond ourselves...and the theology provided a way of articulating that.

Or as Macleod concluded to a rapturous ovation back in 1998 when speaking at an Edinburgh University conference, which was also addressed by Lord Sewel, chair of the government's Land Reform Policy Group:

The campaign for land reform is driven by ideals: by a desire to curtail the powerful and to empower the disempowered; by a concern for stewardship and community; by a passion for freedom and justice. No one bill is going to deliver on these ideals; and until the ideals are delivered the campaign will continue, if necessary through bill after bill, because we are driven by the most irresistible of all forces: the divine spark of discontent (Macleod 1998: 54).

From data such as that just summarised, it was evident that theology undoubtedly influenced many of our informants. To varying degrees it legitimised, nuanced and empowered their role in land reform. The high profile that some theologically informed players were given in public debates and in the mass media during the run-up to the 2003 Act bears witness to the traction they held in what was otherwise a secular political arena.

At this juncture, it is worth making an aside to note that explicit Marxist materialistic analysis was almost entirely lacking in public

discourse, though it did inform some of the much earlier scholarly background (e.g. Hunter 1976). Land reformers were often accused of being communists by figureheads of landed power, but their main driver was an attempt, in the wake of Thatcherism and with the onslaught of globalisation, to rekindle an indigenous communitarian cultural ethos (MacKinnon 2008). Alongside this were influences from the co-operative, mutual solidarity and mutual self-help movements (Boyd 1998), as well as environmental campaigning such as that developed in the 1990s by the pioneering NGO, Reforesting Scotland,<sup>16</sup> which seeks to reconnect arboriculture with multiple layers of human culture. Such ontologies of human ecological relationship are deeply embedded in Scotland and in other corners of 'Old Europe'. Expressed as communitarianism, they long pre-date Marxism and do not imply a materialistic dialectic. Their pedigree—rural but with urban continuity in Scotland's case—can be essentialist to the point of positing an 'essential Scotland' (McCrone 1992: 13, 17) in which people understand themselves as being shaped in time and space both by their history and place (McIntosh 2008).

While communitarian principles are eminently compatible with contemporary 'green spirituality' and its variants, they are rarely, in vernacular Scotland, overtly driven by it. Societies with ancient roots are sometimes wary of what they may see as mildly wacky new-fangled formulations. Most Scots would see their communitarianism in very prosaic terms. It is simply 'of the people'—with roots both in Christianity and the poetry, literature, and song of a living bardic tradition (Smith 1986; Newton 2000, 2009; McIntosh 2001). It is their indigenous way; one that is increasingly recognised as consonant with that of other indigenous peoples (MacKinnon 2008).

But there lies the rub. Within that mythopoetic universe is a wealth of legend, magic, and faerie (cf. Black 2005; MacInnes 2006; Newton 2009).<sup>17</sup>

16. A leading land reform campaigner, Andy Wightman, was the Development Officer of this NGO from 1991 to 1993 and helped organise an influential study tour for Scottish activists and policy makers to learn from Norway's land tenure. See online: [http://www.reforestingscotland.org/projects/study\\_tour.php](http://www.reforestingscotland.org/projects/study_tour.php).

17. Some scholars—the so-called 'Celtosceptics'—deplore what they consider to be the excesses that can stem from what they characterise as 'Celtic twilight' representations of the tradition (e.g. Markus 1997; Meek 2000). Often in Scotland such reaction is a rearguard defence against what Protestant evangelicals once dismissed as 'Papist superstitions'. Carmichael's collection, which, alongside Irish material, is the main source of much contemporary nature-centred 'Celtic Christianity', was gathered during the nineteenth century mainly from the southern Outer Hebrides—an area that had been evangelised by Franciscans during the counter-Reformation (Carmichael 2007). Celtosceptic rancour does, however, find a more justifiable target in the

How does that sit alongside a post-Enlightenment pragmatism that routinely dismisses anything metaphysical as ‘airy-fairy’? In a much-cited century-old work of literary criticism, Professor G. Gregory Smith tackled this conundrum, arguing that ‘a strange union of opposites’ lies at the heart of Scottish culture. He called it the ‘Caledonian antisyzygy’—a capacity to hold contrary forces together in dynamic tension. Such, he said, is ‘the Scottish antithesis of the real and the fantastic’ wherein ‘the one invades the other without warning [as] “polar twins” of the Scottish Muse’. That which becomes florid and pretentious, like some ‘Celtic’ ramblings, is fast-deflated. But equally, that in the culture which oversteps practicality to the point of losing connection with the inner source and becoming prosaic—is correspondingly, as Smith describes it, ‘in the fun of things thrown topsyturvey, in the horns of elfland and the voices of the mountains’ (Smith 1919: 19-20). Such is ‘faerie’ in its psychodynamic function of freeing-up imaginal wellsprings in the unconscious (McIntosh 2005).

Landowners have tasted that ‘fun of things thrown topsyturvey’ that was often the secret weapon of reformers—as with such ‘merry pranksterism’ as market spoiling. And to Professor Smith’s eye, it would have been no surprise to find activists, as we have seen, doubting on the one hand the impact of theology on land reform, and on the other hand, completely living it out. Neither might it have surprised Professor Smith that when the people of Eigg took control of their island on 12 June 1997, three clergymen blessed the proceedings—Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, and Episcopalian. They did so at a menhir that had been newly erected by the pier and named *Clach na Daoine*—the ‘Stone of the People’. And that night, during a ceilidh dance headlined by the shamanic Celtic fusion band, Shooglenifty, the people and the lawyers and the politicians—and who knows...maybe even a late-to-bed clergyman—watched the White Women, the Blue Men, and the Red Beastie Drummers of the neopagan Beltane Fire Society of Edinburgh<sup>18</sup> whirl

‘unmediated individualism’ of much ‘New Age’ and neo-pagan appropriation of cultural material—this in ways that are abstracted from their context and depoliticised (Heelas 1996: 21). In passing, McIntosh observes, too, that contemporary Irish scholars (i.e. mainly of Roman Catholic extraction) commonly use the term ‘Celtic’, whereas their Scottish counterparts (i.e. mainly of Calvinist Protestant extraction) tend to prefer the linguistically based designation, ‘Gaelic’. This begs the question whether such terminology serves to maintain post-Reformation distinctions between Britain and Ireland, and whether the oft-explicit Celtosceptic distaste for mystical syncretism has sectarian origins.

18. Edinburgh’s annual Beltane spectacle on Carlton (faerie) Hill on 30 April attracts 12,000 spectators, notwithstanding efforts by some Christian fundamentalists

their torches high in the air around *Clach na Daoine*...as if spirituality might be more inclusive than any one sectarian mindset...as if the faerie host might yet be afoot, and as if antiszygy releases an elemental creative energy deeply consistent, we would not wish to doubt, with those Hebridean traditions that knew the immanent Christ as 'King of the Elements' (Carmichael 2007: 217).

#### *What Theology Says About the Land*

Although Dressler, Forsyth, Fyffe, and McIntosh variously mentioned 'hippie', 'green', 'faerie', Buddhist, Hindu, Taoist, and Native American influences, the general spiritual thrust admitted by our informants was explicitly Christian. As the Church of Scotland's Dr Alison Elliot put it, 'I mean, the faith expression predominantly at that time in Scotland was Christian. I don't know what the theologies of other faiths would say of ownership of land'.

The 'Old' Testament or Hebrew Bible featured much more than the New Testament. As Northcott put it, 'There's not a strong theology of land in the New Testament because the Kingdom is a sort of almost beyond place...' Nevertheless, Christ implicitly incorporates the Hebrew ethic of periodic land redistribution by proclaiming Jubilee in his debut mission statement.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Christian theology is deeply panentheistic. It renders the whole of Creation holy on account of the sustaining synonymy of life and incarnation.<sup>20</sup> And the Earth is described as Christ's 'footstool'<sup>21</sup>—a term that, in Hebraic theology, suggested the seat of the immanent presence of God (Jones 2003).

Among our interviewees, four generative themes emerged that strongly articulated a Judeo-Christian land theology: sovereignty, stewardship, exile, and Jubilee.

No fewer than four informants specified that God's sovereignty over the land was rooted in Psalm 24: 'The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof'. Forsyth spelled out the implications of this passage:

In the Old Testament it's taken for granted that the Earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. We're not owners, but custodians for a period. Yeah, for me, it's just what I call natural justice. It's built into my whole spirituality, my 'being'. A right to have some aim without being ripped of by someone owning the land, or owning a right to your labour.

to have the Council stop it on 'health and safety' grounds. See online: <http://www.beltane.org/>.

19. Lev. 25.8-12; Luke 4.19. 'Jubilee' also has such translations as 'the acceptable year of the Lord'.

20. John 1.1-9; Heb. 1.3; Rom. 8.22; cf. Prov. 8.22-36.

21. Matt. 5.35.

Blount anchored an almost identical point into constitutional theology and thus, by implication, into the mandate of the Scottish Parliament to carry through land reform:

There is a long tradition in Scottish theology of saying that if the Earth belongs to the Lord then no one individual should wield disproportionate power about land and its use... Sovereignty belongs to God and that sovereignty is entrusted by God to what, in traditional Scottish constitutional language, is called the Community of the Realm, which in some sense...represents the people of Scotland. And it is therefore for the people of Scotland to establish what institutions they wish to express that sovereignty.

Many others concurred. Elliot stated that, 'In dealing with landownership and land tenure, you're dealing with something that is ultimately a community resource. It's not ultimately something that is in the ownership of an individual'. Macleod said, 'I think the whole idea of somebody owning land is very problematical', and the reasons why this is so were described by all informants in terms of social justice. MacRae, for example, averred: 'It is not so much the ownership that matters, you know. But it's the power that goes with it'.

This brings us to the second generative theme—stewardship. As Northcott has written, in the Hebrew Torah land belongs to God, and the Israelites 'farmed it only as tenants and not as absolute owners' (Northcott 1996: 191). The implication of Psalm 24, said the Iona Community's Reverend Ian Fraser, is that 'any use of land is...as stewards, as trustees for God'. Elliot said the same.

The Earth belongs unto the Lord. The land itself is a gift from God. We are stewards of it and we have it in trust. And the idea of somebody 'owning' it in the same way you own a bicycle is something that is deeply offensive, to people who have that basic perspective on life and creation.

Macleod traced the mandate for stewardship back to Genesis:

Theologically, the drive comes most fundamentally from Genesis One and maybe Genesis Two, which even more specifically defines our relationship with the land... When I was engaged with the preparation for the Lingerabay Quarry<sup>22</sup> I looked into this more thoroughly. The ideas of service and guardianship, custodianship, are very very clear. The old English translation of the bible of Genesis Two said that Adam was put into the garden to till it and to keep it, but the actual language used in Hebrew is 'to guard it and to serve it'. Genesis is very plain, you know, the

22. His theological testimony at a government public inquiry about a proposed massive roadstone quarry—transcript in McIntosh 1995; 2001: 233-34.

bond between human species and soil is very, very close. Dust we are, and to dust we shall return.

Born in a traditional dry-stone thatched 'black house' in a Hebridean crofting community, Macleod set stewardship into pastoral perspective:

The soil produces food that sustains us. Yet it only does so if we cultivate it... I think the land needs to be loved and tended as much as livestock does. You have to be good to it. If you want a return from it you've got to be good to it in the same way as if you want to have a good return from your cow you've got to be good to your cow.

Martin touched on the bardic dimension, recalling that land consciousness has long been a concern of the poets, singers, and writers who frequently function as cultural prophets.

There's a very famous Scots singer who writes beautiful songs. His name is Dougie MacLean. He wrote a wonderful song a number of years ago. It's to do with the land: 'you cannot own the land / the land owns you'.<sup>23</sup> You're merely a human being in this lifetime passing through [but] the Island [i.e. Gigha] is eternal. We're just passengers in time. When we're here, we're given the responsibility to be stewards and ambassadors.

Exile—whether physical or psychological—was the third theological strand the research revealed. Such alienation invites parallels with the Israelites' captivity and return from both Egyptian and Babylonian slavery. In McIntosh's words: 'I've used that metaphor in my work. Landlordism is Egypt, but we're reclaiming the Promised Land'. To him, 'Land is the most fundamental form of capital and therefore capitalism colonises land and turns it into a commodity. Control over the land becomes a form of enslavement of the people'. Northcott expanded the same theme into a general critique of modernity.<sup>24</sup>

Modernity begins with a changed relationship between human beings, local communities, the state, and land. One of the first things the nation state does is to take land from the people. It does this in England through the acts of the Enclosures. And after those acts people lost their ability to forage for food and fuel, to hunt, to graze their animals freely. And they become more servile and were even forced to come and work in the cities. And this is like the beginning. This is like what happened with Scotland with the Clearances. And it's the kind of fundamental injustice in which modern society is born. We haven't become wage slaves by accident. We have become wage slaves partly as result of the changed relationship

23. From the album *Real Estate* (1988): 'It's the Land. It is our wisdom/ It's the Land. It shines us through/ It's the Land. It feeds our children/ It's the Land. You cannot own the Land. The Land owns you'.

24. A critique which forms a recurring theme in his work (Northcott 1996, 2005).

between people and land. That is a crucial part of what the state does. And that still goes on today.

Several respondents had a similar take on history, often using the Highland Clearances as a proxy for the rise of modernity. MacRae, for example, said 'People have never forgotten the history. The law, the crofting acts, gave the people the right to be on the land...but it never gave them back the rights they had'. Northcott—who is Scottish-domiciled with English family roots—connects this freshness of folk memory to the dynamism of Scottish land reform.

I think there's a spiritual relation to land in Scotland that is stronger than in England. There is still a sense in Scotland, even with people living in cities, that the land belongs to them. I think that's a kind of gut level sense that you find in Scotland but you don't find in England because the Clearances were much more recent [than the Enclosures].

The metaphoric return from exile and the end of slavery finds perpetuation in our fourth theological generative theme—the Jubilee of the Older Testament. Part of this proclaims 'liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants' and the redistribution of the land every fifty years. God says: 'The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants...[and] you shall provide for the redemption of the land'. Here 'redemption' means both giving the land back to its original holders and granting it a 'Sabbath' of rest. Blount discussed this point, emphasising Isaiah's injunction not to enlarge land holdings at the expense of one's neighbour's needs: not to 'join field to field'.<sup>25</sup>

The Jubilee provisions are not just about the cancellation of debt but the return of land...symptoms of poverty and other misfortune... Indebtedness is a downward spiral and the theology, the justice of the Jubilee, is about recognising that and saying that there has to be an intervention to stop the cycle...and that applies as much to land ownership as to indebtedness.

For Fraser, such Jubilee points towards salvation as a deeper freedom wherein 'freedom is a gift of God'. McIntosh expressed it as the call to full humanisation.

I see land reform as holding out the possibility of nothing less than the full expression of what it means to be a human being. And I think that's why land is such a burning issue in the Bible. When people have been alienated from the land it becomes a spiritual issue, and not just a matter of economics or agriculture.

25. Isa. 5.8.

Let us now summarise our four generative themes that express what theology was perceived to say about the land question. Most of our informants understood divine *sovereignty* to imply a human mandate of *stewardship*. But landlordism subsumes this, and like the Egyptian or Babylonian *exile*, imposes varying levels of slavery—physical, psychological, and perhaps spiritual. Finally, *Jubilee* symbolises the restoration of freedom. Here the idea is that divine justice should periodically intercede and punctuate the timeline of human history.

We might note at this juncture the power of a metanarrative in giving meaning and direction in the struggle against oppression. For many of our informants, narratorial control—the power to determine story—was and is ultimately constellated by Scripture (though not necessarily as a literal fundamentalism). Such ‘poetic constellation’ (McIntosh 2001: 153) can be experienced as a living force in the being of those who ‘see’ spiritually by the soul, just as they also ‘see’ physically by virtue of their eyes, or ‘see’ reason through their minds (Panikkar 2006: 12-13). Even those of our informants with an interfaith perspective tended to express their local struggles in ways that were scripturally configured. In a Scottish context, such archetypally rooted story arcs have narratorial traction. They tap bedrock strata of meaning in both the personal and in the cultural psyche.

Lyotard may have defined postmodernity as ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ (Lyotard 1986: xxiv). However, the perennial taproot of the pre-modern ancient psyche casts suspicion on such hermeneutics with their characteristic oblivion to the possibility of divine grace (Spretnak 1991). The soul queries the nihilism endemic to postmodern narcissism. In so doing the land—the physical basis of life—becomes a sign and a portent. Its ecology calls us back to the essential, and to spirituality as the essentialist underpinning of life-infused reality. Such, we would argue, is nothing less than the cosmic working-through in space and time of all-sustaining Divine Providence. It is the unfolding of Dharma; the ongoing process of the Creation that reconciles the physical and the metaphysical.

#### *How Theology Challenges Landlordism*

The bottom-line challenge was what Blount (2001) has expressed as ‘the sin of latifundianism’—that is to say, the ‘sin’ (or breaking of community with one another, with the Earth, and with God) of large-scale landlordism structured to extract wealth from tenants. According to Walter Wink (1992), theology challenges this by naming, unmasking and engaging the Powers that Be. Wink’s triune rubric will serve to organise our discussion in this subsection.

*Naming the Powers* is required to bring them into visibility. Fraser illustrates such conscientisation from his experience growing up in north-east Scotland.

I felt there was something that had gone very wrong, but I couldn't get my finger on it as a boy... It was a bit like an elephant in [the] High Street. You could put your hand on it, and feel there was something that was strange. There was something wrong there, but [you would] not know what it was... Really, it was the rapaciousness of [those] who threw people out of houses and burnt their homes and their roofs over their heads.

It was Fraser's encounter with liberation theology in Nicaragua that later helped him to 'name' his experience. Macleod also understood the importance of 'naming' as the courage to stand up and speak out.

I try to highlight certain obscenities, like the sporting estates which... occupy huge parts of the Highlands and, indeed, took them out of economic use. And they were simply for pleasure... individual fiefdoms and no-go areas. It's a general sense of injustice that people who were totally alien to the culture had exclusive rights to shooting the deer and fishing the salmon, and they were also able to obstruct the community's projects. They could insist that our road, for example, couldn't go near their residences, and they could refuse to release land for houses and whatever.

*Unmasking the Powers* goes deeper. It reveals the working of oppressive psychological and spiritual dynamics. McIntosh, for example, 'saw landlordism as being more than just an economic evil, but also a psychological and spiritual evil... Theologically land is God's gift of providence. It provides what people need. And a landowner, taking rent from the people is a theft of their providence'. Martin also laid it bare:

There was so much social injustice. In my experience, the ones who suffered under the rule of the landlords were people who objected to their methods... [But consider] Easter for example, the crucifixion. The Lord gave his life to release us from the tyranny of Satan. Similarly we're released from tyrants as well. The tyranny of the landlords, the so-called lairds.

*Engaging the Powers* may entail legislative or other resolute action, but that is usually preceded by confrontation at a psychospiritual level. In our view it is imperative to understand that much of what drives land-ownership is damaged ego identity. The tangibility of owning land props up an insecure sense of belonging (Bull, McIntosh, and Clark 2008). As such, landed power is nearly always vulnerable to embarrassment. It hides behind legitimising tokens of benevolence such as charity and *noblesse oblige*. Engaging the Powers questions this, revealing what Paulo Freire calls 'false generosity' by pointing out that, 'In order to have the

continued opportunity to express their “generosity”, the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well’ (1972: 21). But as Freire also says, our calling must ultimately be to lift oppression while simultaneously helping the oppressor to rebuild their own humanity. ‘Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one... The oppressor–oppressed contradiction’ must be ‘superseded by the humanization of all men’ (1972: 25).

Blount deftly demonstrated the possibility of combining confrontation with love when he said:

We challenge the principle that one major landowner should have disproportionate power—even when we recognise that some of them used that in very positive and progressive ways—for exactly the same reason as we believe in a democratic political system even though some dictators can be benevolent.

Forsyth similarly said, ‘Without soul there is no growth’. ‘Only through love’ can growth transcend its growing pains and set free the audacity to hope. By ‘speaking truth to power in love’—a favourite Quaker expression of Forsyth’s—we edge towards the mystical realisation ‘that we’re all one essentially; in essence, we’re all one’.

#### *The Challenged but Empowered Community*

Sometimes it is hard for outsiders to understand why communities wanted to function as self-governing communities of place when the challenges are so multi-layered. MacKenzie told the story of how, on ‘a miserable day’ in December 1992, a ‘lady journalist’ came to see him at Assynt and said, ‘I can’t imagine why it is that you people are so passionately keen to gain control over this land. After all, it’s pretty barren and uninspiring’. He then pointed out the heaps of stones that lay scattered over his and every other croft and asked her what they might be. She suggested that they might be unusual geological formations. MacKenzie replied:

Every stone that you see there bears testimony to my forebears cleaning this land to make it reasonably capable of agricultural cultivation. As far as I’m concerned, this unbroken link that I have through my forebears with this area of land is replicated by every native of this community in terms of their determination to gain control of the land of their forefathers.

Few would want to ‘go back’ to the living conditions of their forebears. But is even going forwards as an empowered community of place a possibility given the conflicting demands of the modern world? Macleod wrestled with the possibility in this way:

So community ownership in my view is an ideal. It’s a tremendous thing that you have these homes, each with some four acres of arable cultivable

land and with rights to graze animals on the common grazings. And each one has a stake in the community... The community enterprise as I knew it worked extremely well. But it worked well in an economy where people did not have a lot of spare income, where people didn't have cars, didn't have telephones and televisions. They didn't have mobile phones. They didn't have computers and didn't go on holidays. And [having] all that [nowadays] means [needing to earn] a considerable amount of income... You know, that generation was time-rich and money-poor. And we are money-rich and time-poor. And because we are time-poor, we are also socially poor... But the crofting community, at least in the 1940s, had a very rich social and intellectual and spiritual and communal life. [The question is] whether we can reinstate that? Not if people expect average incomes at £25,000 a year, I'm afraid. And I suppose we do expect that.

Further barriers to empowered community include high levels of mobility made possible by cheap oil and pronounced property price differentials between southern and northern Britain. This has brought benefits but has also destabilised traditional social cohesion. Echoing a complaint that can be heard time and again in most indigenous villages, Meek observed that today, 'The Highlands and Islands are changing. All new people come in, hiding from other problems in their lives, social problems, mental problems'. Speaking of a legal process that can allow a croft to be taken out of tenancy and transferred to freehold—thus to the full exposure of free market speculation—Meek captured a widespread sentiment with the phrase: 'To buy your croft is deceit against the community'.

Tension also manifests between those who value human community and those who buy mainly to acquire a view, or even for property speculation. Such crosscurrents have soured native people's perception of 'the environment' in some communities. Animosity is also felt towards outside environmental groups that lack understanding of indigenous mores. As MacRae said:

We may have thrown off the feudalism of landlords here in Assynt, but it's rapidly being replaced by the feudalism of environmentalists... You end up a spectator on your own land... They don't have any affinity with the land. They're like empire builders I'm afraid... People give them their money, because these bodies are saying, 'We're protecting the land'. Protecting it from what? From us? People like me!... These organisations are in many respects, as far as the future of our community is concerned, maybe the biggest enemy we have. And it is a terrible thing to say that. Because I have no problem with the conservation ethics. None whatsoever. But when I see it being hijacked by these organisations, and them using it for their own ends...that, as a native, that's what I must resist. Oh yes!

Such negative perceptions are not unique to buyout communities. On the contrary, buyouts empower grassroot communities in ways that can

work symbiotically with the power of big conservation organisations. What matters is that the community, and not outside officials, are in control. On Eigg, for example, there is an exemplary partnership with the Scottish Wildlife Trust which helped during the buyout appeal and with subsequent job creation. MacRae was much more positive when it came to describing what autonomy had achieved.

It gives us rights that we didn't have as [landlord tenanted] crofters. As [such] crofters you only had the right to use the land agriculturally. This has given us the fishing rights, the sporting rights, the right to development, or whatever... The land is poor, and I think up here our communities in a sense are withering away. Crofting is in decline [but] if we own the land maybe we can do something to reverse that... [The buyout] has helped. I think we have arrested the depopulation in this area. It's a slow process.

All three of the iconic buyouts have set about tackling depopulation by establishing successful social housing programmes. These can liberate the land's value in ways that help to sustain families and local services. For McSparran:

I think you will need to keep an amount of houses that people can afford [otherwise you end up with] forty holiday homes instead of forty affordable rentable homes. People in a couple of years will buy and sell at hundreds of thousands of pounds... Who could afford that? Nobody can... Well, that is no bloody good to Gigha. That's no good to anyone!

Such public-spirited cussedness has served Gigha well. In the first seven years of freedom,

the school has gone from six to twenty-three, the population has gone from ninety to a hundred and fifty again. We have given people the opportunity to have their own businesses: a hotel, a gallery, houses... Instead of paying rent to the laird, you're paying the Gigha Heritage Trust...so that stays in the island...it's not going to that crocodile laird who could buy a yacht... It's Gigha money and it remains ours...for the good of the island, not for one individual.

For Martin, all this had led him to remain on the island and to take pleasure in knowing that his daughter could consider returning. The qualitative achievements exceed any statistics:

The term Laird no longer exists on Gigha. It's nothing but medieval nonsense. I really believe the direction we've taken is the direction to go... Have you heard of the notorious Monday morning feeling? Well for years every day from Monday till Friday or Saturday, it was hard to go to work. Your heart wasn't in it... [But] when I was sixty, land reform took place. I was employed by the Isle of Gigha Heritage Trust, and the Monday

morning feeling had gone. I had a complete transformation in attitude, all because of freedom.

'The time of social justice has arrived. The time of social injustice has gone', Martin continued. Residents could assume a sense of responsibility previously denied to them 'because the people have a say in the matter. They're in control rather than a person who bought Gigha as an investment to hold it for a few years, double their money, and move along'. As such, Gigha now has a responsibility 'to encourage people to come here and make them welcome. And wherever we go on this Earth we should act as ambassadors, not for any personal gain but for the good of the island'.

For Martin, the remaining challenge 'is to strengthen the church again'. Likewise, speaking from the opposite end of the Reformation religious divide but from the same inner spiritual space, MacKinnon said:

Now, I visualize a full church, full of people huddling together in the church to worship God together. That vision leads me to work for the Church. But I don't force my vision. One has to be humble, and to leave the effect of one's work in God's hands. It may in the end not happen as I envision it. Or it might happen by someone else. What happens, it is the will of the Lord.

### *Mainstreaming Church Politics of the Land*

This brings us, lastly, to the institutional churches. Often maligned with good reason, a church at its best should be a trellis upon which the vine of spirituality can grow. The churches have always played a pivotal part in Scottish identity and constitutional affairs (Storrar 1990; McIntosh 2000). In the 1980s and 1990s, church leaders and theologians helped bridge both denominational and political divides in the campaign that delivered Devolution (Wright 1997). Some, such as Canon Kenyon Wright, an Episcopalian, worked intimately on the politics of devolution and also pressed for land reform (SLRC 1999).

During this period, Scottish religious NGOs, including Christian Aid and the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund, actively promoted liberation theology. In March 1995, Gustavo Gutiérrez was brought from Peru to deliver the Drummond lectures at Stirling University. His themes included 'The Preferential Option for the Poor' and 'Doing Theology'.<sup>26</sup> Few public Scottish theologians doubted that theology was

26. By the time this paper appears, McIntosh hopes to have digitised the tapes of his lectures. See online: <http://www.alastairmcintosh.com/general/resources.htm>.

to be lived and not just argued. As Gutiérrez says: 'To liberate = to give life' (Gutiérrez 1988: xxxvii).

Blount captured the ecumenical tenor in his interview when he warmly praised the leadership of Free Church of Scotland, which had broken away from the Church of Scotland (of which Blount is a minister) in the Disruption of 1843:

I think it's interesting that the Free Church of Scotland which in some ways is seen as a very conservative, theologically conservative, institution—far more conservative than the Church of Scotland—nonetheless has said both in the twentieth century and in the nineteenth century, hugely radical things about land reform from a theological perspective.

The Scottish Churches' Parliamentary Office, of which Blount was Secretary until 2009 and which politically represents both Protestant and Roman Catholic churches, stated in a briefing on land reform that it sought to 'enrich the debate in ways that reflect the commitment of the churches to the well-being of Scotland' (SCPO 2000). Another briefing affirmed ecumenism by opening discussion of the 'Theological Context' with reference to a 1998 Pontifical Council document, 'Towards a Better Distribution of Land', which spoke of the 'dramatic human, social and ethical problems caused by the phenomenon of the concentration and misappropriation of land' (SCPO 2001).

Both the Free Church of Scotland and the Church of Scotland produced reports for their general assemblies on the need, practicality, and theology of land reform (Free Church of Scotland 1997; Church of Scotland 1998). It will suffice to cite the latter as it was informed, in part, by the former. The question of 'who owns this land?' it said, is a 'profoundly spiritual' question. Assynt and Eigg are cited as 'invaluable examples of new forms of community ownership which need to be developed and encouraged'. The report concludes:

If it is to reflect Biblical priorities then land reform needs to be directed towards reversing the treatment of land as a status symbol or a commodity and dispersing the concentration of land ownership. In so far as the Bible recognises the deep interconnection between the justice and health of human society and the health and fertility of the land so land reform needs to reconnect the people and the land...restoring the biodiversity of the land and directing its use to the benefit of the community as a whole (Church of Scotland 1998).

Whatever the national church's past failure to promote social and environmental justice, it had clearly taken an impressive stand as the twentieth century drew to an end. By embracing a theology of liberation and integrating the land itself into the community to be freed, it

demonstrated, hand-in-hand with the theologically more conservative Free Church of Scotland, a fresh relevance for the twenty-first century and beyond.

### *Conclusion*

For a decade leading up to 2003, Scotland demonstrated a remarkable flowering of land reform theology. An impressive degree of ecumenical unity and wider political integration surrounded this. The movement was locally based but internationally informed, and its achievements today remain fledgling but internationally acclaimed.<sup>27</sup>

For a while it was as if a mighty whale had breached into consciousness. A movement of the Spirit, normally deep beneath the cultural surface, briefly touched the societal mainstream. As of 2009, that Leviathan has retreated from view, but in this paper we have sought to catch the backslash before its waves subside.

We are living in an era where theology has a new-found political relevance, but often in regressive ways. Our research hints at progressive possibilities—ones that can emerge when the 'Remnant' is permitted to flourish into a constellating rubric aided by liberation theology. The whale may for now have dipped back into the archetypal waters of the collective unconscious. But in Scottish land reform it has left a sign and a portent. Such are its regenerating communities of place that embody hope and give life.

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27. Eigg, for example, was visited in May 2009 by four executives from the Inter-American Development Bank (serving Latin America and the Caribbean), interested in its governance and community entrepreneurial projects, such as its electricity grid running on renewable energy—photo gallery online: <http://critics.sundayherald.com/slideshows/eigg/4.html> (accessed 8 June 2009).

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