

Land, Culture, and the Future of Rural Communities

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Introduction

One of the areas of study which fascinates me most, is that which links land, culture, and rural development. At its most basic, rural development should be about improving the quality of life for people in rural communities. The land is our most fundamental resource from which this improvement can begin. The quality of the natural habitats, the management of farming, forestry, housing, and both recreational and productive land use, are dependant upon the land and our attitudes towards it. The priorities which we place upon these uses of land, and indeed towards the ownership of land and land-based resources, is conditional on the cultural perspectives of our society. There are, however, many perspectives which have shaped the attitudes of society, and these change with time.

It is my contention that we are so firmly associated with the land of this country, so conditioned by the ways in which we view landscape, and of belonging to the land, that land should cease to be an object with individual property rights. Our relationship with the land is so intimately tied to our culture as a people, that the ownership and use of land should be regarded as common property of the community of the nation.

Land and Language

Perhaps the most public connection between land and culture is in the naming of places.

In Fionn MacColla's novel "The Albannach", his character Duncan Lachlan Iain of the Squint at one point is given to say of the English language:-

" there's no music in it at all that I could ever hear and the queerest thing in it is that the words seem to have no meaning to them. Now in our own Gaelic a man can't tell his name itself without every man will know his whole history and his people's before him; and the name of every place will be a picture of what will be there, so that a man will almost know a place on its first seeing by its

likeness to the name that will be on it. Say Achadh nam beith to a Gaelic man and he will be seeing in his mind a level place and the birch trees growing here and there, and they white and slender. Say Achadh nan siantan and he will be seeing little plain between great mountains and the rain driving down on it. But will a man of you tell me what Achbay or Achnasheen will mean in the Beurla, or what kind of place is in Lowestoft or Dover?" [1]

The names given by a people to the features and localities which are important to them is both a functional and a spiritual activity. To begin with, the naming of the landscape may have evolved from a pure description of the topography, the shape of the land formations, the colour of a patch of hillside, the texture of the land surface.

I Leave Tonight From Euston [2]

I shall leave tonight from Euston

By the seven-thirty train,

And from Perth in the early morning

I shall see the hills again.

From the top of Ben Macdhui

I shall watch the gathering storm,

And see the crisp snow lying

At the back of Cairngorm.

I shall feel the mist from Bhrotain

and the pass by Lairig Ghru

To look on dark Loch Einich

From the heights of Sgoran Dubh.

From the broken Barns of Bynack

I shall see the sunrise gleam

On the forehead of Ben Rinnes

And Strathspey awake from dream.

And again in the dusk of evening

I shall find once more alone

The dark water of the Green Loch,
And the pass beyond Ryvoan.
For tonight I leave from Euston
And leave the world behind;
Who has the hills as a lover,
Will find them wondrous kind.

At a simple level, the reader does not need to be familiar with the meaning of Gaelic names of the Scottish mountains in order to enter the spiritual landscape of fond memory which these mountains evoke.

At a deeper level, these names go far beyond a mere descriptive functionality, as any study of the linguistic nomenclature of the uplands will show. Gaelic place names such as Alltnabreac, Meall an Tarmachan, Strathspey, and Loch an Eilean, are not only purely descriptive, but they have entered into other languages, and into the national identity, with a utilitarian familiarity in which, though the original meaning has been obscured, ensures that they have gained new geographical significance.

This level of significance has even been maintained (though to a lesser degree) with the vast litany of Gaelic and Scots place names which have been heavily bastardised into some semblance of English phonetic speech. Names such as Cairn Gorm, Garve and Lettermore, are still closely recognisable as first generation derivatives of the original, descriptive place names of the land.

Land and Function

A next stage beyond this complex physical description of the landscape stems from the stories which are generated by a human society when it occupies an area for any significant period of time. There is an immense catalogue of place names which stem from anecdotes of folklore, social history, and land use, and which are thus rooted, not just in the vocabulary of a people, but in their ways of life, their customs, hopes, fears and value systems. Thus, for example, in Gaelic, there are more than 20 names used to identify the parts of a peat bank, while the Gaelic word for a tractor is "tractar". It is one of the few words which I am equally familiar with in the Inuit language, German, French, Hebrew, Spanish and Hindi, to name but eight!

This does not simply reflect that a tractor is a relatively modern invention, for in many languages there are newly discovered concepts and articles which have been quite traditionally named in the indigenous language. It is about the relevance of peat to the lives and culture of the people. The importance to a crofting family of peat for domestic fuel is reinforced by specific access to land for cutting peats, and indeed the legal right to cut peats in certain areas, frequently forms part of the heritable tenancy of a croft. On an individual croft or common grazings, the right to cut peats may be required for the present, and reasonable future, domestic use of the croft is actually enshrined within the Crofting Acts [3]. This is surely a very early example of the practical application of what we now term "sustainable development" in relation not just to the human use of the land, but in the very consumption of the land itself. The allocation of peat-cutting areas, the design in the layout of the peat banks, and often the timing of the peat cutting were important features in the life-cycle of the rural community. The fact that these activities continue at all, in so many areas, is a testament to the strength of the link between human rural society and the natural landscape. That traditional peatland management persists with such tenacity is an indication that this tradition reaches right back into the early mists of our emergence as a tool-using species.

Through the reconstruction of the language of the land and landscape, it is possible to rediscover a physical-spiritual relationship with the land which relates to the history of our people and our place in this part of the cosmos.

It should not be interpreted, however, that this relationship with the land is wholly a historical experience. The essence of being able to link historical facts to the reality of present day rural life is precisely the feature which gives depth, continuity, and a sense of identity to rural communities in the midst of a new "commercialised" society which is rootless, alienated, and selfish. In addition, as the rural families depended upon the land for their existence, they often banded together in an extended family in order to maximise their labour potential, and to spread the load of their existence. The patterns of their lives, their social and economic opportunities, were in large measure conditioned by the demands and the rewards of the land on which they dwelt.

An interesting observation on this facet of life in close proximity to the practical use of the land, is in the fact that the extended families within indigenous communities often maintain these strong links to the land, despite migration to the city, relocation to other countries, and /or intergenerational separation. It has been a common practice, for example, for Scottish schools to observe a special "tattie holiday" in order to release extra labour for potato harvesting; and it is still a common practice for expatriates and students to return to have their holidays at home in the Highlands and Islands specifically in order to help with harvesting the peats.

Many cultures share this wholesome trust and fellowship with the soil. In the ancient horse and cattle bazaar of Kashgar, when a deal is struck, the middle-man will touch the palms of the buyer and seller to the earth as a sign of fidelity to their agreement.

Another reflection of this sense of identity can be sketched by a simple, true, story which happened to me several years ago. After a Scottish Crofters' Union Executive Meeting in Durness, the members of the committee drifted outside to view some of the local sheep in an adjacent field. One of the local crofters asked one of my colleagues where he came from, and on being told Glen Roy, Lochaber, the local man immediately began to quote some verses of Gaelic poetry about the glen which he had learned nearly fifty years ago at school. On the way south in the car, the man from Lochaber said, "That's what I like about these meetings. When two farmers meet, they talk about the price of grain or the cost of livestock, but there I met a man who could quote a poem more than two hundred years old, describing my own glen, though he has never even been there".

This ability to use language and written images to create representations of our surroundings is part of the imaginative and communicative ability of humans which sets us apart from other animals. The descriptive oral and musical traditions of the land, and the stories associated with the land, true and mythical, are reflected in the cultures of many human societies throughout the world. It is popular knowledge that the names of many of the landscape features of the Western Isles and west coast mainland of Scotland have been derived from the Norse, not simply as the language of colonists, but as reference points of navigation for persistent visitors. This may explain why prominent hills and headlands which are easily visible from the sea have Norse etymological roots, whereas the physical landscape of the areas further inland are uniformly Gaelic in derivation. [4]

Those of you who are familiar with the work of Bruce Chatwin will recognise a resonance of the aboriginal "songlines" [5] which he so beautifully described in the book of that name. In this book he describes in detail, perhaps as well as any non-aboriginal is able to do, the musical vade mecum inherited by every Aboriginal from their tribal elders, which enables them to navigate through unfamiliar territory.

Each family inherits a snatch of traditional song which describes the lie of the land, - where to hunt, where to find water, and the tribal history of that area. A person with sufficient verses of a song would be able to navigate across unvisited land, literally by singing their way from one end of Australia to another. The culture of the people helps to provide a mental map of the land, which is independent of personal knowledge of that landscape.

This is an exceptional, but very practical illustration of the intimate connection of culture with the very fabric of the land. But it is of course much more than just a navigational tool, it is a spiritually and physically binding relationship with the land which serves to reinforce the self-identity and self-esteem of the indigenous people.

It is easy to recognise in this modern, highly transient, society the fact that the arrival of a non-indigenous community of people into a locality will alter the context of that society in many ways, good, bad, and indifferent. It is perhaps less easy to appreciate that the fundamental relationship of the indigenous community to their surrounding environment is also altered.

At its simplest, the lack of understanding of the place names of a locality, whether because they are named in a different language to the language of the new arrivals, or because they are embedded in a different cultural tradition or social history, will mean the almost complete loss of one intimate level of relationship between the land and its people.

Many of the "original" place names are lost in their entirety, some are bastardised into the new tongue, and the remaining features which are left unaltered are reduced to the appendage of exotic labels, with no utilitarian nor cultural function. This is why the work of people such as Adam Watson, in his collection of the Gaelic place names of Upper Deeside, is so invaluable [6]. This is no sterile collection of names, but an attempt to reincorporate the local language of the land into normal, every-day conversation. This is vitally important, for if the language of the land is not utilised as the living language of the common people of the locality, it becomes a ritualistic, academic exercise, divorced from its cultural roots, and a sterile tool of linguistic comparison, frozen forever in time and in scholarly exercise books.

At another level, there is a deeper, spiritual attachment to the nuances of the land. There are many peoples across the globe, who, when the first cartographic surveys arrived in earnest, took great delight in hiding and misnaming the features of the landscape from the newcomers, who were usually of a different nationality, and were frequently supported by various military organisations. [4]

The Scottish Gael, the Maori, the Australian Aborigine, and the North American Indian were at pains, not only to obscure the meaning of the places about which the map-makers enquired, but also often swapped the names of hills, lochs, and rivers, both to confuse the newcomers, and to retain the "correct" knowledge of the topography, which they felt belonged, as of right, to themselves alone.

The newcomers, when they settled and became residents in their new land, contributed both positively and negatively to the cultural links with the land. Some links arose from incidents such as battles, the establishment of new settlements, and social events which have since been written into history. The negative events include the colonialist renaming of places in order to overlay newer claims of cultural identity.

Within the Highlands, the village of Inverlochy (a descriptive term - "the mouth of the river Lochy") became known as "Fort William" in honour of the conquering Hanovarians, but the new Gaelic name became An Gearasdan (the garrison) which still reflects the Highlanders' contempt, hidden from the usurpers by their ignorance of the landscape and the language. This was true in many countries where the military victors began to make maps of their conquered dominions, and to rename the features of the landscape in their own tongue. [4]

As well as the overtly political aspects of such renaming, there are also examples of cultural antagonisms. The thin spire of rock known as Bod an Storr, "the penis of Storr", offended the sensibilities of Victorian visitors, and was changed to Bodach an Storr, "the old man of Storr" for subsequent maps. In many localities, such ironies remain to highlight the clash between the romanticised perceptions of the newcomers, and the utilitarianism of the older tongue. The twin tops of the mountain Lochnagar (itself a misnamed derivative) are romanticised in poetry by Lord Byron, among others, but are still called prosaically in Gaelic Cac Carn Mor and Cac Carn Beag, respectively translated as Big and Little Pile of Shit.

This, of course, is not limited to the Scottish landscape and language. In a diametrically opposed region of the globe, the travel writer Paul Theroux [7] noted a locality in the Marquesas Islands, in which the local name for "The Bay of Penises" so-called because of the "unmistakably phallic basalt pillars" has been sanitised into "The Bay of Virgins" by the insertion of the letter "i" by "outraged missionaries". This cosmetic linguistic alteration has effectively emasculated the natural features of the landscape and the local culture from the contemporary vocabulary of the region.

But I repeat, is it not to be supposed that this attachment to the land is a mere historical record, though it is certainly true that in most areas the links have been diluted through time.

I am reminded of the story of a friend in Tennessee. [8] A knowledgeable "mountain-man" with a vast, intimate, practical knowledge of the mountains complained to the official authorities about an obvious breach in US environmental protection laws. Spoil from strip mining activities was fouling a local stream, endangering aquatic life and threatening to flood the local valley. Eventually, a young geologist arrived, inspected the damage being done to the stream, and finally announced, "I'm sorry, I cannot take action. According to my map, there is no stream there." This is a graphically stark indicator of the different perspectives from which we view even the apparently incontestable physical features of the landscape. How much greater potential for disagreement is there when we begin to consider judgements which are based upon apparently less tangible attributes and attitudes connecting our relationship with the land?

A stark example from South Australia is further testament to the colonisation of the knowledge of indigenous people by a newly arrived, more powerful elite. The confrontation between modern tourist development and the inviolability of aboriginal sacred sites was compromised by the traditional need for secrecy regarding the rites, obligations, and importance of sacred sites. Oral evidence from both male and female elders of the tribe was dismissed in favour of more "objective" documentation of white anthropologists who were "experts" on aboriginal culture. A comment was made that, "The white government doesn't believe blackfellas until they see things written down by white fellas." [9]

In his unique and original study into the lives of Beaver Indians in North-west Canada, Hugh Brody made startling use of land use occupancy maps. [10] These are graphical representations of the total land use which a community makes of its available land area. With only mild modifications, such mapping techniques can be applied to great effect in other geographical localities. Within the realms of a crofting township, for instance, there are distinct areas of land utilisation, for the purposes of settlement, agriculture, peat cutting, improved and rough grazing, sand extraction, fishing, seaweed harvesting, shellfish collection, forestry, hunting, and recreation. This realisation, is perhaps not so obviously apparent in the age of convenience foods and energy at the flick of a switch, but it reflects our continued dependence on the land as a whole, as opposed to just those discrete sections of it which we most commonly frequent.

When these varied and vicarious activities which make use of the land are aggregated together, it is often surprising to recognise the extent of the land impact which even a modern, non-subsistence society, may have on the surrounding environment. In the light of this, however, it should come as no surprise that the vast majority of rural-dwelling individuals still have a residual sense of belonging to the land, and can identify, even irrationally, with the emotive impact of any restrictions placed upon their realisation of this affinity.

This is the beginning of the extreme depth of perspective which that great Highland writer, Neil Gunn, described as belonging to "the other landscape". [11] In his novel of this name, he described the attenuation of the senses to the point at which a person is able to recognise "a landscape behind the physical one that I looked at". He went on to compare it with the range of impressions which we instinctively form of different strangers with whom we have short conversations. Even when the conversations are similar, our impressions of individuals may differ widely, from conviviality, to distrust, to open hostility, according to the subliminal signals which we somehow perceive. There are people too, who are able to read the unseen landforms and landmarks, usually, but not necessarily always, people who live in an intimate conspiracy with the land for their food, shelter, their labour, and their orientation.

I am also reminded of a verse of a poem by Norman MacCaig [12] which reads,

"On our way to a loch, two miles from Inveruplan,
Three of us (keepers) read the landscape as
I read a book. They missed no word of it:
Fox-hole, strange weed, blue berry, ice-scrape, deer's hoof-print.
It was their back yard, and fresh as the garden in Eden
(Striped rock 'like a Belted Galloway'). They saw what I
Saw, and more, and its meaning. They spoke like a native
The language they walked in. I envied them, naturally."

The historian Simon Schama has stated that nature and human perception of the world are not two separate realms, but part of a continuous whole. [13] This is in the great Scottish tradition championed by Sir Patrick Geddes, that mankind is not something set apart from the land and the global ecosystem, but an indivisible part of this system. With clarity, however, they investigated the links between human culture and that which we call "nature", and emphasised that if we are to recognise individual features of the landscape, let alone begin to understand them, then we need to give this landscape a shape and a form which is congruent with the history and the values of our own society. In part this can be conditioned by folk historians and folk memories. (e.g. [14], [15])

Though there are a great many misconceptions concerning the use of the land by indigenous communities - generally romanticised - there is little doubt of the potential impact of the collective memory. It was the ability to tap into this collective memory, with its associated feelings of injustice and indignation, which assisted, for example, the Assynt crofters in the mobilisation of public opinion throughout the world. As a result, many people backed them morally, politically, and with their own, however modest, financial contributions, to buy back the land on which they live. The vision which this campaign helped to create was assisted by a populist revulsion against the memory, or at least the perception, of the infamous Highland Clearances. The folk memory of this historical period is so strong that it engenders feelings of empathy, even solidarity, with any societal group appearing, however remotely and/or irrationally, to be attempting to redress these historical wrongs.

The crofting community is seen by many as a natural champion in this reconstructionism, despite the last two hundred years of decline, retrenchment, and marginalisation from what is perceived as the "mainstream" of rural society. This tentative, vaguely described, and even more vaguely rationalised image of the "typical" Highland community can be considered as a powerful "cultural landscape". This term, derived from the Scandinavian experience, effectively conjures up the mental picture, or stereotypical image of a landscape which has been created and / or maintained by the activities of

the human community living and working on that land, and which lies close to the heart of the imagination of the nation. [16]

In the Norwegian psyche, for example, the cultural landscape may be a rural image of a countryside with independently-owned family farms, earning a part-time living from farming, partly from fishing, partly from forestry, perhaps with a private saw mill and a small boat.

In North America and other parts of the "New World" this concept of the cultural landscape tends to be associated with the rugged-spirit, self-reliance of the early Western pioneers to the region. In both the Old World and the New World some extraordinary political and economic actions have been taken in order to support and sustain these national self-images of a "romantic" tenuous hold on existence during an imagined historical past. There is currently, however, considerable discussion on the level of balance between the concepts of "natural" and "managed" land which defines the maintenance of a cultural landscape.

Over the next few years, the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, the enforcement of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and the vacuum which will fill the gap caused by the collapse of the "Second World", will be crucially influenced by the strength of adherence to our concepts of the cultural landscape, and to the independence of small family farms in the landscape.

Elsewhere in his book on "Landscape and Memory", Schama draws attention to the fact that the beautiful landscape of the Yosemite Valley, the first National Park in the USA, was mistakenly regarded as a "wilderness" landscape, when in fact the meadow-floor was created and managed through regular fire-clearances by the Ahwahneechee Indians who occupied the valley. Later, this cherished landscape was afforded "protection" by evicting the Indians and excluding humans from much of the locality. It is ironic to note that this "firestick farming" style of landuse management was practised in many rural areas, from Native American lands in the USA and Canada, to the maquis of the Mediterranean rural areas, to supposed "wilderness" areas such as the Australian Outback. [17] In the Outback, for instance, Aboriginal people used sophisticated patterns of burning to maintain sustainable cropping of arid land animals, vegetation, and water sources. [18]

Without at this stage wishing to enter the whole political and economic debate on sustainable development, there is one vivid anecdote which further encapsulates our relationship with the land. In the aforementioned book on the aboriginal songlines, Bruce Chatwin describes an incident, while driving with an aboriginal friend, in which they cross the track of the man's songline. There was some confusion at first, until Chatwin realised that the man had learned to recite the song at walking pace, and so he slowed the car down to a crawl, whereupon the man began to sing his account of the region. Though it is unwise to read too much into this metaphor, there is a clear message that

our inter-relationship with the land is on a human scale. No matter the vastness of the landscape, or the enormity of the elemental challenge faced, the interface between an individual and the land is reducible to the personal level. This intimacy between the human individual and the landscape was perfectly encapsulated by Lewis Grassie Gibbon, that master of words and mood, not only in his novels, but in a 1934 essay on his own relationship with the land. In this, he conjured up the farming landscape of north-east Scotland, and an evocation of its wildlife - then added a new dimension.

"Those folk in the byre whose lantern light is a glimmer through the sleet as they muck and bed and tend the kye, and milk the milk into tin pails, in curling forth - they are The Land in as great a measure..... I like to remember I am of peasant rearing and peasant stock. Good manners prevail on me not to insist on the fact over-much, not to boast in the company of those who come from manses and slums and castles and villas, the folk of the proletariat, the bigger and lesser bourgeoisies. But I am again and again, as I hear them talk of their origins and beginnings and begetters, conscious of an overweening pride that mine was thus and so, that the land was so closely and intimately mine" [19]

Behind this reality, there are two very different philosophies. On one hand, there is the belief in an evolutionary ladder of human existence, a gradation of society from the primitive peasant to the suave, sophisticated urbanite. On the other hand, there is an insistence that all men and women are equal throughout the globe, and that cultural and societal differences are related to factors of history, environment, education, political stability, etc. The relationships of these two opposing perceptions of the land itself could not be more contrasting, and like many other cultural reflections, a myriad of stereotypical forms exist, from the peasant savage, to the peasant poet, from the country-dweller who is in harmony with their rural environment, to their neighbour who takes it for granted, and in so doing, damages the land, perhaps irreparably.

The relationship between pictorial images of the land and the human society in the Highlands and Islands has been documented by a book and a major exhibition to mark the centenary of the first Crofting Act. [20] In another publication, [21] I have tried to capture the essence of the relationship between Scottish literature and the land, so I do not want to greatly expand on those topics here. Suffice to say that the legacy of both pictorial images and text is extremely rich and highly varied.

A crucial aspect, however, is the difference in perspective between writers such as Burns, Gunn, and Gibbon who had intimate practical experiences as landusers, and those others who merely write from their imaginations. The different attitudes and attachments to the land are not simply questions of caprice, but are based upon the fundamental nature of human values as conditioned by direct environment. It is this difference, this awareness of the immense scope of landscape and of nature, which is often mistaken for apathy and indolence among indigenous people.

The persistence of many so-called "minority" cultures in maintaining forms of societal behaviour which are different from a homogeneous norm is regarded by detractors as a type of deviancy. To the indigenous people, however, the virtues of nomadism, part-time farming, hunting and trapping, transhumance, seasonal movements and a variety of traditional crafts, are integral to the very fabric of their existence. For many life styles which are intimately connected to the land, flexibility, adaptability, and mobility are the keys to ensure survival. For these reasons, it becomes apparent why ideological distinctions and logical abstractions in political argument are often defended with such tenacity. For the dwindling communities who interface with the land in more than an economic locus, there is steadily less room for compromise.

Art and the Land

The psychological link between human well-being, and the land environment which we each inhabit, is reinforced in a myriad of spiritual and artistic practices. The adherence to traditional skills, under the mantle of modern activities such as hobby-farming, guiding, and heritage employment is a means of maintaining real contacts with an intuitive past. This may be reinforced in the physical use of the land itself, for example in the soapstone carvings of some of the indigenous Canadian people, the carved Runic stones of Scandinavia, the Pictish stones of N.E. Scotland, or even in the colossal sculptures of Mount Rushmore.

The monumental standing stones and stone circles, such as Calanais in Lewis, are both ornaments of the land, and for the land. They are constructed, with a high level of long-forgotten skills, from the natural stone of the area, and serve a ritual, historical, and practical function for the societies which constructed them. The ritual and the practice is rooted in the celestial observations and their relationships to the celebration of key events such as planting, harvesting, and the passage of the seasons. Their historical relevance is often retold in folklore, such as tales that various standing stones were originally warriors and/or heroes, turned into the native stone for eternity as a perpetual reminder of past achievements and/or misdeeds.

Even lesser monumental activities, such as the construction of drystone dykes and hill-summit cairns have aspects in their construction which are not purely functional, but also show fine levels of artistic merit. Indeed, with many mountain cairns and route markers, the aesthetic and creative aspects of their construction hugely surpasses their functional eloquence.

A natural extension of this practice is seen in the prayer flags and mani walls which are constructed in Tibet and Nepal to mark passes, summits, and other important features of the landscape. These are emphatic spiritual and religious expressions, giving thanks for reaching a difficult part of a

journey safely, and also, quite simply, rejoicing in the elements and the beauty of the landscape. Each flutter of a prayer flag, Bhuddists believe, sends the prayer written upon it towards heaven, therefore it is preferable for these tokens to be in high, windy locations within the landscape.

The Inuit of Northern Canada have taken the symbolism a stage further, for in the construction of their rock sculptures, the "inuksuit", they have created totems which are functional, artistic, and also have a strong spiritual significance. These inuksuit are constructions of natural stone, some of which give directions in difficult route-finding terrain, some indicate good hunting grounds, or campsites, or winter shelter for the traveller, pointing to them or framing the important perspective through a stone window. Some ingeniously, are constructed to resemble human figures, and serve to scare caribou and other wildlife into areas where they can be ambushed by experienced hunters. In some regions these sculptures are held in such reverence that they may not be altered, or even touched by the non-initiated.

This may seem somewhat divorced from the stern determinism of Scottish Calvinism (and Catholicism), but we do have some comparative examples. In the Uig area of Lewis there is a difficult moorland path to Harris which has been marked by similar stone constructions. These objects blend into the surrounding landscape, but once an awareness is raised, they are recognisable as an unusual structural formation, a stone of contrasting colour pointing the way, or by a pile of stones placed in an unusual position. The person who constructed these route markers has now passed this world and in a generation or two it is likely that much of the meaning behind these constructions, and indeed many of the stones themselves, will have passed into the mystic realms of undocumented history. They will begin to acquire the obscure symbolism and promiscuous pedigree of prehistoric standing stones everywhere, whether at Calanais, Carnac, Easter Island, or in Peruvian desert. They will return to the landscape.

The loss of this construction detail and function might seem trivial in itself, or at least of interest only to anthropologists and archaeologists. When this is combined, however, with the loss of place names, with the dereliction of historical habitation, with the detachment of the resident inhabitants from their collective folk memory, and the reduction of the population of some areas of land to the role of seasonal recreational visitors only, then the problem of alienation and loss of human dignity also becomes acute.

The cumulative impact upon cultural erosion is always extremely difficult to comprehend and to counteract, simply because it is composed of small, scattered, losses, each in themselves apparently insignificant. Nevertheless, it is precisely the effect of this incremental, cumulative impact which has the most invidious and desultory effect on those who continue to live in close, regular, contact with the land. Moreover, it is becoming clear that this impact begins to function as a social process in itself, frequently resulting in despondency, fatalism, and disempowerment among the residual population, and in romanticism, voyeurism, and/or rejectionism among the exiled Diaspora.

This is a clear link between the natural environment of a people and the social effects resulting from their intimacy with that landscape. It has been said of the African American, within the society of the USA, that undue deference to the authorities of slavery and racism retarded emancipation by several generations. In direct contrast, it has also been stated that it is precisely because the preceding generations have been able to hide their pride, to grit their teeth in the acceptance of humiliation, thereby enabling them to survive the oppressions and injustices heaped upon them, that their descendants are alive to protest so articulately today. (e.g. [22])

A similar case can be made for the history of the Highlands and Islands. If our ancestors had chosen badly the occasions to resist the superior forces of oppression, rather than lowering their gaze, tugging their forelock, accepting the blows, and nursing their spirit intact for better days, then it is unlikely if many of us would be here today. Our ancestors would have been exterminated, exiled to foreign lands, or incorporated completely within the emergent regime. It is therefore unhealthy for us to perpetuate the myth that all of the brightest and the best of our society have continued to migrate out of our communities. It has also taken a special courage and exceptional abilities in order for people not only to merely survive, but also to thrive and remain within the land area known as the Highlands and Islands.

Alison McLeery, in an article on the evolution of early Highland development policies described the evolution of the crofting system as a "cultural adaptation to adversity". [23] This describes the persistence of crofting families to a pluriactive, diversified, extensified life style, despite the encouragements, intimidations, and assistance to become specialised, mono-cultural, mono-lingual, urbanites. It is the persistence of this diversification, and this intimate attachment to the extended environment of our surroundings from which springs the wonderful, rich, unique beauty of Highlands and Islands culture.

By its definition, however, the act of gritting the teeth and hoping for something better, implies a realistic chance that something better will eventually come. The creative vitality of cultural experimentation, of poetry, prose, art, and politics is an indivisible and logical projection of the ambience of our immediate and extended living environments. Access to these rights, endowments, and entitlements are a fundamental part of the fabric of a civilised society. As a natural consequence, access to the land, the resources and fruits of the land, and the opportunity to incorporate the historical and cultural events of the locality into the fabric of contemporary cultural values, therefore becomes a concern of the fundamental civil rights of a people (cf. Mabo. [24]) It is an issue which transcends whimsy, temporal expediency , and party politics, and is based on the recognition of the essential values of the quality of human existence. In this aspect it is perhaps not surprising that Common Law rights and controls involving the relationship of indigenous peoples with their land, is at such a marked contrast from the constitution law of the superseding colonising powers. [25]

There is a growing realisation of the urgent need to adopt more sustainable forms of development, with all its attendant, complex requirements for a reorientation of goals, processes, and models for human development. The loss and damage to commonly held resources has been described as "the tragedy of the commons". [26] It is a self-evident fact that if each individual with access to a common resource, be it grazing land, fishing grounds or forest, continues to maximise his/her own yield at the expense of everybody else, the entire stock will eventually be depleted. The only solution against this must be the establishment of respected, democratic authority to oversee the management of common resources for the benefit of all. This is not without other problems of ownership, accountability and practical implementation, but these difficulties are not insurmountable.

As an illustration on how the very different perspectives which we have upon land use and land ownership can be conditioned by our cultural perspectives, it is interesting to step outside our own culture, even for an instant. So, for instance:-

"One of the peculiarities of the Russian land system was that the idea of private property never developed, as it did in England in the Middle Ages or even earlier. In England it was a recognised principle, enshrined in common law. In Russia they took a different view: a man should have land when he needed it - when he had children to feed (and, by the same act, hands to work the land). When the children grew up, the land dropped back into the village pool, to be reallocated according to need by the village elders Of course this made for great problems with agriculture. But in terms of Christian economics, it made some sense; and it is not an accident that the Russian word for 'peasant' is *krestyanin* : Christian." [27]

Elsewhere in European history, the basis of our democracy lies quite literally in our relationship with the land. The roots The Greek word "-HMOKPATIA" which gives us our word 'democracy' is drawn from etymological roots which are highly significant to this study. The first syllable "-H" is derived from the name "-HMHTPA", the mother goddess of the earth. The second syllable "MO-" is derived from "MOPION" which is " a part or a piece of the earth or ground". This gives us "-HMO-" - the assembly of the farmers or owners of the land. The conjunction of these terms gives us the concept of democracy, which means "the system where the power is taken by the owners of the land."

It is no surprise therefore, that the Common Grazings Committee of crofting townships is the smallest statutory, democratically elected unit in the hierarchy of Scottish government. The challenge of the Common Grazings Committee is to ensure that its democratic and egalitarian structure, based essentially on a peasant grazing economy, continues to support and sustain the integrity of the crofting community in the light of modern pressures on land use, the rural economy, and rural society. I do not doubt that there is a moral in this for better governance and the strengthening of participatory democracy, as well as for our relationship with the land upon which we live and work. In every country of the world it is no longer possible to separate the disparities of

human development in education, health, housing and political freedom, from access to resources, civil rights, and the establishment of democratically accountable systems of resource management.

In a remarkable book, [28] Hanson makes a cogent case for considering that the rise of our modern democracies grew not from the leisured urban classes of Ancient Greece and Rome, but from the equality-building network of independent family farms which strengthened egalitarianism, and free-thinking. This preceded the establishment of the new city states. At one point he states...

"The material prosperity that created the network of Greek city-states resulted from small-scale intensive working of the soil, a complete rethinking of the way the Greeks produced food and owned land, and the emergence of a new sort of person for whom work was not merely a means of subsistence or profit, but an ennobling way of life, a crucible of moral excellence in which pragmatism, moderation, and a search for proportion were fundamental values. The wider institutions of ancient Greece - military, social, political, - embodied the subsequent efforts of these small farmers to protect their hard won gains - the results of, not the catalysts for, agrarian change."

Situations in which local communities are denied fair and equal access, ownership, and control of the land and land resources, are not only economically and socially inappropriate, they are a denial of basic civil rights. In this way, land reform itself becomes a civil rights issue, which if pursued with integrity and vigour, offers an opportunity to act as a dynamo for the development of society in which economic aspirations are in harmony with cultural and environmental ethics. Perhaps in this manner our intimacy with the land may help us to rediscover some important cultural and social values without either attempting to turn the clock back, or by reinventing some artificial and sterile virtual reality setting. This is a compelling case - in social, cultural, economic, and environmental terms - for the outright ownership of the land by the community of people who are resident upon that land. It should be formally recognised, however, that ownership should stimulate the wider responsibilities and obligations which are due to human society at large. This is a collective responsibility as well as a basic civil right.

When the ownership and management of the land is viewed on this basis, as a fundamental right, and indeed obligation, of the community of people who live on that land, then a very different scenario emerges for the exploitation and protection of land resources. A local community, who reside in the area, and make their living in the area, have necessarily a longer term perspective than an outside speculator who seeks to sell his asset to the highest bidder. Very important but difficult to implement concepts such as sustainable development, economic security, local identity and cultural vitality, become more than just catch-phrases, but very tangible indicators to which the community can aspire and plan towards. Rural development become a truly integrated way through which the people within a community can participate in the improvement of their own quality of life, and in securing these improvements for future generations.

In terms of its wider relevance for rural development, a civic society, based upon the community ownership of land resources, offers a unique opportunity to support the empowerment of citizens to take a full part in the decision-making process. A transparent and democratic participation in a management process which shares the benefits and rewards good husbandry, is a key element in any scenario of sustainable development. This is an issue which a Scottish Parliament cannot afford to ignore, and which inevitably reaches right to the heart of democracy, equality of citizenship, and social justice. I hope that you will agree that this is something which our society should strive towards.

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