





CHAPTER

3



FINDING A 'SENSE OF PLACE'

 CAMILLE DRESSLER

With half a dozen other islanders, I am sitting on the lawn in front of an elegant building that was once the Big House, the prestige home of the wealthy shooting and fishing elite that used to own the [Isle of Eigg](#). It is a small, rugged island, with a population of just 87, an hour off Scotland's remote west coast port of Mallaig.

We are listening intently to a soft-spoken young woman with luminous, dark eyes. Liliana is dressed in the

colourful traditional clothes of the Misak people from the high plateau of Columbia and she has come to Scotland to share with communities such as ours the Misak way of sustainable development. Their '*Plan de la Vida*' – Life Plan – is constructed like a tree: *"the roots reaching deep into the soil are your history and your values, the solid trunk embodies the principles that you want to live by and the numerous branches are the actions that you take to ensure*

your community's well-being," Liliana explains.

It is quite a surreal experience. Liliana and her partner Jeremias are talking about the need to have a strong '*sense of place*' for rural development to succeed. Roughly twenty years ago, in exactly the same location, the same discussion was taking place as we – the rebel population of Eigg – were embarking on our journey in community management.





1. The Isle of Eigg with An Sgurr - its iconic mountain, its hay meadows and beaches
2. Welcome to Eigg: Liliana and Jeremias
3. Participants of the ENESD workshop in 1997

"I got involved in the regeneration of a small population determined to fight depopulation and landlordism."

And what a journey that was: in 1997, this speck of land in the Hebrides archipelago made history when it went from private hands to community ownership and management. I am the chronicler of this island history – heir to the Eigg tradition-bearers I learned about 35 years ago for my anthropology degree before going native and raising a family on Eigg. Completely seduced by the Gaelic way of life I had initially come to study, I got involved in the regeneration of a small population

determined to fight depopulation and landlordism. After decades of activism, it is time to hand over to a new generation.

As I am listening to Liliana's words, with a handful of younger islanders now getting ready to take over responsibility for steering the island into the future, I feel that we are revisiting a very strong moment of our island history. Suddenly the Misak people's concept of circular time seems to make sense: time might well be spiraling, and not be linear at all.

A JOURNEY OF MUTUAL DISCOVERY

Back in 1997, it was an equally warm and sunny day and we were taking a break from intense discussions in the Big House for a group photo. Our group consisted half of islanders and half of European visitors from across the continent.

They were brought to Eigg by the Highland and Islands Forum, in effect the 'Scottish branch' of Forum Synergies. Eigg was one stop on a discovery journey, which had started a few years before, in 1995.

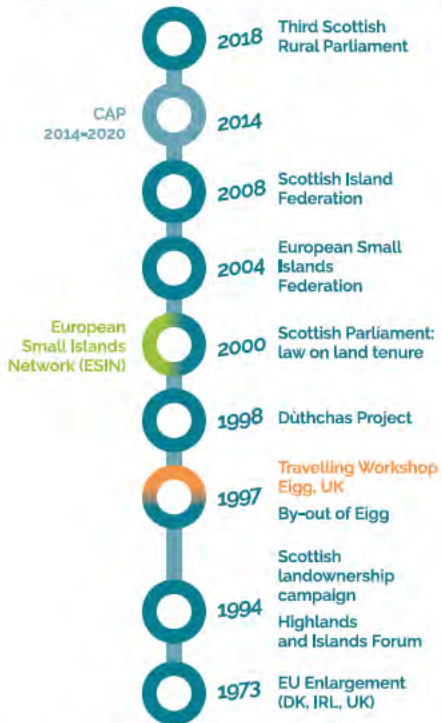
It had certainly been a lively day, attended even by Winnie Ewing, the region's MEP (member of European Parliament), whose party campaigned for changes to the extremely



4. Simone Matouch (2nd from left) between her Eigg hosts

to grips with. "The incredible Scottish landscape we discovered on our long train journey from Glasgow - would you believe it, they slowed down the train for us to take a picture of the famous Glenfinnan viaduct; the kindness of strangers, who organised for a fish and chips meal to be delivered at one of the longest stops for our group of hungry travellers; the warm welcome we received from the families that hosted us on the Isle of Eigg; and the way people were taking time to talk about practical day-to-day issues without stressing about having to rush away. It was the passion the islanders expressed as they were telling the story of their long campaign to buy their island from landowners who had done nothing for the land or for them, that created a really inspirational picture," recalled Simone Matouch, who had come all the way from Austria.

Journey through time



concentrated pattern of land ownership in Scotland.

For our new friends from the Continent, this was an extraordinary story – one they had started to get

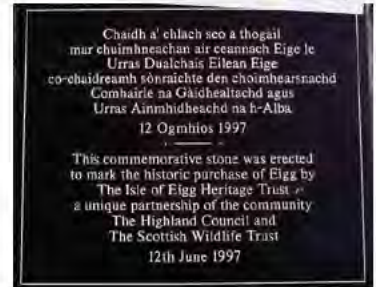


THE ISLE OF EIGG COMMUNITY BUY-OUT

Decades of stagnation in the hands of absentee landlords had left the islanders struggling to make a meaningful future for themselves. The island was in poor shape with decaying infrastructure and electricity dependence on noisy and dirty individual generators that only kicked into life at night. The land was mostly grazed by sheep and cattle for export with hardly any food growing on the island's crofts, micro-farms which until the 1950s had been self-sufficient in hay, oats, potatoes and eggs. There was just one fisherman left and too many people were living in damp

and cold houses, which they could not renovate because there was no possibility of owning their home or even acquiring a long-term lease.

In the early 1990s, the plan for community buy-out of the island kicked off in earnest. The Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust was formed by a partnership between the Eigg residents' association; the Highland Council, our regional authority, and the Scottish Wildlife Trust, a major environment charity. After a remarkable public appeal, the Trust managed to buy the island for £1.5m in 1997.



5. 6. The Isle of Eigg Community buy-out ceremony of 12 June 1997

THE EIGG REVOLUTION

For anyone in the Scottish countryside, this was huge: it opened up whole new possibilities for the local management of resources throughout the country. For Scotland, it truly was a revolution, and one that Isobel Holbourn, the strong and tenacious Shetlander at the head of the Highland and Islands Forum, was absolutely determined to share with all her friends in Forum Synergies. She had been instrumental in helping the islanders of Eigg break their isolation, connect with other Scottish rural communities, and learn the tools that helped them on their journey to self-determination. For her, bringing the Forum Synergies folks to Eigg was the final part she wanted to play in that journey.

THE SCOTTISH LAND TENURE REVOLUTION

It was only when the Scottish parliament was finally re-instated in 2000 through the UK devolution settlement, that the land tenure law which still included feudal aspects was finally modernised: this is when a new Communities Right to Buy Act was created. This ground-breaking reform was a direct consequence of the Eigg community buy-out campaign: by highlighting what was wrong in a land ownership system which gave 7% of the population control over 84% of the land, Scottish land-reformers were able to push for the much needed changes in the law that finally gave rural communities in Scotland the possibility to gain control of the land they lived on.

After the heady days of celebration, when the great and the good and all the friends of Eigg came together on the now historic date of the 12th June 1997, it was time to get back to work.

There was a plan for the future which the Highland and Islands Forum team had helped the islanders put together to underpin the buy-out campaign, and now was the time to implement

it. Isobel's vision was to gather the strength and energy of the Forum Synergies folks together with Scottish decision-makers and land-reform activists to help the islanders start on that new turn of the Eigg journey.

"It certainly was an exciting time," recalled Karen Helliwell, the secretary of the Eigg Residents Association and one of the many strong island women involved in the campaign, *"but there was still quite a*

bit of apprehension at the scale of the challenges ahead. So we were more than happy at the thought of sharing our plans for the future with others. We were opened to all ideas and suggestions!"

PEOPLE!



Based in the very remote Shetland island of **Foula**, passionate about Scottish history and rural development, **Isobel Holbourn** exerted a huge influence as a writer and broadcaster. Having brought up her family when there was still no electricity or running water on the island, her active community involvement promoted the Foula airstrip and the Foula electricity scheme. Drawing from her personal experience, she was instrumental in setting up the Highland and Island Forum as a networking organisation, bringing together isolated rural communities to learn from each other. Enthusiastically involving herself in the work of Forum Synergies, she then served as the first president from 2000 to 2006. *'She was full of fun, always up for a laugh and she saw the great side of everybody.'* Sadly she passed away in 2010 and is much missed.

FROM STORYTELLING TO CEILIDH DANCING

Organising a social evening to welcome everyone in the Big House, now acquired by the islanders, was the perfect setting to signal Eigg's positive intentions: subverting a place associated with a rigid social hierarchy into an open, fluid and social space was the best way to kick things off!

Then came the important stuff - the *'ceilidh'*. The *'ceilidh'* is a Gaelic institution which originally meant a sharing of news, stories and songs,

and which has now come to mean energetic dancing to the traditional reels and jigs of the Scottish Gaelic culture.

"Music and dance are very important to us," explained Karen, *"it cuts across all generations and all the differences there might be between the indigenous islanders and those that have moved here in the last 20 years. For us, music is a huge part of our identity and 'sense of place'. Every year we have a small traditional music and dance festival - Feis Eige- to ensure the next generation will continue with ceilidh dancing and play fiddle and accordion tunes. The old folks used to say that if the island loses its music, it will lose its soul, and we certainly don't want that to happen."*

7. Winnie Ewing Member of European Parliament (MEP) (centre)

8. From right, Hannes Lorenzen, Vanessa Halhead and Drennan Watson



'DÙTHCHAS': CONNECTION TO THE LAND

For Vanessa Halhead of the Highland and Island Forum team, who had been working on community empowerment in Scotland for decades, the 'sense of place' was right at the centre of it all. The Gaelic speaking people of the Highlands and islands called it 'Dùthchas', (pronounced dooo-hass), a word representing the notion of kinship with the land, of belonging. *"It is a rootedness, an understanding of what makes them what they are,"* she explains, *"which has to do with the history, to do with their families, to do with their physical environment. And it's the amalgam of all those things, which defines for a person what is special about this place that they live in. But it's also incredibly important for people when they actually want to work for that place because they have this great passion for it, this strong image of what their place is and what it should be. So it's spiritual, it's historical, it's factual, it's cultural."*

For the Eigg people, that 'sense of place' had been central to their

reclaiming of the land for the community: not everyone was an indigenous islander, but everyone that had come to live on the island understood and embraced the concept of 'Dùthchas'. For me, this meant having to give something of yourself - time, energy, skills - to build the community, to make sure things worked. It meant being faithful to the stories I collected and ensuring they were passed on, looking after the heritage, the culture, teaching children about wildlife and nature.

'Dùthchas' goes back to the ancient tribal Celtic notion of 'stewardship' of land - as opposed to ownership by feudal power. Transposed to modern times, it means *"you don't own the land, you are owned by it,"* as the great Scottish poet Norman MacCaig so eloquently put it.

As the steward or custodian of the land, you look after it. This gives you a greater claim to it than the absentee landlord who placed a monetary value on the land since it was seen as a purely financial asset, one to be bought and sold.

This claim of a modern stewardship was at the heart of the islanders' campaign to buy the island and



9. The Eigg wildlife ranger with Vanessa Halhead on the left and islander Colin Carr in the background

*"You don't own the land,
you are owned by it."*

Norman MacCaig

manage it themselves, and that belief had carried it through to a successful conclusion. It was when we saw that other folks started to believe in it too, including Scottish politicians and decision-makers, that we knew we had won over their trust. It was a real turning point.





EXPERIENCE AS LEARNING

Sharing our stories with our Forum Synergies visitors meant we could learn from each other. For an islander like Colin Carr who had never travelled out of Scotland, it was eye-opening to find so many things in common with other rural areas of Europe. Invited to a following event in the Lesachtal later that summer, he came back with an even strengthened conviction. "In their valley in Austria, they were just like us," he said, "few opportunities because of the remoteness. The difference is that they took security of tenure for their houses and land for granted, whereas we had to fight for it."

No wonder that with such an experience behind them, the islanders could take part in the 'Wrecking Game' almost enthusiastically. The wrecking game belonged to a dimension which Oliver Emmes liked to bring into Forum Synergies events to liven things up a bit. He called it the fun principle. In this game devised by Drennan Watson, also a member of the Highland and Islands Forum team, everyone had to think of any methods that could be used to threaten or halt sustainable rural development. "We had to write this on red cards on the wall," Colin Carr reminisces, "it was quite a laugh, we all vied with each other to write the worst possible

action we could think of. And you know what? It was just like the story of Eigg: no security of tenure, no say, no representation, no democracy, fear of reprisal, top-down decisions - it was all there, the kind of feudal set-up we had had to live with!"

Precious insights were gained in the process. "You see, after the wrecking game, it was easy to draw out good practices in contrast: you wrote those on corresponding green cards, and here were the conclusions we needed to wrap up the event. In this way, rather than an abstract concept, sustainable rural development had become a personal experience and this enabled it to become embedded in the participants' psyche," explained Drennan, "or so we liked to think."

For the Eigg community, this focus on the local experience brought new a perspective and confidence: "Here were all these people coming to discuss with us a common vision of sustainable development, and we felt validated that, informed by our 'sense of place' and community, our ideas for the future were judged to be sound," explained Karen.

The week of both hard and fun discussions, of social and cultural exchange had not only generated confidence, inspiration and enthusiasm, but highlighted some important principles: the basic needs of people were the same everywhere,

"We felt validated that, informed by our 'sense of place' and community, our ideas for the future were judged to be sound."

Karen Helliwell



10. Climbing An Sgurr, Eigg's iconic mountain
11. "And here's to all of us, and Eigg's success!"

and everywhere there was a need to put value on community as well as on wilderness and heritage. Rural development had to be people-focused, because it was the people that kept the land going.

But much was also dependent on systems of land tenure. These were an important part of the arena of power, as our friends from East Germany, Estonia and Hungary were able to tell from bitter experience. The challenge was to take this issue to European rural policy makers and get them to deal with it, Hannes Lorenzen had boldly proposed at the Big House gathering.

FROM LOCAL TO GLOBAL

Today, the Misak people visit us on Eigg with their thoughts on how we can continue to effect change for future generations, if we root our work in social and environmental justice informed by our *'sense of place'*. It is heartening to see the changes the last twenty years have brought. The EU may never come to grips with the issue of land and power, but significant changes have been made to the design of rural policy and support with community and place-based approaches right at the centre of it.

The island of Eigg is a telling example: its growing prosperity has been facilitated by many of the EU's rural policies. Where there were rotting fence posts, there are now brand new crofting and farm



12. Enjoying a well-deserved celebratory moment at the summit (From right, Camille Dressler and Oliver Emmes)
13. Crofters' cattle
14. Silage harvest

"We can continue to effect change for future generations, if we root our work in social and environmental justice informed by our 'sense of place'."

boundaries, erected with Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP) funding which also financed a machinery ring and the agro-

environment schemes which are perfectly suited to our rugged crofting landscape and the wildlife it attracts.

EU Structural funds have helped build the new Eigg pier and fund

THE CROFTING SYSTEM OF LAND TENURE

Crofting is a form of land tenure defined by small-scale food production in the Scottish Highlands. Individual crofts are typically established on 2–5 hectares of arable land for better quality forage, arable and vegetable production. Each township manages poorer-quality hill ground as common grazing for cattle and sheep. Crofting is important to the Highlands and Islands, involving 10% of the region's population. Crofters typically produce 20% of all beef and 45% of breeding ewes on 25% of the region's agricultural land, whilst delivering many environmental benefits in terms of wildlife conservation.



15. The new Eigg shop
16. Young entrepreneurs' weekly delivery of Eigg eggs!

the 'roll-on roll-off' ferry which has undoubtedly changed our lives by making the island far more accessible. A centre at the pier with a licensed restaurant, a general store cum real food deli and a craft shop now welcome the visitor, whilst the old 1940's tin roof shop has been turned into a much-visited, hands-on recycling facility.

A second tranche of EU LEADER funding has brought an increase in population and work opportunities: young people who were growing up during the buy-out campaign have come back to bring up their families, start new businesses and inspire others to settle. Access to the internet – which we now managed through our own community interest company – means that many islanders, including myself, can now work remotely. Many folks have built their own houses on land provided at affordable prices or even free, depending on your income. For the latter, the Trust retains ownership of the ground. Our

primary school is an eco-school, where the island children learn about sustainable living and governance from a young age. I am always impressed how they take it in turns to be secretary, treasurer and chair: it will be so much easier for them to take on these roles later in their life, whereas we had to learn it the hard way!

Building on its 'sense of place', Eigg continues to be a place of traditional music and dance, with the June anniversary of the Eigg buy-out an opportunity for a yearly music festival. The difference is that we now drink more beer produced locally by the island's micro-brewery than the red or blue cans imported from the mainland. There is an increasing amount of food produced locally, artisan bread and preserves, herbs and salads for sale, and a thriving orchard. The only fruit grown before was reserved for the Big House and its visitors.

The island economy is still fragile, affected by its marginal location and the cost of freight. Over-dependency

FINDING A 'SENSE OF PLACE'



17. Tunes on the Pier Café terrace
18. The old shop 'museum'



19. 20. Eigg's windfarm and solar array

on tourism was a risk, but the islanders have preferred to invest in developing craft activities, well-being and slow adventure tourism which makes use of the island's rich landscape, history and wildlife.

Since we own our natural assets, we have also been able to take full advantage of them: since 2008, Eigg has been powered by an award-winning micro-grid bringing together hydro, solar and wind power, mostly financed by European Structural funds. We have even put our Misak friends in touch with Spanish-speaking renewable energy islands that will help them devise their own

renewable energy system and like us, train their people to run and maintain it. Our off-grid island has become part of a growing group of European islands supported by the Clean Energy EU Islands Initiative to trail-blaze the transition to a fossil fuel-free economy. Our ambition for island community empowerment is translating into a much bigger and broader picture as Eigg is now part of the international Smart Islands movement, intent on making islands the lighthouses of the transition movement whilst ensuring local communities are the ones steering sustainable development.



21. 22. Hiking to the An Sgurr summit is offering a great view on landscape and the sea

OPPOSITE
23. Harbour of Mallaig (1997)

EIGG AND I

Reflecting on this island's journey, which is also very much my own, I feel that this Forum Synergies visit twenty years ago was instrumental in kindling my interest in European cooperation. First, as the Eigg representative on the board of the new Scottish Island Network and then getting involved in exchanges within the European Small Islands Network ([ESIN](#)) which was set up in 2000. Seventeen years later, both networks have evolved into Federations growing in strength,

and I am honoured and humbled to have been given the chairmanship of both. It has enabled me to continue working on island resilience, now on the national and European level.

In Scotland, the hard-won success of Eigg means that community ownership of land is now seen as the easiest and quickest way to rural empowerment. As everywhere else in rural Europe, Community-Led Local Development ([CLLD](#)) is the ferment that is making sustainable rural

development grow and spread.

Whatever path Scotland is able to steer out of the Brexit chaos, it will be one where CLLD will continue, as clearly stated at the 2018 [Scottish Rural Parliament](#).

The massive impact of the EU Cohesion policies in the UK as a whole in the absence of a national regional policy has fostered a vigorous debate on the need for a comprehensive, well-resourced and transparent rural support policy for Scotland. If it can be delivered, it should ensure a wildlife-rich environment, resilient to climate change and sustaining rural communities where food production

"Community ownership of land is now seen as the easiest and quickest way to rural empowerment."

from farm to fork can play its part in Scotland finally becoming a Good Food Nation.

Our next challenge will be to bring that strong island *'sense of place'*, which Eigg now shares with so many other small European islands, to the next European Rural Parliament. Having met up again with Hannes Lorenzen at the last [European Rural Parliament](#) steered by Vanessa Halhead, our Scottish sustainable rural development pioneer, our various journeys have all now come full circle, and we are ready to start on another.



THE EIGG EXPERIENCE IN A NUTSHELL

Welcoming our European visitors back in 1997 was a chance to reflect on our journey to the community buy-out, to share the experience - what worked well, what not so much - and to learn from the different situations across Europe. As I have now learnt is characteristic of Forum Synergies events, I left with a warm feeling of shared struggle and understanding coupled with a recognition that each place is different, they operate under different land tenure systems, for example. One thing was abundantly clear though: who owns land and who is given access to it, are vital benchmarks of sustainable rural development.

The struggle for land ownership and to have local voices heard in decision-making about land is a theme across Europe. The Scottish land tenure revolution, kicked off by the Eigg buy-out, has become an example for land justice and reform movements across the continent. A recent report

delivered to the UK Labour Party makes multiple references to the Scottish approach which has successfully managed to get communities involved.

Our islanders' *'sense of place'* - our strong emotional attachment to the land and our desire to look after it rather than own it - was the foundation of our buy-out strategy. This approach reframes our whole understanding of land, not as something which should be held in private hands but rather as a common good, something we have a duty to maintain, for our prosperity but also for that of future generations.

This tries to move away from an extractive relationship to the land, where we only take what we can, to a more reciprocal one; we care for the land as it does for us. This fundamental rethinking of our relationship to land must be a central part of our European transition to more sustainable and healthier food, farming and rural future.