

14. The Land for the People.

'I can see the proprietor here has no conscience and commitment as far as the people here are concerned. That's what you find with many proprietors in the Highlands and Islands. I think the people here have to take the initiative themselves. Things haven't got to stand still. People can shape the future if they have a will to do so'.

THE HIGHLAND land question somewhat disappeared from Scottish politics in the 1950s and 1960s. This may have been connected to the renunciation, by the leadership of the Labour party in Scotland, of the party's long-standing commitment to Home Rule. This renunciation was, of course, reversed when Labour began to fear electoral obliteration at the hands of the Scottish National Party.

But the land question did not go away in these years and - as we have seen earlier - was an issue of continuing importance in the 1970s and 1980s. And the 1990s were witness to some modest changes for the better in land-ownership in the Highlands - not least in Assynt, at Borge in Skye, and on Eigg in the Inner Hebrides. These are likely to be the first of many more changes, given the election of a reform-minded Labour government to Westminster in the later part of the decade and, rather more importantly, the rebirth of a Scottish parliament shortly afterwards.

But research published in the middle of the decade nevertheless emphasises the extent to which private landlordism continues to dominate the ownership of land in the Highlands, on a scale which would astonish any other European country (and many a former colonial nation in the Third World).

Andy Wightman's *Who Owns Scotland?* was published in 1996, as an updating of John McEwen's similarly-titled book from twenty or so years earlier. As Wightman says in his introduction, the ownership and use of land is 'one of the most fundamental issues in any society': but it is a subject which in Scotland remains poorly understood. 'Not only does ownership convey significant and far-reaching privileges to those in possession of land, but the system and pattern of landownership has extensive economic, political, cultural and environmental impacts on the economy and development of the country'.

And he goes on: 'How we as a society choose to define and distribute property rights and what obligations we place on their enjoyment has a profound bearing on not just economic activity but on the opportunities for the creation for the distribution of wealth. Politically, land is important. Culturally, land and its ownership and use have shaped the outlook of the people of Scotland. Contemporary debates about land-ownership are a clear expression of a deep-seated feeling, unaffected by two centuries of urbanisation, for the land'.

For the five mainland crofting counties (including the Hebrides as part of either Inverness-shire or Ross-shire), Wightman's research identifies the extent to which large owners dominate the scene. For Argyll, he lists the top five owners as: Robert Fleming and Trusts, with 88,900 acres; Trustees of the Duke of Argyll, with 60,800; Islay Estates Company (Lord Margadale), with 49,500; John M. Guthrie, with 37,000; and the Raven family at Patrick Sellar's old estate of Ardtornish, with 34,100. Pension funds are also listed as large-scale forestry investors in the county, with Eagle Star

insurance possessing 10,000 acres; and the pension fund of Gallaher, the major tobacco concern, having 4,254 acres.

Wightman observes that Argyll strikes him as, 'rather a sad place, where many of the local farmers have sold up and a new breed of wealthy overseas buyers has moved in'. This is a feeling shared by many people in Argyll, who have 'seen the forestry plantations spread over the hills and the farmers disappear. Argyll, as much as anywhere, convinces me that we could do things better'.

As for the environmentally sensitive landscape of Caithness, Wightman records that, 'it has seen big changes in both the pattern of land-ownership, and the people involved, since 1970. The structural changes are associated with the frantic expansion of private forestry on the peatlands which caused a raging controversy in the mid-1980s. Fuelled by low land prices, a forestry company called Fountain Forestry went round London financial advisers persuading wealthy clients who had a high exposure to income tax to invest in tree plantations against which tax could be written off. The environmental controversy, together with the publicity surrounding the tax breaks, ensured that in the 1988 Budget, forestry was removed completely from the tax system and the mechanism which was fuelling afforestation in some of the most sensitive parts of the country was abolished. Land use changes of this magnitude could not take place without the unregulated market in land and un-coordinated land use policy which Scotland is still suffering from'.

The five largest estates in the county of Caithness were the 45,000 acres of Langwell and Braemore (principal interest, Lady Anne Cavendish Bentinck); the 37,400-acre estate of Dunbeath and Glutt; Viscount Thurso's 36,800 acres; a 20,000-acre estate at the

old land-agitation site of Latheronwheel; and the 13,600 acres of the Shurrey estate.

Inverness-shire too remained a county of big estates, though some well-known holdings had fragmented during the late 1980s and early 1990s. 'The most spectacular of these had been the virtual disappearance of the ancient lands of the Lovat family', according to Wightman. Simon Fraser had died in 1994, leaving massive debts. He had sold the entire estate to one of his companies (Highlands and Islands Oil and Gas Ltd.) for just over £6 million, and mortgaged the whole sum. After the sell-off of the Braulen estate in 1990, and the North Morar estate in 1994, 'the remaining 19,500 acres were sold in lots in 1995, with 6,500 acres being kept for the new Lord Lovat, still a schoolboy'.

Another estate to have been broken up was Knoydart which, after Brocket, passed through various hands including those of Lord Hesketh (a Conservative spokesman in the House of Lords during the 1980s). He bought Knoydart for £250,000 in 1972 with the usual expressions of eternal respect for heritage and patrimony, and promptly flogged it in April the following year for six times what he had paid for it. According to Wightman, 'Philip Rhodes who bought Knoydart in 1984, proceeded to split it up further, making a profit of over £1 million'.

In Inverness-shire, the five largest estate owners were Alcan Highland Estates Ltd. with 112,400 acres; South Uist Estates with 92,000 acres; Sir Donald Cameron's Lochiel Estates with 76,000 acres; the Earl of Granville's North Uist Estate Trust with 62,000 acres; and the Earl of Seafield and Viscount Reidhaven with 50,000 acres. In sixth place on the list was Jonathan and Lady Marcia Bulmer's North Harris estate, comprising some 49,900 acres of

cider-funded land at Amhuinnsuidhe. Lord Burton's 31,000 acres at Dochfour and Glenquoich came in twelfth on the list. And yet further down the list were the 22,400 tobacco acres of Gilbert Wills, Lord Dulverton.

But it is Ross-shire, according to Wightman, which is the pre-eminent county of the sporting estate. 'From east coast to west coast, the straths are empty and most of the owners are absentee. In Wester Ross alone, of a total population of around 4,000 in 55,000 acres, only between 250 and 300 people live more than one kilometre from the coast. No more than 300 people therefore live in 536,000 acres of land'. Wightman believes that Ross and Cromarty could be vibrant and dynamic, with its dramatic scenery, interesting wild life and great outdoor recreational opportunities. 'All it lacks is a population. Comparable areas in Norway are packed full of villages and small farm-forestry holdings. There is not one good reason why Ross and Cromarty should not develop in this way'.

The largest estate, the 81,000 acres of Letterewe and Kinlochewe, was principally owned by Paul Fentener van Vlissingen. The Stornoway Trust, derived from the ownership of Lewis by Lord Leverhulme, had 69,400; while the third largest landowner, with 63,140 acres, was Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum of Dubai. Captain Fred Hills was principal owner of 62,000 acres at Applecross, while the Gairloch and Conon estate comprised 56,900 acres.

Others included Jonathan Bulmer and syndicate with 45,000 acres at Uig and Hamnavay; and Richard Munro Ferguson, with 20,000 acres at Novar. The 23,600 acres of Inverlael and Foich were owned by H. J. E. Beuningen and others, through an investment management company. Lord Burton had 17,000 acres

at Glenshield and Cluanie through the Burton Property Trust. Edmund Vestey had nearly 16,000 acres at Assynt and Benmore through the Glencanisp and Drumrunie Deer Forest Trust. Major Michael Wills had 14,800 at Achnashellach; Investments Bermuda Ltd. had over 5,000 acres at Glenfield; and Fountain Forestry Ltd. had 3,000 acres of Lanwell Forest.

The pattern of land ownership was broadly similar in Sutherland, an 'empty and lonely country' in Wightman's view. Here in 1971 the newly constituted Highlands and Islands Development Board (HIDB) presented proposals for development to Willie Ross, the Labour Secretary of Estate for Scotland (who had been, with others, responsible for setting-up the Board). But in the event these proposals failed to make headway due to lack of political will, and as the 1970s came to an end, 'landowners sighed with relief'. In 1979 all such thinking was swept aside as a new body, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, took over. 'The land question has been discreetly dropped with barely a member of staff working on the subject'.

Trustees for the 2nd Duke of Westminster owned 95,000 acres of Sutherland, while the Countess of Sutherland controlled another 83,239. Edmund Vestey had 70,500 at Glencanisp and Inchnadamph. Lord Robert Iliffe and the Stone family had nearly 26,000 acres at Lochnaver, Syre and Rhifail, and Viscount Leverhulme had 24,700 acres at Badanloch. David Nall-Cain (of the Brocket family) and friends controlled 6,600 acres at Gualin; while Fountain Forestry clients had land at another eight locations in the county.

But there were however, during the 1990s, a handful of developments in land-ownership that, in spirit at least, threatened the prevailing pattern of giant landholdings.

The first of these, appropriately enough, was at Assynt in north-west Sutherland. In June 1992 the Assynt branch of the Scottish Crofters' Union agreed that it would attempt to bring into community ownership the North Lochinver estate, with a view to preventing it being broken up and sold off in small portions. The attempt followed the news that the estate, formerly part of the Vestey holdings in the area, was to be sold in seven lots. This sale came in the wake of the collapse of its owners, Scandinavian Property Services UK - a foreign-owned company which included in its important portfolio of socially-conscious investments a 'sauna-club' in London. Crofters said that if the estate were to be sold separately, it would reduce crofting in the district to a state of chaos. The initial plan was that the Highland Regional Council would buy the estate - asking price, £473,000 - and at once pass it over to a community trust, which would thereafter reimburse the council.

The existing crofts in the district derived from inland clearances dating from the early nineteenth century. At that time, towards the end of the wars with Napoleonic France, the evicted tenants had been driven to thin strips of poor soil by the coast, to crofts which they had to 'dig out of the bare hillside with their own hands' (in the words of the secretary of the local Crofters' Union).

There were further major clearances in the 1830s. When the Napier Commission visited Lochinver in the 1880s, the Stoer cottar Kenneth Campbell told of forty-eight townships which had been cleared to make room for sheep farming. The last of these to be cleared was Ardvar, from which eleven families had been driven out. And in 1878, eighteen families had been removed from the farm at Clashmore: this being the spark that ignited the major disturbances in the area during the later 1880s.

In April 1887, a sheriff-officer sent from Golspie was met by a crowd of fifty or sixty men when he tried to serve summonses for rent arrears. The Clashmore men placed these summonses on a burning peat, forced the sheriff-officer and the landlord's local agent out of the carriage in which they had tried to take shelter, and got them to promise never to return. A fortnight later, Michael Davitt addressed the tenants of the district at a pier-head meeting at Stoer, with the local Free Church minister as chairman.

Later the following month, a policeman returned with more writs. As the menfolk were absent cutting peats, the women assaulted him, took the writs by force, and burned them in front of him. They then threatened to throw the policeman in the river, before driving him out of the village. One of the crofters later appeared in Dornoch sheriff-court and got fourteen days in gaol.

That autumn, there was further trouble at Clashmore. A week or so after the great raid on the Park deer-forest in Lewis, the tenants of Clashmore drove their cattle onto the lands of the local sheep-farm. The farm steading mysteriously burned itself to the ground, and a few days later another property in the ownership of the Duke of Sutherland went up - or down - in flames too. In early December the Jackal, which had been busy arresting the Park raiders, came across the North Minch to land forty marines and arrest one Clashmore tenant believed to be guilty of deforcement. But they failed, according to contemporary press reports, to get the man they really wanted: for Hugh Kerr had taken to the hills.

A crowd shouting 'down with the House of Sutherland' later mobbed the marines as they marched with their prisoner to Culag House. Subsequently, the soldiers were not allowed to leave their temporary barracks, 'on account of the unfriendly spirit exhibited

towards them by the people. The officers found it impossible to show themselves in Lochinver without receiving some unpleasant remark of the people's dislike'.

On the last day of that year, the authorities put in hand a middle-of-the-night raid on Hugh Kerr's house, in the expectation of catching him there for Hogmanay. At three in the morning, under bright moonlight, six marines, a number of policemen and the intrepid Sheriff MacKenzie crept through rock and bog; but found that their elusive quarry was still somewhere in the hills. At the same time men brought into the district to repair sheep-farm walls that had been knocked-down by the Clashmore people, effectively struck work and went home. Hugh Kerr was not apprehended until August the following year.

It was therefore with some considerable sense of their own history and the story of their own community that the Assynt crofters launched in July 1922, in the shape of the Assynt Crofters' Trust, an appeal for public support to buy the estate. A loophole in the crofting legislation meant that the crofters could force the purchase of the land for no more than fifteen times the annual rental, if no agreement with the sellers could be reached. In so doing, they would improve the social, educational and cultural environment of the crofting communities and of the natural environment of Assynt.

'We the crofters have resolved to band together to buy the estate, not for reason motivated by political or romantic sentiment, but because we believe that to give our crofting communities the best chance of surviving and prospering in the future, control of our resources - especially the land - will be our best chance. We have history, justice, and the law on our side. With a little help from our friends, we will succeed'.

A packed meeting in Stoer village hall heard the local MP, Robert MacLennan recall, 'When I was elected twenty-six years ago, there was no worse example of absentee landlordism. At that time the feudal superior imposed upon the tenants heavy and unacceptable conditions on land use. You were not allowed to open a shop in competition to shops owned by the estate. You were not allowed to sell petrol in competition to the estate. You were not allowed to enjoy an extension of your lodging-house beyond a very short period of seven years so that improvements could not be made'.

In the first week of the appeal, £15,000 was raised. By the end of August, the appeal had raised £50,000. It had also secured a grant of £50,000, along with the promise of a loan of another £90,000. The HIE network (successor to the HIDB) had contributed the first sum, as a 'pilot project to collect information on the performance of a crofting estate owned and managed by local people'. The offer of a loan of £90,000 had come from Highland Prospect, an investment company established by the Highland Regional Council. A further grant of £20,000 was forthcoming from Scottish Natural Heritage.

In September, with the closing date for the sale of the 21,000-acre estate just a fortnight distant, attention focussed on the extent to which the district had languished under the very long reign of the Vestey's. It had been bought in 1937 by Ronald Arthur Vestey, father of the present owner and architect of the family's vast meat and shipping empire. But despite a staff of 22,000 and a turnover of £1,000 million in the financial year prior to that of the proposed buy-out, not much of this imperial wealth appeared to have usefully found its way to the Assynt community. Around fifteen years earlier,

a child born in Clashmore had been the first baby in the Stoer district for over thirty years, for instance. And in the 1950s and 1960s, following decades of decline, it was thought likely that Assynt would soon be entirely empty of people; a curious if oddly resonant outcome, it might be thought, of twenty-five years' of extremely wealthy and sporting ownership.

Twice, the crofters' offer for the estate was rejected that autumn. But in December, after two weeks of tense negotiations with the principal creditors of the owners, the Assynt Crofters' Trust heard that their increased offer of £300,000 - rather than the £475,000 originally demanded - had been accepted.

In the triumphant words of the West Highland Free Press, 'Private landlordism in the Highlands and Islands was shaken to its foundations this week as the crofters of Assynt heard that they had succeeded in breaking the lairds' stranglehold over North Lochinver estate, at last realising the dream of land for the people. The stunning breakthrough has been heralded by the crofters as the beginning of a new era in land use. And there have already been calls for crofters elsewhere in the Highlands and Islands to follow their lead and take their claim to the land. The atmosphere this week was electric, the air of hope almost tangible. Greeted by accordion music and rapturous applause, Assynt Crofters' Trust chairman Allan MacRae could not conceal his delight. But just as deep-rooted was his sadness, shared by many present, that others before them who had fought unsuccessfully for the land had not lived to see their aspirations realised. 'My immediate thoughts are to wish that some of our forebears could be here to share it with us', Mr. MacRae, whose own great-grandfather was cleared off the land at Assynt to make way for a sheep farm, said. 'There's no doubt

that, in owning the land, the crofters have struck a historical blow for people, right through the Highlands and Islands’.

The second blow for popular ownership of the land was struck on Skye on early 1993, when crofters submitted a letter of intent to buy the 4,500-acre crofting township of Borge and Annishader. The tenants were to base their offer on the formula of the 1976 Crofting Act, in terms of which they were entitled to buy the land for fifteen times the annual rent paid without having to pay half the development value to the landlord. The proposal to transfer the land in question - unlike the Assynt buy-out - had come from the landlord himself, Major John MacDonald. The bid had followed the failure of the twenty one tenants and the owner of the estate to agree the provisions of a proposed forestry project.

The crofters of the township had been set to become the first to benefit under the terms of the 1991 Forestry Act. This legislation allowed crofters, rather than landlords, to plant trees on common grazing land - and to retain ownership thereafter of those trees. But the Act required the consent of the owner to any such scheme. And at Borge the landlord was unwilling to grant consent, as it would deplete the value of the estate without depleting his running costs of it.

In early February, therefore, the crofters decided to proceed with an offer, which was to be of rather more value than the minimum stipulated by the 1976 Crofters’ Act. Nevertheless, it was to be worth no more than a fraction of the open-market value of the land in question. According to the crofters’ spokesman, Alastair Nicolson, the crofters were confident that they could raise the capital needed to buy the land as a crofting trust. But they were also

prepared to consider forcing the sale in terms of the 1976 legislation if no deal could be agreed.

In the week that the Assynt crofters were celebrating the acquisition of their own district, Mr. Nicolson said that while land remained in private ownership, there was always the possibility of it being sold over the head of local communities. 'We have now got a chance to be masters of our own destiny', he said. 'To have control over our own township will let us know where we stand for the future'.

The Western Isles MP Calum MacDonald, who had introduced the crofter-forestry legislation, added, 'in the Assynt case there was just a threat to use the legislation. If the Borge crofters succeed, it will be yet another breakthrough for the right of crofting communities to control their own destinies'. He hoped that the buy-out in Assynt, and the proposed buy-out at Borge, would represent 'a turn of the tide', leading to the formation of similar community trusts throughout the Highlands.

And just two months later, the crofters' attempt to acquire the 4,500-acre township was successful. In the middle of April, they heard that their second offer of £20,000 - just £3,500 higher than the first bid - had been accepted. It included mineral rights, but not sporting rights, and was generally considered an amicable agreement with a co-operative landlord.

On the island of Eigg, however, the landlord was to be somewhat less than co-operative, and the historic buy-out of the island was to be somewhat less than amicable.

The twentieth century had been one of continuous decline for the island's economy. During the First World War, twenty men left the island for military service. Ten were to die as a result (four of

them from one family). After the war, the island crofters demanded more land under the 1919 Land Settlement Act. As a result, 150 acres of grazing land came under crofting occupancy. Still, in 1923, eleven islanders from the MacDonald and MacQuarrie families emigrated to Canada - a second terrible blow to a tiny island culture already on the brink of extinction. By 1931, there were just 138 people left on Eigg, living in conditions of very considerable economic fragility. And in the Second World War, when sixteen men left the island for military and related service, only two returned to live there when the hostilities were over.

Still, the island at least enjoyed continuity of sympathetic ownership from the early 1930s until the mid-1960s. But in 1966, Eigg was offered for sale. A locally-connected consortium was outbid, according to Camille Dressler's *Eigg - the Story of an Island*, by a Welsh farmer called Captain Evans. Just five years later, however, Evans sold Eigg. Some of those involved in the earlier consortium again tried to get the island. But their detailed plan failed to persuade the HIBD to help finance the purchase. The Board was in the business of market forces, to which that old 'emotive and political thing' of land ownership was most safely left.

As a direct result, Captain Evans sold Eigg (for a profit) to the Anglyn Trust, which styled itself as an adventure project for handicapped boys. It was, the Trust said, Christian in purpose, and was also 'non-profit making'. The Trust enjoyed as a colourful figurehead a self-styled ex-navy officer by the name of Commander Bernard Farnham-Smith. This nineteen-stone Cockney arrived with his entourage shortly after buying the island. Chaos quickly followed. Not even the HIBD would give him money for his alleged development schemes. Quite quickly, it became apparent that the

man was a fraud, who had never commanded anything more grandiloquent than a fire engine.

He had formerly also 'commanded' a private school for handicapped children somewhere in Sussex. It had failed to reach government standards, and in 1968 the appropriate department stopped local authorities from sending children there. As a result, the school closed. In 1984, Smith put Eigg up for sale, asking £200,000 - twice what he had paid for it three years earlier.

This time, however, the HIBD was shamed (somewhat unsurprisingly) into trying to buy Eigg. It offered that amount of public money to secure the island. Instead, however, the island went to Keith Schellenberg - the heir to a Yorkshire fortune in gelatine, which is a sort of cheap glue made from old bones and animal carcasses. He had bought Eigg jointly with his second wife, and they owned it in a limited partnership. The island, it was widely reported, had been bought specifically to keep it out of any sort of public ownership and 'to show what private ownership could do in the Highlands'.

Eigg was now to see just what private ownership could indeed do in the Highlands. Although 'Commander' Smith had wanted £200,000 for the island, and though the HIBD was prepared to pay this price, Schellenberg at the last moment offered £274,000. Smith pondered the social responsibilities attached to Highland land-ownership for about two seconds, grabbed the better price and bolted. Schellenberg said the board should offer him a grant, or at least an interest-free loan, to match the difference in asking and selling price, claiming that it was the intervention of the Board that had raised the price! The Board demurred at this truly fantastic

effrontery; but would nevertheless spend a lot of public money to help finance the schemes of the new owner.

And so the private-enterprise development of Eigg - Schellenberg took over on April Fools' Day, 1975 - was once again under way. It may even have been a well-meant development at first; the island population quickly grew from thirty-nine to sixty and the school-roll jumped from two to twelve. Schellenberg, meanwhile, imported a vintage car to the island's (very) few miles of (very) single-track road and hosted, from the island lodge, what he described as the Eigg Highland Games.

This insolent travesty, on the old Gaelic island of Eigg, concluded - according to the social diary of the Field - with a 'war game between the Hanoverians and the Jacobites'.

Or, as one guest of the owner later told the Daily Mail, 'we spent our days as if we were Somerset Maugham characters, sunbathing or playing croquet on the manicured lawns. Or we piled onto the running board of the stately 1927 Rolls and made our leisurely way to jewelled beaches for long, lazy picnics or midnight games of moonlit hockey and football'.

The remainder of the island's (permanent) resident went about their business, meanwhile. And if they had thoughts on the matter, neither the Field nor the Daily Mail saw fit to ask what, precisely, these thoughts might consist of.

Within five years this jewelled picnic of private enterprise had all gone wrong. Schellenberg and his wife divorced: the settlement resolved that she remained joint-owner of the island, as she had contributed half the money to buy it. Schellenberg devised a forestry scheme and grant-aid was approved for a 200-hectare planting on land surrounding one of the island's designated Sites of Special

Scientific Interest. The planting ruined its unique, little bio-environment in the shadow of the Sgurr, the marvellously scenic volcanic plug that rears up above Eigg.

Meanwhile, the new forester felt free to catcall the 'anti-enterprise environment which pervades the north-west Highlands'. At the time of the 1988 'Games', one guest flew from the United States to London by Concorde. Another arrived on the island by helicopter in full Prussian Army dress-uniform, with an entourage in matching ankle-length capes. On this occasion, a swastika flew over the Lodge. Schellenberg's daughter Serena explained this during the course of her father's failed libel action against the Guardian in 1999; 'a group of my father's friends called the Kaiser Team were coming and I could not find a German flag, so I put it up as a joke for them'. Serena's joke, it was reported, had made her father 'furious'; it was not reported how a swastika flag happened to be available on the Isle of Eigg for that day's Games.

A dispute developed later that afternoon, and one of the guests felt it proper to scream at some of the islanders, 'scum of the earth, half-baked socialists'. Some of his islanders, soothed the 'furious' glue-millionaire by way of explanation, 'are not even British'.

The former Mrs. Schellenberg remarried. In 1988, she took legal action against her former husband in the Court of Session. She accused him of 'mismanagement of their joint assets to the extent that the island was declining in value'. She now wanted the island sold, so that she could redeem her share. Schellenberg moved ownership of his share to a company of which he was a director. He appealed the court's decision, but lost the following year.

By 1991, it was expected that the island would be offered for sale imminently. The Isle of Eigg Trust launched an appeal for £3 million to remove the island forever from private ownership. But money was slow in coming in. In May 1992, Eigg was indeed offered for sale on the open market. Highland Regional Council asked the selling agents for an extension to the closing date for bids, but the request was refused. And that July it transpired that the new owner of Eigg was - once more, Keith Schellenberg! He had bought the island, in effect, from himself, for £1 million.

The exultant laird announced that he was going to take the Rolls on a triumphant tour of the island, and added that he 'could not sit back and watch Eigg become a sporting estate or worse still an example of collectivism'.

By early 1994, Schellenberg's stewardship of Eigg had all gone wrong again. On the night of 6 January - in as evident an intervention of the hand of God in Highland affairs as that which had hurled a graveyard's stormy contents onto a landlord gable in Skye a century earlier - Schellenberg's vintage Rolls Royce spontaneously combusted. By the following morning, there was little or nothing left of it, but a pair of vintage and heavily singed axles. The next day, Schellenberg himself arrived on Eigg, accompanied by police, whose enquiries, forensic if not theological, were to prove inconclusive. Schellenberg was, recorded an observer, 'quite scared actually, it was plain that he did not believe it was an accident and that he was wondering what would happen next'.

A month later, Schellenberg had recovered his not-inconsiderable nerve sufficiently to take part in a live radio debate from the island schoolhouse (in which the land-leaguers of the island had welcomed their Crofters' Candidate Charles Fraser-MacIntosh

in the autumn of 1885). One of the guests was Allan MacRae, chairman of the Assynt Crofters' Trust.

He told the meeting, 'I can see the proprietor here has no conscience and commitment as far as the people here are concerned. That's what you find with many proprietors in the Highlands and Islands. I think the people here have to take the initiative themselves. This is something that our European counterparts have taken for granted long ago. Here we are in Europe, and we are told to think like Europeans, and yet we still live under a feudal system in large parts of the Highlands and clearly there have to be changes. Things haven't got to stand still. People can shape the future if they have a will to do it'.

The broadcast was deemed to have had a cathartic effect on the islanders, whose efforts were duly enhanced in the search to secure a solution to the problem of Schellenberg. For his part, he announced that he would never accept community control of the island, and warned that he would sell it bit by bit to new-money outsiders. Two properties were offered for sale as holiday homes in the Daily Telegraph: 'the crofting township is at the other end, they are far enough away not to be a nuisance'.

According to Dressler, the islanders 'denounced this as asset-stripping', for they were concerned that 'selling Eigg into lots would turn it into an island of holiday homes, with disastrous consequences for its culture and traditions'. The islanders, in other words, had 'more constructive ideas'.

Their central idea was a community buy-out, the first step of which was the handover of the Isle of Eigg Trust to the islanders themselves. An appeal for funds to buy Eigg was launched, with a target of £15,000. To this, their millionaire (and Lloyd's 'name')

landlord responded with obstructive derision. He would never consider anything so 'childish or pathetic' as the notion of community ownership. 'I own Eigg and I will never sell it', he said in August 1994.

By the following spring, however, Schellenberg was believed to be in financial difficulties, following separation from a third wife and big losses on Lloyds. It was also rumoured that an offer of £1.5 million had been made for Eigg. At Easter 1995, Schellenberg arrived on the island; denied that the island had been sold; spent a long island night at the Lodge shifting furniture; and fled the island at dawn.

Later that day it became clear that he had indeed - with dazzling contempt for the islanders - sold Eigg. And he had sold it some considerable time previously, for £1.6 million, to a German self-proclaimed artist, Professor Marlin Eckhard, who styled himself 'Maruma'. Schellenberg had made a profit of £600,000 in just over three years.

The newspapers of Scotland did what they are sometimes very good at indeed, and lost no time in exposing this new owner for the fraud that he was. His art professorship was fictitious; so too was his chair in architecture. He was completely unknown on the art market. Meanwhile, the heavyweight German news magazine Stern checked the credit-rating of 'Maruma' and found it unsatisfactory. Further, he had taken out a bank-loan equal to the value of Eigg, and had used the island as security against a loan of £300,000 from a company in Hong Kong. Very soon, wages were being unpaid, and it became clear that Maruma's connection with Eigg was going to be a short one.

At the end of July 1996, Eigg was back on the market. The asking price was £2 million. A month later, the islanders announced their plan for the community to buy the island, in partnership with local government (the Highland Regional Council), and conservation interests (the Scottish Wildlife Trust). By the end of November, £1.2 million had been raised and, on the basis of a professional valuation of Eigg as a property, offered. The selling agents announced, with what might politely be described as magnificent insouciance, that £1.2 just wasn't enough: but that Professor Maruma had been kind enough 'to leave the island on the market to enable those who offered, and anybody who might also wish to do so, more time to raise the necessary funds to meet the asking price of £2 million'.

Meanwhile, however, one of Maruma's creditors got tired of waiting. In March, the Hong Kong businessman who had loaned Maruma £300,000 on the day Eigg was purchased, got a court order in the cause of getting his money back. The creditor could now force the sale of the island - to the highest bidder - within twenty eight days. On Friday 4 April, the creditor's lawyers accepted the islanders' offer of £1.5 million (much of it made possible by the contribution of an anonymous English woman).

And so the Isle of Eigg was at last free from the sort of landlord who had bothered it for so long. Given the shameless circus of greed, idiocy and obstructionism that had preceded this move, it might be thought well within the bounds of realism to describe the takeover of the island, by the people and in the name of the people, as an improvement of some due modesty.

There were other developments in the Highlands during the 1990s, in terms of the erosion of the dominance of private landlordism. At the end of 1997, Skye and Lochalsh Enterprise took

ownership of the 4,600-acre Orbost estate on Skye. And in the autumn of 1998 the conservationist John Muir Trust bought the 8,400-acre Sconser estate on Skye, two months later trebling the common-grazing hill land of the local crofting community.

There was also, throughout the decade, a growing awareness of and interest in the Highland land question as a matter of economic and cultural significance for both the Highlands and Scotland as a whole. This was reflected powerfully in a string of publications, conferences and the policy resolutions of most of the political parties. In time, it was even reflected in the activities of HIE.

During the early years of the decade, certainly, the land question was ignored by HIE. The agency's reports until 1997-1998 scarcely mention land, and dismiss the Assynt buy-out in a couple of sentences. But with the new Labour government in place after the general election of 1997, and the obliteration of the Conservative party in Scotland (and to a lesser extent south of the Border), HIE - without a blink of embarrassment - was able to proclaim a great, new 'fresh imeptus on land'.

According to its annual report for 1997-1998, 'access to land as a vital resource in the development of sustainable rural communities received substantial impetus from the new Government. This followed the successful acquisition of land by communities in Assynt, the island of Eigg and at Borge in Skye. Following a request from Brian Wilson, MP, then Scottish Office Minister for State, HIE set up a Community Land Unit in July of 1997.

'The Unit's objectives are to promote community-led land purchase or management initiatives, provide technical advice and support, including financial assistance, and to contribute to the

research and development of land policy. Main achievements during the year included the purchase by HIE and Skye and Lochalsh Enterprise of Orbost estate on Skye, with the intention of creating a new rural settlement based on a mix of housing, smallholdings and workspaces.

‘We made a successful application for European Objective 1 funding to create a technical assistance programme and gave technical and financial assistance to the Knoydart Foundation and its fund-raising appeal, and to some 20 smaller community land initiatives, including Balmacara, Lochcarron, Achmore, Eigg and Laggan. Financial assistance helped Abriachan Forest Trust to purchase 540 hectares of woodland on the side of Loch Ness from Forest Enterprise - the first such transfer to a community group in the UK.

‘Research projects included an audit of existing community land initiatives, an evaluation of the Laggan community forestry project and the formation of a digitised land-ownership map and register in the Highland Council and Argyll and Bute areas. We assisted a series of community land-training seminars and approved funding for four major conferences on land-reform issues’.

This extraordinary volte face serves as something of a grim reminder of how - at times - politics really are a matter of immense importance in the Highlands, as elsewhere.

But it also underlined the extent to which, as Scotland enters the twenty-first century, there is at last a legislative and financial framework in place for an expanded and radical reform of land ownership in the Highlands. After all, in the Westminster and Edinburgh elections of the late 1990s, all the parties in Scotland - excluding the Conservatives - were committed to land-reform; and

the early years of the reborn parliament in Edinburgh are likely to be distinguished by legislation in this cause. That, after all, is what the majority of its members were elected to do. And indeed, that new Scottish parliament moved very quickly indeed on land-reform. It was formally opened on 1 July 1999; and just eight days later the new administration published its first Scottish White Paper - on land-reform. This was launched, appropriately enough, at Abriachan above Loch Ness.

According to the terms of the White Paper, around £10 million of lottery funds could be available to help communities throughout rural Scotland to buy the land on which they live and work. There was in addition the threat that powers of compulsion could be available against obstructive landowners.

A community body wishing to buy its land must, for the legislation to apply, have first registered an interest. If the land in question then comes on the market, the community will have thirty days in which to signify a wish to buy. A government-appointed valuer will then set a price for the property. Thereafter, the community will have six months in which to raise monies to match the valuation.

According to the Depute First Minister, the Liberal Jim Wallace, 'our proposals on community ownership and right of access will create in Scotland a modern and fair approach to land ownership and represent a long-awaited and significant change. But this is only the beginning. There will be an integrated programme of action and legislation over the next four or five years'.

And in the following eight years, land restitution in the Highlands - the land for the people - has rolled forward, acre by acre, estate by estate. In 1999, ownership of Knoydart passed to

the local community in the form of the Knoydart Foundation. Three years later, the island of Gigha, off Kintyre, also passed into community ownership.

In 2003 a community right to buy was indeed - as had been proposed earlier - enshrined in the Scottish Parliament's flagship Land Reform Act. In 2005 the Assynt Foundation took over ownership of the 44,000-acre Glencanisp and Drumrunie estates from the Vestey family, with much of the cost put up by the Scottish Land Fund. And by the late autumn of that same year, local communities also owned the 7,000-acre Loch Seaforth estate adjoining the 55,000-acre North Harris estate - meaning that the whole of North Harris was under community ownership. Shortly afterwards, plans were advanced to hand-over Barra and Vatersay to community ownership. By the winter of 2006-2007 the 93,000-acre South Uist estate, from Eriskay to part of Benbecula, was under community ownership.

And in January 2007 Galston on Lewis came at long last into the control of the people, with transfer of ownership of the 52,000-acre estate to a community trust. This brought to 250,000 acres the land in the Outer Isles owned by the community, and meant that over two-thirds of the island population now lived on land owned by the community.

To its report of the buy-out at Galston, the West Highland Free Press added that, 'several more communities in Lewis and Harris are currently embarked upon the process which is expected to lead to further community buy-outs, backed by the crofting community right to buy which was enshrined in the Land Reform Act of 2003'.

The story ran under the headline 'The Quiet Revolution', with a Gaelic sub-heading to the effect that 'the land is now in the hands of the people'.

John Murdoch and Alexander MacKenzie - among many others - would surely have wondered why it had all taken so long. But they would - surely - have approved.