

Fiona Mackenzie,
Department of Geography
Carleton University, Ottawa.

Stream: Theory

**'Where do you belong to?': Land, identity, and community in the Isle of Harris,
Outer Hebrides, Scotland.**

May 1998

Introduction

The Gaelic greeting, 'Coit do'n bein sibh?', in translation in the title, signifies, first, the historically deep association between people and land in the crofting estates of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.¹ It recalls tenacious struggles to maintain a livelihood when what was perceived as an 'inalienable right'² to a particular piece of land and a sense of rootedness particular to place (in Gaelic, through the notion of dualchas) was under threat at the time of the Clearances. Second, it strikes at the heart of contemporary debates about land, as the task of rethinking land ownership takes on new meaning with the 'resetting of political discourse'³ as Scotland establishes its own parliament.⁴

In both respects, land is central to an understanding of identity and community, to a reimagining of locality and nation. In terms of discourses of property, reconfiguring feudal tenure is fundamental to the process of democratisation. In creating a new 'property democracy' which breaks the thrall of feudalism, David McCrone argues that it is essential to break out of the either/or of dominant political discourses of land, of choosing between 'mass public ownership' or 'treating it as an alienable product' over which owners have absolute rights. Ironically, in his view, the feudal tradition, 'in the midst of its rag-bag of ideas and notions', has 'bequeathed' a way out - 'a sense of conditionality', of contingent rights and shared interests, of use value and exchange value, to particular pieces of land.⁵ This legacy is bound up, as John Bryden explains, with the view that, as 'residual power and right in land belong to the people, as the community of the realm'⁶, there has never been such a thing as absolute private property rights in land in Scotland. There has always been 'a public interest in land and ... a set of public rights, even if these have been marginalised through time'.⁷ Such a legacy, where 'public rights are prior and paramount'⁸ and private rights are subordinate, is in many respects at odds with the cues of modernity and a vision of property rights as absolute and land as an alienable commodity. Assynt and Eigg, both of which are crofting communities, may, with the recent establishment of community trusts, McCrone argues, be 'crucial straws in the wind' in challenging modernist discourses of land as private property and in establishing an accountable democracy.⁹

But land is also imbricated in identity through contemporary discourses of land use. Most obviously this is the case at the national level where the landscape of the Highlands, a socially constructed 'wilderness'¹⁰, is iconic in terms of Scotland writ large. As a potent reminder of the past and the Clearances where sheep and then deer replaced people subsequent to Culloden (1746), it evokes a contemporary national 'imaginary'¹¹, ironically constructing out of Highland cloth an image of the nation as a whole. To use a phrase of Denis Cosgrove's, land is a 'terrain of power'¹², deeply connected to the construction of the nation, and constituted through the symbols of material struggle. At the local level, the integrity of land and people is visible most clearly in the crofting communities, where the deep historical association between people and place is evident, for example, in the density of place names, 'mnemonic devices'¹³ which recall the past. It is this close association which, inter alia, James Hunter and the Scottish Crofters Union draw on to suggest that crofting, as an ecologically sustainable form of land use, provides the basis for rethinking agricultural and rural policy within the EU, a view which contrasts sharply with attitudes evident as recently as the 1980s¹⁴. Low input agriculture combined with part time employment in other activities, is proposed as a key to rural reinvigoration.

Crofting then, lies at the nexus of discourses of land as property and land use at an historical moment when a discourse of democracy, nationally, and a discourse of sustainability, nationally, within Europe, and globally, assume center ground. Expressed otherwise, democracy and notions of social justice in political discourse in Scotland, and sustainability more generally, provide the discursive ground within which land is being contested in Scotland at present. In this context, with reference to the Isle of Harris, Eilean na Hearadh, in the Outer Hebrides, the objective of this paper is to examine crofting as a site where these meanings are contested. Crofting, I argue, is, as it has always been, a negotiated space, a site of contestation and collaboration. It is both a counter narrative to that of globalisation/modernisation, the 'market of triumphalism' of Richard Peet and Michael Watts¹⁵ and a powerful symbol in the reconfiguring of rural Scotland.

In this paper, I begin by examining the croft as a cultural marker before exploring how this historically resilient metaphor is negotiated in contemporary Harris. I refer specifically to recent proposals to establish community trusts in the land owned by the Scottish Office. In the fourth part of the paper, I examine the cross currents of agricultural policy and practice which pertain to the question of environmental and agricultural sustainability.

The croft as metaphor

Beyond a surface deeply etched through history, resonant with a sense of powerlessness in altering the course of events, what Anthony Cohen refers to as 'a powerful sense of self'¹⁶ is identifiable in the symbols that communities create as boundary markers. The croft, he suggests in the context of Whalsay, a Shetland island, is one such marker. It is 'an anchor'; spatially it keeps people in situ on the same small patch of land that has been occupied by generations of their antecedents; symbolically and ideologically it provides a sense of cultural continuity amidst the flux 'of modern economic and technological life'¹⁷. Perhaps,

he continues, 'what is most compelling about the croft is not just that it is land, but that it is a particular piece of land'.¹⁸ The croft, "' lineage" territory, the tiny, finite space within which much of one's history is located', becomes a 'fundamental referent of personal identity'.¹⁹ As with other symbols, meaning is not inherent in it; it provides 'the capacity to make meaning'.²⁰ It lies, in Cohen's reasoning, within the realm of 'meta-meaning ... that realm of consciousness which we occupy when we are aware of some "added value" in our behaviour; when we know there is something more to what we are saying or doing than there appears to be'.²¹

Most recently in the case of Harris, the croft was engaged metaphorically as a powerful counter narrative to the modernist discourse of proponents of the Lingarbay superquarry. Together with those other signifiers, Sabbath observance and the Gaidhealtachd, it served to distinguish the 'community' from places outwith the island. Its power, as I explain elsewhere, inheres in its ability through history to connect individual and family, through rights to labour and land, with community.²² The contemporary croft, as that in the past, combines individual control of land, the in-bye land, either adjacent to the croft house or nearby, and access to common grazing - in the west of the island, on the machair and on 'the hill', the rough grazing of the moors, or, in the east, solely on the moorland. The retention of the common grazing ensures the daily, or at least seasonal, negotiation of community as sheep are gathered for shearing, or dipping at the fanks. The common tasks also recall a past where, under the runrig system²³, arable land was also held in common, and access to it depended on kinship, 'the nexus of obligations and rights residing in the clan system'.²⁴

Evidence of the depth of people's connection to precise parcels of land through the croft is found in the density of place names in the Bays area of east Harris, as it is here that close settlement of the land pre-dates the Clearances.²⁵ In the case of 'Morag's map' (Figure 1), the dailiness of the place names records the history of particular places associated with the names of family members or events.²⁶ Christina Shaw, resident of Harris, interviewed by Morag MacLeod of the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, confirmed this image:

'There wasn't the length of between here and the gate that we didn't have a name for, which is not the case nowadays. Every ben and every mound and every hill, and An Carnan, Am Bealach, A'Ghil, and everything ... I could name them all.'²⁷

Such place names, as Charles Jedrej and Mark Nuttall relate, are 'multi-dimensional' and contain 'mythical, factual, historical and personal meanings': They 'bind the landscape with human imagination and experience and inform us about a multiplicity of close associations which thereby blend the human and natural worlds into one'.²⁸ For Alastair Maclean, writing of a croft in Ardnamurchan on the mainland, 'Without names for ourselves and our possessions and places, we return to the void'. His grandfather, he continues, 'lived in a different landscape', one where names were 'a matter of survival': 'The gods of place, in his young days, the days when one was drawing from a landscape rather than simply walking over it, punished ignorance much more severely'.²⁹

The place names on the croft certainly recall a family's individual history and the sense of place associated with a particular locality. They represent, to follow Dennis Gaffin, the fusion between people and their landscape. But they are also evidence of the great value that attaches to localness, to local identity, and to participation in a particular community. This knowledge is restricted; incomers do not have access to it. In Gaffin's analysis of a Faeroese community, 'Outsiders' ignorance of local names impedes intimacy of local life'.³⁰

The croft on Harris, as elsewhere, has undergone substantial change since the Clearances. The majority of crofters may be 'sheep farmers', as one so aptly put it, but others (two) are reintroducing Highland cattle, one produces eggs, and several are engaged in woodland schemes, either individually or collectively. There is some diversity, an issue which will be followed later. But the point that needs to be made is that despite such difference, and the recent participation of incomers as crofters, crofting and the croft remain powerful identifiers of community in the face of external threat. In Cohen's words, the croft is a symbolic resource through which identity is 'stabilised' at times when social stability is at risk.³¹ Precisely because reference to the past is sufficiently vague - 'timelessness masquerading as history' - it allows the outward expression of commonality while simultaneously allowing the internal expression of difference.³² The croft on Harris is contested space. As I have indicated, it has recently provided the means of constructing an alternative discourse to that of modernity. It is not that it does not engage in economics; rather, 'it is non-economic: it belongs to a quite a different realm of discourse'.³³ But it also provides the political space within which meanings are contested within Harris - in part, as I discuss elsewhere between islander and incomer.³⁴ In this context Gaelic, whose significance in the construction of community is evident in the boundaries established through place names, becomes part of the re-negotiation of the politics within crofting. Anne Frater's powerful poem, 'Aig an Fhaing'/'At the Fank' captures precisely the constant negotiation of individual and collectivity.³⁵ Despite the 'difference' created by her being educated elsewhere,

'The nails of improvement have left me stiff in the wind.'³⁶

She writes in another poem, it is 'my own language on my own tongue' which resolves the tensions she experiences in relating to her community. Gaelic, writes Christopher Whyte in commenting on the poem, provides 'the key to integration, a key which is invisible but powerfully communal'.³⁷

The croft as property: Community trusts?

Who possesses this landscape?

The man who bought it or

I who am possessed by it? (Norman MacCaig, 'A Man in Assynt')³⁸

Security of tenure to the croft was guaranteed, subsequent to the struggles of the Highland land wars of the nineteenth century and the findings of the Napier Commission

established in 1884, by the Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act of 1886. Falling far short of people's demands for the return of land lost to them during the Clearances, the Act legislated for a 'fair rent' to be defined by a Crofters Commission rather than the landlord, and the right to pass on tenancy of the croft to someone of their choice. If they left the croft, compensation for improvements were to be made to the crofter. The Act did not address the return of rights to fishing, wood, or hunting, which had previously been part of the bundle of rights accorded to people through customary law - and which, together with claims to mineral rights, remain an unresolved issue.³⁹

The Crofting Reform Act 1976 extended these rights. Inter alia, crofters now had the right to purchase the croft from the landlord for an amount equal to fifteen times the 'fair rent' for the crop and the right to half the development value of any land taken out of crofting and put to other use. By making it easier for the crofter to obtain full legal title to the house site, the legislation facilitated a crofter's ability to obtain a mortgage. Finally, grazing committees were given extended rights to develop township improvement schemes.⁴⁰ With respect to the option of purchase of the croft land, 22 years after the legislation only 3000 of the 17,685 crofts on the Crofters Commission's crofting register have been designated as owner-occupier.⁴¹ Most of these are located in Easter Ross, Caithness, Shetland and the Orkneys. Only 44 of the 5,981 crofts in the Western Isles had been purchased within 15 years of the legislation,⁴² and only nine of the 559 crofts on Harris were owner-occupied in 1997.⁴³ Opposition to the owner-occupier scheme is general. Although people who take this option remain eligible for the Crofting Counties Agricultural Grants Scheme (CCAGS), there is a lack of eligibility for housing grants and loans, a significant factor leading to the unpopularity of the scheme.

The most recent legislation to affect crofting tenure pertains to The Transfer of Crofting Estates (Scotland) Act 1997, an Act which allows tenants on crofting estates owned by the Secretary of State to own the land they work collectively, On Harris, this involves the crofting estates of Scaristavore, Luskentyre, and Borve (Figure 2 and Table 1). The remainder of the crofts on Harris are located on the land of individual, private, estates. My objective in this part of the paper is to examine the initiative of community trusts on Harris, recognizing that, with a review of land tenure now underway in Scotland, the question of whether communal tenure should be extended outwith the Secretary of State's crofting estates is extant.

The three crofting estates belonging to the Secretary of State represent the most recent land on the island to come under crofting tenure. Established through the Small Landholder (Scotland) Act 1911 which allowed for the extension of crofting tenure throughout Scotland, the initiative was motivated, Leah Leneman argues, by a commitment to land reform of the Liberal government under than Prime Minister Henry Campbell-Bannerman, a Scot. In his words, spoken in 1906: 'We wish to make the land less a pleasure ground for the rich and more of a treasure house for the nation'.⁴⁴ Under the Act, a new Board of Agriculture was set up in Scotland, authorized to implement schemes through the Agriculture (Scotland) Fund to increase the number of land holdings. The promise of land was held out as part of the propaganda campaign for the 1914 - 18

war. A subsequent piece of legislation, The Small Holdings Colonies Act 1916, extended the power to acquire land for 'experimental small holding colonies', although no special funds were provided for this purpose.⁴⁵

On Harris, the first scheme was established on Ardhasaig Farm which, subsequent to raids in 1915 and 1919, became the site of 15 new crofts. At the time of settlement in 1919, the land had been owned by Lord Leverhulme's Lewis and Harris Welfare and Development Company.⁴⁶ Raids in south Harris, for example in 1921 and 1922 on his Rodel Farm, were evidence of the growing frustration of lack of local access to land and occurred despite his demands that no applications for the creation of crofts to the Board of Agriculture be made during the period in which he attempted to promote his development schemes which centered on the new harbour at Leverburgh.⁴⁷ Demand for land was particularly acute in the west of the island for the fertile machair which had been cleared in the 1820s, the majority of people emigrating to Cape Breton, some moving to the Bays in the east. The demand for land increased with Leverhulme's death in 1925.

The land that had belonged to Leverhulme was disposed of in different ways. Kyles and Rodel in the south were sold to a private owner and settled as crofts under the auspices of the Board. Much more controversially, Scaristavore was settled in 1929 after substantial local upheaval which included successive land raids and the visible resistance of women who, in April 1929, threw buckets of 'odorous waters', i.e. the urine collected for the purpose of waulking the tweed, onto the heads of the ploughmen, two days later putting a stop to the ploughing by lying down in the path of the horses. They were protesting the division of land, specifically the lack of compensation to the raiders.⁴⁸ These were eventually settled on a neighbouring estate of Luskentyre under a new Secretary of State, W. Adamson, a man with less 'hard-line' views on rewards for the raiders.⁴⁹

The resettlement of Borve Estate, the last on south Harris, occurred again subsequent to several raids. In this case, the decision to approve the scheme was based on 'political and social considerations'. In the words Of the King's and Lord Treasurer's Remittances from whom the Treasury had sought advice:

The Department [of Agriculture] make no pretense that this is an economic scheme; it is simply a means of averting an anticipated outbreak of land-raiding. The King's Writ hardly runs in Harris, and if land-raiding starts, the situation will get out of hand ... The money is being paid to buy off disorder; whether it is a good one is a political rather than an administrative decision.⁵⁰

The land remaining under the ownership of the Secretary of State, Scaristavore, Luskentyre and Borve, is now the subject of the latest suggestions for the management of crofting estates. In many respects the proposal to establish community trusts or crofting trusts is congruent with the demands of those who opposed the idea of owner-occupation in the legislation of 1976.⁵¹ Introduced by the then Secretary of State, Michael Forsyth, in 1996, the Consultation Paper defined a crofting trust as follows:

A crofting trust would own all the land on a particular estate or set of estates on behalf of the local communities concerned. It would own all the common grazings and the tenanted in-bye land. The existing crofting tenants would become tenants of the crofting trust and the protection of rights and obligations under the Crofting Acts would continue to apply.⁵²

In order that no initial debts were incurred, the government stated that it 'might be prepared to consider a transfer at no consideration'.⁵³ Thereafter, there would be no financial contribution towards running of the estates. The initiative was modeled on the recent trusts established in Assynt in Sutherland and Borve and Annishader on Skye.⁵⁴ Like the trusts established there on what were private estates purchased by the communities, the trust would give crofters powers beyond the agricultural use of the land. Forsyth emphasised that the potential benefit lay in exploiting 'development opportunities ... more sympathetic to local needs' than those possible through the Scottish Office Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries Department (SOAEFD). He went so far as to state that the transfer of ownership could include sporting and mineral rights, depending on the terms under which the land was held.⁵⁵

The Scottish Crofters Union (SCU) welcomed the proposal, the president, Alastair MacIver noting that it could reverse the loss of croft land which has followed the decrofting measures introduced with the 1976 legislation.⁵⁶ The SCU considers that its importance rests, further, first in facilitating the initiation of economic projects such as those introduced in Assynt and Borve and Annishader which include, developing tourist facilities (holiday chalets, agri-tourism, sporting activities such as fishing or pony trekking), wind and water power generation, affordable housing for young people, projects involving computers, and crofter forestry. Secondly, the SCU sees the initiative as advantageous with respect to long term security. The SOAEFD, it suggests, at some future time might decide to dispose of its estates to 'a group of faceless businessmen from the south or a "foreign national"'.⁵⁷ "Tenants of a SOAEFD estate", Frank Rennie, a founding member and first president of the SCU stated, 'have no more control over the running of that estate than do passengers of British Rail. Both are state-owned. Neither are run by the people who use them'.⁵⁸ The SCU reiterates the significance of the issue of local control, seeing it as leading to an 'air of self-confidence and self-determination' among crofting communities.⁵⁹ This view was reinforced by the results of a feasibility study they commissioned into a pan-Highland and Islands crofting trust which, it was proposed, would undertake the day to day running of the communities until such time as communities had the confidence to take over the management on their own. 'Community empowerment' was listed first among the benefits to be achieved, followed by the potential for the creation of local employment.⁶⁰ In the words of a Councilor, M. Foxley, Comhairle nan Eilean/ the Western Isles Council, 'It is all to do with confidence and it is to do with successes in the Highlands because there is a past history of confidence being severely battered in many communities'.⁶¹ Management by this trust would differ from that by the SOAEFD as there would be community participation. Angus Macleod, principal founder

of the SCU, goes further in suggesting that the 'community ownership principle' could well be extended to all croft land, not just that held by the Secretary of State.⁶²

Those arguing against the proposal most commonly cite the reason that the SOAEFD is 'a good landlord' and thus ask, 'Why rock the boat?' Some concern is raised that the reason behind the proposal is to offload the costs of administration onto crofters themselves. In response to this concern, the SCU commissioned a study on estates in Skye and Raasay and concluded that the running costs were higher on SOAEFD estates solely because, as part of the civil service, they had 'complex and costly' administrative procedures which would not be replicated in a locally-run trust. A final argument against the proposal centres on the question of pre-emptive rights, that the former owners might have the right to buy back the land once the SOAEFD ceases to be the landlord. In response to this concern, which does not affect the majority of SOAEFD estates, the SCU call for legislation to amend such feudal rights.⁶³

Of the three SOAFED estates on Harris, the issue of a community trust is under active consideration by only one, Scaristavore. Here, the matter is of moment owing to the location on part of the common grazings of the Harris Golf Club. At present, in return for the use of the common grazing on the machair, the Golf Club rents 150 acres of glebe land from the Church of Scotland for the township. It has applied to the Sports Council of the National Lottery to meet at least part of the amount (60,000 pounds) for which the church is willing to sell the land. If the amount of money is raised, the Golf Course will buy the land for the township, and in return, the township will sell, for the same sum, the land presently used by the Golf Course. The township looks on the scheme favourably as the amount of land they will receive is three times the amount of land they have lent to the Golf Course and the land is of as good quality. It is, however, not as conveniently located with respect to the fank.⁶⁴

Table I . Crofting Estates run by the Secretary of State for Scotland, 31 December 1994, Isle of Harris

Grazings	Crofting Lets	Total Hectarage	Number of Townships With Common
Scaristavore	10	1 192	1
Luskentyre	10	2 396	1
Borve	32	3 013	3

Source: Scottish Office 1996:7.

On the advice of Simon Fraser, a lawyer who deals with matters of crofting in the Western Isles, and who met with the township in May 1997, the township is considering setting up a trust to administer the glebe land. Without it, Fraser has advised, at some future time, any of the ten crofts in the township might decide to sell, and then the township would be left with only half the land. His suggestion has been that the township place all their land

under a trust, and thus the glebe land would become part of this trust. Although there is 'unanimous' support for transferring the land to the Golf Course - the move is viewed locally as important socially, as it would give adults and children a place for recreation ('Quite a lot of this place has gone too far on the drink side and we wanted to guard the young generation against this') - there remains guardedness about the trust. They are 'not hard done by the SOAEFD', in the words of one of the (male) crofters. In the words of another, a woman, who had seen the Harris Crofters Association of 45 years ago falter and then disappear for want of cooperation, 'They're much too individual on their own.... I suppose it comes back from the Highland Clearances where they were kept down and now they have a certain degree of independence, they want to hold onto it'. But another crofter, a younger woman, was strongly supportive: 'We owe it to our ancestors. This is an opportunity to win the land they fought for'. She cited the words of a song written by Mairi Mhor nan Oran, the Poet of the Land League, in translation:

Unless you give a hard strike
While the axe is in your hand
They will keep you going and going
Pitiful, dispossessed for ever.

For another crofter who lives on the north Harris estate owned by Jonathan Bulmer, people's position with respect to crofting trusts is related to age, which in turn is linked to confidence. 'The older generation don't have the confidence to take on responsibility', she thought. For her, the issue of ownership is of vital importance: Bulmer may have paid for the land, she remarked, but 'it doesn't belong to him'; it belongs to those with the hereditary right to work it. Community trusts, she continued, 'would give people control over the land and their lives that they don't have at the moment. It's a daunting thing because we're so conditioned into having somebody else own our land and take responsibility for it.... The potential is there for people to take ownership of it This would have a lot of benefits for the community'.⁶⁵ Not only are there only six crofters working the ten crofts in Scariatavore, for the majority (four) age may well be an inhibiting issue.

The croft and discourses of land management

[N]ow that there is an urgent, and universally recognised, requirement to devise rural policies designed to meet the circumstances created by agricultural overproduction, the case for crofting is an extremely strong one. Far from being a mildly embarrassing relic from the distant pasts crofting points the way to the diversified rural economy which is being sought on all sides.⁶⁶

Since its inception in 1986, the SCU, as evident in the words of its first president, Frank Rennie, above, has sought, again in his words, to reverse an image of the crofter as 'a poor soul whose very survival depends on public subsidies', or, in Hunter's words, as 'a latter-day representative of that class of people known to the Victorians as the deserving poor'.⁶⁷ Such perception by the government and state agencies, both argue, has itself engendered loss of self-esteem, damage to morale, and what Shucksmith et al. refer to as a prevailing

sense of powerlessness.⁶⁸ The 'claim' of crofting, the SCU argues, rests on its potential to point towards a more sustainable future within Scotland and, more widely, as the EU rethinks the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

The grounds for such a claim rest, first, on the croft as an enterprise which provides part-time employment on the land. The croft has never been, as Hunter demonstrates convincingly in his book, *The Claim of Crofting*, a place where a full-time living based on agriculture might be obtained.⁶⁹ A livelihood in crofting communities has always relied on a combination of activities which have included fishing, weaving (Harris tweed), labouring, bed and breakfast and, more recently, telecottaging. Past attempts to treat crofting in terms of agricultural policy have as, inter alia, Brydon and Hunter have shown, been doomed to failure, a position recognised by the Commission of Inquiry into Crofting Conditions (The Taylor Commission), 1954, and the work of Fraser Darling carried out at about the same time.⁷⁰ To argue otherwise, as those bodies suggest, would aggravate, rather than alleviate, problems in rural Scotland.

Foremost among these benefits, as Angus Macleod pointed out in 1987, has been the ability of crofting to keep people on the land, 'while farming has been emptying the countryside'.⁷¹ In contrast, Bryden remarks, the non-crofting parts of the Highlands 'can all too often be described as social, economic and cultural deserts'.⁷² In a situation in Europe now where the predominant concern is to limit rather than expand agricultural production, and to find ways in which rural people can earn a livelihood less dependent on agriculture, the case for crofting, the SCU maintains, 'has been totally transformed'.⁷³ Crofting supports more people per unit of land than any other 'non-urban' land use in Scotland, and what was looked on as a weakness at a time of maximization of agricultural output, has now, in terms of demonstrating the sustainability of rural communities through diversification of economic activities, become a strength.⁷⁴ There is thus now a convergence between the arguments made by the SCU since its formation and those of the EU.⁷⁵ In the words of the SCU: far from being seen as

some sort of quaint anachronism, possibly deserving of preservation in much the same way as a thatched cottage or a medieval mill, crofting ought now to be seen as a first-rate means to achieving policy objectives of the type now being proposed right across the EC.⁷⁶

The second claim, critical to the development of the argument of this paper, is that crofting, as a low input form of agriculture, is of vital significance in terms of environmental sustainability. Again, there is a convergence between the SCU and the direction that some of the re-thinking of the CAP is taking. Not only is the cost of continuing the CAP prohibitive, and beneficial for the most part to the largest farmers on the better land,⁷⁷ but such support has contributed to ecological damage. There is now, as Hunter explains, both a financial and environmental case against the large farmer.⁷⁸

Visibility of this issue in the SCU increased after the 1989 SCU conference to which Marion Shoard, a conservationist, and Richard Body, Conservative MP, were invited. Shoard argued that it was in crofters' interest in terms of getting recognition and support within UK policy circles to obtain the support of the environmental movement by showing how crofting, unlike larger scale agriculture, was compatible with environmental sustainability. Body, long critical of government policy which had benefited agribusiness rather than the small family farmer, suggested alliances with groups such as the Small Farmers

Association.⁷⁹ Subsequent to this, the SCU began to note publicly the relationship between low input agriculture and the diversity of wildlife and flowers that were found in the crofting areas. The survival of crofting, it was argued, was linked to the sustainability of biodiversity. Of particular significance was the machair whose richness in terms of plant biodiversity is dependent on the land management practices of crofters, and particularly grazing by both cattle and sheep and rotational cultivation on the land held in common. The SCU, working in partnership in the 1990s with the Royal Society for the Preservation of Birds (RSPB), has argued further that the 'maintenance' of crofting communities and biodiversity is a

"public good" that cannot be sustained by market forces alone. The 'public goods' produced by crofters, it is argued, include, 'habitats that are rich in wildlife, an attractive and unpolluted landscape, a rich culture, access for recreation and food'.⁸⁰

The SCU's suggestions as to how to promote this include a rethinking of current support systems, specifically the headage payments for sheep which include the Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowance (HLCA) and the Sheep Annual Premium Scheme (SAPS) under the CAP. These subsidies, as is widely recognised, contribute inter alia to overstocking and associated environmental degradation. They have also favoured sheep at the expense of cattle as the relative headage payments have benefited the former rather than the latter during the last 20 years. In their stead, a new support system centred on the principle of 'cross compliance' is recommended. This would provide the 'mechanism for linking the schemes available to crofters to the provision of environmental benefits'.⁸¹ Cross compliance, the SCU argues, would facilitate the integration of agricultural, environmental and rural development policies, including support for the Gaelic language.⁸² Particular measures that the SCU identifies include increasing the ratio of cattle to sheep by increasing the number of cattle and decreasing the number of sheep, replacing subsidies on the basis of headage to a hectare basis; extending the area of late-cut hay and silage in order to increase the habitat area of the 'globally threatened' corncrake and to adopt culling methods which minimise disturbance to the birds; reintroducing or expanding 'appropriate cropping patterns', including the purchase of equipment necessary to spread seaweed and dung in order to promote an extension of the cropped area; and promoting the drawing up of township conservation plans with respect to the management of common grazings and woodlands, contingent on which would be eligibility to specified grants and concessions on freight costs.⁸³ The SCU emphasizes that such measures must be linked to support for economic diversification. Such new policies, the SCU maintains,

should not be seen as a subsidy or charity but as payment for 'those crofting "products" on which the wider world is setting more and more store'. The crofting areas may have had 'comparatively little to offer nationally and internationally in food production terms', they continue, but as 'a model of how rural communities can be organised in ways which both safeguard the natural environment and permit the integration of agriculture with a wide range of other income-earning opportunities ... the crofting experience is of quite outstanding importance'.⁸⁴ What were once considered to be the weaknesses of crofting have become strengths.

This discourse of sustainability is potentially powerful at the level of policy makers in the new Scotland and in the EU, where 'the environment' has been accepted as a 'legitimate' in political discourse. But for those crofters outwith those areas designated as Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESAs) as the Uists, where there is support for such environmentally sound practices, the economic benefits of engaging in sheep monoculture, rather than past environmentally sound practices, are all too attractive. On Harris, the decline in the number of cattle over the past two decades has been associated with a marked decline in the cultivation of crops, oats, crops for feeding stock and barley, in turn coincidental with the end of the Marginal Cropping Grant in 1981.⁸⁵ And it costs 100 per cent more to buy winter feed in the Western Isles than it does in Inverness.⁸⁶ For this reason, those many crofters who, in the past, kept two or three cows for the home production of milk have, in the great majority of cases, eliminated their herd within the last sixteen or so years. The degradation of the common grazings both on the machair and in the hills is associated both with this decrease in the number of cattle and with the increased number of sheep. Only a few crofters on the west side of the island where the fertile machair may be more easily ploughed, maintain some stock. Sheep demand both less attention and have a subsidy attached to their production. Of the few crofters who are exceptions to this trend, two have recently re-introduced small herds of Highland cattle into Harris, taking advantage of what they perceive to be a potential niche market in terms of the food industry and of significance in the development of a BSE-free cattle industry. Both of these crofters are conscious of the environmental significance of what they are doing. In the words of one: 'Cattle are the only thing that doesn't have to be brought in on a ship that can restore the balance of what we can grow'. The sheep, he added, 'are eating the heart out of the island'. Not only do Highlanders, like other cattle, eat different lengths of grass than sheep and graze on some of the tougher grasses which sheep leave but, unlike other cattle they rely, for the provision of trace elements, on a diet which includes heather and the prostrate willows which grow virtually flat. They thus take advantage of an ecological niche which sheep cannot use. One of these crofters is now actively involved with the Grazings Committee, 'the power house', in the purchase of machinery collectively to be used in ploughing and to help with the spreading of manure, inter alia, to ensure increased production of winter feed.⁸⁷

The Grazings Committee in Luskentyre, often referred to as the most youthful on the island, stands out in terms of mobilizing around community activities which include those which are environmentally sensitive. Using grants from the Township Development Scheme of the Scottish Office, and the Forestry Department, they have engaged in the

planting of woodland, broadleaf and Scots pine; the replacement of 40 year old fences with stone dykes; and the replanting of marram grass where this was necessary to prevent coastal erosion. Initial reluctance in undertaking the venture, part of whose costs were borne by the crofters themselves, and particularly towards the planting of woodland on the rough grazing, was overcome by linking the planting of trees to fencing. Of the 2295 hectares of common grazing in the township, only 4.6 ha. were, in the end, planted. A number of crofters, individually, have planted trees, taking advantage of the Woodland Grant Scheme and the new (1997) Farm Woodland Premium Scheme.⁸⁸

Intended to be of more immediacy with respect to supporting environmentally sustainable agriculture, the Countryside Premium Scheme was introduced in 1997. In recognition of the disadvantage that small farming unit particularly crofts, faced in the first year of its mandate, the Scheme has now been revised.⁸⁹ It is, however, not as far reaching as the schemes to which crofters in the ESAs have access and it remains to be seen whether the SCU's skepticism of the earlier version will be eliminated and whether, without more fundamental policy change, such as that proposed through cross compliance, crofting can, in fact, achieve the potential outlined by the SCU in making the 'claim' for crofting. What is needed in addition, as the SCU continues to emphasise, is that such schemes must be accompanied by measures to support economic diversification outwith agriculture.

Towards a conclusion

The third claim of crofting, Hunter argues, is the claim that 'crofting is equally intimately linked with the survival of Scotland's ancient and distinctive Gaelic culture'. The problems of the crofting communities, and particularly the loss of population, may be related to limited economic opportunities, but they were also related, he surmises, to 'the ceaseless devaluing of the crofting community's cultural heritage; by the conviction, on the part of almost all those in authority, that practically everything about the crofting way of life, starting with the Gaelic language, was intrinsically inferior; by the practically universal assumption that the path to betterment must forever point outward from the croft'.⁹⁰ But in the new political climate in Scotland, this language and culture, the SCU points out, becomes a 'public good', together with those of biodiversity and magnificence of the landscape.

The potential power of this argument was recognised within Harris by members of the Quarry Benefit Group during the recent public inquiry into the proposed superquarry at Lingerbay. If the discourse of Redland and other proponents of the quarry at that forum, together with claims of 'sustainable development' was construed on the basis of a modernist paradigm of progress and growth, defining the debate in terms of jobs versus the environment, thereby attempting to pit 'islander' against 'incomer' / 'white settler', those on Harris who opposed the proposal did so by constructing a counter narrative which drew on profoundly different epistemological grounds. Sustainability, they countered, lay in valuing local identity, the 'profound and experience-near identification with a particular and irreplaceable place or set of social relationships'.⁹¹ Their counter narrative centred on the uniqueness of community in terms of crofting, of its pivotal role in the Gaidhealtachd,

and of its strict observance of the Sabbath. The close relationship between people and land was integral to this definition of collective identity.

Endnotes

1. Crofts were established at the time of the Clearances, subsequent to Culloden, from the middle of the eighteenth century in the Highlands and Islands. The Clearances refer to the period following Culloden when people were cleared from the land to make way, first for sheep and then deer, as these provided more profit for landlords. Crofts were never intended to provide a livelihood from agriculture alone. As James Hunter in *The Making of the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh, John Donald Publishers, 1985) explains, initially, a workforce was needed by landlords to exploit the lucrative kelp industry of the mid-eighteenth century.
2. Leah Leneman, *Fit for Heroes?: Land Settlement in Scotland After World War I*, (Aberdeen, Aberdeen University Press, 1989).
3. David McCrone, *Land, Democracy and Culture in Scotland*, Third John McEwan Lecture, (Perth, Rural Forum Scotland, 1997).
4. See Scottish Office, Land Reform Policy Group, *Identifying the Problems*, (Edinburgh, Scottish Office, 1998).
5. McCrone, 1997 op. cit. More generally, with respect to the distribution of land in Scotland, see Andy Wightman, *Who Owns Scotland?* (Edinburgh, Canongate Books, 1996).
6. For discussion of the concept of 'community of the realm', see Neil MacCormick, 'The English Constitution, the British State and the Scottish Anomaly', *Scottish Affairs* (Special Issue, Understanding Constitutional Change, 1998).
7. John Bryden, *Land tenure and Rural Development*, Second John McEwan Lecture, (Perth, Rural Forum Scotland, 1996), p. 7.
8. McCrone, 1997, *ibid.*, p. 20.
9. *ibid.*
10. F. Fraser Darling, *West Highland Survey: An Essay in Human Ecology*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1955); T.C. Smout, *The Highlands and the Roots of Green Consciousness*, (Edinburgh, Scottish Natural Heritage, 1993)
11. The use of this concept follows Arturo Escobar, 'Imagining a post-development era' in Jonathan Crush, ed., *Power of development*, (London, Routledge, 1995). p. 211-227.

12. Denis Cosgrove, 'Terrains of power', *Times Educational Supplement*.
13. Charles Jedrej and Mark Nuttall, *White Settlers. The Impact of Rural Repopulation in Scotland*, (Luxembourg, Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996). p. 123.
14. James Hunter, *The Claim of Crofting. The Scottish Highlands and Islands, 1930 - 1990*, (Edinburgh, Mainstream Publishing, 1991); Scottish Crofters Union/Aonadh nan Croitearan and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds/An Comann Rioghail Airson Dion nan Eun, *Crofting and the Environment. A New Approach*, (Stornoway, Acair, 1992); Scottish Crofters Union/Aonadh nan Croitearan and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds/An Comann Rioghail Airson Dion nan Eun, *Rural Development and the Environment. Opportunities in the Highlands and Islands/Leasachadh Duthchail agus an arainneachd. Cothroman air a'Gaidhealtacht agus na h-Eileanan* (1995).
15. Richard Peet and Michael Watts
16. Anthony P. Cohen, *Whalsay: Symbol, segment and boundary in a Shetland Community*, (Manchester, Manchester Univ. Press, 1987), p. 16.
17. *ibid.*, p. 108
18. *ibid.*, p.108
19. *ibid.*
20. *ibid.*, p. 16
21. *ibid.*, p. 18
22. A. Fiona D. Mackenzie, 'The Cheviot, the Stag and the White, White Rock? Identity, Community and Environment, Isle of Harris, Scotland', *Environment and Planning D. Society and Space* (forthcoming, 1998).
23. For a discussion of the runrig system, see Charles Withers, *Gaelic Scotland: The Transformation of a Culture Region*, (London, Routledge, 1988); R. J. Brien, *The Shaping of Scotland* (1989)
24. David McCrone, *Understanding Scotland: The Sociology of a Stateless Nation*, (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 116-117.
25. See Bill Lawson, *Croft History, Vol. I* (1994) and *Vol. II* (1997), (Taobh Tuath, Isle of Harris, Bill Lawson Publications).
26. Personal communication.

27. Morag MacLeod, 'Christina Shaw and Peggy Morrison. Two Sisters from Harris', *Tocher*, 41(1987-88), p.265.
28. Jedrej and Nuttall, *op. cit.* , p. 122.
29. Alastair Maclean, *Night Falls on Ardnamurchan, The Twilight of a Crofting Community*, (London: Victor Gollanez, 1984). p. 185-186.
30. Dennis Gaffin, 'Landscape, personhood and Culture: Names of Places and People in the Faeroe Islands' (1993), p. 67-69.
31. Anthony Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London, Tavistock, 1985), p. 103.
32. *ibid.*
33. Cohen, 1987, *op. cit.* p. 109
34. Mackenzie, 1998 forthcoming, *op. cit.*
35. Anne Frater in Christopher Whyte, *An Aghaidh na Siorraidheachd/In the Face of Eternity*, (Edinburgh, Polygon, 1993), p. 77
36. Anne Frater, 'Out Tongue and Our Tweed' in Whyte, *Op. cit.*, p. 73.
37. Whyte, *op. cit.*, p. xx.
38. Norman MacCaig, 'A Man in Assynt', in *Collected Poems*, (London, Chatto and Windus, 1990), p. 224-231.
39. James Hunter, *The Claim of Crofting. The Scottish Highlands and Islands, 1930 - 1990*, (Edinburgh, Mainstream Publishing, 1991).
40. *ibid.*, p. 143 - 148.
41. Scottish Office, *Land Reform Policy Group, Identifying the Problems*, (Edinburgh, Scottish Office, 1998). p.11.
42. Hunter, *op. cit.* 1991, p. 147.
43. Western Isles Council, *Crofting Development Policy (Draft)*, (1998)., p. 1.
44. Leah Leneman, *Fit for Heroes?: Land Settlement in Scotland After World War I*, (Aberden, Aberdeen University Press, 1989), p. 5.

45. *ibid.* p. 8

46. *ibid.* p. 125 - 126.

47. Leverhulme's demand reflected his concern that there was no repetition of the events in Lewis, See Leneman, *ibid.*, p. 118 - 125.

48. Leneman, *ibid.*, p. 128-9 and p. 224, n. 39, n. 40, n. 41. Also, see Finlay Macdonald, *Crotal and Cream*.

49. Leneman, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

50. *ibid.*, p. 130, citing SRO.E824/537

51. These included members of the Scottish Council of the Labour Party, Allan Campbell MacLean, Margaret MacPherson, and Brian Wilson. See Hunter, 1991, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

52. Scottish Office, *Crofting Trusts. Consultation Paper on the Disposal of the Secretary of State's Crofting Estates*, Edinburgh, Scottish Office, 1996), p.1.

53. *ibid.* , p. 4.

54. For discussion of these community trusts, see Scottish Office, 1996, *op. cit.*: *The Crofter*, (March, 1996), p. 2-3; also, Alastair McIntosh, 'Conscientisation in the Community: the "French Revolution" in Eigg and the "Gravel Pit of Europe"', unpublished manuscript.

55.. In *The Crofter*, (March, 1996), p. 1.

56. In *ibid.*, p. 1.

57. In *ibid.*, p. 2-3.

58. In *ibid.*, p. 3.

59. In *ibid.*, p. 4.

60. Independent Northern Consultants in Association with Graeme Scott and Co., Chartered Accountants (Inverness) and Simon Fraser, Solicitor, Anderson McArthur and Co. (Stornoway), *Crofting Land Trust Feasibility Study and Draft Report*, (Nairn, INC, 1996).

61. M. Foxley, Councillor, Comhairle nan Eilean, *Minutes of Evidence Taken Before the House of Lords Select Committee on the Transfer of Crofting Estates (Scotland) Bill*, (Inverness, 12 December, 1996), p. 15.

62. Cited in Hunter, 1991, *op. cit.*, p. 223. Also, see the evidence of Foxley and Angus Graham before *The House of Lords Select Committee*, *op. cit.* p. 15, 9.
63. In *The Crofter* (March, 1996), p. 3.
64. Interviews, July 1997, May 1998.
65. *ibid.*
66. Frank Rennie, cited in *The Crofter*, (June, 1989), and quoted by Hunter, 1991, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
67. Hunter, 1991, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
68. Mark Shucksmith, Polly Chapman, and Gill M. Clark, *Rural Scotland Today: The Best of Both Worlds?* (Avebury, 1996).
69. Hunter, 1991, *op. cit.*
70. John Bryden, 'Crofting in the European Context', (*Scottish Geographical Magazine*), 103 (2) (1987), p. 100 - 104; F. Fraser Darling, *West Highland Survey: An Essay in Human Ecology*, (Oxford, Oxford U. Press, 1955).
71. Cited in Hunter, 1991, *op. cit.* p. 206.
72. Bryden, 1987, *op. cit.*, p. 100.
73. SCU/RSPB 1992, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
74. Hunter, 1991, *op. cit.*, p. 208.
75. Hunter, 1991, *op. cit.*, p. 205. Hunter cites The Bulletin of the European Communities, Supplement 4/88, *The Future of Rural Society*, (Luxembourg, 1988), p. 8: 'What is needed is not only action regarding agriculture itself but also a policy of creating lasting, economically justified jobs, outside the farming sector.'
76. SCU/RSPB 1992, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
77. Bryden, 1987, *op. cit.*, p. 103.
78. Hunter, 1991, *op. cit.*, p. 209.
79. Hunter, 1991, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

80. SCU/RSPB 1995, *op. cit.*, p. 12. In 1992, the SCU/RSPB estimated that 'perhaps 3 per cent' of support from the EU and the UK was directed towards public goods (*op. cit.*, p. 45). With respect to an evaluation of Objective 1 policy in the Highlands and Islands, including the objectives regarding the environment and community development, see Bryden, 1997.
81. SCU/RSPB 1992, *op. cit.*, p. 10-11.
82. SCU/RSPB 1992, *op. cit.*, p. 50.
83. SCU/RSPB 1992, *op. cit.*, p. 10-11; SCU/RSPB 1995, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
84. SCU/RSPB 1992, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
85. See, M. Kinloch and G. Dalton, *A Survey of Crofting Incomes - 1989*, (Skye, SCU, 1990). p. 41.
86. Crofting Development Officer, WIC, interview, May 1998.
87. Interviews, May and July, 1997; May 1998.
88. Interviews, July 1997; May 1998.
89. Scottish Office, Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries Department, *Countryside Premium Scheme*, (Edinburgh, SOAEFD, 1998).
90. Hunter, 1991, *op. cit.*, p. 221.
91. Mackenzie, 1998 forthcoming, *op. cit.*