



SCOTTISH LAND COMMISSION  
COIMISEAN FEARAINN NA H-ALBA

# REPEOPLING EMPTIED PLACES



Centenary reflections  
on the significance and  
the enduring legacy  
of the Land Settlement  
(Scotland) Act 1919

James Hunter



## SCOTTISH LAND COMMISSION COIMISEAN FEARAINN NA H-ALBA

The Scottish Land Commission has commissioned a series of independent discussion papers on land reform issues to stimulate public debate. The opinions expressed in the papers are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Commission.



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# FOREWORD

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Land is at the heart of Scotland's identity, economy and communities. The way we own and use land is fundamental to realising Scotland's ambitions for a fairer and greener economy. Land reform across both urban and rural land can unlock opportunities for delivering the healthy and dynamic environments, economies and communities Scotland wants.

Land reform is not a new thing. Scotland's current pattern of land ownership, management and use is a product of years of evolving tradition, law and practice. This year, 2019, marks one hundred years since the Land Settlement Act in Scotland. The Act aimed to resettle populations following the end of the First World War through the creation of smallholdings and crofts. As a result, a great deal of resettlement was made possible in areas that had suffered population declines over previous years. Among those was the settlement of 67 previously landless families from Harris and Lewis at Portnalong which transformed into a populated and thriving township.

Now, when we are faced with declining populations within some of our most fragile rural communities, we have to look at the past to learn from the lessons and experience it has to show us alongside new and innovative solutions to tackling land issues. Looking at the personal stories in this book in parallel to the challenges rural Scotland is facing helps to open up the debate for solutions and opportunities land reform can provide.

New collaborative approaches across sectors using a mixture of ownership and governance models can help to stimulate population growth. The momentum for change is growing with a focus on population challenges in the new Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 with a commitment to 'increasing the population of the rural areas of Scotland'. Land availability in the right place at the right price, is core to securing long term renewal of remote rural populations, and land ownership is key to making this happen.

The way we own and use land is central to big public policy challenges including climate action, productivity, and inclusive growth. Reforms to both land ownership and use are needed to unlock opportunities for inclusive growth and to make the most of our land for the benefit of all.

I hope that in another hundred years, we see this as the pivotal moment to achieve the change that is needed.



Andrew Thin  
Chair  
Scottish Land Commission

# Ulva



Ulva Parish Church

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On a Sunday towards the end of April 2019 some 60 people are attending a service in Ulva's church. Such services are rare. When the church was built in 1828 and during the 10 or 20 years that followed, each Sunday would have seen Ulva's minister, Neil MacLean, mount a still-surviving pulpit to preach in Gaelic to a congregation drawn from more than 600 islanders. Then came evictions and deportations that emptied all of Ulva's 16 crofting townships and set in train a depopulating process that's ended in the island now having just five permanent residents.

The youngest of these residents, Matilda Munro, aged eight, and her brother Ross, five, are here with their father, Rhuri. And quite a lot of what's said by minister Johnny Paton – who, like most of his listeners, has come over on the passenger ferry from the adjacent and much larger island of Mull – is being said to Ross and Matilda. Johnny's theme is renewal and revival. A first-rate storyteller, he blends all sorts of disparate elements into a single narrative. It's still the Easter season and that season's message is there. As is the fact that it's springtime and so Ulva's woodlands are newly in leaf.

There's mention of the New Testament account of the healing of a little girl who's brought back from the edge of death. Also in the mix is the tale of Sleeping Beauty – cursed by an evil fairy and left to sleep until, after 100 years, she opens her eyes on being kissed by a handsome prince.

An island, Johnny Paton says, is asleep when next to no-one lives on it. But just like Sleeping Beauty, the minister goes on, Ulva is at last being returned to wakefulness. The island's equivalent of Beauty's handsome prince, he reckons, is the Scottish Land Fund which, in the summer of 2018, made it possible for Ulva to become the latest addition to the 600,000 or so acres – in widely separated parts of Scotland – now in community ownership.

Pencils are produced. A big sheet of paper's pinned to a board. Perhaps, Johnny\* suggests, Matilda and Ross might jointly draw a picture of how Ulva, now that it's once more on the move, might one day look. The children work while everyone else gets through a succession of energetically sung hymns. There are going to be more animals on Ulva it appears – cattle, sheep and one or two less identifiable creatures. There are going to be more people too. And houses. New houses. Perched on top of a ladder shown leaning against one such house, someone can be seen to be putting finishing touches to their roof. As far as Ross and Matilda are concerned, wakened-up Ulva's going to be a bustling place.

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At a numerously attended meeting held in the Temperance Hall, Salen, on the 7th of August [1883] ... the following list was given of townships cleared on the island of Ulva ... From Ormaig, 7 families; Craigaig, 9; Kilvicewen, 6;

Eolusary, 4; Glaenagallan, 4; Ballighartan, 4; Beannas, 4; Cuilinis, 5; Abas, 5; Sorata, 7; Achanatutha, 4; Tairi-nan-Ardraidle, 3; Upper Ardeallam, 2; Lower Ardeallam, 5; Blar-nan-Corr, 2; Salen Buadh, 2; total, 73 families. Some of these evicted families were first removed from sufficient farms to smaller ones, then they were reduced to a house and grass for a cow or two, then to nothing at all, and when they would not clear off altogether some of them had the roofs taken off their huts.

Statement by former Ulva resident Lachlan McQuarie to the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Condition of the Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, Tobermory, 10.

*August 1883*

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The successful bid to take Ulva into community ownership was organised by the North West Mull Community Woodland Company (NWMWC), a locally controlled grouping whose members own and manage an area of plantation forestry – formerly the property of the Forestry Commission – near Dervaig in the northern part of Mull. To be shown something of Ulva by John Addy, one of the Woodland Company's directors and a retired marine biologist, is at once to sense his and his colleagues' commitment to making this again a peopled place.

There are no roads on Ulva. But there is a network of tracks – all dating from the island's populated past and all signposted by newly installed way-markers carved by Rebecca Munro, Rhuri's wife and Matilda and Ross's mother. The track John takes is one that leads, through a little glen between low hills, to Ormaig on Ulva's south coast.

\* Not many days after this Ulva service the Reverend Johnny Paton died while hill-walking.

To come down the steep path into Ormaig is to be aware, as always on Ulva, of the place's relationship to other islands small and large; close-at-hand islets all named long ago in Gaelic; the slightly larger Inchkenneth and Little Colonsay; Mull, of course, Iona and, further to the west, the Treshnish Isles, Coll and Tiree. Today, John Addy says, Ulva, especially from an urban perspective, might seem peripheral, remote. But the island, he stresses, was readily accessible when people got about mainly by boat.

Ormaig is a place of ruins. But there are pointers here and elsewhere to Ulva having been productive agriculturally. Not far away is what's left of the island's once substantial mill – its long-abandoned millstones still in view. And all around, not just in Ormaig but in other former settlements, is land that in times past would have been cultivated – land that, more recently, supported lots of livestock. All that NWMCWC has taken over by way of agricultural activity on Ulva is a 53-strong flock of Hebridean sheep. But plans to restore a cattle herd are well advanced – something, John Addy comments, that will help beat back the bracken that of late has encroached on island grazings.

Much else is underway. The jetties used by Ulva's ferryman, Donald Munro, Rhuri's father, have received badly-needed repairs. Deer numbers have been reduced by means of professionally-organised culling – something that's resulted in a modest income from venison sales. The further expansion of Ulva's already extensive woodlands – consisting mostly of indigenous tree species – is being planned.

Ulva House, the 1950s-era mansion previously occupied by Ulva's lairds, might – if the necessary funding is forthcoming – become a multi-purpose centre consisting

of, for instance, office accommodation for NWMCWC staff, holiday apartments and an exhibition illustrative of Ulva's past, its present and its hoped-for future. The heritage aspect of this particular project will draw heavily on research conducted by Emma McKie, Rhuri's sister, who has been uncovering lots of detail about individual islanders – people whose stories can be used to illustrate, and make more meaningful, the wider history of an island with which thousands of families, all around the world, have an ancestral link.

But much the most urgent priority for everyone involved in Ulva's management is the provision of more housing. The refurbishment of six existing but mostly run-down homes is well in hand. The construction of six new homes is envisaged. By such means, it's hoped, Ulva's population can be increased to 30 or so by 2030, to 50 or more some ten years after that.

We have appointed The Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust to undertake a survey for us, identifying individuals, businesses and families who may wish to move to Ulva. The survey explores many possibilities for potential new residents and business ideas. This has been the result of a great deal of activity behind the scenes, working towards beginning renovations to the existing housing and looking forward to ... new housing ... There has been a huge response to the survey online and it has attracted a lot of media interest.

*Ulva Newsletter, Winter 2019*

Key to all of this is the input of the Munro family. Rhuri is a fisherman. Rebecca, in partnership with Emma, her sister-in-law, runs the Boathouse seafood restaurant located just above the slipway where Ulva's visitors – their numbers boosted by the publicity surrounding the island's move into community ownership – come ashore. Talk with Emma, Rebecca, Rhuri and NWCWC's chairman, Colin Morrison, a tour boat operator, and it's evident that nothing of what they're about is in any way straightforward. Equally evident, however, is their unflagging commitment to the task they've set themselves.

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The whole process has been truly life-changing for us, and I can never express how grateful I am to everyone involved in making this happen. Land reform legislation offers communities the opportunity to turn around decades of economic and social decline. The impact of self-determination on a community should not be understated. The very existence of the Scottish Land Fund sends a message that there is confidence in what we are trying to achieve.

*Ulva resident Rebecca Munro, speaking at a Westminster reception organised by Argyll MP Brendan O'Hara, March 2019*

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What matters most about community ownership, Rebecca says, is the local control that comes with it. Yes, taking charge is time-consuming. Yes, there can be disagreement. Yes, Ulva will need more help of the sort the island has had already from many different quarters. But we'll get there, Rebecca insists. We'll make Ulva once again a peopled place.

And why not? Repeopling Ulva, after all, will simply be to do here what was done a century ago in other parts of Scotland – though then, when long-asleep localities were being brought back to life, folk didn't speak about repeopling. They spoke instead about land settlement.



# North Talisker



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To be in Fernilea or Portnalong or Fiskavaig, on rising ground above Loch Harport in the western part of Skye, is to be in places that look a little bit like Ulva. Here, as in Ulva, there are lots of small but knobby hills with, lower down, a scattering of sheltered corners. And as in Ulva, you're aware at all times of the nearness of the sea. But there is one immediately apparent contrast between the two localities. In Fiskavaig, in Portnalong and Fernilea, you're in a peopled landscape. Homes are everywhere; some large, some less so; some fairly old, some clearly very new. It's easy to assume, then, that Fernilea, Portnalong and Fiskavaig are settlements that have evolved here through as many

centuries as Skye has been inhabited. But in no way is that the case. A hundred years back – not long ago historically – this landscape was as empty, as abandoned, as deserted as the greater part of Ulva is today. And for exactly the same reason. Two or three decades into the nineteenth century, not just Fiskavaig, Portnalong and Fernilea but the wider district to which they belong, were subjected, just as Ulva was a little later, to wholesale clearance. Present-day Fernilea, Portnalong and Fiskavaig, it follows, could easily be as unpopulated as present-day Ulva. That they aren't is due to what happened here in the summer of 1923. That was when family after family – most of them previously resident in Harris

and Lewis – moved on to the 68 crofts then taking the place of a sheep farm dating from the clearance era. This farm was North Talisker. How its newly installed settlers were getting along is set out in a report compiled in December 1924.

This report's author was Colin MacDonald. Then in his early forties, MacDonald was an Edinburgh-based civil servant – but a civil servant of a most unusual type. Not for him the dark suits and bowler hats then *de rigueur* among more deskbound colleagues. 'Except at funerals, weddings and such serious occasions,' MacDonald's daughter Margaret recalled, 'he invariably wore a plus-four suit, usually of a crotal colour beloved of the Hebrides, and tailored by the Fifty Shilling Tailors of happy memory. The plus-fours were worn at Head Office in Edinburgh as well as on his many field trips to the Highlands and Islands. Accompanying this somewhat conspicuous outfit were stout handmade shoes ... [and] a "fore-and-aft" bonnet of the same tweed as [the] suit.'

A Gaelic-speaking Highlander raised on a croft on the Heights of Inchvannie between Dingwall and Strathpeffer, Colin MacDonald was employed by a government agency, the Board of Agriculture for Scotland (BoAS). His primary loyalty, however, was to the many folk he helped to set up home in places like North Talisker.

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It was my luck to be born and brought up on a croft where my forebears had lived for a very long time ... It has also been my privilege to have been closely associated with crofts and crofters all my life. Up to the age of 26, I lived (and,

from the age of five, worked) on the home croft. Then a tapsalteerie turn of the dice-box of fate sent me for a couple of years to an agricultural college ... There followed four years as an agricultural instructor in the Gaelic-speaking districts of the Highlands and Islands. Then for nearly 30 years I served in various capacities with the Board (now Department) of Agriculture, mainly in the promotion of crofter land-settlements.

*Colin MacDonald, Crofts and Crofters, Edinburgh, 1955*

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The 1923 re-peopling of North Talisker had its origins in BoAS's 1920 acquisition of a 60,000-acre tract of territory previously in the ownership of Norman MacLeod of MacLeod. Those 60,000 acres, consisting mainly of sheep farms like North Talisker, cost the Board £58,609. At present-day prices, this equates to some £1.9 million. Given that the area involved was roughly 12 times more extensive than Ulva, that £1.9 million compares very favourably with Ulva's £4.65 million purchase price – a price NWMCCW was able to meet only with the aid of a £4.4 million grant from the Scottish Land Fund.

From Colin MacDonald's perspective, BoAS's £58,609 had been well spent – something confirmed, he felt, by his December 1924 visit to North Talisker. When that visit was made, just 18 months had elapsed since the point when BoAS staff had begun to lay out and allocate the crofts now constituting Fernilea, Portnalong and Fiskavaig. But in those 18 months a lot had been accomplished.

## THE PEOPLE

Of the 68 holdings in the settlement, 43 are tenanted by Harrismen, 20 by Lewismen and 5 by Skyemen. There is a total population of approximately 400.

## HOUSING

One holder has built a substantial stone-and-lime built house ... Another has built a house with stone-and-lime gables, concrete walls and felt roof, and a third has provided himself with a corrugated-iron house ... The rest of the settlers live in huts provided by the Board [and bought from the army at the end of the First World War], but it will be readily appreciated ... that the accommodation in the great majority of cases is very limited indeed, and the provision of more commodious and permanent dwellings is a matter of great urgency ... It is satisfactory to note that 21 of the holders have now signed building-loan bonds [entitling them to mortgage-like cash advances from BoAS] and it is greatly to be hoped that the erection of the new houses will proceed rapidly ... Quite a number of the holders have done a little towards smartening up the surroundings of their dwellings – small gardens with flowers and vegetables, footpaths, drains, etc.

## EARNINGS

Until recently the scheme works [meaning the construction of BoAS-planned and BoAS-funded access roads and other infrastructure] provided good wages to nearly every household, some £6,000 [£325,000 today] having been paid in wages ... About a dozen of the settlers have gone to work on the new roads now being made near Sligachan [some 10 miles away] ... 12 of the Lewismen and 7 Lewis girls went as hired hands to the English herring fishing this year and have just returned home ... Tweed-making is carried on by 31 families.

## CULTIVATION AND CROPS

A start has been made with cultivation. Each holder put in approximately ¼ acre of potatoes and most of them ¼ to ½ an acre of oats. The potatoes are a fair crop of excellent quality. Oats were a fairly good crop.

## DIET

Enquiry into day-to-day feeding showed that the plainest-living of the households have:

- Breakfast – Porridge, milk, tea, bread-and-butter;
- Dinner [at midday] – Potatoes and [locally-caught] fish ... tea and bread-and-butter;
- Tea [evening] – Bread-and-butter.

This may be regarded as the standard diet and, though plain, it is really very good. Some of the holders who can afford it have a more varied diet.

## SCHOOL

Part of an iron hut placed by the Board at the disposal of the Education Authority [Inverness-shire County Council] serves as a school. The accommodation is limited and rather wretched, but no doubt the Education Authority has in contemplation the early provision of a suitable building.

Looking at the settlement as a whole, its present position is as good as that of most island communities, while the possibilities of the holders improving their position are distinctly greater than was open to them in Harris and Lewis. It is significant that the women of the settlement are in the main contented and consider their present position a decided improvement.

*National Records of Scotland AF83/30:  
Report to the Board of Agriculture on the  
Present Position of the North Talisker  
Settlement by Colin MacDonald, 9  
December 1924*

By today's standards, much of what Colin MacDonald described seems decidedly sub-optimal. No-one is likely to move to Ulva to live in an ex-army hut or to subsist on bread, butter, potatoes and fish. But MacDonald, it needs stressing, was reporting on settlements that came into existence in early twentieth-century Scotland. This was a Scotland where, in 1911, almost half the population had to make do with amenity-less homes running to just one or two rooms; a Scotland where malnourishment and the illnesses it caused were common. In that Scotland, North Talisker, while no earthly paradise, was by no means an unattractive place to be.

Here families could equip themselves, courtesy of BoAS, with loan-financed homes of their own. Here those same families were assured – because of their having land to cultivate and because of their having access to a fish-rich sea – that they would not go hungry. How it came about that so many North Talisker settlers came from Harris in particular is touched on a little later. What matters at this point is these people's conviction that they'd gained greatly from their crossing of the Minch. In the Outer Isles they'd had no crofts. In the Outer Isles they'd lived, some of them, in thatched, earth-floored and often damp houses of the poorest type. That was why, as MacDonald noted in 1924, even a timber-built hut on one of North Talisker's freshly laid-out holdings (those huts being solid and substantial) was widely thought a step-up in itself.

As the 1920s turned into the 1930s, there was no lack of difficulty in North Talisker. The former farm's sheep stock, bought by BoAS when prices were high, had been sold on to the farm's settlers – who managed this stock on a 'club' or collective basis – at the same high price. This had been made possible by BoAS loans that

had to be repaid in years when returns from wool and lamb sales were at rock bottom. Nor, at a time when all of Britain was in deep recession, were off-croft jobs easy to come by. But North Talisker, for all that, continued to progress. By the end of 1928, for example, the occupants of 54 holdings had equipped themselves with new homes – while another seven such homes were being built.

That all of this was a marked advance on what had gone before seemed self-evident to novelist Neil Gunn who, while sailing in the Hebrides in the summer of 1937, chanced to put into Loch Harport and to land at Portnalong. Gunn, whose own forebears had been turned out of their homes when Sutherland's interior was forcibly depopulated, was greatly taken by the way that, at North Talisker at least, the clearances had so spectacularly been reversed.

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Portnalong we found a very interesting place ... [Its] houses are all built to the same pattern: stone gables, corrugated iron sides, and roof of grey artificial slate. With rare exceptions they are freshly painted or whitewashed, look very well and fit into the landscape ... Those we were in appeared snug and comfortable.

Families ... settled here under a Board of Agriculture scheme ... The Board had the crofts fenced off in roughly 20-acre lots, with a black wooden hut, now housing the [family] loom, as a temporary home until proper dwellings were built. Money and material were advanced on very favourable terms for the building of these dwellings, and tenants had the option of buying the wooden huts at something like half the original cost.

I was anxious to find out the general attitude to the Department [as the Board had become] of Agriculture ... and, as far as I could make out, though some grumble over difficulties, on the whole they feel they got a good and, in some respects, a generous deal.

But however one may argue or discuss the merits of the present settlement, there can be no doubt of the happy contrast in which it stands to the same district under the dominion of the old landlords or chiefs. Less than a century ago Portnalong was cleared of its inhabitants ... and the folk herded [away] ... As we wandered in the hilly lands about Portnalong ... we came on the new houses everywhere, in sheltered hollows, on sunny slopes, and their bright faces seemed like the mind of a folk who thrive for untold centuries, and would thrive for centuries more, if the greed and egoism of the landed or plutocratic designers of our worldly affairs gave them half a chance.

*Neil M Gunn, Off in a Boat: A Hebridean Voyage, London, 1938*

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It's by no means impossible that, while strolling through Portnalong, Neil Gunn glimpsed a little boy, just three years old, in the fields surrounding one of the township's recently-constructed homes. This was Danny MacLeod who, more than 80 years on, continues to be engaged with the life of this community he's been part of for so long.

Like most of their Portnalong neighbours, Danny's parents, Roderick and Morag, came here in 1923 from the east side of Harris. There, in a place where rock

can seem more plentiful than vegetation, they'd had access to almost nothing in the way of agriculturally productive land. Here things were different. 'A lot of the crofts folk got were big crofts,' Danny says. 'They varied quite a bit in size – depending, I suppose, on where it made most sense to fix their boundaries. But quite a few ran to 20 or more acres of inbye. And then, on top of that, there were thousands of acres of good grazing out there on the hill.'

Many North Talisker crofts came into existence on land that would have been cultivated prior to the clearances. The same sort of land on Ulva is nowadays under bracken. That was equally true, Danny comments, of North Talisker. 'I've heard folk say that, when they got here, the bracken was six or more feet high. But the cattle they put on the crofts soon got rid of it. At the beginning, you see, there were no fences – and so, to stop them straying, the cattle were tethered by means of long chains fixed to stakes. Well, as the cattle moved around, those chains took down the bracken and then the cows trampled it into the ground. That's how fields were got ready for ploughing.'

When Danny was growing up, North Talisker cattle were sold in Oban. Today they'd go by road. Then they were moved by sea. 'The Board of Agriculture had a pier built here in Portnalong,' Danny says. 'A MacBrayne's steamer, the Dunara Castle, would come into the loch and tie up at the pier. Folk drove their cattle down there. A canvas sling would go under each beast, then the boat's derrick would swing over and beast after beast would be hoisted aboard. Mind you,' Danny goes on, 'I heard one man say that, when prices were really poor, what he got for his cattle in Oban didn't so much as cover the transport bill he was sent by MacBrayne's.'

Roderick MacLeod, Danny's father, was a carpenter to trade; a man who'd worked on fitting out ships in Glasgow shipyards. All through the years when new homes were replacing North Talisker's BoAS-provided huts, Danny says, his father didn't lack for work. 'But neither did anyone else,' he goes on. 'This was a busy place. There was stock to look after. There were peats to be got in. There was hay and corn to scythe and harvest. There were potatoes to be lifted. So even when you were just a boy, you had to lend a hand.'

When Danny MacLeod started school in the 1930s, the 'iron hut' mentioned in Colin MacDonald's 1924 report had been replaced by a new building where three teachers catered for around 70 children. 'In summer,' Danny recalls, 'we went to school barefoot. In October you got a new pair of tackety boots. They took you through the winter. Then you were barefoot again when the better weather came.'

That makes it sound as if Portnalong families were not at all well off. But shoeless summers were common among children of that time – and their prevalence in the North Talisker of Danny MacLeod's childhood is not to be taken as an indicator of the settlement's failure. People of his parents' generation, in Danny's recollection, felt they'd done well to come here – Danny's thoughts on this point coinciding with what was said of North Talisker by 1920s and 1930s visitors like Colin MacDonald and Neil Gunn.

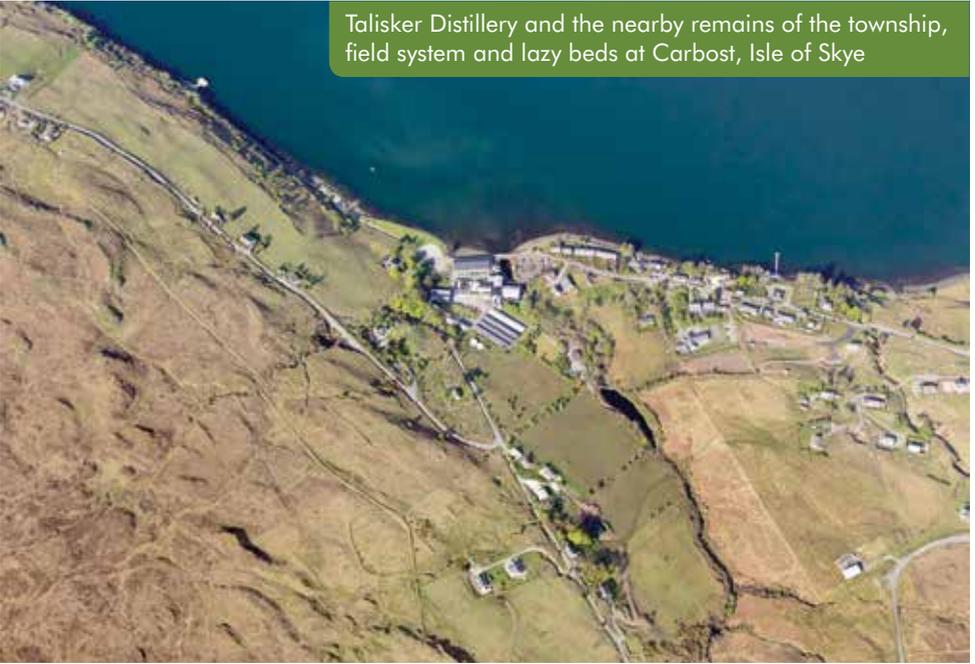
'As we went up the road in the evening,' Gunn wrote of Portnalong, 'we heard the klak-klik-clok of the looms – each housed in a timbered hut beside its cottage.' Danny MacLeod, unprompted, talks of that same sound. 'You'd be out and about after tea in the summer,' he says, 'and everywhere you'd hear folk at work on their

looms. Almost all the people who came here from Harris made tweed for sale. The looms were kept in the sheds that families first lived in. And the houses that came after were good houses. Two bedrooms; a living room and kitchen; a porch added later on. That was a lot of space to have back then.'

And what of Portnalong and Fiskavaig and Fernilea today? As in most other crofting districts, agricultural activity is in decline. The North Talisker Sheep Stock Club, in which Danny MacLeod had a key role for many years, continues in existence. But there's not much sign of cropping. And only half a dozen or so people, Danny reckons, now keep cattle.

But what this place possesses – in a way that Ulva hasn't for a long, long time – is a substantial population. There are more houses here today than when Danny MacLeod was young. There are several (mostly tourism-related) businesses, a community hall and other facilities. There is activity, traffic, enterprise. There is, in short, a worthwhile human presence in a locality where, but for what was done here in the 1920s, there would be none. Portnalong, Neil Gunn thought, seemed set to 'thrive for centuries.' So far at least it's managing, if not quite in the way that BoAS first envisaged, to do exactly that.

Talisker Distillery and the nearby remains of the township, field system and lazy beds at Carbost, Isle of Skye



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Portnalong, Skye





# The politics of land settlement

The re-peopling of places like North Talisker by the Board of Agriculture for Scotland was made possible by legislation that received its royal assent from King George V on 23 December 1919. This was the Land Settlement (Scotland) Act which equipped the then seven-year-old BoAS with the powers needed to bring into existence, often in a matter of months, communities such as those that took shape during 1923 and 1924 in Fernilea, Portnalong and Fiskavaig.

Arguably the most transformative land reform Scotland has seen, the 1919 Act enabled – indeed instructed – the Board of Agriculture to lay out smallholdings, to select their occupants and to assist those occupants to provide themselves with homes, livestock, agricultural buildings, farm implements and much else. This could be done on land bought by the board or on land still in private ownership.

While, in both instances, BoAS preferred to proceed by means of negotiation and agreement, the agency could, if necessary, have recourse to compulsion. Landowners, then, could be forced either to sell substantial acreages to the Board or to have BoAS-funded smallholders installed on land those same owners, left to themselves, would have kept in other uses.

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An Act to make ... provision for the acquisition of land for the purposes of smallholdings ... With the consent of the Secretary for Scotland and the Treasury, land may ... be acquired compulsorily by the Board of Agriculture for Scotland ... Where the Board are satisfied that there is a demand for smallholdings and that suitable land is available for that purpose, it shall be the duty of the Board to prepare a scheme for the constitution of ... holdings on such land.

*Land Settlement (Scotland) Act 1919*

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The Land Settlement Act was the work of a coalition government headed by David Lloyd George. Elected overwhelmingly in December 1918, just weeks after the end of the First World War, the coalition was, in essence, a continuation of the administration formed by Lloyd George when, in 1916, he'd replaced Herbert Asquith as wartime prime minister. Like Asquith, Lloyd George was a Liberal. But prior to the 1918 election the Liberal Party had split; one part of the party looking to re-establish its former independence; the other, headed by Lloyd George, committed to maintaining a Liberal-Conservative coalition in which, as it turned out, Liberal MPs were to be in a minority. That might have been expected to reduce

the likelihood of land reform – for, while the Liberal Party (not least Lloyd George himself) had been associated with the cause of such reform for many years, the Conservative and Unionist Party, which provided much of the coalition’s parliamentary support, had been identified, prior to the war, with root-and-branch opposition to what the then Liberal government was aiming to achieve. By 1919, however, this had changed. The coalition’s election manifesto, issued jointly by David Lloyd George and by Tory leader Andrew Bonar Law, committed both men to a land reform programme. So did the speech with which Lloyd George launched their election campaign.

What is our task? To make Britain a country fit for heroes to live in ... A systematic effort must be made to bring the people back to the land ... There must be a scheme for resettling returned soldiers and sailors ... I do not say all soldiers will get back on the land ... [But] for those who desire to go on the land smallholdings should be provided.

*David Lloyd George, speaking in Wolverhampton, 23 November 1918*

Plans have been prepared, and will be put into execution as soon as the new Parliament assembles, whereby it will be the duty of public authorities and, if necessary, of the state itself to acquire land on a simple and economical basis for men who have served in the war ... for allotments or smallholdings as the applicants may desire and be suited for.

*David Lloyd George and Andrew Bonar Law, Coalition Manifesto, November 1918.*

As is evident from the public pronouncements of the coalition’s leading figures, the land reforms they had in mind were a response to the urgent need, as they saw it, to provide for men then beginning to be released from the country’s armed forces. In part, it was felt, that need could be met by settling ex-servicemen on smallholdings. This, or so it was believed, would have the additional effect of combating rural depopulation – something that had been, for some time, a source of widespread concern. Nor was thinking of this sort peculiar to Britain. Australia, in 1919 and in the years immediately following, would settle some 40,000 discharged soldiers on the land. Canada would do something similar. So would a number of European countries. Their governments, often dominated by the political right, saw in land reform a means of countering the appeal of Soviet-style communism – the 1917 Bolshevik revolution having been backed by many of Russia’s peasants because it gave them control (prior to Stalin-era collectivisation) of what had previously been aristocracy-owned estates. Calculations of the Continental sort didn’t loom so large in Britain. But neither, at what was a time of acute industrial unrest in much of the United Kingdom, were they entirely absent.

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The declining rural population, and the decreasing production of foodstuffs from the land, point to the need for increasing the number of smallholdings in Scotland ... The dread of Marxism was the important factor in securing a multiplication of smallholdings in Denmark, Sweden, Germany and other continental countries ... They appreciated the fact that a landholder has no time for revolution. The need for a similar antidote in Scotland is apparent ... The holder feels he has a stake in his country and his face is turned towards stability and security.

*National Records of Scotland AF66/57: Land Settlement Memorandum by James Dunlop, Board of Agriculture for Scotland, February 1926*

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The coalition government found it easy to add to the already-existing ability of county councils in England and Wales to buy farms that could be turned into smallholdings. But because of what had gone before in Scotland, where issues having to do with land and its management had long been more contentious politically, there was some nervousness among ministers about the reception that might be accorded to their Land Settlement Bill. This nervousness is apparent in remarks made by Scottish Secretary Robert Munro when, in August 1919, the Bill made its first appearance in the House of Commons.

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The subject of this Bill, from the first line to the last, is land. Its object is to facilitate and secure the settlement of suitable persons upon the land, preferably persons who have served in the forces of the Crown ... [The Bill]

represent[s] ... an honest attempt, after repeated and anxious consideration, to grapple with subjects which are not only vital and difficult but which, in the past, have been acutely controversial.

*Robert Munro, House of Commons, 15 August 191.*

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As Munro was well aware, controversies of the sort he mentioned had been most evident in the Highlands and Islands. Equally aware of those controversies was the Duke of Sutherland. His ownership of the estate to which he owed his title, together with his prominent role in the Conservative and Unionist Party, meant that the duke's background, socially and politically, was very different from that of the Scottish Secretary – a pro-coalition Liberal who'd grown up in a Free Church manse in Alesch. Like Robert Munro, however, the Duke of Sutherland saw in the Land Settlement Bill an opportunity to draw a line under earlier quarrels.

For a hundred years the Highlands have, from time to time, seen a series of land agitations. They have died down only to rise again and to cause fresh unrest and trouble. Let us hope that this Bill, the fruit of a compromise with all parties, may be a way of laying that ghost of unrest which has haunted the Highland glens for so long.

*George Granville Sutherland-Leveson-Gower, Fifth Duke of Sutherland, House of Lords, 11 December 1919*

The duke is likely to have dated the commencement of his century-long 'series of agitations' to the years between 1813 and 1821 when his great-great-grandparents had presided over the

eviction of thousands of people – author Neil Gunn’s ancestors among them – from localities like Strathbrora, Strathnaver and the Strath of Kildonan. These dispossessions were resisted – sometimes violently. But it was not until the 1880s, both in Sutherland and elsewhere in the Highlands and Islands, that crofter-organised protest became so widespread and so effective as to result in legislation that made further clearance impossible.

This consisted of a Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act passed by William Gladstone’s Liberal administration just prior to that administration’s fall in the summer of 1886. By providing every crofter with security of tenure, by making this security heritable (transferable, in other words, to a crofter’s heirs) and by making croft rents subject to control by a government-appointed Crofters Commission, the 1886 Act (a remarkably sweeping interference with previously sacrosanct property rights) conceded key crofter demands. Other than marginally, however, the Act did nothing to meet a further such demand – for the restoration of land lost to crofting in the course of clearances of the Sutherland type.

Consequent disappointment was most acute among the group known as cottars or squatters. These were people – many of them descended from clearance victims – who lived in, or on the margins of, crofting townships but who did not have crofts of their own. Folk in this category were much involved in a post-1886 rash of disturbances that usually took the form of well-planned incursions on to sheep farms where, it was felt, there was no lack of land that could be used to provide landless families with crofts.

The Conservative ministers who took office in the second half of 1886 were

not inclined to give way to what they saw as lawlessness – farm invasions or land raids (as these episodes came to be known) being countered by military deployments. But in 1892, by which point the Liberal Party was again in power, a royal commission was established to assess just how much scope there might be in the Highlands and Islands for land settlement – the term that now began to be applied to the formation of new crofts or smallholdings. Settlement, it was contended, could happen either on sheep farms or on the deer forests increasingly taking the place of such farms at a time when, because of imports of cheaply produced wool, lamb and mutton from Britain’s Australian and New Zealand colonies, hill sheep farming of the sort established in the clearance era was becoming less and less profitable.

Although the 1892 commission was to calculate that as much as 1.75 million acres could in principle be added to the area in crofting tenure, no immediate action followed. In 1897, however, powers to promote land settlement were made available to a newly-formed government agency, the Congested Districts Board (CDB).

The CDB’s operations were confined to those Highlands and Islands localities – mostly in the Hebrides or on the mainland’s western seaboard – where self-evidently overcrowded or ‘congested’ crofting townships were to be found in close proximity to comparatively empty farmland. Created by a Conservative administration, the CDB resulted from the application to the Highlands and Islands of policies trialled in Ireland – then, in its entirety, a part of the UK.

In Ireland, where conflict between farmers and landlords was endemic, Liberal politicians had tried to ease tensions

by providing tenants with rights of the sort the same politicians extended to crofters. Conservatives, in contrast, were increasingly to take the view that it would be fairer to landlords to buy them out entirely and to transfer the ownership of farms and smallholdings to their occupants. An Irish Congested Districts Board, established in 1891, had experimented with this approach. Now Scotland's CDB was to do likewise.

Because the Scottish CDB had a wide range of developmental responsibilities, having to do with the provision of roads, piers and other infrastructure, and because its budget was limited, the organisation's land settlement activities were less extensive than they might have been. In 1901, however, the board made a first substantial purchase at Syre in the lower reaches of Strathnaver – a purchase that brought about the re-peopling of a locality that had experienced an especially brutal clearance.

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In view of the applications we had received from persons ... resident in the parishes of Eddrachillis, Farr and Tongue, all of which are congested areas, the Board purchased, as at Whitsunday 1901, the lands forming the northern portion of Syre Farm ... The lands thus acquired extend to 12,116 acres or thereby, including hill pasture, and embrace a considerable area formerly arable ... Some of our number who visited the settlement in October [1901] were greatly pleased with the excellent houses ... being erected ... and with the choice of sites overlooking the river in this beautiful glen.

*Congested Districts Board for Scotland,  
Report for the Year Ending 31 March 1902*

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Although much of Strathnaver, 200 years on from the valley's emptying, remains unpopulated, the CDB's Syre settlement endures. Also still in existence, and still occupied, are the many crofts created on the Glendale and Kilmuir Estates in Skye – properties (together extending to some 65,000 acres) acquired by the CDB at a total cost of £95,000 in 1904.

In Ireland by the early 1900s not just the Irish CDB but an Irish Land Commission were purchasing estate after estate and selling farms and smallholdings on these estates to their former tenants who acquired ownership by means of annual payments made over periods of 50 years or more. These procedures, put in place prior to Irish independence by a succession of Conservative governments, added up to the most far-reaching set of land reforms ever implemented in the British Isles. Their long-run outcome has been to make Ireland, both north and south of the present-day border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, a country where owner-occupied farms predominate and where large estates on the still-surviving Scottish pattern no longer exist.

Tory ministers expected the Scottish CDB to bring about an Irish-style expansion of owner-occupancy. But crofters in the Highlands and Islands turned out to be unwilling to purchase their holdings. In part, this was because, as owner-occupiers, they'd have had to meet much higher rates bills. But there were also deeper-seated reasons. Unlike their Irish counterparts, crofters felt no need to move on from secure tenancy to owner-occupancy. Only on the Glendale Estate, where crofters stuck with 50-year purchase plans through a half-century that ended in 1955, was ownership preferred to tenancy. Elsewhere the CDB was obliged to agree

that crofters could become its tenants. This arrangement, which would be replicated on land bought by BoAS, has remained in place. That is why lots of crofters in localities like Syre, Kilmuir and Portnalong are today rent-paying tenants of the Scottish Government's Rural Payments and Inspectorate Division (SGRPID) in its role as inheritor of responsibilities once exercised by BoAS and the CDB.

The [CDB] originally thought that the holders of all estates bought by the Board would gladly become purchasing proprietors, and the Board's money would thus be kept in circulation. This was a complete miscalculation and shows the difference between Ireland, where ownership is fervently desired, and the Highlands, where security of tenure and heritability of tenure are clearly seen as the important matters. The Crofters Act of 1886 had given this security and heritability of tenure, so there was no need to buy.

*F. Fraser Darling, West Highland Survey, Oxford, 1955*

The crofting population's hostility to owner-occupancy meant that the Scottish CDB (in the absence of annual purchase payments) became still more starved of cash and thus unable to embark on further large-scale acquisitions. The result, particularly in the Hebrides where landlessness was most prevalent, was renewed land-raiding – with the island of Vatersay, cleared and turned into a sheep farm in earlier times, being invaded by Barra families who built huts for themselves on what, as Inverness-shire sheriff John Wilson discovered when making on-the-spot enquiries, they regarded as their crofts.

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As the result of informal interviews ... I came to the conclusion that the leading man among the raiders was Donald Campbell [a fisherman whom I arranged to meet] ... After three hours conversation, I engaged him to take me and my wife over to Vatersay in his boat ... Under Campbell's guidance, we walked across the island and he pointed out the raiders' potato beds ... These beds cover about two acres ... We also saw the 13 wooden huts erected [by the raiders] ... One of these belonged to Campbell himself. We entered it and met his wife (a most respectable-looking woman) and three of his sons ... Campbell gave us full information as to ... his position and his views ... Up to 50 years ago [Donald Campbell said of himself and his companions] their grandparents and remoter ancestors had had crofts at the very place where the raiders' huts were now set up, and though their grandparents had been evicted, their descendants had never given up their claim. Throughout all the years these descendants, down to this day, have continued to bury their dead on Vatersay.

*National Records of Scotland AD59/20: Report by John Wilson, Sheriff of Inverness-shire, to the Secretary for Scotland, 23 May 1907*

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The Liberal government, which came to power by way of a landslide victory in the 1906 general election, solved the Vatersay problem by instructing the CDB to buy the island. The same government was also committed to boosting the rate of land settlement more generally. Such settlement, however, was no longer to be confined to the Highlands and Islands. With a view to halting or reversing depopulation in every part of the Scottish countryside,

new holdings were to be made available throughout Scotland while, at the same time and in order to make it more difficult for landowners to amalgamate farms into ever larger units, the security of tenure gained by crofters in 1886 was to be extended to smallholders in the rest of the country. That much, and more besides, was made clear by the Liberal government's Scottish Secretary, John Sinclair, when, in March 1907, he published his Smallholders (Scotland) Bill.

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The purposes of the measure are to encourage the formation of smallholdings ... It is no exaggeration to say that the rural districts should support at least double their present population. Yet in Scotland during the last 50 years, while the population of the entire country has increased by close on 2,000,000, there has been an absolute decrease of no less than 400,000 in the rural districts ... The first thing we have to do, if we are to check this tendency to depopulation, is to give security of tenure to existing holders ... The lesson of the Crofters Act [of 1886] is that security of tenure is essential to the wellbeing of a smallholder ... It is urged that to apply this system to the Lowlands would be an injustice ... If it is fair to the Highland landlord to apply these conditions to him, why is it not fair to impose them on the Lowland landlord? One man has as good a title to the land as the other ... The House will gather [then] that the Government proposes by this Bill to provide security of tenure for all smallholders [in Scotland] and [to provide] for the creation of new holdings by agreement or by the exercise of compulsory powers.

*John Sinclair, House of Commons,  
19 March 1907*

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As is evident from the Scottish Secretary's tone, he expected his Bill to come under attack. And it did. Lowland lairds, angered by proposals that might make it impossible for them to re-let smaller farms while simultaneously compelling them to subdivide larger holdings, at once denounced Sinclair's Bill and set up a Scottish Land and Property Federation (the forerunner of today's Scottish Land and Estates) to oppose it. There was opposition too from the Conservative and Unionist Party. Its spokesmen backed the landowning lobby's contention that Sinclair's measure, by limiting landlords' freedoms, would bring about a state-imposed reduction in landed property's market value – the ensuing furore becoming all the more impassioned when it emerged that Liberal ministers intended, by means of what was called 'a people's budget', to impose new taxes on land in order to finance planned welfare reforms such as the introduction of old age pensions.

Soon it was apparent that, with the political climate becoming ever more heated, John Sinclair's Bill was doomed. Endorsed twice by the Commons, where Liberals were in a big majority, it was twice rejected by the House of Lords – then consisting entirely of hereditary peers who, in many instances, were also Conservative-inclined landowners. But when, by voting down the 'people's budget', peers precipitated a constitutional crisis that ended in their veto powers being trimmed, the Liberal government was able to proceed not just with its budget but with a revised version of the 1907 Bill – a Bill that became law, in 1911, as the Small Landholders (Scotland) Act.

This Act, which took effect in April 1912, abolished two prior institutions, the Crofters Commission and the Congested District Board. The commission's rent-fixing and other powers were transferred

to a new body, the Scottish Land Court which had, and still has, a Scotland-wide remit. The CDB's land settlement functions were similarly transferred to a further new organisation, the Board of Agriculture for Scotland, which was also to operate on an all-Scotland basis. Not just crofters, but tenants of any Scottish holding extending to less than 50 acres or rented at under £50 annually, were now to have rights (enforceable by the Land Court) of a sort previously confined to the Highlands and Islands. Nor was land settlement to be limited, as it had been, to 'congested districts' – BoAS being expected to establish smallholdings wherever there was demand for them. Although such holdings were to be planned and financed by BoAS, they would mostly take shape, or so it was anticipated, on privately-owned estates. Ideally, this was to be accomplished by agreement. But in the absence of such agreement, the 1911 Act made clear, BoAS, subject to Land Court consent, could resort to compulsion.

Where ... the landlord refuses to negotiate or where ... no agreement can be reached, it shall be lawful for the Board ... to intimate to the landlord ... that it is in the public interest that ... new holdings should be established [on such a landlord's property] ... and that they propose to ... make an order or orders for the constituting of one or more holdings.

*Small Landholders (Scotland) Act, 1911*

Applicants for smallholdings expected, as did ministers, that land settlement would now go ahead at speed. This did not happen. As constituted by the 1911 Act, the Board of Agriculture was underfunded, understaffed and saddled with administrative and legal mechanisms – not least those relating to compensation

arrangements – that were as complex as they were time-consuming. Progress, in consequence, was slow, and soon there were indications that land-raiding was about to break out again in the Western Isles, the area where demand for holdings was, as had been the case since the 1880s, most intense. But then, in August 1914, came world war.

Until 1916, when conscription was introduced, Britain's armed forces relied on volunteers. Proportionate to the region's population, the Highlands and Islands contributed very substantially to the numbers coming forward. This, it began to be said, made it essential that, when peace came, servicemen returning to the Highlands and Islands – servicemen who, in many instances, had applied to BoAS for holdings before 1914 – should be provided with a stake in the enormous areas of land that, since the clearances, had been under sheep and were now more and more going under deer.

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Speaking yesterday at [a] meeting of the Inverness-shire Liberal Association ... Mr Thomas B. Morison MP, Solicitor-General for Scotland, said that while no man could foretell when the war would end, he thought the time had come when they should be looking ahead, and among the many problems of social reconstruction [to be dealt with] ... none was more important than the cause of land reform. They were entitled to expect that the land question in the Highlands would be solved once and for all. The unchecked expansion of deer forests had been nothing less than a national scandal ... There was ample room for settling crofters on good land.

*Glasgow Herald, 5 October 1917*

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There was, then, a particular Highlands and Islands dimension to the more general post-war commitment to rural repopulation and land settlement. But would Highlands and Islands land reform really be high on the agenda of a government reliant, in the wake of the 1918 election, on the Conservative and Unionist Party? Donald Murray, Liberal MP for the Western Isles, worried that Scottish Secretary Robert Munro, because of his having to carry Unionist MPs with him, might backtrack on promises made to servicemen with an interest in obtaining crofts on island sheep farms.

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The men of the Highlands and Islands are coming back ... Land has been promised them ... and they want to know whether these promises are going to be fulfilled. The Government promised, the Secretary for Scotland promised, and the officials of the Board of Agriculture promised that, when the war was over, these matters would be sorted ... [But] the Board of Agriculture are doing nothing ... There is a large number of Unionist Members in this House, and there is an idea abroad in the Highlands that the Unionist Party have always been associated with opposition to proper schemes of land reform.

*Donald Murray MP, House of Commons, 10 March 1919*

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Murray's concerns were set at rest, in part at least, by the response his remarks elicited from Frederick Macquisten, a lawyer who was also Conservative and Unionist MP for Glasgow Springburn.

I want to assure ... the Member for the Western Isles ... and also the Secretary for Scotland that there is no step which the Right Honourable Gentleman [Munro] can take to ameliorate ... conditions in the Islands and Highlands of Scotland ... that will not have hearty and cordial support from every Unionist Member who has the interests of Scotland at heart. I ask the Secretary for Scotland to take his courage in his hands, and deal in a most drastic way with ... the question of land which has been depopulated. Our Glasgow constituencies are full of men whose fathers and grandfathers were driven out by the crucifixion of the people of the Highlands and Islands upon the rights of property.

*Frederick Macquisten MP, House of Commons, 10 March 1919*

And so, with Conservative backing, Robert Munro's Land Settlement Bill became law. The Board of Agriculture's land acquisition powers were enhanced, its procedures streamlined and its funding boosted massively. Before the war, BoAS had had to finance all its activities, land settlement included, from its annual budget of £200,000. That budget was increased only modestly, to £215,000, by the 1919 Act. But to ensure that land settlement was in no way constrained by lack of cash, BoAS, the Act stipulated, would be entitled to meet settlement costs by drawing down additional funding from the Treasury. Up to £2.75 million was to be available from this source – a figure increased to £3.75 million (£150 million today) in 1921.

As originally constituted, BoAS could acquire land for settlement only in 'congested districts' where it could exercise

functions taken over from the CDB. Now the board could buy land anywhere in Scotland. When looking to enforce settlement on land in private ownership, moreover, BoAS could no longer be held up by the obstructive tactics – involving almost endless appeals, counter-appeals and other legal manoeuvres – that some landlords and their lawyers had perfected in the post-1911 period. But BoAS, for all that, continued to encounter problems. Much the most serious of these stemmed from its having taken Robert Munro and his colleagues all of 1919 to get the Land Settlement Act drawn up, agreed and passed. During that time, as Donald Murray had warned was likely, the patience of homecoming servicemen ran out. Instead of waiting passively for the land that had been promised, they staked their own claim to it.

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I hope the House will believe that I am a man of peace and that the men of the Western Isles do not want any disturbance if they can avoid it ... But I warn the Secretary for Scotland [that] ... some thousands of these men have been at the War and [have] learned the value of direct action.

*Donald Murray, House of Commons,  
10 March 1919*

Throughout Scotland great impatience has been manifested at the slow rate of progress that the Board have been able to achieve in the way of actual land settlement, and ... in the North and West the dissatisfaction has already culminated in extensive forcible seizures of land.

*Board of Agriculture for Scotland,  
Annual Report for 1919*

Land-raiding began during the spring of 1919. During the next two or three years – while BoAS officials like Colin MacDonald wrestled with the unavoidably complex task of bringing settlement schemes to fruition – raids proliferated. Sutherland, Skye, Raasay, the Outer Isles and various other localities were affected. Some raiders were tried and imprisoned. Others were told that anyone engaging in lawlessness would cease to be eligible for a BoAS-created croft or smallholding. But neither threats nor punishments made much difference. The only way to stop land-raiding, it became evident, was to settle the farms that raiders were targeting. This necessarily took a bit of time.

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The winter of 1920-21 brought a rapid increase in tension and a still more widespread tendency ... to resort to direct action ... In December, in what was said to be ‘one of the largest raids that has [ever] taken place in the Western Isles’, several thousand acres of farmland in North Uist were occupied ... Hundreds of sheep and cattle having been driven off, an immediate start was made on building huts and houses and on preparing the land for cultivation. By March, over 30 acres had been ploughed ... Handed sheriff court orders which instructed them to quit the farms they had seized, the raiders – most of whom had seen service in France – refused to budge, one of them remarking, ‘We don’t care a damn for the sheriff. We are soldiers.’

*James Hunter, The Making of the Crofting  
Community, Edinburgh, 2000 edition*

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Difficulties were most acute in Lewis where, since the 1880s, the island's many landless families had been looking to get crofts on island farms. BoAS, before the war, tried to get Lewis's then owner, Duncan Matheson, to consent to a comprehensive settlement programme. Agreement, however, had not been forthcoming; and when, in 1917, Matheson sold the island to manufacturing magnate Lord Leverhulme, a negotiated solution became still more unattainable.

Leverhulme was no hands-off proprietor. A man who'd made a fortune from the production and marketing of Sunlight Soap, he wanted, in effect, to industrialise Lewis; to equip the island with a modernised fishing fleet; to develop canning and freezing plants; to hugely expand Stornoway; to link the town with other island communities by means of a light railway network. Crofting, perhaps needless to say, did not feature in this thinking. From Leverhulme's perspective, it was an archaic, inefficient mode of landholding which ought to be scrapped. It was unacceptable to him, then, that farms at Coll and Gress to the north of Stornoway – farms he wanted stocked with dairy cattle – should be subdivided, as BoAS had been proposing, to accommodate people who would do better, Leverhulme felt, to take jobs in one of his planned enterprises. When, within months of the November 1918 armistice that ended the First World War, Gress and Coll were occupied illegally, Leverhulme accordingly made clear his determination to keep the farms in being. He agreed, however, to meet with the Coll and Gress raiders. Also present was BoAS's Colin MacDonald whose account of proceedings serves to highlight the gulf between Lewis's new owner and the men he confronted.

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[Lord Leverhulme conjured up] the most graphic word picture it is possible to imagine – a great fleet of fishing boats – a large fish-canning factory – railways – an electric power station; then one could see the garden city grow – steady work, steady pay, beautiful houses for all – every modern convenience and comfort ... Altogether it was a masterpiece; and it produced its effect; little cheers came involuntarily from a few here and there – more cheers! – general cheers!! ... Then, while the artist was still adding skilful detail, there was a dramatic interruption.

One of the ringleaders managed to rouse himself from the spell, and in an impassioned voice addressed the crowd in Gaelic, and this is what he said: *'So, so, fhiribh! Cha dean so gnothach! Beireadh am bodach mil-bheulach sin chreidsinn oirnn gu 'm bheil dubh geal 's geal dubh! Ciod e dhuinn na bruadairean briagha aige, a thig no nach tig? 'Se am fearann tha sinn ag iarraidh. Agus 'se tha mise a faighneachd (turning to face Lord Leverhulme and pointing dramatically towards him): An toir thu dhuinn am fearann?'* The effect was electrical. The crowd roared their approbation.

Lord Leverhulme looked bewildered at this, to him, torrent of unintelligible sound, but when the frenzied cheering with which it was greeted died down, he spoke. 'I am sorry! It is my great misfortune that I do not understand the Gaelic language. But perhaps my interpreter will translate for me what has been said?'

Said the interpreter: ‘I am afraid, Lord Leverhulme, that it will be impossible for me to convey in English what has been so forcefully said in the older tongue; but I will do my best.’ And his best was a masterpiece, not only in words but in tone and gesture and general effect: ‘Come, come, men! This will not do! This honeymouthed man would have us believe that black is white and white is black. We are not concerned with his fancy dreams that may or may not come true! What we want is the land – and the question I put to him now is: Will you give us the land?’

The translation evoked a further round of cheering. A voice was heard to say, ‘Not so bad for a poor language like the English.’ Lord Leverhulme’s picture, so skilfully painted, was shattered in the artist’s hand!

*Colin MacDonald, Highland Journey,  
Edinburgh, 1943*

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The Gress and Coll raiders were right to be sceptical about Leverhulme’s ambitions. A downturn in his financial position, together with the fishing industry’s loss of continental markets because of war and revolution, meant that work on a series of Leverhulme-backed projects had to be abandoned. Ronald Munro-Ferguson, Viscount Novar, who had succeeded Robert Munro as Scottish Secretary when the post-war coalition was replaced in 1922 by a Conservative government, thus felt free to overturn his predecessor’s 1921 decision – always controversial – to suspend BoAS operations in Lewis until Leverhulme’s projected developments took effect. Among beneficiaries of this change of stance were families who had been hoping, not just for years but for decades, to obtain crofts on the most northerly of the island’s larger tenancies. This was Galson Farm on Lewis’s Atlantic coast.

# Galson



Galson Farmhouse, with the house Agnes Rennie's grandparents received on the right of the farmhouse

Courtesy of Agnes Rennie

Galson, like Ulva and North Talisker, had been cleared – the farm's 6,000 or so acres containing the sites of several townships emptied in 1843 or in the 1860s. But in Galson's immediate vicinity, during the decades following those dispossessions, there remained a substantial and still growing population. In the winter of 1887-88, landless families among this population –

families disappointed by there having been no land settlement provisions attached to the 1886 Crofters Act – started to press for crofts on Galson Farm. Its tenant's lease, it was pointed out, was due to expire in May 1889. This, it was suggested to Lewis's owner, Lady Jane Matheson, created an opportunity for her to return Galson to crofting occupancy.

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This has been an exciting day in Stornoway. A force of cottars and crofters ... visited Lady Matheson in Lewis Castle ... Last night was one of the wildest and darkest of the season, but notwithstanding the state of the weather, men collected in the vicinity of Barvas early this morning and by daybreak they had tramped [some 12 miles] into Stornoway ... The whole force numbered close on 300 ... and their appearance, travel-stained and soaking with wet, as they marched into town was depressing in the extreme. Poverty was written in unmistakeable characters on the countenances of a large proportion of them ... It transpired that the leaders of the band were entrusted with a written petition drawn out for presentation to Lady Matheson ... The purpose of the petition was a request, couched in very respectful terms, for an allotment [or subdivision] at fair valuation of the lands at present held [at Galson] ... for the rearing of sheep. It is declared that the people are forced to make this demand in consequence of the utter impossibility of raising their families on the mere scraps of rocky soil on which they are now placed.

*The Scotsman, 6 January 1888*

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Lady Matheson – widow of Sir James Matheson who had bought Lewis in 1844; an aunt of Duncan Matheson who would afterwards sell the island to Lord Leverhulme – rejected all notion of subdividing Galson. In response to consequent threats that the place would be taken by force, a police detachment, some of its members drafted in from as

far away as Aberdeenshire, was stationed at the farm where overnight demolition of boundary dykes had become a regular occurrence. Following clashes between dyke-breakers and police, Ross-shire sheriff John Cheyne, in Lewis (then part of Ross and Cromarty) on account of the unrest gripping not just Galson but the rest of the island, turned for help to the military who, because of the same unrest, were available in strength. On Cheyne's orders, soldiers, marines and a naval gunboat, HMS Seahorse, were sent to the Galson area.

On Friday night 1,400 measured paces of drystone dyke [at Galson Farm] were broken down. The dyke was five feet high.

*National Records of Scotland AF67/39:  
Police Report, Galson, 16 January 1888*

I have the honour to report ... that between 10 and 11 a.m. on Wednesday I received intelligence, brought by mounted messenger, that early that morning the police who were protecting the marches of Galson Farm had had a collision with a large band of people who were engaged in pulling down the dykes, and that some of the police had been rather badly injured. I at once put myself in communication with the ... forces here and it was arranged that Captain Farquharson of the Royal Scots should march with his detachment [of 20 infantrymen] ... and 20 marines ... by road to Galson while the Seahorse should land me and her marines at the Port of Ness, the nearest landing place ... to Galson. These arrangements were carried out with great dispatch and the whole force reached Galson that night ...

Finding that it was thought that six men could be identified as having taken part in the attack on the police, I started before daybreak yesterday along with 20 police and the military to arrest these men who all live in a township called Borve ... We reached the place about daybreak and the arrests were made without any difficulty or opposition ... As the troops were exhausted by their long march on the previous day and by the morning expedition, and as it would have been unsafe to take the prisoners through [this] disturbed district without military protection, I thought it best to send a messenger to Stornoway to request the Seahorse to come round to Ness ... and pick us all up.

*National Records of Scotland AF67/39: John Cheyne, Sheriff of Ross-shire, to Lord Lothian, Secretary for Scotland, 19 January 1888*

Four of the six men arrested in the course of the Galson troubles were tried in Edinburgh where all were acquitted. But though Galson – subsequent to these events – remained a farm, the aim of having its fields and grazings restored to crofters was not given up. As soon as the Board of Agriculture took office in 1912, its staff received numerous applications for holdings on Galson. However, Lewis's pre-war proprietor, Duncan Matheson, proved every bit as resistant as his aunt had been to any change in the farm's status. This meant that a BoAS settlement scheme, finalised during 1914, had not been implemented when war intervened. Nor was there any rapid progress after the war's end, the Galson scheme, like several others, falling victim to Scottish Secretary Robert Munro's January 1921 moratorium on settlement in Lewis. Not until that moratorium had been lifted by Lord Novar was BoAS free to once again turn its attention to Galson where, by the end of 1922, a new land raid was imminent.

Sir, it is now 11 years since we made the first application for smallholdings on Galson Farm and we now think that 11 years is quite long enough for the Board to consider what is to be done ... Therefore there is about 60 men of us pledged ... that we are going to take forcible possession of Galson Farm and divide it among ourselves.

*National Records of Scotland AF83/767: Donald Murray, Roderick Martin and Donald MacKenzie to BoAS, 17 November 1922*

Galson extend[s] to 6,115 acres and [is] rented at £235. There has always been a very keen demand for holdings on this farm and in 1914 the Board made formal application ... for a compulsory order authorising them to subdivide Galson into 57 new holdings ... It was decided ... to sist [or suspend] proceedings ... in view of the War, and the proposal was ultimately abandoned ... Notwithstanding the landlord's hostility ... to any scheme of land settlement being proceeded with on Galson, the Board ... have been considering the matter further. At this stage, intimation was received that about 60 men proposed to take illegal possession of the farm. The condition of these men and their neighbours is necessitous and the Board are satisfied that the only method of ameliorating that condition is to proceed at once with a scheme of land settlement in Galson ... to [be put into effect] ... by the [Board's] exercise of their compulsory powers under the Small Landholders (Scotland) Act 1911 and ... the Land Settlement (Scotland) Act 1919. The Board strongly recommend this procedure.

*National Records of Scotland AF83/767: BoAS Memo to Under-Secretary for Scotland, 1 December 1922*

Leverhulme, while opposed to any settlement at Galson, would have preferred BoAS to buy the farm rather than force him to accept as tenants the smallholders or crofters the Board planned to install there. But the Conservative government's Scottish Secretary, despite his past criticisms of the imposition of smallholding tenants on private landlords, told Leverhulme that purchase, in this instance, had been ruled out.

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I remain of opinion that whenever conditions permit ... purchase is preferable. I am afraid, however, that these conditions do not prevail in the case of Galson. It is remote [and] encircled by your estate. The cost of management would therefore be excessive, and an isolated case of Board management in the centre of your property could hardly fail to create difficulties for you as well as for the Board.

National Records of Scotland, AF67/391:  
Lord Novar, Secretary for Scotland, to Lord Leverhulme, 8 March 1923

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With Novar's backing, BoAS accordingly issued a June 1923 compulsory order for the settlement of Galson. Inbye land totalling 652 acres was to be divided into 52 crofts whose occupants, the order stated, were also to have the use of a 5,439-acre common grazing.

Because the number of applicants was well in excess of the number of crofts thus created, it fell to Colin MacDonald to preside over a sometimes-acrimonious selection process. Among the candidates placed on MacDonald's 'first priority' list was 46-year old Angus Gillies who made the grade in part because, while serving

with the navy, he'd seen action during the First World War in both the Mediterranean and the North Sea. Also in Gillies's favour, BoAS records reveal, was his having savings of £30 and being the owner of a horse, two cows and 30 sheep. By the close of 1923, therefore, Angus Gillies had been given the go-ahead to make the four-mile journey from his brother's croft at South Dell, where he, his wife Jessie and their six children had been living, to a newly constituted holding – extending to 11 acres – which BoAS designated 25 South Galson. Today this croft is home to Angus Gillies's granddaughter Agnes Rennie and her husband Frank.

To spend a few hours looking around Galson in Agnes's company is at once to get a sense both of the settlement's lay-out and of the continuing significance, from Agnes's perspective, of what took place here in the 1920s. Although the 52 holdings that BoAS brought into existence at Galson have always been treated (for administrative and other purposes) as a single crofting township, these holdings, from the outset, were arranged in three groups – North and South Galson and Melbost. From Melbost, the most southerly of the three, it's possible to pick out the remnants of what was Galson Farm's much fought-over boundary wall. Not far beyond is Borve where, 130 years ago, Sheriff Cheyne and the military came in search of this same wall's demolishers. To have been in Borve at that time was to have had at best a little scrap of land; to have had, in many instances, no land at all. It's easy, Agnes says, to see why, in such circumstances, Galson's extensive pastures – the product of clearances that, in the 1880s, were well within lots of folk's lifetimes – would have seemed so wrong, so unjust, so offensive.

In North Galson, towards the former farm's opposite boundary, Agnes points to the clustered ruins of one of the communities – closer to the nearby sea than Galson's present homes – emptied totally of people in 1843. Next it's on to South Galson, where Agnes grew up and where she still lives – her home some two-thirds of the way along a township road that began as the track giving access to the substantial farmhouse and equally substantial steadings and other outbuildings that took shape here in the years following the 1843 evictions. That farmhouse and these buildings, though altered in the interim, are still to be seen – as are the fields where, in January 1888 at the end of their forced march from Stornoway, men of the Royal Scots put up the tents in which they were accommodated for the duration of their stay.

Adjacent to the farm's cobbled farmyard is what was known as *Taigh nan Gillean*, the lads' house. Home to Galson Farm's usually young and single labourers, this solidly constructed building is referred to in BoAS documentation dating from Galson's resettlement as the farm's 'Bothy Block'. Along with one or two associated sheds and other premises, *Taigh nan Gillean* was valued in 1923 at £60. It was sold for that sum to Murdo Macdonald one of Galson's newly installed crofters – Murdo, on 12 February 1924, putting his name to the paperwork that led to his securing from BoAS an advance of the total purchase price. Preserved today in the National Records of Scotland, where a mass of BoAS documentation eventually fetched up, that same paperwork records Murdo's receipt of the loan he'd taken 'in order,' he stated, 'to assist me to purchase the [Galson Farm] bothy block, consisting of bothy, workshop and henhouse'. This loan, which provided Murdo and his family with what now became their home on 23 South Galson, Murdo's newly allocated croft, was

on standard BoAS terms. It was subject to a fixed annual interest rate of just under 3.5 per cent and was repayable in six-monthly instalments over 40 years – the final payment falling due in 1963.

By that point, a girl called Agnes Gillies (today Agnes Rennie) was a frequent visitor to what had been *Taigh nan Gillean* – Murdo (or Murchadh) and his wife Seonaid (or Janet) having been Agnes's maternal grandparents. It's evident that granddaughter and grandmother – "a strong, quiet woman," Agnes says – were always close. And it's good that there survives a sound recording Agnes made (not long before Janet Macdonald's death at the age of 97 in 1995) of her grandmother recalling, in her and Agnes's first language, something of what it meant to have had the opportunity to make the move to Galson from the Macdonald family's former home in Siadar, a mile or two beyond Borve.



Seònaid Ruairidh (Jessie Macdonald) and Murchadh 'An Bhàin' (Murdo Macdonald), Agnes Rennie's grandparents.

Courtesy of Agnes Rennie

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*Thàinig mise agus Bean Sgotaidh a-nuas aon latha. Choisidh sinn à Siadair: A' coiseachd a-nuas agus a' coiseachd suas. Bha am baile falamh an uair sin. Cha robh càil ann ach an taigh mòr. Dh'fhalbh sinn suas a-rithist dhachaigh 's bha a h-uile duine a' faighneachd dhuinn na chòrd an t-àite rinn. 'O, chòrd glè mhath. Chòrd glè mhath!' Bha e brèagha allright. Bha e gorm, glan. Cha robh càil air àiteach ach an rud a bha air an taca a-staigh ...*

One day Scotaidh's wife and I came down to Gabhsann [Galson] ['Scotaidh' was Roderick Martin. His wife was Anne, Anna Mhòr.] We walked from Siadar. Walking down and walking back up again. The village [the term always used in Lewis English of what elsewhere is usually called a township] was empty at that time. There was nothing but the big house [the farmhouse]. When we got home, everyone was asking if we liked the place. 'Oh, yes, we liked it. Yes, we liked it!' It was lovely right enough. It was green and clean. Nothing was ploughed except for the land around the tack [the farmhouse and its steadings].

We came down again in the spring. Tuesday after the Barvas Communion – February 1924 [the month Murdo signed the bond that enabled the Macdonald family to take over their new home] ... Then my husband's mother and his sister Mòr [Marion] came down with us when we got a bit settled. We had a cow and some sheep and a little horse. My father-in-law came down with a cart and my own father came with another cart – one

cart had peat on it and the other what little we owned. We did not have much ... It was a lovely day. I had Iain Beag ['wee John,' her son] in my lap and Seonag [Agnes Rennie's mother]. She would have been around two ...

When the ploughing time came round, we began to turn the soil with the little horse. Doileag was her name. She was so small ...

The village didn't have a church or a school at first ... After [people] got a bit settled they built a church. Everyone helped to build it ... [We] were about two years without a school ...

The tack [meaning the settlement] was in full swing [when everyone got settled]. Large amounts of barley, corn [oats] and potatoes had to be harvested. When the barley was being prepared it had to be threshed and winnowed and then it was put on the kiln where it was dried. Then it was threshed and winnowed again and dried. After that it was taken to the mill – the Dell Mill [about four miles to the north]. That was a good mill ...

Everyone had pretty good land. When the ground was satisfactorily turned, they took seaweed up from the shore to feed the soil – seaweed for the corn and the potatoes and the manure from the byre for the barley ... The seaweed was brought up by the horse from the shore after taking it off the rocks in creels. Normally we planted five bags of potatoes ... At dinnertime we always had potatoes ... Two families shared a butchered cow. Although there were no freezers then we

had the salt barrel. We also dried the meat, salting it first, then hanging it above the fire to dry ...

[People] earned the right to have [Galson], having fought in the war ... It was mostly young families who moved here ... They brought all their possessions as they were not coming on a temporary basis. They were here to stay.

*Seonaid Mhàrtainn, Janet Macdonald, recorded by Agnes Rennie. Agnes's transcription and translation are available in: Bill Lawson, Croft History, Isle of Lewis, Volume 13, Northton, 2007*

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'Sometimes I still listen to that recording,' Agnes Rennie says. 'Hearing her voice, I feel I'm seeing through my grandmother's eyes this place as it seemed to her when she first saw it. You sense just how tremendous it was for her and for her family to have been able to come here. In Siadar they'd lived in a part of someone else's home. In Siadar, because they'd had no croft of their own, they had no rights, no security. Here things, for them and others like them, were so much better. It was almost as if they'd emigrated; almost as if they were making a fresh start in a new country.'

Because of their acquisition of the former farm's 'bothy block', Janet and Murdo Macdonald had from the first in Galson a solidly built home – 'three rooms with a wee bit of a scullery added in due course,' Agnes comments. Galson's other settlers, meanwhile, were busily constructing their own accommodation – BoAS taking the view that, because most new arrivals here were within reasonably short distances of their former homes, there was no need in Galson for huts of the sort provided at

North Talisker. The houses that initially took shape on most of the settlement's 52 crofts, then, were of a longstanding Lewis type. Their roofs were thatched. Their walls were made from stones taken very often from what had been the dykes surrounding Galson Farm's inbye fields. But fairly soon, it's clear, homes of that sort began to give way to more modern equivalents – some of these, in their turn, eventually being replaced by still more up-to-date residences.

In 1924, when its BoAS-selected occupants were just moving in, Galson could have gone into a form of community ownership. Towards the close of the previous year, Lord Leverhulme, then transferring his Hebridean base from Stornoway to Harris – which he'd also bought and where he hoped to encounter fewer difficulties – offered all of Lewis to its residents. Leverhulme's gift, if accepted in its totality, would have required two locally-constituted groups to take possession. The first group, who were to accept what was made available to them, had the option of taking control of Stornoway and its surroundings – an area managed, since 1924, by what became the Stornoway Trust. The other, had it taken shape, would have been in charge of the remainder of the island. But especially in the economically parlous circumstances of the 1920s, few could see how this – enormously extensive – property could be made viable financially. Members of the Lewis District Committee, consisting of local authority councillors, were anxious, as they stressed when meeting Scottish Office ministers, 'to co-operate in carrying out Lord Leverhulme's proposal that the landward part of Lewis should be handed over to a public trust to be administered for the benefit of its inhabitants'. But in order to cover its likely operating deficit, the district committee felt, any such trust would require assistance – 'for a few years at

least' – from government. This assistance was not forthcoming. Over the next year or two, as a result, much of Lewis was divided into a series of newly-delineated estates that were disposed of at knock-down prices. The most northerly of these, a 56,000-acre tract of territory dubbed Galson Estate – and including the then new settlement of the same name – was sold for just £500.

Today this same estate belongs to the people living on it. That has been the position since January 2007 when a locally-established grouping, *Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn*, the Galson Trust, acquired ownership. To Agnes Rennie, a key member of the *Urras* from the outset, this was not so much a new beginning as the culmination of a movement with its roots in past struggles. It was to make this point that, at a particularly crucial public meeting in the run-up to the *Urras's* community ownership bid being taken forward, Agnes read aloud from an 1883 account of Galson's clearance. It was to make the same point that she helped ensure that the events surrounding the formal transfer of the Galson Estate to *Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn* included a dramatised re-enactment of the confrontations that occurred at Galson Farm in 1888.

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**Q. Do you know about the people who were removed from Galson?**

A. I ought to. I was born there and my ancestors lived there.

**Q. What was the name of the town[ship] you lived in?**

A. North Galson.

**Q. How many families were removed from that town[ship]?**

A. There were over 60 of them ...

**Q. Were there any more townships cleared besides North Galson?**

A. Other three.

**Q. Name them.**

A. Balmeanach, Melbost and South Galson. In Balmeanach there were 10 families, in Melbost 25 and in South Galson 13 ...

**Q. There seem to have been 108 families altogether, we shall say upwards of 100. What became of these families?**

A. About 40 of them went to [North] America. The rest were scattered all over the country.

*John Macdonald, crofter, South Dell, giving evidence to the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Condition of the Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, Ness, 7 June 1883*

In an age when communities are becoming increasingly dislocated, there is something inherently right about the people of these islands taking responsibility for the land. It is the most precious resource we have; it is our most tangible legacy from the past; and we have a duty to cherish it for future generations.

*Agnes Rennie, speaking at the formal handover of Galson Estate to Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn, 12 January 2007: West Highland Free Press, 19 January 2007*

# Later phases of land settlement

In Lewis by 1925 much of the land cleared during the previous century had been resettled. The same was true of the Uists, Barra, Tiree, Raasay and Skye. In the first three areas, as in Galson and other parts of Lewis, settlement mostly took place on land in private ownership – sometimes by agreement with landowners and sometimes as a result of BoAS resorting to compulsion. In Skye and Raasay, and to some extent elsewhere, settlement took place, as at North Talisker, on land BoAS took into state ownership. Afterwards there would be criticism that – because of political pressures and the ever-present risk of land raids – much of this settlement was rushed. That, however, was not how BoAS's efforts were seen in the Highlands and Islands – even beneficiaries of these efforts censuring the agency not for over-hastiness but for its opposite.

‘What is that floating in the ebb?’  
the old Highlander asked his crony.  
‘It looks like a board ... or something.’  
‘If it is moving fast,’ was the reply, ‘it  
will be a plank of wood. If it’s moving  
slowly it’ll be the Board of Agriculture.’

*Finlay J Macdonald, Crowdie and Cream,  
London, 1982*

As settlement wound down in the Hebrides, attention switched to the east and south of Scotland. There, as had been the case since 1912, BoAS's focus was on the

creation of what were not so much crofts as small farms – several hundred of these taking shape in the 1920s in areas like Caithness, Easter Ross, the Black Isle, the Lothians, Ayrshire, Galloway and Dumfriesshire. During the 1930s, with a view to providing opportunities for some of the many thousands of miners and others left workless by the slump that followed the 1929 financial crash, what was now the Department of Agriculture for Scotland (DoAS) concentrated more and more on localities adjacent to urban centres in the Central Belt. Here the formation of smallholdings of up to 10 acres – each of them equipped with a DoAS-financed bungalow and appropriate outbuildings – was combined with the provision of around 2,000 allotments known at the time as ‘plots for unemployed persons’.

In 1932 the Department arrived at the conclusion that, under then existing conditions, the type of smallholding which would most readily lend itself to successful working was the small-sized unit, ranging from about 5 to 10 acres, devoted to the intensive production of poultry, eggs, pigs, market-garden and glasshouse produce, fruit and other commodities ... and that an opportunity to form such holdings existed near large consuming centres in the Central Belt.

*Department of Agriculture for Scotland,  
Annual Report for 1938*

Buildings are now of a standardised type for all [non-croft] holdings of the smaller class. They consist of a four-apartment house, with scullery, larder and bathroom, and a shell outbuilding suitable for internal adaption for individual requirements.

*Department of Agriculture for Scotland,  
Annual Report for 1938*

Assessing the overall settlement record towards the end of the 1930s, by which point more than 5,000 new holdings had been put in place, the Department of Agriculture was in no doubt as to the good effects of what had been accomplished in the 40 or so years since settlement had begun under Congested Districts Board auspices. By way of illustration, DoAS highlighted the continuing success of the CDB scheme at Syre in Sutherland – where, it was pointed out, there were by 1938 ten times more people than there had been at the start of the century.

Of the many schemes promoted by the state in the Highlands and Islands, it may be sufficient to quote one example of a strath in the north of Scotland which had not been peopled by crofter inhabitants since the early part of the nineteenth century. Before being acquired for settlement purposes [by the CDB] ... it contained a sheep farm of over 12,000 acres and was managed by two married shepherds and a boy ... The settlement has passed through a period of development which enables an estimate to be made of the results achieved. The number of acres under cultivation has increased from 6 to 232, the number of

cattle from 4 to 158, of horses from none to 26 and of sheep from 1,700 to 2,163, while the total population maintained has grown from 10 to almost 100.

*Department of Agriculture for Scotland,  
Annual Report for 1938*

Nor were DoAS or its senior employees prepared to concede that, as some critics of settlement alleged, the replacement of bigger farms with smallholdings was bound to lead to reductions in agricultural productivity. At Syre, it was pointed out, output had increased markedly. Much the same, it was felt, was true of settlement schemes more generally.

Following the First World War many large farms were broken up into crofts for ex-servicemen. Pessimists predicted a sharp falling off in crop production and quality of stock as compared with that on the large farm, but soon the crofter, in comparison with the large farmer, amply demonstrated his ability to maintain the standard of both when it came to open competition at the auction mart and agricultural shows.

*Colin MacDonald, Crofts and Crofters,  
Edinburgh, 1955*

The Department have no lack of evidence as to outstanding successes among smallholders settled – men who began in a small way on holdings of every type and have gradually built up out of profits considerable businesses ... Statistics show that failures have been comparatively few.

*Department of Agriculture for Scotland,  
Annual Report for 1938*

Although the pace of land settlement was slower in the 1930s than in the period immediately after the passing of the 1919 Act, there was every indication, then, that such settlement was likely to continue. But as Table 1 (below) shows, this did not happen. After 1939, there would be virtually no land settlement in Scotland.

The immediate cause of settlement's 1939 cessation was the outbreak that year of the Second World War. But this conflict, unlike the preceding one, produced no commitment to giving homecoming servicemen a chance to establish themselves and their families on smallholdings. When, in 1948, a number of ex-servicemen mounted a 1920s-style land raid on a farm on the Knoydart estate, then belonging to Ronald Nall-Cain, Lord Brocket, they won public backing – not least because Brocket, in the run-up to Britain's war with Hitler's Germany, had been notoriously pro-Nazi. The post-war Labour government, however, had no intention of engaging

in extensive land settlement in Knoydart or anywhere else. As their 1947 Agriculture Act made clear, ministers were certainly committed to boosting UK agricultural production. But this, it was thought, would best be achieved by state-aided mechanisation, by the widespread application of newly-available artificial fertilisers, by price guarantees, by production subsidies and by enlarging, not subdividing, the country's farms.

The particular position of the Highlands and Islands, it was argued in the 1954 report of a Commission of Enquiry into Crofting Conditions was such as to justify a reactivation of earlier land settlement programmes in the region. Much the same point was made by the Highland Panel, an officially constituted advisory grouping, in a 1964 report on land use in the Highlands and Islands. These recommendations, however, were not acted on – despite the fact that, well into the 1950s, the annual total of applications to DoAS for new holdings seldom fell below 300.

**Table 1: Land Settlement, 1897-1956**

Phase	On Private Estates	On State-Owned Land	Total
1897-1911	252	388	640
1912-1918	596	-	596
1919-1930	928	1,608	2,536
1931-1937	96	1,161	1,257
1938-1943	41	204	245
1943-1956	-	37	37
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,913</b>	<b>3,398</b>	<b>5,311</b>

*Alexander S Mather, O'Dell Memorial Monograph No 6: State-aided Land Settlement in Scotland, Department of Geography, University of Aberdeen, 1978*

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It may be a matter for argument whether, from the point of view of food production, one big farm ... will produce more than the same farm divided up into smallholdings ... But there can be no argument as to the difference which the introduction of smallholdings will make to the population of a district ... We recommend, therefore, that an active and imaginative use should be made of land settlement powers in the crofting counties ... Extensive powers to acquire land for purposes of settlement, by agreement or by compulsion, are already vested in the Secretary of State [for Scotland]. We think these powers should be freely used.

*Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Crofting Conditions, 1954*

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Now and then, admittedly, settlement of a sort continued to occur. Scotland's last land raid, at Balelone Farm in North Uist in November 1952, resulted in several crofts being extended at the farm's expense. And in June 1953 the Department of Agriculture resettled at Craignure in Mull a number of crofting families evacuated, at their own request, from Soay.

Nine crofters and their families from the island of Soay, [off] Skye, who had petitioned the Secretary of State for evacuation, were transferred in June to accommodation at Craignure, Mull, which had been acquired by the Department in 1952 for the purpose.

*Department of Agriculture for Scotland, Report for 1953*

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There were 27 passengers aboard the SS Hebrides when she pulled away from Soay that June day ... With them they took their furniture, their farm implements, their hens, their cattle and their sheep ... The Hebrides had carried a similar cargo from St Kilda 23 years earlier. Her destination then had been Lochaline in Morvern. Now it was Salen – the village on the other side of the Sound of Mull from which the Soay people would be taken to new homes at Craignure.

The total cost of the evacuation, including the expense involved in finding homes and holdings for the islanders, was £13,000. The economy-conscious Department of Agriculture for Scotland, who were called upon to foot the bill, were well pleased. The people of Soay, the Press and Journal reported, were well pleased also. Their new homes had all the amenities their old homes had lacked – hot-and-cold running water, bathrooms, well-equipped kitchens.

But amenities aren't everything. Margaret Campbell, one of the five Soay people who still live at Craignure, recalls that men who had scarcely seen a tree before they came to Mull were given jobs with the Forestry Commission and that a community which had previously lived by fishing was resettled in a place where ... no harbour was [then] available.

*James Hunter, 'The Exiles of Soay', Press and Journal, 14 July 1978*

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The movement of people from Soay to Craignure – a small-scale re-enactment of what had been undertaken at North Talisker 30 years earlier – signalled no new departure. In the mid-1960s the newly established Highlands and Islands Development Board (HIDB), to which the Highland Panel's 1964 recommendations had been referred, investigated land settlement possibilities in Mull and in the Strath of Kildonan. But no settlement went ahead in either location. In Lowland Scotland, meanwhile, the retitled DoAS, now the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries for Scotland (DAFS), had not just given up on settlement but had begun disposing of smallholdings of the sort created widely in the 1930s.

In 1958 it was confirmed that the government's policy was to improve conditions on existing holdings rather than to create new ones ... Improvement on smallholdings was usually interpreted in terms of amalgamation ... The number of smallholdings was also reduced by sales to local authorities and other public bodies for development. Since many of the units created during the 1930s were near towns and cities, they were favourably located for abstraction for urban purposes.

*Alexander S Mather, 'The Rise and Fall of Government-Assisted Land Settlement in Scotland', Land Use Policy, 1985*

A more comprehensive disposals programme was launched in 1980 in the wake of a House of Commons Public Accounts Committee finding to the effect that DAFS was spending three times more on the management of smallholdings than those same smallholdings were producing by way of rent. Tenants of state-owned holdings in non-crofting localities, it was now announced, would be encouraged to buy their holdings from DAFS at prices 70 per cent below open market value. This offer was taken up widely. By the end of the 1980s, as a result, DAFS owned few smallholdings outside the Highlands and Islands. The fate of DAFS-owned crofting properties, however, remained to be determined.

Occasional pleas for renewed land settlement are still heard ... For all practical purposes, however, the programme of state-aided land settlement is at an end ... Its legacy survives in the Highlands and Islands ... In the Lowlands [that] legacy is fading fast, although a few small, whitewashed bungalows in their tiny fields around the industrial towns and cities remain as monuments to a movement in which neither momentum nor direction were long sustained.

*Alexander S Mather, 'The Rise and Fall of Government-Assisted Land Settlement in Scotland', Land Use Policy, 1985*



# Land settlement estates and community land ownership

In 1955, as recommended by the enquiry commission that reported the previous year, a new Crofters Commission was established. This new organisation had none of the rent-fixing and other powers of the post-1886 Commission. These remained with the Land Court. Its founding legislation, however, made the Commission responsible for 'reorganising, developing and regulating crofting'. Concluding in the 1960s that crofting tenure of the traditional sort had become 'obsolete', the Commission began to advocate a wholesale conversion from tenancy to owner-occupancy – to be achieved by the government compulsorily acquiring all privately-owned croft land and at once transferring the ownership of that land to its occupiers. This was to revisit an issue that had bedevilled the Congested District Board some 60 years before; and soon the Commission was to discover, as the CDB had done, that owner-occupancy was by no means desired universally in crofting areas. But neither was it universally rejected. The outcome was compromise legislation in the shape of the Crofting Reform (Scotland) Act 1976. Crofters, the Act stipulated, could continue as tenants. But they were also to have an absolute right to acquire ownership of their inbye land at a cost equivalent to 15 times that land's annual rent.

Take-up varied geographically. Popular in Shetland, Orkney, Caithness and some parts of the eastern Highlands, owner-occupancy was much less so in the West Highlands and in the Hebrides. Because DAFS-managed crofting estates dating from the land settlement era were mostly in these areas, this made it hard for the Department of Agriculture to replicate on its Highlands and Islands properties a disposals programme of the sort that had proved successful in the Lowlands.

This was a disappointment to ministers in Margaret Thatcher's Conservative administration – an administration which had taken office in 1979 and which, in the course of the 1980s, set about selling off a whole range of previously state-owned assets. Addressing the 1989 annual conference of the then recently-formed Scottish Crofters Union (SCU), Russell Sanderson, Borders peer and Minister of State at the Scottish Office, duly underlined the government's wish to persuade the Department of Agriculture's crofting tenants to buy their crofts. He was aware, Lord Sanderson said, that to swap a croft tenancy for owner-occupancy was to gain little and, potentially, to lose a lot – in that agricultural and other grants available to crofters were less easily obtained by owner-occupiers than by tenants. But

he wished, the minister stressed, 'to hear of suggestions which might assist those interested in home and land ownership [of the sort] the government [was] anxious to promote'. At once it was put to Lord Sanderson by the SCU (today the Scottish Crofting Federation) that, if the government wanted out from under its ownership of crofting estates, then – instead of advocating individual owner-occupancy, ministers should explore ways in which those estates (technically the property of the Secretary of State for Scotland) might go into ownership of the sort exemplified by the Stornoway Trust. The outcome, in February 1990, was a Scottish Office announcement that crofters on DAFS estates in Skye and Raasay were to be given the chance of opting for trust ownership.

When Lord Sanderson indicated to the SCU ... that he was minded to dispose of the Department of Agriculture's crofting estates, we told him bluntly that the introduction of wholesale owner-occupation would not be acceptable to us. Instead we suggested a community ownership approach along the lines pioneered on the Stornoway Trust estate in Lewis.

*Angus MacRae, SCU President, speaking in November 1989: The Crofter, February 1990*

The future of the Secretary of State's crofting estates has recently attracted considerable interest. The government take the view that they should not continue to hold land which is not required for the purpose for which it was acquired ... I am ... fully seized of the difficulties of, and possible objections to,

owner-occupation ... I was accordingly most interested when the possibility of some form of community ownership was raised with me ... We consider that there is scope for more direct involvement in the running of the estates at present owned by the Secretary of State and that local skills, knowledge and interest might be harnessed to achieve this.

*Lord Sanderson, Minister of State at the Scottish Office, speaking in November 1989: The Crofter, February 1990*

This consultation paper seeks views on the possible transfer of responsibility for some of the Secretary of State's crofting estates to trusts including crofting interests or to some other form of community ownership ... Transfer to a trust would provide local communities with greater control over, and greater responsibility for, their own affairs, with the scope to be more responsive to local sensibilities, and with greater ability to take account of local interests and opportunities.

*Department of Agriculture and Fisheries for Scotland, Consultation Paper on Possible Disposal of the Secretary of State for Scotland's Crofting Estates, February 1990*

The Skye and Raasay estates managed by DAFS – estates purchased by the CDB and BoAS in the opening decades of the twentieth century – extended to just under 150,000 acres and were tenanted in 1990 by some 630 crofters. If this acreage was to be sold to crofting or community trusts, then the price paid by those trusts, or so it was assumed, would be in accordance with the 1976 formula for determining

the purchase price of an individual croft. This meant that the selling price of DAFS property on Skye and Raasay would be in the region of £500,000. How might crofters raise this amount? And beyond that, how were crofters to meet the annual running costs of estates from which, it emerged, DAFS were deriving a total yearly income, from crofting rents and other sources, of around £41,000 – while simultaneously spending £155,000 annually on management?

While the acquisition cost problem could be solved by government simply giving its crofting estates to communities free of charge, something the consultation paper of February 1990 suggested might be done, the resulting community groupings, or so it seemed to many crofters, were likely to find themselves carrying a big administrative burden – the February paper having warned that, in the event of a cost-free transfer of ownership, ‘there would not be a strong case for further government support’ being made available to newly created trusts. Just as the difficulty of meeting estate running costs had led to the rejection of community ownership in the greater part of Lewis in 1924, so now the same difficulty went a long way to convincing a majority of crofters on the DAFS estates in Skye and Raasay that the Conservative government’s community ownership offer should be rejected. Today, when it’s become apparent that Highlands and Islands estates can actually be run cheaply by people living on them, administrative costs are not a barrier to community ownership. But that was by no means obvious in 1990 – a point stressed afterwards by Lewis lawyer Simon Fraser who, with others, had been commissioned by the SCU to report on ‘the legal and practical implications’ of what was on offer from Lord Sanderson and his colleagues.

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What struck most people ... about our findings was the enormous sum the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries were spending every year on estate management. The department, of course, operated bureaucratically with decision after decision being referred further and further up the organisation ... Their Skye and Raasay estates could easily have been run by crofters for a fraction of what these estates were costing the government. But people ... were reluctant to accept this. There was a widespread perception that Highlands and Islands estates were immensely costly to manage and that, as a result, they could be owned and operated only by well-financed public bodies or by very wealthy individuals. Today we know better. Today we’re well aware that all sorts of communities can run estates both efficiently and profitably – delivering a whole set of benefits in the process. But in the early 1990s this was something that had still to be proved.

*Simon Fraser speaking in 2011: James Hunter, From the Low Tide of the Sea to the Highest Mountain Tops: Community Ownership of Land in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, Stornoway, 2012*

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On its becoming evident, in December 1991, that the Scottish Office had given up on the possibility of DAFS estates in Skye and Raasay going into community ownership, the documentation dealing with how such ownership could have worked in practice was filed away in Simon Fraser’s Stornoway office. There, it seemed probable, the file in question was likely to be left to gather dust. Just six months later, however, Fraser got a telephone call that

led to its being reopened. This call came from Bill Ritchie, a crofter at Achmelvich on the west coast of Sutherland and treasurer of the SCU's Assynt branch. Most of the branch's several dozen members were tenants of the North Lochinver Estate which had just been advertised for sale. At meetings called to discuss the implications of this sale, crofters on the estate had decided to launch their own bid for the property. Their aim was to bring the estate into community ownership, and they wanted Simon Fraser to act on their behalf.

The campaign thus launched caught the public imagination. And when, in December 1992, it was announced that the North Lochinver Estate had been acquired by the Assynt Crofters Trust – constituted much as the projected Skye and Raasay trusts might have been – it became apparent that the community land ownership concept, which looked to have died a year earlier, had been restored to life.

[In 1990] the Scottish Office ... carried out a pilot study looking specifically at the Government's estates on Skye and Raasay. As part of that, a crofting trusts structure was [devised] ... While the crofters turned down the proposal to take over these estates, the crofting trust structure developed has a continuing relevance. This structure, based on a company limited by guarantee and with charitable status, was the model used by the Assynt Crofters Trust ... The same model has been used by community landowners since.

*Land Reform Review Group, The Land of Scotland and the Common Good, 2014*

Over the next five years, several more areas – Melness in Sutherland, Borve and Annishader in Skye, the island of Eigg – would follow the North Lochinver Estate into community ownership. Momentum increased when, following Labour's 1997 return to power at Westminster, Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), the HIBD's successor agency, was instructed to establish a Community Land Unit with the job of helping community groups to progress land ownership ambitions. Attainment of these same ambitions, said the new government's Scottish Secretary, Donald Dewar, would also be assisted by the Scottish Parliament that Labour was pledged to create.

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With the advent of the Scottish Parliament, there will be for the first time a real sustained opportunity to debate at Parliamentary level the policies which are right for Scotland ... It is clear that we need an integrated programme of land reform legislation ... to fit Scotland for the 21st century. Such a programme needs to deal, not just with the highly publicised circumstances of the big Highland estates, but with land-related problems in all their diversity throughout Scotland ... I don't know yet how many pieces of legislation all of this will require. What I do know is that, with the advent of the Scottish Parliament, we shall have at last the means to legislate in Scotland for Scottish land reform.

*Donald Dewar, Land Reform for the 21st Century: John McEwen Memorial Lecture, Perth, 1998*

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Soon a Land Reform Policy Group had been launched and when, in 1999, the Scottish Parliament was established, its first administration, a Labour/Liberal Democrat

coalition, set about giving effect to the group's recommendations by means of what became the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003. Provisions intended to facilitate community land ownership were prominent in this legislation. They are equally prominent in further land reform measures enacted by the Scottish National Party (SNP) administrations that have dominated Scotland's devolved legislature since 2007. Many of those measures stem from proposals made by a further Land Reform Review Group. All have been welcomed (as was the Scottish government's 2016 creation of a Scottish Land Fund) by Community Land Scotland (CLS) – set up in 2010 to advance the interests of existing or aspiring community land trusts.

Since 1999, then, land reform has loomed large on Scotland's political agenda – something that has helped greatly to ensure the still-continuing expansion, in Ulva and elsewhere, of the area under community control. This area includes numerous localities settled or resettled under CDB or BoAS auspices. Galson is one such locality. Others include former sheep

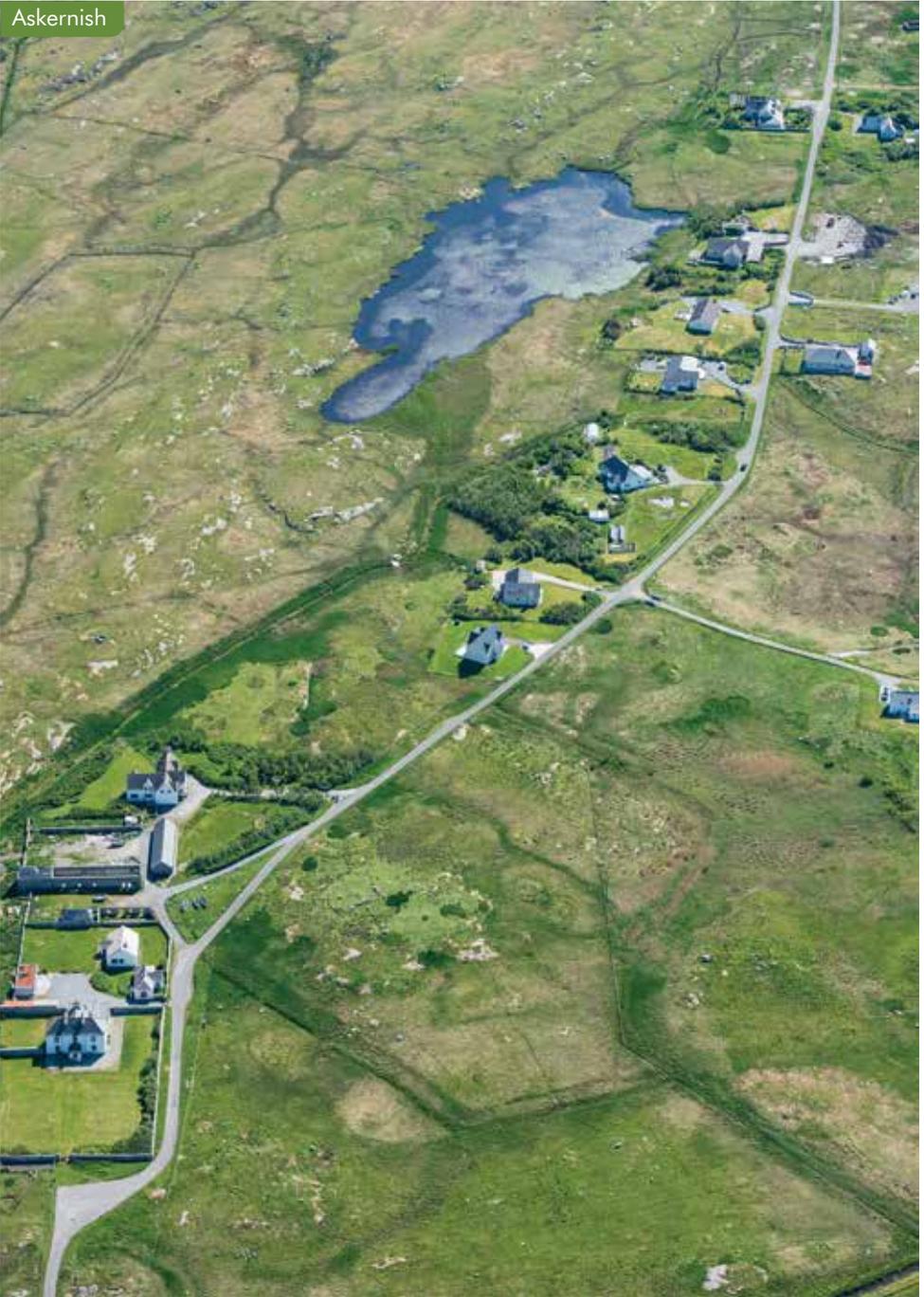
farms – Peninerine, Ormiclate, Bornish, Milton and Askernish, for instance – on the now community-owned South Uist Estate. Places like these, however, were in private ownership when, in the early twentieth century, they were divided into crofts. Less evident among the 600,000 or so acres constituting the community land sector is land that was formerly in state control.

A number of communities, to be sure, have taken over land previously under the jurisdiction of the Forestry Commission. Among this land is 1,334 acres at Abriachan beside Loch Ness, 642 acres at Aigas near Beaully and the 1,670 acres taken over in 2006 by the North West Mull Community Woodland Company. But despite publicly-owned land settlement estates having been the first modern candidates for large-scale community ownership, most such estates (including the Skye and Raasay landholdings offered to crofters in 1990) remain today in the possession of the Scottish government. The single exception consists of the 17,853 acres which, since 2010, have been managed by the West Harris Trust.



Ormiclate

Askernish



# West Harris



© Martin Lamb

West Harris contains some of the most outstanding scenery in the British Isles. This is a place of blue-green seas and snow-white beaches – all backed by steep hills. The area, by island standards, is also agriculturally desirable. Calcium-rich shell-sand from the ocean here underlies grassland known as machair – the resulting sward providing first-rate grazing. That’s why, when large-scale sheep farming reached the Hebrides in the early nineteenth century, this area’s inhabitants were expelled. Some left for North America. Most of the rest were forcibly transferred to Harris’s eastern, and thus Minch-facing, shoreline. There, in rock-strewn settlements that came to be known collectively as the Bays, the only ground that could be cropped consisted often of wholly artificial and laboriously

constructed plots. In Gaelic these are *feannagan*. In English they are ‘lazybeds’ – an absolute misnomer.

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Nothing can be more moving to the sensitive observer of Hebridean life than these lazybeds of the Bays district of Harris. Some are no bigger than a dining-table, and possibly the same height from the rock, carefully built up with turves and the seaweed carried there in creels by the women and girls. One of these tiny lazybeds will yield a sheaf of oats or a bucket of potatoes, a harvest no man should despise.

*F. Fraser Darling, West Highland Survey, Oxford, 1955*

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To see these now abandoned lazybeds when a few were still in use, as this publication's author did on his first visit to Harris in 1972, was to glimpse something of the hardships faced by families moved to the Bays when West Harris was cleared. Their new homes gave these people access, by way of numerous tidal creeks, to the sea and its resources. But the land was inhospitable. Little wonder, then, that folk from here – folk Danny MacLeod grew up among in Portnalong – should have welcomed BoAS's 1923 offer of a new start at North Talisker.

When family after family were quitting the Bays for Skye, Lord Leverhulme, focusing now on the developmental potential of the South Harris port of Obbe, or Leverburgh as it had been renamed, was managing to extract promises that Harris's larger farms would not be raided as so many of their Lewis counterparts had been. But when Leverhulme died in 1925 his plans for Harris died with him. Like Lewis, Harris was split into segments and sold off. This opened the way for the eventual resettlement of three adjoining West Harris localities denuded of their occupants 100 or more years before – these localities being, by the 1930s, in the possession of the Department of Agriculture for Scotland.

In West Harris, where there had been farms since the clearances, there were now more than 50 crofts. But by the twentieth century's close it was clear that, for all the gains resettlement had produced, this DoAS-created crofting community was falling victim to depopulating pressures resulting from a scarcity of non-croft housing and an equal lack of any means of earning off-croft income. Hence the formation in 2007 of the West Harris Trust (WHT).

'It seemed to us that West Harris was becoming unsustainable,' says WHT chairman Murdo Mackay, who's been involved with the trust since its inception. 'More than a third of the people living here were over 65. There were next to no small children. And there were far too few folk in their twenties or thirties.'

While ownership by DoAS and its successor agencies had brought about the repopulating of West Harris, these agencies, Murdo feels, had for a long time shown little interest in doing anything more than administering the area. 'We felt we could revitalise the place by making it possible for more people to live here,' Murdo comments. 'That was going to require the provision of new houses, the creation of new employment opportunities.' The only way they could make these things happen, or so Murdo and his WHT colleagues reckoned, was by taking West Harris into community ownership.

In principle, this should have been straightforward. When, in the mid-1990s, Michael Forsyth (now Lord Forsyth) was made Secretary of State for Scotland in John Major's Conservative government, he took a close interest in community ownership of the type taking shape on the Assynt Crofting Trust's then recently acquired landholdings. One outcome, in part the product of a visit Forsyth made as Scottish Secretary to Assynt, was the first land reform legislation of the modern era, the Transfer of Crofting Estates (Scotland) Act 1997. That Act was meant to enable crofters on government-owned properties like West Harris to take charge of the land on which they lived. This was something that DAFS tenants in Skye and Raasay had, some years before, rejected. But in the light of what had meanwhile been accomplished in Assynt

and elsewhere there would surely be, or so it was thought, greater willingness than there had been in 1990 to swap state ownership for community control.

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I was surprised to find when I became Secretary of State for Scotland last summer that [as a result of early twentieth-century land settlement] I was the largest crofting landlord in Scotland ... It seemed to me that there was an opportunity to launch a new initiative which would help to give crofters more effective control over their land. We surely need to ask whether these estates would not be better run in the future by local communities themselves rather than [by] a government department which, with the best will in the world, cannot be as sensitive to a community's needs as those who actually live there.

The aim of the crofting trust initiative is to ensure that the day-to-day management of estates, and the use of the land, is sympathetic to local needs. Ownership of the land will also allow the local crofting community to exploit potential development opportunities ... Our initiative provides a valuable opportunity for crofters, on those estates for which I have responsibility, to attain ownership and control of the land they work ...

And let me make one thing absolutely clear. We are not disposing of these estates in order to raise money for the Exchequer. We are opening this window of opportunity for the crofting communities because it is the right thing to do ... Such is our commitment to this cause that we are even prepared, if the

circumstances justify it, to transfer certain crofts free of charge ... Our aim is to make sure that crofting trusts get off to a good start and succeed. And ... the terms of transfer will reflect this.

*Michael Forsyth, Secretary of State for Scotland, addressing a meeting of the Scottish Grand Committee of the House of Commons, Inverness, 5 February 1996*

An Act to enable the Secretary of State to dispose of his crofting estates ... to approved crofting bodies ... The disposal of property under this Act shall be on such terms as the Secretary of State, with the consent of the Treasury, may agree with the body acquiring the property.

*Transfer of Crofting Estates (Scotland) Act 1997*

By 2007, when WHT announced that its members wished to take control of West Harris and to do so by means of the Transfer of Crofting Estates Act, political responsibility for these matters had been transferred from Westminster to Scotland's devolved government. But this government (in SNP hands by 2007) was, on the face of things, every bit as committed as the UK administration of 1997 had been to community ownership's expansion. WHT, therefore, expected its ownership request to be speedily agreed. It wasn't. That's why – more than a decade later – Murdo Mackay still becomes a little irritated when talking about the innumerable obstacles WHT encountered when en route to community ownership. Not only was there to be no chance of a free-of-charge deal of the type Michael Forsyth had envisaged. WHT would have to accept, or so it was suggested by Scottish government negotiators, a variety of

clawback provisions intended to ensure that government shared in any revenues the trust might generate from commercial developments. This, as Murdo points out, would have been to make pointless much of what WHT aimed to achieve. After much argument, then, the envisaged clawbacks were dropped. A purchase price, however, was insisted on – something the Scottish government’s own Land Reform Review Group was afterwards to describe as hopelessly counter-productive.

The West Harris Trust purchased the Scottish government owned estates of Luskentyre, Borve and Scarista in January 2010 after long and difficult negotiations. These negotiations were needlessly lengthy and tortuous due to a civil service culture geared to complying to every imaginable negative scenario rather than dedicated to community empowerment.

*West Harris Trust, Submission to the Land Reform Review Group, 2012*

The Review Group considers that crofting trusts or crofting community owners should be able to purchase Scottish government crofting estates at less than open market value. The Group recommends that Ministers direct the Scottish government to make provision for this to happen and to clarify the circumstances under which this can occur. The Group also recommends that the government should take a more pro-active approach to facilitating and supporting such transfers.

*Land Reform Review Group, The Land of Scotland and the Common Good, Edinburgh, 2014*

Today, not quite 10 years on from WHT’s eventual acquisition of the area the trust at last took over in January 2010, a great deal has been accomplished. When in state ownership this area yielded annual revenues of not much more than £10,000. WHT’s annual income is very many times larger. As is apparent from a quick tour of West Harris in Murdo Mackay’s company, much of this income derives from a wide range of trust-organised initiatives. Two wind turbines and a run-of-river hydro scheme have been constructed. Several business premises have been got up and running – their occupants including an artist, a chocolate-maker and an architect. Six new and affordable homes have been made available for rent and, in the summer of 2019, four more were being built. Other, privately owned, homes have appeared on house sites sold by WHT – sites subject to legally enforceable restrictions designed to ensure that these homes remain in permanent occupation.

More homes are planned. So is an extension to what is much the most striking of all WHT’s many accomplishments. This is *Talla na Mara*, WHT’s Community Enterprise Centre, an architecturally spectacular complex on rising ground overlooking what the *Talla na Mara* website calls ‘the golden sands of Niseaboist Beach’.

*Talla na Mara*, the Centre by the Sea, is owned and managed by the residents of West Harris. Facilities include a gallery, artists' studios and craft workshops, a performance space for film, theatre and live music events, office spaces, a restaurant and campervan hook-ups ... The Centre also hosts regular classes, workshops and pop-up shops [as well as] special events such as weddings, conferences and private parties.

*West Harris Trust website, 2019*

One result of WHT's activities has been a marked rise in West Harris's population from 119 in 2012 to 151 today – an increase of more than 25 per cent. More such rises will occur as additional houses are completed and further businesses take shape. Nothing of this, it's worth stressing, could have occurred but for the 1919 Land Settlement Act and the consequent return of a substantial population to a locality that, for a century or more, had contained no worthwhile number of people. But what's so dramatically transforming this same locality's current prospects is WHT's belief that a place which benefited from

settlement of the 1920s and 1930s variety – settlement dependent entirely on the provision of crofts or smallholdings – now needs re-peopling all over again. This new round of settlement is driven in West Harris by WHT's commitment to economic diversification and by the trust's equal commitment to putting in place as wide as possible a range of residential accommodation. As other re-peopling opportunities open up – in Ulva and elsewhere – this surely is the sort of approach that will more and more be essential.

*West Harris is a very special place: the spectacular beaches, flower-rich machair and local culture make it a much sought after holiday location and a very enviable place to live. The West Harris Trust is a community charity responsible for managing 7,225 hectares of land [in this area] ... We believe that a long history of declining population and limited opportunities can be turned around by local endeavour and that there is a bright future for our community.*

*West Harris Trust website, 2019*

Traigh Rosamol, Luskentyre



© Mo Thomson

# A future for land settlement?

Might land settlement be revived? In one respect, that of providing more agricultural holdings, it already has been – the Scottish Government’s Farming Opportunities for New Entrants (FONE) programme having resulted, since 2016, in 90 agricultural units or part-units having come into existence. These occupy over 15,500 acres. No part of this large area was acquired by government for FONE purposes – all of the land in question having already been in the ownership of public bodies such as Forestry and Land Scotland (the 2019 successor to Forestry Commission Scotland), Crown Estates Scotland, Scottish Water and local authorities. Nor have occupants of FONE holdings been granted secure and heritable tenancies of the sort standard in the land settlement era – holdings being let on a comparatively short-term basis to people who, it’s hoped, will progress from these ‘starter units’ to other, already-existing and ideally more substantial, farms. The FONE initiative, then, is not meant to emulate BoAS accomplishments of a century ago. But it is, nevertheless, the first government-organised effort to add to Scotland’s landholdings total since land settlement of the early twentieth-century variety was abandoned in the 1950s.

Most FONE holdings are in upland localities and the overwhelming majority are in eastern, central and southern

parts of Scotland. Further north and west, however, new crofts are again appearing. Few such crofts were established in the decades following land settlement’s abandonment, and the Crofting Reform Act 1976 – which, as mentioned previously, originated in an attempt to phase out crofting tenure – made it legally impossible to designate any more. This remained the position until the Scottish government’s Crofting Reform (Scotland) Act 2007 enabled the Crofting Commission (as the Crofters Commission has been renamed) to add newly constituted holdings to its crofting register. Since then more than 60 crofts have been created – mostly (but not exclusively) on land in community ownership.

Neither in a FONE nor new crofts connection has the term ‘land settlement’ been used. Nor have the Scottish ministers responsible for crofting and for the FONE initiative sought to use powers of the type made available to their long-ago predecessors by the Land Settlement (Scotland) Act 1919. That Act, however, has not been repealed. In principle, therefore, today’s ministers could do as Robert Munro and Lord Novar did in the 1920s and set about the formation of smallholding or crofting settlements on the lines of those that took shape in places like North Talisker or Galson. Despite occasional calls for the 1919 Act’s reactivation, this has not happened.

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Green MSPs will campaign to provide smallholdings, community gardens and community-supported agriculture across Scotland through modernising the Land Settlement (Scotland) Act 1919.

*Scottish Green Party, Election Manifesto, 2016*

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But if there is no widespread backing for a renewal of large-scale land settlement, there is growing recognition of the need to grapple once more with one of the issues land settlement was intended to tackle – rural depopulation. Especially in more thinly peopled parts of Scotland, such depopulation threatens to become so acute as to negate efforts to provide these localities with viable economies – working-age populations in the Southern Uplands and in a number of Highlands and Islands localities being projected to decrease by as much as a third by the 2040s. Hence the inclusion in the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 of a commitment to ‘increasing the population of the rural areas of Scotland’ – together with a further instruction to ministers to ‘have regard to the desirability of ... resettling rural areas that have become depopulated’.

The sparsely populated areas of Scotland have a demographic legacy which, in the absence of intervention, will result in population decline, and shrinkage of their working-age population, on a scale which implies serious challenges for economic development, and consequences for landscape and ecology which are poorly understood.

*Andrew Copus and Jonathan Hopkins, Demographic Change in the Sparsely Populated Areas of Scotland, James Hutton Institute, 2018*

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The Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997 is amended [in such a way as to have the Act’s desired outcomes include] ... increasing the population of rural areas in Scotland ... [and in preparing] a revised National Planning Framework ... Scottish Ministers ... must have regard to the desirability of ... resettling rural areas that have become depopulated.

Planning (Scotland) Act 2019

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In September 2019 those legislative requirements were incorporated into the Holyrood administration’s new Programme for Government. This programme committed ministers to the development of an ‘action plan’ containing measures that would have the effect of assisting the repopulation of rural and island communities. That plan, the Programme for Government stated, would become the basis for ‘pilot projects’ of a type intended to test such repopulation mechanisms as might be devised.

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Rural Scotland makes a vital contribution to our national economy. We know that more young people want to stay in the areas where they grew up, but we need to do more to stem rural depopulation and attract more people to live and work in rural and island communities. We will develop an action plan to support repopulation of our rural and island communities and work with partners to test approaches using small-scale pilots in rural Scotland.

*Protecting Scotland’s Future: The Government’s Programme for Scotland, 2019-2020*

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Does the land settlement record offer pointers as to how these objectives might be secured? One such pointer is perhaps to be found in BoAS having had, at its own hand, the capacity to plan, finance and rapidly push ahead with the numerous settlements the agency brought into existence. BoAS, to be sure, was operating in advance of the national planning system introduced by British governments in the period after the Second World War. When deciding where to locate North Talisker's homes, access roads and other infrastructure, then, BoAS staff were free to do as they pleased. That could not be the case currently. While there are no plans do in Ulva what BoAS did in Galson or North Talisker, it's easy to imagine the obstacles that would be encountered were this to be suggested in present circumstances. Had Ulva been taken over by BoAS in the 1920s, it's probable that island tracks would have been turned quickly into roads and that emptied settlements like Ormaig would have become home – almost overnight – to newly-established crofters. Whether this would have been a good thing or a bad thing may be a matter for debate. What's certain is that no such course of action would be permitted readily today – all of Ulva being inside the Loch na Keal National Scenic Area (NSA) and thus subject to the stringent restrictions NSA designation places on development.

But if the comparative ease with which BoAS could bring about re-peopling is to be envied, there are aspects of the BoAS approach which, from today's perspective, are a good deal less appealing.

These include the wholly top-down character of what BoAS was about. Whether by threatening or by actually carrying out land raids, communities could pressurise BoAS into proceeding with particular settlement schemes. But

affected communities had little say in what then transpired. Settlement lay-out, tenant selection and associated matters were handled by BoAS with virtually no local input of the type that's insisted on by the Scottish Parliament's land reform legislation and is in any case regarded as good practice by the locally elected groups constituting the present-day community land sector.

Nor did early twentieth-century governments, for all their commitment to land settlement, believe it to be their role to expand wider economic opportunities in the localities where settlement occurred. Adam Collier, an economist who studied Scotland's crofting areas in the 1940s, was firmly of the view that the resulting tendency of BoAS and its successor agencies to evolve into entirely passive managers of crofting or smallholding properties was settlement policy's key failing. Much the same point was made more recently by the West Harris Trust in evidence to the Land Reform Review Group – WHT majoring on what seemed to the trust, as indicated earlier, to be an absence of developmental thinking on the part of administrators of the Scottish Government's crofting estates.

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Criticism has been directed against the administration of the land settlement policy by the Department of Agriculture which should really have been directed at the policy itself. Its chief fault was that it was land settlement and not social reconstruction, including the provision of an adequate amount of suitable employment ... Policy must be comprehensive.

*Adam Collier, The Crofting Problem, Cambridge, 1953*

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Following settlement, [West Harris] ... suffered a long period of decline ... There was no attempt to develop the land as the Department [of Agriculture] ... did not see that it had any remit to do anything other than manage the activities of [what was] solely a crofting estate. There was [for example] a policy not to release land for public sector housing which resulted in the west side of Harris being the only area of the island with no such provision.

*West Harris Trust, Submission to the Land Reform Review Group, 2012*

But while recognising the weaknesses inherent in land settlement policy, might it be possible to learn from that same policy's strengths? Might there be scope, for instance, for the setting up by the Scottish government of a re-peopling agency which, while being required to collaborate closely with community and other interests on the ground, would also be granted powers of the sort made available to the Board of Agriculture by the Land Settlement (Scotland) Act 1919? This would be to take a public sector led approach to dealing with the depopulation crisis that, as already underlined, threatens no small part of rural Scotland.

Public sector led development occurs when a public sector body (local authority, regional development agency, government body) plays a leading role in initiating and driving forward major development in order to achieve particular public policy objectives.

*Steven Tolson and Archie Rintoul, The Delivery of Public Sector Led Development in Scotland: A Discussion Paper, Scottish Land Commission, 2018*

Any such organisation's key responsibility would be to assist actively and speedily with the provision of housing and other essential infrastructure – thus minimising complexity of the sort that's embroiled Ulva's new owners in an almost endlessly ongoing series of consultations with, and applications to, planning authorities, public agencies and funding bodies.

It is evident that housing supply is absolutely fundamental to the ability to secure the repopulation and renewal of rural areas. This has land use policy and land supply dimensions, but it also has to do with how housing is financed. Much housing support policy, understandably and properly, is based around existing need. However, in the context of repopulation and renewal the supply of housing becomes a regeneration tool and cannot, by definition, be based solely on current local need as population has already drifted away ... It is clear from demographic studies of sparsely populated areas that ... the return of [a working-age] population is the only way in which trends to further depopulation are likely to be addressed successfully ... Good quality affordable housing is key to this – along with the availability of other soft and hard infrastructure.

*Community Land Scotland, Rural Repopulation and Renewal: Seminar Report, 2018*

We're working with Highland Small Communities Housing Trust to submit an application to Rural and Islands Housing (Scottish Government) which if successful will make the renovation of the 6 existing houses financially viable

as well as allowing the development of infrastructure to enable additional house plots to be provided ... We've had a meeting in Oban with Argyll and Bute Council (A&BC), Historic Environment Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Scottish Government housing department ... In addition to this we have met A&BC planners on Ulva and explained our objectives regarding new housing and possible redevelopment of older properties ... We have been encouraged by A&BC to submit a 15-year Masterplan for the island ... so that in the future, once the Masterplan has been adopted, developments agreed in and consistent with the plan will effectively receive automatic planning consent ... This is all very encouraging, but we know from past experience that all these things will take a lot of time and hard work before we see any results!

*Ulva Newsletter, Summer 2019*

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A re-peopling agency's founding legislation would equip it with planning, land acquisition and funding powers. These might not be applicable nationwide. They might instead apply only to localities where, possibly in response to requests from land trusts or other community groups, re-peopling action areas might be designated – subject always to approval by Scottish ministers. Within these areas (in much the same way as occurred in places where BoAS had sanction to operate) the agency might be able, if circumstances required this, to purchase land (if need be compulsorily) for housing and related purposes – development of this type being financed directly by the agency or by means of BoAS-style low-interest loans (payable, as housing and other loans from BoAS were, over periods of as long as 40

years) to individuals or to appropriate and locally-based organisations. Precedents for an initiative of this sort can be found not just in land settlement legislation but in the legislation sanctioning the formation of the New Town Development Corporations which operated in Scotland from the 1940s until the 1980s and which brought about the creation of urban communities like Livingston and Glenrothes.

New Towns were established under the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1947 which provided funding and compulsory purchase powers to New Town Development Corporations to address acute shortages of housing. The Scottish New Town Development Corporations were able to borrow for land acquisition, develop infrastructure, build public sector houses, schools and social facilities as well as developing industrial and business space.

*Steven Tolson and Archie Rintoul, The Delivery of Public Sector Led Development in Scotland: A Discussion Paper, Scottish Land Commission, 2018*

Might re-peopling action areas, or something like them, take shape? And might they make it possible to facilitate the regeneration of what the 2019 Planning Act calls 'rural areas that have become depopulated'? Currently, the difficulties in the way of any such initiative might seem substantial. These difficulties, however, should not be made too much of. Time was, after all, when it seemed not so much improbable as impossible that Galson, North Talisker and lots of other emptied places would ever be resettled. But they were.



## “Arguably the most transformative land reform Scotland has seen...”

Renowned Highland historian James Hunter has over 40 years' experience in land-related areas: in the 1980s he was director of the Scottish Crofters Union, precursor to the current Scottish Crofting Federation, and he is now Emeritus Professor of History at the University of the Highlands and Islands.

The Scottish Land Commission has commissioned a series of independent discussion papers on land reform issues to stimulate public debate. In *Repeopling Emptied Places: Centenary reflections on the significance and the enduring legacy of the Land Settlement (Scotland) Act 1919*, Dr Hunter explores the background to the historic Act – radical in its day – and its impact on the communities created, and explores the opportunities for going forward with land reform today.



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