

**Ailsa Raeburn – The Future of Highland Communities**  
**Talk at Celebrating 50 Years of The Making of the Crofting Community**

Morning, Madhain mhath,

Thank you so much for the invitation to speak today.

I have to say I absolutely wasn't clear when I was originally asked by Elizabeth a few months ago that I would be the only non-academic on the agenda.

I have tried to not let that unnerve me too much. Hopefully I can bring a slightly different perspective to the fantastic discussions that we are having over these two days.

My name is Ailsa Raeburn. I am currently chair of the Isle of Eigg Heritage trust and also chair of my local community trust in Achnamara, a small rural coastal community in Argyll, about 60 miles south of Appin. I also sit on the boards of HIE and Crown Estate Scotland.

Last December. I stood down after five years of being Chair of Community Land Scotland, and 7 years overall on the Board.

I have also been an adviser to the Scottish Government on housing and second homes policy, as well as having many energetic and exorcised conversations with SG officials around land reform, community wealth building and who owns and benefits from Scotland's energy resource.

When I look at all of that, it surprises me to see how closely I have followed in Jim's footsteps. Jim was of course Chair of HIE between 1998 and 2004, and a key supporter of the Isle of Gigha's community buyout in 2002 as well as overseeing the establishment of the Community Energy Unit. He founded and headed the Centre for History at the University of Highlands and Islands, and I was so proud to be the recipient of the first Professor James Hunter prize for an Undergraduate dissertation. He was Vice Chair of the Land Reform Review Group between 2012 and 2014. He was the second formal Chair of the Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust during its period of very significant development of its renewables infrastructure in 2007. Jim was also of course an early Board member of Community Land Scotland – establishing the credibility and reach of this national organisation that speaks for community owners and is the national voice for land reform. He was a leading advocate for both the establishment of CLS and then the reintroduction of a Scottish Government funded Scottish Land Fund in 2012.

Both in his writing and in his actions, Jim was clear that his works should educate and entertain but probably more importantly contribute to the betterment of the Highlands and Islands. He has done this over and over again.

I always feel therefore that I have got very big shoes to fill.

That's before we get started on the 14 books – I still have a very long way to go there!  
For this lecture, I did of course revisit some of Jim's books and was struck again by Jim's starting point

for his approach – focussing on the archive of the feet. To properly understand Scotland’s history, we must consider carefully the sources we use – who do we listen to – what stories do we retell – what evidence remains – rather than rely on the economic and military focus on previous Highland historians.

Tom Johnston wrote in *Our Noble Families*:

‘the histories of our land have mostly been written to serve the political purposes of and flatter the conceits of our aristocracy.’

Firstly, Jim didn’t do that. His exhaustive research on the experiences of the displaced and dispossessed and his ability to articulately craft an academic historian’s response is hugely impressive and made all of his readers consider the history of this region in a completely different way. He added the intellectual and academic grit, the lack of which some of his supportive predecessors such as Prebble were criticised for.

There is a quote in the New Edition of *The Making of the Crofting Community* referring to the work of EP Thompson and the seminal *Making of the English Working Class* – he said Thompson rescues the working class ‘from the enormous condescension of posterity’. I love that phrase as through my work at CLS, on Eigg and Gigha and sometimes my Board roles – I feel I spend a lot of time rescuing normal people wanting to do good things for their community – from that enormous condescension of posterity. The question has oft been asked – although to be fair less so today - How can these people possibly achieve what generations of well resourced and well connected landlords have signally failed to do – rebuild their communities and create thriving successful places to live where all are welcome and can share in the proceeds of growth, whilst protecting the environmental, social and cultural values of a place?

Secondly.

Jim was clear that the analytical framework in the *Making of the Crofting Community* was Marxist in origin. Still hugely out of fashion today – sometimes we haven’t moved much further from the Daily Mail’s ‘Mugabe style land grab’ – still in common parlance with some well connected members of the aristocratic landowning set in 2015 (David Cameron’s father in law). However some of Marx’s concepts of the redistribution of the main source of wealth and power in Scotland – land – are at the heart of much of our work here.

If we look over the past 25 years of Scottish Government policy, it’s clear to see how Jim – through his academic work - has closely and effectively influenced land reform and community wealth building policy.

His work at the Land Reform Review Group established a number of settled principles, now central to Scottish government policy. Namely the rights of communities to seek land for sustainable development. Compulsory purchase rights for communities. The ability for communities to successfully lead their own development – these are all now suitably enabled and empowered, although always more to do.

All of this has hugely influenced my own thinking on how Scotland can build a fairer and greener nation. I have been really pleased to join with colleagues in the room here today working with

Scottish government to influence legislation and policy. Recently this has taken the form of making through CLS what I would consider to be very significant interventions in the Land Reform Act 2025, particularly around the land that will be subject to the Act and the significant penalties for non-production of Land Management plans and failure to engage with local people. The Act did, of course not go as far as we would all have hoped and I was absolutely holding out for a limit on total private ownership unless that can be proved to be in the public good. Next time, hopefully fingers crossed! Over to you Josh [Doble]!

I've also been able to further some of Jim's thinking particularly around his work for the Institute for Sparsely Populated Areas. Community Land Scotland were able to secure on the face of the 2019 Planning Act a statutory commitment to repopulation. This has threaded through to a whole range of public policy areas, including National Planning Framework 4, and the Corporate objectives of HIE and SOSE, together with the setting up of teams within the Scottish government to specifically pursue repopulation policies. We may all have thoughts specifically on some of the achievements of the Action Plan to address Depopulation – but at least it's on the agenda.

So hopefully that gives you a good flavour of how Jim's work and perspective has really influenced and contributed to the betterment of the Highlands and Islands. Practically through his support for the communities of Eigg and Gigha as well as many others - but also via legislation and the development of public policy.

Today one would find only a very few landowners, and a few stick in the mud NIMBYs who don't want to see any change - you know the sort - they moved to their village or community because they like it just the way it is, and are not too bothered about homes or jobs for young people– there are only a very few people that would not advocate that the development of sustainable thriving communities is critical to the future success of the Highlands and Islands region. To protect our cultural and social inheritance. But also to ensure that we have the people to perform the critical public service tasks to make living here possible– doctors, nurses, teachers, plumbers, electricians, bar staff and also people who can work in the industries of the future growing the region's economy and ensuring we have a tax base to fund future services. So a thriving community is really important in every sense. Thriving economically, culturally, socially and environmentally.

One of my absolute favourite jobs was working at Highlands and Islands Enterprise as head of the community assets team. On the ground we supported communities, big and small, resourced and not resourced, to buy land and buildings that were important to them locally. From our work supporting communities and often working in close partnership with organisations like Community Land Scotland we were also able to change policy and ensure that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Scottish Land Fund, launched in 2016, supported more communities and in a more effective way. Over the past 13 years therefore I have had a lot of time and opportunity to reflect on what a successful rural community looks like.

Sometimes it can be hard to describe, but you know it when you see it.

As you might expect, I often speak about Eigg and the achievements of the community there. They have increased their population, almost doubling since purchase. More importantly the demographic is changing with many more younger people on the island and a healthy school role. They developed their own renewable energy infrastructure - the first community in the world to own and operate their own 24/7 energy system purely based on wind sun and hydro. Now with a very effective and

impressive battery storage system. Residents are restricted to 5kw per day and businesses 10kw. This has absolutely made Eigg residents think about energy and how they use it. Changing this mindset could be very valuable if exported elsewhere. They have built **twice** really impressive visitor and community facilities at An Lhamrig. Once when they bought the island and again now they have outgrown it. A £5m development built to budget. They have just completed the development of two new houses, the first public housing built on the island for 20 years. They have a successful tree nursery business and have supported a wide range of individual private businesses to establish on the island.

However, although it has not been without its challenges, Eigg was always blessed from the start. It had a number of extremely strong characters supporting at the outset and still supporting. Without Maggie Fyfe, the extremely determined lady from Bolton who still has the most incredible Bolton accent even after 40 years. Or the redoubtable Simon Fraser who was absolutely instrumental in so many early buyouts, one wonders whether Eigg could have established in the way it has. It is also a discrete island community which makes it easier. It had a common enemy of a string of disreputable landlords which made it much easier for people to coalesce around. It also had a strong partnership at the outset with the Highland Council and Scottish Wildlife Trust, both of whom are still members on the Trust board. And of course it also was able to catch the national mood with an anonymous donation of £900,000 which provided that critical funding at the outset. At the time there was no public funding available for this type of acquisition.

And, after a slow start, Eigg has had fantastic agency support especially from HIE and the Scottish Government. It has also had the intellectual and creative ability to try things, at risk, accepting that not everything will work and accepting that things take a long time. I became chair in 2020 with an absolute determination to see new housing on Eigg and it's taken only six years to get there!

Of course one of the main benefits that Eigg had was that it owned all of the main assets and therefore sources of revenue. It has often taken the decision not to exploit these. Such as the decision not to partner with any fish farms off the coast of the island to protect Eigg's fabulous environment. Appreciating that this was at the cost of well paid jobs.

Other communities of course have not had these blessings. I was also involved with the acquisition of the island of Ulva by Northwest Mull Community Woodlands company. I still think this was the right decision and over time will prove to be of great benefit to local people. However the community that lived on Ulva was too small to go it alone, only six people at the time of the buyout although this has now risen to almost 20.

Right from the outset there was a dispute between 2 neighbouring community landowners - NWMCWC and MICT as to who should take the purchase forward, when the island came up for sale. That was eventually settled but undoubtedly caused a fracture in relations for many years. The community of North West Mull wasn't especially cohesive around or supportive of the Ulva acquisition. NWMCWC had been set up specifically to acquire forestry assets and its extension then to acquiring an island with housing and services and all sorts of other issues stretched the organisation to its limits.

Thankfully it does now seem to be on track however – partly as a result of a very strange but happy coincidence - the recent public profile from the Grand Island hotel series has hugely boosted visit

numbers and therefore the economy of the island and the businesses that tourism supports. The community has managed to restore all of the housing on the island creating safe secure warm housing for the first time ever. It is also now looking at new housing on Ulva to continue to build the community.

What Ulva proved to me is that community credibility and cohesion is absolutely critical. High-profile proposed community buyouts at Lochaline and Wanlockhead, both failed to secure sufficient community consent to proceed at ballot. A huge blow to those involved who obviously felt their intentions were good and who would've committed huge amounts of time and energy and local personal capital to the projects.

However, to date, there hasn't been a single failure of an asset **owning** organisation. Comparing this to the 50% of new businesses that fail within five years – and the undoubted fact that these businesses are often run by people with no business experience or legal or financial experience – but just ordinary folk like you and I -and certainly not landowners with generations of experience and access to very expensive support and advice – we are not doing too bad. That's a pretty good success rate. It is of course dependent upon those legislative and policy underpinnings that Jim worked so hard to put in place throughout his career. Organisations like HIE and SOSE have been critical when communities go through difficult periods.

A really important new development in Scottish government policy builds upon all of this. Community wealth building is a principle that at its heart requires that economic benefit stays local. For community land owners it's principally how we ensure that local assets are used for the benefit of local people. Ensuring that income or revenue from land-based assets are shared more fairly locally. Community wealth building is obviously at the heart of what many community land owners are about and do on a day-to-day basis.

For example on Tiree an island 60 miles or a 3 1/2 hour ferry journey away from the Scottish mainland, the local Development Trust is involved in a whole range of activities. The Tiree economy is dependent on fishing, tourism and agriculture. The community together with these businesses has seen major investment from the Development Trust largely funded by the community owned wind turbine Tilly.

The Development Trust now employ 11 full and part-time employees and since going live in 2009 Tilly has contributed over £3.5 million into the local community. This investment has helped to secure the community hall, a critical social venue for the island, retain the general shop, fund the ranger service and youth work program, support the local tourism marketing organisation and recently help fund the redevelopment of the two main harbours at Milton and Scarinish. It's also contributed to the construction of a much-needed new community run filling station.

Both of the harbours were sold to the Development Trust for £1 by the local landowner Argyll Estates of Inverary fame. Milton was a focus for the fishing industry in Tiree, which was almost at the point of collapse. Following the provision of a safe harbour and moorings fishing is now thriving and growing. Demonstrating the importance the industry has for Tiree, almost a third of the children on the school roll have a connection to the fishing fleet. A surviving and thriving fishing industry also supports and sustains many other island businesses

On Mull communities are engaged in a wide range of economic and social activity all of which underpin the development and retention of local wealth. They own commercial forestry plantations, commercial seaweed businesses, build houses, run shops, manage pontoons, have built and operate a hydro scheme which uses some of its income to fund critical cost of living payments to the community. Community land based organisations also deliver local training schemes and support business through digital marketing and business development programs. They have also developed business and industrial units which are supporting start up enterprises and employ 36 jobs across 20 businesses with more waiting for space. They're also focused on key worker accommodation to ensure that the local key workers from teachers to nurses to plumbers can stay on Mull.

Being able to own land and generate their own revenue, the organisations have always been able to take a holistic approach to developing a sustainable and thriving community. They recognise that everything is connected. Without successful small businesses local young people have to leave to find opportunities off the island. But for businesses to grow and employ staff local people they need decent and accessible affordable housing. People need places to get their messages. Young people (and old people) need places to socialise. Everything is connected.

Moving up to Lewis we can look at what a traditional crofting community Galson has achieved.

The Galson Estate Trust has been in community ownership since 2007. It's a community owned estate of 56,000 acres of coast, agricultural land and moor in the north-west of the Isle of Lewis. Comprising 22 villages and with a population of nearly 2000 people - their vision is to see a thriving and well-connected community with excellent local services and amenities.

The community knew that renewable energy ownership would be key to the long-term sustainability of the trust. After a long process, starting in 2005, one turbine was installed in 2013 and two additional turbines were installed in 2015. The net profit from these 3 900 kW turbines are distributed to the community via the Community Investment Fund. The Fund has supported a huge number of projects since its creation in 2014. Both financially and through advice and guidance. The Fund has created opportunities for much greater social impact across the community supporting a wide range of projects including island games archaeological and heritage projects and social isolation projects. They now have a 20 year strategy which plans to increase the estate's value, grow employment and improve facilities and continue with their sustainable land management approach. The strategy does note though the various setbacks that have happened and sight some of the challenges that lie ahead. These have included the new business centre and Trust offices being totally destroyed by fire and the subsea electricity cable failing to the mainland, which robbed the trust of its income stream for about 18 months. The Estate Trust has proven itself to be resilient and able to handle these challenges.

Finally I want to turn to Skye – a once very traditional crofting community central to Jim's work. And home to the Battle of the Braes and the Glendale uprisings and today's Revolting Crofters Social Club. Skye is also home to a great range of successful and ambitious community landowners. Again, in an area that has suffered significant demographic and economic downturns – like Lewis and Tiree and Mull. And talk about a single community landowner there.

The Staffin Community Trust based in the north-east of the Isle of Skye exist to tackle the range of challenges faced by their community. It's an ambitious forward thinking and resilient organisation

which has been working proactively to support the area's people and economic prospects since 1994. Staffin is classed as economically fragile with a shortage of permanent all year round employment and affordable housing, an ageing and falling population and a loss of young people and families. Staffin also lies within one of the most scenic parts of Skye with the landscape protected by a raft of designations which makes community development all the harder.

The community have so far built an award-winning housing development including health and business units, delivered 2 phases of the Skye eco-museum project including new footpaths, car parking, viewing platform, interpretation and extensive activities program. They are now focused on delivering major infrastructure improvements at Staffin harbour and completing the long-awaited crofters memorial at the Kilt Rock.

I could of course go on and on about the fantastic achievements of so many communities in areas that were always seen as problematic. Working with local people and local businesses and establishing partnerships with public agencies, communities right across the region have delivered absolutely critical facilities and services to ensure that the Highlands and Islands remain successful and thriving. Particularly in community owned areas, population numbers are going back up and the demographics are changing as more young people want to move into the area. Our environment and culture remains absolutely first class and communities are at the heart of protecting and conserving both.

If I were to sum up therefore what makes a successful thriving community that will survive well into the future, I feel I would have many experiences to draw upon.

It's about having strong minded, stubborn, possibly thrown??, individuals who can work together. Are resolute and resilient and can handle what the weather, cancelled ferries or closed roads, inexplicable bureaucracy and midges – can throw at them. Refusing to accept that the way things have always been, are the way things have to be in the future. I meet so many quiet under the counter radicals – it's always inspiring.

But they need to be good listeners – to not have all the answers, to be able to accommodate a wide range of views. This is at its heart a people business. And people leading community organisations have to have local credibility.

Communities need to have agency. They need to have a voice at the table in any place where things are being 'done' to their community. Their voice needs to be respected and heard.

Communities need to have young people – to work and bring up families – but also to provide that range of diverse views about what the community should look like into the future. Fortunately we now have more and more people wanting to come and live or return to the H&I. They need housing and good transport for a decent social life and childcare – all hot topics of today – but they DO want to live here. Compare this to Jim's quote of young people in the 1970's.

*If you were going to get on, you got out. 3 or 4 Good Highers and a grant were the equivalent of an emigrant ship.*

Communities need to have a plan to become self sustainable. We cannot continue to depend on an

ever decreasing public sector, now focussed firmly on prevention and core public services. We must work towards influencing and controlling local resources and economies – through the full or shared ownership of assets. Successful communities control their future through generating revenue, the use of which they decide. This now extends beyond land – to other assets, especially renewables. Sharing proceeds through good community benefits agreements which properly reflect the impact on local people of developments and their rights to share in the community’s natural assets. Or shared or full ownership. It’s good to see public policy and support moving in this direction.

Finally they need to think outside the box. Create and innovate. Often community organisations initially establish to save a particular facility or service – be that the Village Hall, Church, shop, pub. From these relatively small acorns etc etc . They move, as in my own small community, to buying the Hall, raising £50,000 to refurbish the Hall and run sports and cultural and entertainment activities throughout the year – and then buy the Forestry Shed next door – to create a Mens Shed that keeps the retired men in the community busy and engaged and importantly – out of their wives’ hair twice a week. The Mens Shed then decide to build a skiff and now run a very active rowing group. They have become the go to group for everyone from neighbours to the Council when benches or gates need replacing. All generating income to go back to the community. There’s more of a buzz about the place. 3 second homes have recently sold and gone back into full time residential use, bringing 15 children when recently there were only 4.

This is happening all over the Highlands and Islands.

Our region is of course changing. It has always been subject to external pressures from the early move away from clanship to commercial landlordism, from the coming of the big sheep, to Victorian tourism to deer forests and conifer plantations, oil and gas, and now renewable energy and space. These have all impacted on how people can continue to live and work in the Highlands and Islands. Lots bad – but some good. We are so fortunate today to have the benefit and perspective of the work of people like Jim and his colleagues here at the Centre for History, organisations like UHI, Community Land Scotland, Highlands and Islands Enterprise - as well as many others. They all help us understand the mistakes and achievements of the past and how we can use this knowledge to influence and persuade - and ensure we build a better future for our communities and the people lucky enough to live and work here.

Ailsa Raeburn  
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