

JOURNEY TO THE HEBRIDES

Alastair McIntosh

THE TEACHING OF HUMAN ECOLOGY

Human ecology studies the ecology of our species: some would say the inter-relationships between population, resources, environment and development. The Centre for Human Ecology at the University of Edinburgh was established in 1972 by the then Principal of the University and an influential group of futuristic thinkers. Some of these, most notably the Centre's first director, Professor C H Waddington, had been involved in commissioning the Club of Rome's seminal 'Limits to Growth' report. This drew attention to the planetary dangers of escalating growth in consumption and population. It laid the foundations for today's debate about sustainable and socially equitable development, which is the primary focus of our research and teaching.

Seen as a lighthouse of transformation by some and a den of subversion by others, the Centre has struggled on negligible resources over the past twenty-one years to raise awareness of socio-environmental problems and point to possible ways forward. It is consulted by environmentalists, industrialists, religious leaders, community workers, civil servants and politicians of all hues. The 1990s have seen a fresh affirmation of the Centre's role within the University. A recent report paraphrases the Senior Vice-Principal as saying: 'The Centre for Human Ecology today finds itself at the hub, its "alternative" views no longer peripheral, but at the core of common concern for the

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environment and the University's integrated approach which leads the way for others in higher education.'

Incorporation within the Science Faculty's Institute of Ecology and Resource Management under Professor Colin Whittemore has made possible the launch of a Master of Science degree in human ecology. This is the first of its kind in a British university. During 1992-93 it attracted ten students from 5 nations, and, this year, there are 12 MSc students from all over the world and six studying for the doctorate in the 'love of the goddess of wisdom,' the PhD. Their studies link such issues as the ozone hole, ecological economics, third world debt, GATT and organic agriculture, computer modelling of ecosystems, transport and planning, ancient philosophy, postmodern psychology, creativity and radical feminist theology.

Back in May 1993 we set off on a fortnight-long field trip to the Highlands and Islands. Its aim was for students to experience something that is so lost from most of the western world that many people hardly know what the word implies. We wanted them to understand what *community* is. Community as individuals articulating their lives through and from within social structures, as part of an ecological community which *is* nature. It is our view that substantive understanding of such complex systems requires integrating the faculties of head, hand and heart. It involves quantitative natural science, practical engagement such as the elmwood table we have built as a class activity in our library, and qualitative insight such as that which Kenneth White, the Scots professor of 20th Century Poetics at the Sorbonne, calls 'geopoetics' - the poetics of deep relationship with place (White 1992). Inclusion of 'subjectivity' like this is integral to any claim of comprehensive 'objectivity', and essential to understanding 'science' as being the uncompromising application of truth to knowing reality.

Such holistic thought/feeling is also a vital part of coming back into sustainable and just relationship with nature. It is central to both the classical and the eco-feminist idea of a university. It *is* philosophy, of which Socrates said in Plato's Republic, 'We are discussing no small matter, but how we ought to live' (c. 390 B.C.). And it is why I want to share here the story of our MSc students' Journey to the Hebrides.

I hope that you, the reader, will not think our efforts dilettante. Rather, they are an attempt, however tentative, to address the concerns of many who are struggling to build peace, dignity, wisdom, justice and love into our common future. These are concerns of ordinary people and of the Scots generalist intellectual tradition of Petrick Geddes and others, as much as of some

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current world leaders. Leaders like Jacques Delors, President of the European Community, who in February 1993 had this to say of the acute urgency with which it is necessary to bridge disciplinary boundaries and achieve metadisciplinary understanding.

Believe me, we won't succeed with Europe solely on the basis of legal expertise or economic know-how.... If within the next ten years we haven't managed to give a soul to Europe, to give it spirituality and meaning, the game will be up. This is why I want to revive the intellectual and spiritual debate on Europe. I would like to create a meeting place, a space for free discussion open to men and women of spirituality, to believers and non-believers, scientists and artists (in Hulbert 1993).

DEPARTURE FOR THE HIGHLANDS

... a sorry sight piles into the university minibus. Exams have not long finished. More than one student has a headache out of all proportion to recent intellectual effort. Phil falls asleep across a raft of rucksacks in the back. Daniel suggests it has something to do with him being in love.

By the time we cross the Forth Road Bridge most have copied Phil, in sleep if not in love. Ulrich Loening, the Centre for Human Ecology's director, needs to buy film. We stop. Alejandro, an industrial physicist from Argentina, tumbles out to make the first of a chain of phonecalls. This repeats at every stop as he assiduously checks the progress of his newborn son.

Malee's worrying how she can fax her late essay off to a lecturer who's in Africa. I'm jetlagged having just got back from teaching in Australia. I abdicate to Ulrich. This is a mistake because he lets everybody get out. Lesson one in community dynamics: the time taken to empty a minibus varies with the square root of the number of people. Lesson two: shepherding them back in is proportional to the headcount squared.

Aberfeldy, and we're only an hour late. This is pretty good for Ulrich, who long since acclimatised to Hebridean standard time where *mañana* is a word which conveys too much urgency. We meet up with Simon Pepper of the Worldwide Fund for Nature. Discussion ranges from Scottish red deer management to global environmental education. But everybody's so dozy! Simon must be having second thoughts as to the wisdom of them having part-

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funded this course. I mutter something about 'the Exams'. He didn't need telling.

ECOLOGICAL ARCHITECTURE; ECOLOGICAL LAND USE

A compulsory early night. The next morning the sun's shining and Sam (Samantha) has been spotted out jogging at dawn. Good omens heralding the slow return of everyone's vibrancy.

One of Scotland's leading ecological architects, Howard Liddel, takes us on the Aberfeldy eco-tourist trail. He makes us laugh a lot and inspires. We covet the environmentally friendly house his firm have designed which has just won a **Daily Telegraph** eco-award. Why can't all new houses be built like this? The materials are mostly from renewable natural sources. Non-toxic and recyclable. The technology is well proven in Scandinavia. Insulation, breathing walls and clever ways of catching and storing the sun's warmth slash heating bills. Construction costs are the same as for conventional methods. There is nothing freaky about this home. It just feels healthy. It extends conviviality, residing as a residence in wholesome relationship to people and nature. Quite simply, it is beautiful. Yet in too many local authority areas, Howard's 'Gaia Architects' have had to battle with planning officers who can get their heads into concrete boxes, but not round ecological harmony. It makes him angry. Us too. For once the **Daily Telegraph** seems in the vanguard of the revolution.

We look at native pinewood regeneration on an RSPB reserve in the Cairngorms, then spend the night at David Reid's croft. In his early but youthful fifties, David is our oldest student. He keeps a hundred beehives on his few acres at Marybank near Dingwall. Heather honey. Oilseed rape honey. We take our pick for breakfast. The latter tastes ... disappointingly good.

It's a public holiday in Dingwall, but Bob Dunsmore, conservator of forests for Northern Scotland, has offered to spend the day showing us what the Forest Authority is doing. He sees the human ecology of peoples' relationship with forests as the most important field where further understanding and research are needed.

Various of his colleagues turn up as we look at crofter forestry, natural regeneration of birchwood, tourist forest trails and clear-felling of sitka spruce plantations. The latter is done by powerful machines which drop the

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tree, strip off all branches, and lay out the logs in a neat row. It all takes about a minute. The efficiency is manifest. Respect for nature, less so.

We hear how much the culture of the Forestry Commission and the Authority it has spawned is changing. The future of forestry in Britain, Bob maintains, depends upon working with environmentalists. We might have suspected a PR hype, but his integrity is too apparent, and we know that recent changes in grants policy to encourage native species and the Crofter Forestry Act are a genuine credit to the policy makers. Everybody is struck by how much these civil servants are obviously committed to a job they love. More than one of them comments how their job has been enriched by new thinking which allows them to view forestry as being not just about economics, but concerned with ecological and community restoration too.

We go to the Strathpeffer sawmill. Here two men are employed by Cromarty Estates milling the equivalent of just thirty large hardwood trees a year. Value is added by on-site crafting into harps. This integration will soon be used to attract tourists. Ulrich is in his element. He too practices sustainable forestry, milling timber at his Lothian Trees company for musical instruments and furniture. We know that, having seen this, he'll be happy for us to do what we want for the rest of the field trip. Everybody's fully alive now. The party can begin!

Depart Marybank at dawn, and drive up to Duartbeg in Sutherland. Emma and Bernard Planterose, Edinburgh University forest ecology graduates, have their pioneering native tree nursery there. We arrive half an hour early. If only Simon Pepper were with us now! Exam and city fatigue gone. Minds buzzing, hearts starting to spiral, senses filled with the landscape and human warmth we're being given. Emma tells us about permaculture and the organic approach to growing trees. They have 50,000 treelets on a quarter acre. The family lives ever so simply, supporting three children mostly from the nursery, contract planting and growing their own vegetables. Next week they lead a Reforesting Scotland excursion to Norway. Some two dozen Scottish decision makers will see how community-owned forests there enrich economy, ecology and the human spirit. Brendan, a TV producer before coming on our course, will be going along to make a video of it.

Off again, down to Lochinver to meet two of the world's most famous crofters. This is Assynt, owned for much of its recent history by the powerful Vesty family. Bill Ritchie and John McKenzie tell us how they won their land back after decades of oppression. For the first time since the 1886 Crofting

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Act gave security of tenure to these subsistence-scale farmers, the pattern of Scottish land colonisation has been reversed.

Interestingly, the community acknowledge drawing inspiration from the struggle of Africans, indigenous Americans, Aborigines, and native peoples around the world who have woken up to the land question. I have been pleased to learn that even Scotland's own Isle of Eigg ownership debate, which had immediately preceded the Assynt campaign, was a stimulus. As one of the trustees involved, it helps me feel that our efforts on Eigg were not wasted.

Alejandro is amazed at what he is hearing. Some of the former landlords of Assynt had partly made their money by cattle ranching in his part of the world - a process which also involved discouraging the common people from owning the land. I tell him to wait until he gets to Lewis! So many Hebrideans used to work in Argentina that you can tell which province they were in by the way they shear their sheep. Or maybe I've got it wrong and Argentineans can look at a sheep and tell which Lewis village influenced its clip....

MAY TIME IN LEWIS

Anyway, we're on a Journey to the Hebrides, and its time to cross water to Stornoway. Four days have passed. I sense the magic starting. The sun is still shining and forecast to remain so. Loch Broom reflects mountains. The Calmac ferry, Suilven, glides us out of Ullapool. Dolphins and porpoises turn lazily.

'May time, fair season,' wrote an unknown ninth century bard. 'The smooth sea flows, season when the ocean falls asleep; flowers cover the world' (in Jackson 1971).

What could be better than the company of people like this, on a May day like this, heading towards the western edge of the world? We lounge on the upper stern deck, unpack instruments, and start to make music. Matt on guitar. Phil and Ulrich's wife, Francesca, both play fiddle. Mary Anna, the marine biologist, drumming. Me, on low Overton whistle. Sam with flute. The CalMac sailors egg us on, ridiculously wagging bums in pretence of dance as they paint the railings. Tourists take pictures. Each snap punctuates a self-conscious discordant note somewhere between us, but who's caring -

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we're all feeling so good in this, the bard's 'excellent May-time of calm aspect'.

Relationship. If human ecology is anything more than a blunt interdisciplinary axe, it is the science and art of relationship. Three-way interconnectedness: with nature including scientific understanding, with one another in community, and with the spiritual; the mystery. Music, like the science we have spent so much time studying, is a way of knowing. And it seems like important music that we're starting to play together. These reels and jigs fit this place. They belong here. They carry stories, convey feelings: knowledge, powers and presence from preliterate times.

We pass what is possibly an early Christian monastic site skirting Annat bay at the back of Scoraig. High tide. Bardic resonance. 'The harp of the wood plays melody, its music brings perfect peace; colour has settled on every hill, haze on the lake of full water.'

Romanticism? You choose your framework of meaning. Mine? For now, enchantment. Celtic zen.

We play MacLeod's classical piece, 'Pipe Major Donald MacLean of Lewis'. Its slow 6/8 time synchronises with the swell as Suilven parts loch for open sea. Enchantment leads me to old Finlay Montgomery. Crippled Finlay, wise, kindly, of few or no words, brother of Norah; elder who taught me small boy handling of small boat in big weather. I remember your promise never met, Finlay, to take me fishing far out there, beyond our normal haunt. The Caranoch! Reef, of initiatory significance to all us youngsters aspiring place in men's tough world. Three miles easting of Lewis, north of 58th parallel. Broken promise, broken fingernails, Finlay, alone on water. Cramped grip on tarry hull. Scraped down beneath Loch Grimashader. Goodbye, dear friend. And I shall always slightly fear the beauty of that sea loch now. 'Very dead,' as you would say on those rare days we let down baited lines six fathoms but to no avail.

Do the students hear this, as we play together? Rarely now can boys take rite of passage with old men. It changed so fast. 1970, I'd say. Steel stern trawlers, echo sounders too, the impending free-for-all of the Common Fisheries Policy. We'd see their lights at night, trawling close inshore spoiling our grounds. Breaking custom to repay bank, and downpayment on the fancy car.

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Stornoway, then we drive across the Barvas Moor to Carloway, bearing set on Gearranan youth hostel. In my boyhood this was by no means the only thatched drystone black house to be inhabited. They say the old lady here left for a council house in 1974, once her cow died. They had tried to make her go sooner, but she protested: no byre attached to council house.

We sit outgazing on rocky kneecap over surf. Nothing but the pebble beach and surging Atlantic holds between us and those other native peoples, North America. A rainbow medicine drum beats four-four time, grave salutation chanted; greetings reciprocated.

'D R' with dogs wanders down to see us and eye sheep. His is the first inhabited house, number eight. 'In the old days there were as many children between numbers one and eight as there are now in the whole village'. 'D R' is great for a yarn. Others too wander down, few much under fifty. None that I know weary of telling about island life, 'in the old days'.

'THE OLD DAYS'

The old days interlace with recent memory here; kelson and ribs round folk's lives. 'The old days,' bear witness wherever you look. Lazybeds - long strips of erstwhile arable land, raised for drainage, still fecund should they be coaxed by a post-catastrophe plough. Rotting cartwheel, arcing out from sheep-shaved field. And three-legged pot, cracked, Carron Ironworks, Falkirk. Whalebones, for curiosity and maybe luck. Black house ruins on every croft, once-ashamed but now slightly questioning tight grant-aided bungalows. Older still, The Stones. *The Stones*. Callanish. And frugal functionality too. As some ignorant tourist rhymed, 'Lewis is a place/ where else will you see/ the head of a bed/ where a gate ought to be'.

Pat MacGregor is warden of the hostel in which we are staying. Her husband, John, weaves Harris Tweed. Graduate philosopher he surely is from the old Highland University of Life. We cross faculties and buy from him. A fair price. Two fathoms. No bartering around. It is the best - natural, durable, self-cleansing - product of good work. Loving and loved.

Atlantic sunset, and John takes us to see the black house where he was born. Daniel, as a historian, is amazed. Such authenticity! Nearly every stone in that house has a story; every lazybed down the croft a history, childfelt meanings. Malee glimpses resonance with her own Thai people. What can Eurocrats formulating the Common Agricultural Policy, what can the Food

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and Agriculture Organisation and the GATT pundits know of the deeper meanings of place? The land! The people! What price cheap food, meat seven-times-three weekly? What loss, the convivial.

And yet, 'D R' tells us, 'It's easier just to buy carrots from the grocery van than to bother growing your own these days'. The arrival of TV in the mid-sixties ended 'the old days'. That, and earlier endings: mobility, wars, hardship, and loss of the Iolare's generation on Arnish rock one stormgripped First World War hogmanay.

Television. People now just stay at home, watching. No more going 'down the road', storying, old bodachs surrounded by clouds from pipe-stuffed Old Holborn; puffing out one cheek as they wink affection, and identity, to the kids.

And these days? Norman MacLeod of An t-Ob, Harris, has a letter in the Gazette: 'Sir, - When Presbyterian homes in every village in Lewis disgorge their youth on Stornoway at weekends, the scenes of drunken, foul mouthed riotous behaviour that turns the centre of the town into a 'no-go' area for anyone not of their own ilk, must be reminiscent of that which greeted the angels of destruction that came to investigate the "Cry of Sodom".'

A few of us sit taking tea with 'D R'. His sister Aggie is at work in their vegetable garden. Easier to get them from the van? Perhaps. But self-reliance is out of fashion too. Fashions or necessity might return if memory is composted, not dumped.

CLEARANCE, BROKENNESS, COMMUNITY

Thursday morning. Jim Crawford describes the Highland Clearances and their aftermath. Some half million Scots forced off their land as commodity usurped community. We idle awhile in a ruined clearance village above Grimersta - one of Europe's finest salmon rivers, Mammon-made for snide or simply ignorant syndicate members. The word, 'ignorant', has a specific Scottish meaning: ignoring of human relations. In Hindu theology ignorance is considered the sole cause of evil. Salvation, said Buddha (and Christian saints and pagans too), has to do with mindfulness; presence; the 'sacrament of the present moment'.

We learn that Garynahine, eight miles from where I grew up, had been established following a post-clearance crofters' land grab. Why were we

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never taught this history as children? David grimly says something about PauFreire's 'culture of silence', oppression internalised, the bile of disempowerment, self-blaming and shame.

I tell him what one of my former teachers said on the boat three years ago: 'We never liked to talk about those things, and it was not in the curriculum'. Gustavo Gutierrez described this in his 'Theology of Liberation'. The oppressor must always deprive the oppressed of their past. This disempowers, blocking the movement of the Spirit. Pushed to 'the underside of history', the dispossessed must first re-member if they are to re-vision and re-claim. Assynt!

We go to Bernera to see the Norse mill Jim is rebuilding. Its grindstone lies smashed near the lilies by the pool. Broken, like most millstones round about, by estate factors in the previous century. Requiring formerly self-sufficient pleasant peasant peoples to use the laird's mill. Extracting thirlage, enforcing patronage, controlling employment, brooding hushed resentment.

Jim tells us he has been reading the late-eighteenth century court records about the thirteen-year-old boy chosen to remember where the boundary lay between Lewis and the North Harris Estate. The factor selected a child since, being young, the knowledge imparted would remain with the community for perhaps fifty years. Dragged to the boundary line, he was mercilessly flogged; never to forget.

I think of one of the tunes we have been playing, me, Matt, Sam-ya especially. Am Muileann Dubh - The Black Mill. Auden wrote a poem which carries its sense. This place contains that quality. I will recite it when next we gather at sunset to play on kneecap rocks off machair slopes by Gearranan bay, overheard by distant native peoples.

O there is a peace here! There scarcely lifts a sound
Save for the creaking of the mill, and that drowned
By the murmur of the weir; the pool is crowned
with lilies; surely a lovelier
ground
Could not
Be found?

Yet in the black trees against the evening sky
And the tossing mill-wheel's weary creaking sigh

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And the long drone from the rushing weir nearby
There trembles a sullen questioning cry
We are -
But why?

The mills of God grind slow.... After two or three times sixty years we have not forgotten where the boundary lies between the North Harris Estate and Lewis. Boundary flailed across the heart.

In Bernera community hall a dozen elderly people, most in late seventies, have gathered to tell us about Life. 'In the old days'. There is a quality of veneration about such a gathering. We start by exchanging stories to establish connection. An old man recounts an event involving my father and a lost sheep back in 1960 when I was four. I reciprocate, holding up the scar on my thumb from a fishing accident twenty-five years ago, when I was helped by Agnes MacLennan of Bernera. The sense of respect and being respected is mutual. The blessing over tea and cakes murmurs from lips of those who remember why food is blessed.

None of the students had previously met Scottish women who as girls had practised transhumance - going out to live in summer sheilings on the moors with their cattle, there to make butter, cheese ... and sometimes (I have heard it said, though not in present company), love. It reminds Jane of her own granny of farming stock in the States. She said it brought a tear to her eye. Likewise, tales from Dr Donald Murray round my mother's hearth that night. He too had grown up in a black house. Many men from the village had been lost at sea. There is a character to communities which have accepted losing people - at sea, down mines.... It has something to do with living life on the edge of death's vale.

'In the old days,' says Donald, 'people were ecological without knowing that they were, or why'. They would carefully re-lay surface turf after cutting peat for fuel because, failing this, the three wise men elected to maintain village custom would chastise. Now that no such wisdom is mandated, erosion can be seen wherever sloppy cutting practice is applied. Today's challenge, he concluded, is for each to relearn the old respect for nature. 'This time they have to understand the why and not just follow the how.'

The old days were hard, but they were also good. Richness lay not in material things, but in meaningful relationship. There was little alienation then, not even for the mentally ill. There were no groups of two hundred youths hanging around Stornoway on Saturday nights smashing in windows. There

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was little formal employment, but plenty of work. And song to the rhythms of life too. 'What music can a tractor make?' I have heard one old woman ask. Though I must confess that to us young boys diesel always smelled of fun, and we used to pour it on puddles to watch the rainbow colours spread.

But we are dwelling too much in bygone times now. We risk being escapist. We have felt community and touched a taproot perhaps leading to days of future passed. We are half-way through the field trip at this stage, and Daniel orders newspapers from Stornoway. The other world crowds in with them. War, unemployment, environmental degradation, world hunger, industrial pollution.

MODERN TIMES; REAL WORLD

We are scheduled to change gear for week two. Alastair Frazer takes us out to his computer-fed salmon farm. We debate the environmental science, the economics: the energy and conservation costs versus luxury food and job creation. The following night we make music with him at our dinner ceilidh, thankful that he has employment keeping him here. He presses the accordion and turns his nose up at our meditative version of Skye Dance. 'More like Skye Funeral!' and we cannot but laugh at ourselves.

His father, Alastair Frazer senior, was one of my best schoolteachers and a Crofting Commissioner. He delivers the address: 'Crofting Past and Future'. Crofting must be safeguarded from current global agricultural policy, he says, because it is not primarily about food production but a way of life. Malee's face is alight as happens when she can 'really respect the teacher'. An award winning environmental journalist, she wonders if the English translation for the indigenous peoples she works with is, 'crofter'. As South-East Asia cuts down its rainforests, we discover crofter forestry.

Ian Steven, my schoolmate and 20th century bard follows on from Alastair. He re-enchants us, storytelling with immense richness of detail about the day he went poaching on Loch Langabhat. Went, with Che Guevara. The powerful salmon is played in towards the Grimersta bank, 'And I looked through the water into his eyes. And it was you I saw! Che.... We did it for the revolution. You and I, Che. And when everybody else was going round sporting Jimmy Hendrix, you brought home that Che Guevara teeshirt. It gave you your byname: the short 'Che' lengthened with our local vowel.'

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Such richness drawn out of a simple story! Here is one of the keys to sustainable livelihood ... drawing much quality out of little quantity.

Earlier that day we had visited Callanish Ltd. Ian once described it to me as 'the sort of company that gives capitalism a good name'. None of your romantic cottage industry here except in the packaging. This is a real factory, with lots of chemical drums stacked out the back. Callanish Ltd market Oil of Evening Primrose and other produce promoted as 'Health from the Heart of the Hebrides'. The ingredients are imported. Most work undertaken at Callanish is not manufacture, but research into fatty acids. The island location and low staff turnover minimises the risk of industrial espionage.

The manager tells us of his fears for the quality of certain ingredients. Reputation depends on meeting only the highest standards. In the past five years it has become impossible to buy fish liver oils from the North Sea which have less than one part-per-billion of heavy metal or PCB pollutants. The standard has had to drop to one part-per-million. Any worse, and they will move out of that product line rather than taint the company's image. The meaning of globalisation is that global forces permit no hiding place. There is now no getting away from it all.

GLOBAL ECONOMY; GODDESS RAPE

More 'real world' contact with global economic forces. We're in Harris. Climbing Ronebhal, which 'construction' giants Redland want to turn into Europe's biggest coastal superquarry for road aggregate. From a distance the mountain is woman-shaped. At its foot rests the sixteenth century St Clements Church; a mini-Iona.

Gazing out to sea from the south wall is a 'Sheila-na-gig'. This early-celtic stone 'goddess' or 'saint' figure holds her back to the mountain, protecting. Womanhood revealed, pocked by shotgun pellets; a Victorian landlady's ghillie had failed to circumcise adequately as ordered.

We stop by for tea with Ian Callaghan of Scarista House Hotel. For two years he and I have been campaigning against the quarry proposal. Lonely voices in Freire's 'culture of silence', we have played the role of outside insider and inside outsider respectively, dispensable in flaunting one flank of the community's position. We have spent maybe £500 of our own taxed money on travel, phone and faxes. The company drove through their will with £500,000, tax deductible.

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The people of South Harris have just voted marginally against the quarry. But further afield people saw it differently and voted in favour, and the BCCI-scandalised Western Isles councillors gave thumbs up 23 - 3. Jobs! without counting other livelihoods destroyed or the cultural invasion of becoming a company town. Jobs, 'Even though it feels like selling our heritage for a mess of potage,' confessed one councillor.

They say the hills of the Hebrides were made by giant women before the old days who fell asleep and turned to stone. Beautiful Ronebhal. All along the bays of east Harris you can see her long hair swept back at the summit. A two-billion year old youthful face gazes heavenwards. Breasts. Belly. Long legs; even two kneecaps, before feet softly touch ocean where otters play at Lingerabay. The superquarry will constitute rape. Literally, metaphorically - it doesn't matter which - we've agreed it's OK to talk poetry here. Raped, if men bulldoze up heathery legs and blast down into womb's crucible.

Oh Prophet Moses, who spoke of 'the eternal mountains!' And our ninth century celtic bard!

May time...
brisk music encircles the hill
tender rich fruits bud...
the glory of great hills is unspoiled.

MOLOCH: COMMUNITY FEEDING ECONOMY

And we've crossed back over to Ullapool. We've walked four miles in to Scoraig, Wester Ross, where a settlement of seventy people have chosen not to have a road. We're sitting in the school they built out of what used to be a Free Church. We are reviewing the field trip: 'More trippy than fieldy!' quips Mary Anna. We will soon be returning to Edinburgh. On getting back we will each be surprised to find that for three days the enchantment lasts. We will feel very close to one another, inadequate at telling others what it was really like. On the fourth day this will break. Depression will set in until we adjust after a week.

But not yet. Ulrich takes the pulpit and focuses discussion. Ul is an intellectual jazz player. He throws out a question. Draws the class into remote improvisations on the theme. Then just as everyone's wondering what the original question was, he pulls the threads together and from some wide ocean of understanding the answer beaches on solid ground.

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As well as rejecting a road, Scoraig chose not to have mains electricity. We've just been out on a windmill tour with Hugh, seen Topher's mussel rafts and boatbuilding, chatted with Bev about violin making and Cathy and Uta about using natural dyes; contemplated ancient philosophy, crofting and the mid-life crisis with peripatetic professor of maieutic vocation Tom Forsyth, and laughed a lot with Jill the poet and nurse, Andrea the musician, Celia the teacher, Tchai the epistemological brewer, Miklos the crofter, host and tree grower, Jan the ... but such descriptions leave out too much of what it is to be a rounded person ... and others, as we answer the school phone solemnly saying, with eyes twinkling, 'University of Scoraig'.

So here we are: UI's in the pulpit and we've just been watching a video, powered by wind generated electricity. It's about the Kogi tribe in Columbia. They've come out of isolation in the high mountains, 'the Heart of the World' to contact the BBC (Ereira 1993). They want to warn the world that the high forests are dying from lack of rainfall. They say that we, their 'younger brother', have caused climatic change by felling lowland forests across the continent to make cattle ranches and smelt metals for our wars.

UI asks what the connection is between 'elder brother' in Columbia, the Assynt crofters, Scoraig, the superquarry, broken millstones, deforestation, Argentina, 'the old days', Che Guevara and the session we had three days earlier with Ian MacLeod, Western Isles fisheries economist. Another old classmate, Ian had smiled when we suggested that fisheries conservation policy should be orientated towards maximising community benefits. He said that government would only listen to 'hard economic arguments'.

And this was UI's hub of connection. Human community and nature were being forced to serve The Economy, when it should be the other way round. UI had just exegised and contextualised the whole field trip. It was not the first time on the course that we had discussed this. But this time it possessed an anger born of feeling that some part of ourselves was being torn at. Only what can be priced is given a value in the market. The priceless is chipped away - nature, community, ourselves ... God?

Coming back over on the ferry, some of us had been reading a newspaper article about liberation theology. Aptly but surprisingly, it was by Professor Donald MacLeod of the Free Church College. He said, 'The only alternative to a caring community is an acquisitive one in which the power of parliament is abused to guarantee the uninhibited operation of the law of the jungle' (MacLeod 1993).

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So what's left behind after this ... (at the risk of cliché) 'rape' of one another and the earth? Theology alone has the words, the ability to name the principalities and the powers: poetry too; such poetry is theology.

The western world is not secular; it has merely returned to worshipping the Golden Calf. And of course, Moloch. That Old Testament god we had thought was long since dead: Moloch! Fire-filled hollow stone statue, into whose roasting arms the children were sacrificed alive; future goodness slayed for today's gross prosperity.

... Some of us say we'd love to stay and live on Scoraig. Or Assynt or Lewis. We are thankful to our hosts. Glad that they do live there. They point to another way; plenty of warts, but a symbol nonetheless that community and gentle livelihood can be rich.

... And we are on Topher's boat. Our eyes are closed. We are soaking up the sunshine; enjoying soft sounds of lapping water against larch bow.

Instantly a Tornado jet strikes low over the windmills. Tilting across Little Loch Broom, it scores an awesome presence up the glen. The screeching banshee gone; a trace of smoke skims the high Munroes.

In the week we started the MSc course the first Trident submarine had slouched like a black slug up the Gare Loch to Faslane. Some of us were there to bear witness. Over £30,000 a day, each day, since Jesus was born. And that, calculated on the presumption that it never shoots off.

'Moloch!' wrote Allen Ginsberg in 'Howl' in the year of my birth 1955. 'What sphinx of cement and aluminium bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination? Moloch! Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks! Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks! Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen!'

We have been on a Journey to the Hebrides. But for now, our work awaits elsewhere. We must turn back to the city.

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