

<b>Institution:</b> University of the Highlands and Islands		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 28		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Historians and Scottish land reform: informing policy, inspiring organisations, and influencing the influencers.		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b>		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Elizabeth Ritchie	Senior Lecturer	2009 to date
Iain Robertson	Reader	2015 to date
James Hunter	Research Fellow	2005 – 2011, 2019 to date.
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2013 - 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>Centre for History (CfH) research has shown that, since the late eighteenth century, land inequality has been one of the leading causes of rural poverty and deprivation in the Scottish Highlands, leading to socially unjust emigration. CfH has built on these findings to inform contemporary public policy debate on land reform and community buyout schemes. This has had an impact on levels of community ownership, on statutory oversight by the Scottish Land Commission (SLC) and on extending community 'right to buy' to the whole of Scotland. The work has fed directly into the Scottish-wide sense of land-access injustices and, as reported by the <a href="#">Land Reform Review Group</a>, has helped shape the Scottish Government's realisation that addressing land inequalities is '<i>fundamental to the wellbeing, economic success, environmental sustainability and social justice of the country</i>'.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>Historic land issues have been at the heart of CfH research since Professor James Hunter established the Centre at the University of the Highlands &amp; Islands (UHI) in 2005. Dr Elizabeth Ritchie's appointment in 2009 and Dr Iain Robertson's Readership in 2015 have helped to create new thinking and a centre of excellence on the subject.</p> <p>The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw mass population movements away from the land in the Highlands and the concentration of land ownership into the hands of a few private owners. At one time, large sporting estates encompassed almost 60% of Scotland's land area, and even today Scotland has the most concentrated pattern of private ownership in the world. According to the Scottish Government in 2014, half of the country's private land was owned by 432 landowners. CfH research has documented the historic reaction from below to these inequities and the legacy of these protests [3.1; 3.2].</p> <p>In the last two decades of the twentieth century, both political and public opinion moved towards reforming historic land ownership patterns. CfH research has had impact in both arenas: directly in politics, while in the public arena the Centre has had significant impact on those who seek to raise public consciousness of land injustices in Scotland. Our work has shown that this shift in opinion was underpinned by a uniquely important event: the Assynt crofters' purchase of their estate in north-west Sutherland [3.3]. Land reform was given further impetus by Devolution and the election of the first Scottish National Party government, leading directly to the 2003 Land Reform (Scotland) Act. Hunter showed that Assynt was the catalyst for the growth of a mass</p>		

movement from below – given power and legitimacy by land reform and operationalised by Highlands and Islands Enterprise – which has resulted in an ongoing and accelerating transfer of land ownership into community hands [3.3].

These research projects reveal why community ownership has been received with such enthusiasm by ordinary people in the Highlands and Islands, drawing as it does on beliefs in communal rights to land that were formed as clan society emerged and endured, and this despite subsequent profound socio-cultural change [3.1; 3.2; 3.3]. Two broad themes emerge from this land research:

Interconnections between land and people: CfH research has demonstrated a symbiotic, complex and contested relationship between land and people. Ritchie's work on pre-clearance livestock practices [3.4] and the distribution of Gaelic Schools [3.5] has raised important questions about popular perceptions of the Highlands as 'wilderness', exposing a wilful blindness to long histories of human population and ecological management. Robertson has demonstrated that this management amounts to a land consciousness which endures and connects nature and culture at a deep level and across time [3.6].

Popular protest: Hunter's work on land disturbances has been taken forward by Robertson to embrace cultural theory and an exploration of the clash between vernacular beliefs and the exploitative tenets of 'improvement' and political economy. Robertson's research shows that popular protest was the reassertion, amongst the crofting tenantry, of a belief in community rights to land. He argues that land raids and other disturbances forced the Government to introduce a state-sponsored land-settlement scheme, the legacy of which is still apparent socially, culturally, and in the landscape today [3.1; 3.2]. Hunter has recently returned to this theme. His latest monograph, the first full-length study of the 1847 food riots around the Moray and Highland coasts, has significantly deepened understanding of this last British manifestation of a centuries-long form of local political negotiation [(3.7].

### 3. References to the research

- 3.1 Iain J. M. Robertson and David Webster. 'People of the croft: visualising land, heritage and identity', *Cultural Geographies*, Vol. 24.2 (2017), pp. 311-318.
- 3.2 Iain J. M. Robertson, 'Spaces of assertion: informal land occupations in the Scottish Highlands after 1914' *Journal of Historical Geography*, Vol. 53 (2016), pp. 45-53.
- 3.3 James Hunter, *From the Low Tide of the Sea to the Highest Mountain Tops* (Lewis, The Islands Book Trust, 2012). All research carried out at UHI.
- 3.4 Elizabeth Ritchie, 'Feeding in the forest: how Scottish settlers learned to raise livestock in the old growth forests of Upper Canada, 1814-1850', *The Agricultural History Review*, Vol. 65 (Spring 2017), pp. 74-93.
- 3.5 Elizabeth Ritchie, 'The people, the priests and the Protestants: Catholic responses to Evangelical missionaries in the early nineteenth-century Scottish Highlands', *Church History*, Vol. 85.2 (June 2016), pp. 275-301.
- 3.6 Iain J.M. Robertson and Mary MacLeod Rivett, 'Of necessary work: the longue durée of the moral ecology of the Hebridean Gàidhealtachd', in Carl J. Griffin, Roy Jones, and Iain J. M. Robertson (eds.), *Moral ecologies: Histories of conservation, dispossession and resistance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 1-34 and 159-187.
- 3.7 James Hunter, *Insurrection: Scotland's Famine Winter*, (Edinburgh, Birlinn, 2019). Research and writing predominantly carried out whilst at UHI.

### 4. Details of the impact

In November 2014, the First Minister set out the Scottish Government's vision for a new round of land reform based on the belief that Scotland's land 'must be an asset that benefits the many,

not the few'. The Scottish Government was acting on the recommendations of the Land Reform Review Group, one of the authors of which was Professor James Hunter. CfH research on the interaction and interconnection between land and people and the enduring power of land consciousness has helped place land reform at the heart of community empowerment policies. This has been achieved through three broad streams of impact: (1) through policy; (2) on organisations; and (3) on influencers.

4.1 Informing policy: According to Kate Forbes, Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP), Hunter has been widely acknowledged as 'enormously influential when it comes to land reform policy-making' and the CfH has been able to 'bridge that gap' between contemporary policy and academic history [5.1, pp.14 and 9]. For the current census period these connections began with the 2013-14 session of the House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee which recognised that Scotland's land reform policies were of relevance to the United Kingdom as a whole. Consequently, the Committee asked Hunter to co-write a paper 'to stimulate debate' and to consider 'one of the major yet underexplored areas of Scottish life: the ownership and control of the land itself' [5.2b, p.3]. Hunter was chosen as an 'eminently credible' land reform advocate of 'considerable public standing' [5.2a, p.1]. The report boosted the land reform campaign to the extent that the Scottish Government felt 'obliged' to develop further policy proposals over which, as revealed in a 2015 SPICe report (briefing papers for Scottish parliamentary business) Hunter's research had a shaping influence [5.2c, pp.4-6, 8 and 34]

Almost immediately, Hunter was appointed vice-chair of the SG's Land Law Reform Group (LLRG) with a brief 'to identify how land reform might enable more people in rural and urban Scotland to have a stake in the ownership, governance, management and use of land' [5.2d, p5]. Its final report acknowledged the influence of Hunter's research on its findings, a sentiment strongly echoed in an opinion piece for The Scotsman, written at the time by Lesley Riddoch – the paper's then Deputy Editor. She saw in the report 'measures that Jim Hunter was advocating' [5.3]. The report led to many policy initiatives and helped shift the SG's approach to rural regeneration towards 'an organic, bottom-up, people-centred process' [5.4, p8]. As Forbes asserts, CfH research demonstrated that 'you can trace back the problems we face today to the decisions that were taken two hundred, three hundred years ago' [5.1, p.14].

The most significant piece of legislation resulting from the LLRG recommendations was the Community Employment (Scotland) Act of 2015. As reported in the SPICe briefing paper [5.2c], the Act explicitly envisaged land reform as a key element in the SGs drive to further empower local communities through extending the community 'right to buy' to all Scotland. Thereby making the direct connection between CfH research [3.3] and national changes in Scottish land ownership and community-led, asset-based development.

In 2015, the 1 Million Acre Short Life Working Group (SLWG) [5.4] was tasked with developing strategy to achieve the Scottish Government's new target of one million acres in community ownership by 2020. Some of the key evidence SLWG used to demonstrate the diverse psychological and material benefits that flow from community ownership came directly from Hunter's research. He showed how community ownership creates diversification of economic activities, leading to increased turnover and staffing levels, thereby changing 'people's perceptions ... and develop[ing] new aspirations' [5.4, p9].

The SLWG's final report used research evidence presented in Hunter's paper for the Scottish Affairs Committee and explicitly linked 'vulnerability, hunger and poverty' to inadequate and insecure tenure rights [5.4, p14], as firmly demonstrated by CfH research. Responding to this, the Land Reform (Scotland) Act in 2016 established the Scottish Land Commission on the principle 'that if Scotland was really to make the most of its land then it would need [a] dedicated statutory organisation that works to improve the potential for land, both urban and rural, to contribute to the success and development of Scotland's people and communities. [5.5a pp.3-4]. Moreover, in acknowledging the 'highly significant ... historical context ... in both practical and political terms' for their work, the Chair of the Commission recognised the ongoing importance of

CfH research into the relationship between land and people to realising greater public recognition of such contexts [5.5b].

4.2 Inspiring organisations: Since 2016 CfH researchers have moved into a closer working relationship with Community Land Scotland, the umbrella organisation for the community buyout movement. CLS commissioned papers by CfH researchers to stimulate conversation and debate around aspects of land consciousness that had not yet entered public discourse. Built around [3.3] and [3.4], papers by Ritchie and Hunter informed and shaped CLS policy positions on 'wild land' and 'rewilding', persuading the organisation that 'wilderness' is partly a cultural construct associated with the Romantic view of landscape. This resulted in CLS leading 'a national conversation' around the repopulation of the Highlands in contradistinction to 'rewilding' [5.6].

Further CfH research into historic land reform has persuaded National Records of Scotland (NRS) to preserve an archive of 1920s land settlement schemes. The archive came under threat of destruction in 2019, with only the depth of Robertson's research [3.1; 3.2; 3.6] persuading the Corporate Records Manager of the Scottish Government that these records 'are clearly of enduring value going forward' and will be 'marked for preservation and passed to NRS at an appropriate future date' [5.7a].

This relationship CfH between historic and contemporary events is embedded in every aspect of CfH land research with Hunter, for instance, revealing the central role Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) played in the embryonic community buyout movement [3.3]. From this perspective and position of strength, when the Scottish Government planned to abolish the HIE board, it was Hunter who led the oppositional campaign, drawing on his 'rare combination of ... historical research and being able to speak into the current climate' [5.1, p. 14]. As an MSP, Kate Forbes affirms this combination is 'very helpful to someone like me' [5.1, pp. 9] with Hunter being quoted and referred to by several MSPs during the Scottish Parliament debate on HIE's future in January 2017 [5.8a]. Later that month, Hunter was invited to meet with Keith Brown, MSP, Economics Minister in the Scottish Government. The Government changed its declared policy and the board of HIE was retained. As Sandra Holmes, HIE's Head of Community Assets declares: 'shining a light' on the key historic contributions of HIE revealed 'that many of the issues of yesterday are ever present' [5.8b].

4.3 Influencing the influencers: The long history of land consciousness in the Highlands demonstrated in CfH research has been inspirational to those campaigning for further land reform today on a number of levels. Alastair McIntosh, an internationally-recognised human ecologist, activist and writer, stated in his foreword to the paperback edition of *The Other Side of Sorrow* (2014) that Hunter's research 'moved me, moved me on, and helped me better to understand myself. In that I know that I was not alone' [5.9c p.xix]. McIntosh, one of the catalysts of the community buyout movement believes that 'James Hunter's history and historiography was pivotal to those of us who pioneered modern Scottish land reform. It legitimised our endeavours, laying the scholarly foundations for an emergent land consciousness' in the wider public realm [5.9b].

The impact of CfH research has been further acknowledged by another influential land reform activist, Mairi McFadyen. It has been, she asserts, a profound influence upon her activism and advocacy and she draws CfH research into every consciousness-raising workshop she runs, whether with politicians, activists, or the public. She describes Hunter and Robertson's land research as a touchstone: 'I have come back to it again and again, especially since I have been doing more work around climate change ... for me, underpinning everything, every social justice issue ... is the question of land' [5.10a, p.8]. Qualitative evaluation of her workshops confirms that delegates find them to be 'inspiring ... a great initiation to raise awareness ... a great opportunity to enjoy music and learn about political issues at the same time ... awareness raising being inspired to look at landscape' [5.10b].

Robertson's research has helped the West Harris Trust make similar connections around land consciousness. This began with a conference Robertson initiated with community groups on the

island of Lewis to celebrate the impact and legacy of the 1919 Land Settlement (Scotland) Act. As a direct consequence, Robertson was commissioned by community landowner the West Harris Trust to train its members to research the history of land consciousness on their estate, 'to raise awareness and understanding', and to help recognise its legacy by writing the text for a celebratory panel to be displayed at the Trust's Community Enterprise Centre [5.7b].

Legacies of land consciousness extend into the economic realm. On Barra, in the Outer Hebrides, CfH research has directly inspired the development of a profitable walking tour business. Tours seek to 'tell the story of the crofters and cottars, the toiling class'. The owner says this research was "the first ... I had read ... that did not allow the landlords the economic 'get out of jail free' card" [5.11].

Summing up CfH's contribution to activism, the land campaigner and writer Lesley Riddoch asserts that CfH research has 'coloured in the Highlands, from what was previously a grudge match, into something much more subtle ... it is not an exaggeration to say that you have re-created the Highlands' [5.3b, p.10]. This is a perception shared by Kate Forbes, MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Finance, who states that the Centre's research legitimises "what people were already doing informally as an act of rebellion or radicalism" [5.1, p. 16].

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- 5.1 Interview Kate Forbes, Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Member of Scottish Parliament, 20/01/20.
- 5.2a) Interview with Chair of the House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee; b) briefing paper for the House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee; c) SPICe briefing paper; d) Final Report of the Land Reform Review Group.
- 5.3 *Pers Comm*, Lesley Riddoch, 03/10/19, journalist, broadcaster and land campaigner. At the time of the LRRG report Riddoch was Deputy Editor of *The Scotsman* newspaper.
- 5.4 'One Million Acres by 2020, Strategy report and recommendations from the 1 Million Acre Short Life Working Group',  
<https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/independent-report/2015/12/one-million-acres-2020-strategy-report-recommendations-1-million-acre/documents/00490614-pdf/00490614-pdf/govscot%3Adocument/00490614.pdf>,  
 accessed 12/08/19.
- 5.5 Impact on Scottish Land Commission. a) Strategic Plan; b) *Pers Comm*, Andrew Thin, Chair of Scottish Land Commission.
- 5.6 Renewal and repopulation, <https://www.communitylandscotland.org.uk/find-out-more/renewal-repopulation/>, accessed 03/03/19.
- 5.7 Archival preservation and training. a) *Pers Comm*, Craig Sclater, Corporate Records Manager, Scottish Government, 24/02/20; b) Letter from West Harris Trust, 15/12/2020.
- 5.8 HIE policy change. a) Scottish Affairs Select Committee; November 2016; b) *Pers Comm*, Sandra Holmes, Head of Community Assets, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, 11/02/20.
- 5.9a) *Pers Comm*, Alastair McIntosh, 12/02/20; b) *Pers Comm*, Alastair McIntosh, 05/02/21; c) 'Foreword', to Hunter, James. *On the other side of sorrow: nature and people in the Scottish Highlands*. Birlinn, 2014.
- 5.10a) Interview, Mairi McFadyen, 06/09/19; b) *Pers Comm* with participant feedback, 01/10/19.
- 5.11 Michael MacLeod, 'Walking in the footsteps of the Barra land raiders',  
<http://bit.ly/BarraRaiders>, accessed 10/10/19