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People of the croft: visualising land, heritage and identity

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Abstract

This short photographic essay emerges from the recognition that identity, landscapes and heritage landscapes in particular are rarely configured and conceptualised wholly linguistically. An affective and emotional charge can involve visual and tactile metaphors and mnemonics. This essay therefore attempts to capture aspects of this visuality and material mnemonics while recognising the constraints imposed by the written word and the need to ask our interviewees to articulate the ‘material thing’ which most spoke to them of their ‘croft’. The heritage landscape that is the focus of this article is that of crofting agriculture in the Scottish Highlands. What emerges between the word and the image is a strong sense of inheritance from the past validated by and made meaningful by work practices and deriving from a very particular land, task and seascape. Together, this constitutes a heritage from below and a sense of localised identity.

Keywords

affect, heritage, identity, landscape, Scotland

The croft. A parcel of land surrounded by legislation. A livelihood. Home. Inheritance. Source and site of conflict. Heritage from below.¹

A grounded context

This short photographic essay emerges from the recognition that identity, landscapes and heritage landscapes in particular are rarely configured and conceptualised wholly linguistically. Affectual and emotional charge can involve visual and tactile metaphors and mnemonics. This essay therefore attempts to capture aspects of this visuality and its material mnemonics while recognising the constraints imposed by the written word, hence the strong and wholly integrated

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Figure 1.

visual element. The heritage landscape that is the focus of this article is that of crofting agriculture in the Scottish Highlands. Recognising that a sense of inheritance from the past is a crucial part of the making of a sense of self, the guiding question here is that of the role played by the family croft and possession of land in local identity formation. What emerges is a strong sense of inheritance from the past validated by and made meaningful by work practices and deriving from a very particular land, task and seascape. Together, this constitutes a heritage from below and a sense of localised identity.

Unquestionably, a sense of inheritance from the past carries a powerfully affective charge that draws on, in the particular taskscape under consideration, visibility as much as it does on verbal memory. This essay attempts to illustrate that sense of connection in a series of photographs taken in the midst of research practice. All the photographs were taken by David Webster, as a member of the research team who took a much less active role in the verbal interchanges, and looked to a more visual recording mode. David hovered with a camera, while Iain explained the concept behind the proposed photographs. The intention was to realise a portrait of the interviewees (many who had been interviewed previously) such that they were portrayed with the material thing that most spoke to them of their 'croft'. All took this opportunity, although not all wanted to appear in the image themselves. The offer was made such that Iain sought not to be overly prescriptive – not 'leading' the respondents unduly. This led to some periods of sustained reflection on the part of the interviewees, but this was the goal. It was only after people had decided what 'worked for them', in terms of location and artefact that David stepped in, and discussed practicalities like light, framing and the like, to ensure the shot worked and that their sense of what they wanted included was at the heart of the image. Here, then, our participants engage in a task heavy with temporal ambiguity, thinking about the past they stand among, its present state and its possible futures. Consequently, in the inevitable polyvocality which arises from this exchange, both memory and photograph are rendered ambiguous and resistant to singular interpretation. Yet in this ambiguity and discontinuity lies a coherence and connection that is suggestive of enduring, emotional investments. The event



Figure 2.

thus captured and the ideas thus engendered variously connect, disrupt, but oddly fulfil the narrative.

Seeking equivalent sort of fulfilment in the creative work of representation, Berger and Mohr eschewed full textual narratives, preferring to speak ‘the language of appearances’.² We draw inspiration from this approach, linking memory, identity and lived experience through self-selected photographs. What emerges is a strong sense of inheritance from the past validated by and made meaningful by work practices and underpinned by the interaction between identity, collective and individual memory and a sense of place deriving from a very particular land and seascape.

One of the most exciting recent trends in heritage studies has been the turn towards the exploration of heritages that are local, particular and mundane.³ This permits the recognition of the public consumption of the past and interlinked social memory as fluid and polysemic. The home in this context is understood as minor-key marker and mnemonic, cutting across the grain of national identity master narratives. The photographs, pictures and shrines found therein acquire a sacred character as identity markers and manifestations of heritage from below.

Unquestionably, there exist tangible and intangible expressions of heritage that draw on perspectives from below and which offer the possibility of alternative constructions of the past to that of the hegemonic. Homes, sheds and sea clearly ‘working’ for the couple in Figure 3 thus become counter-hegemonic landmarks, written into the landscape in support and expression of local identity. As such, they commemorate from within the lives and thoughts of those otherwise hidden from heritage.

Local visions

In common with Dicks’ notion of memorialism, heritage from below is primarily manifest in local testimony as lived experience: personal and emotional recollections of the mundane and everyday.⁴



Figure 3.

But unlike memorialism, heritage from below – as practice – draws heavily on the cultural realm where a sense of inheritance needs no memorial and instead finds its mnemonic in everyday performances such as that made manifest in Crouch's interrogation of the embodied and repetitious practice of allotment work.⁵

Performed repetition, as the manifestation of mundane ritual, is key to the ways in which people articulate and construct a sense of their pasts and historical identities. In so doing, moreover, the emphasis is often placed on domestic spaces, routine material culture and the quotidian as prime sites of memory work.

Working in the garden or with cows in a different space to that of the interview prompted new narratives and additional layers of meaning to that particular croft house narrative. Here too emerges something of the rural counterpart of de Certeau's fragmentary, ephemeral 'urban ghosts and hauntings', textured as they are with their pasts and animated by people's stories.⁶ If this heritage is made material or if it is material, then it occurs almost spontaneously and without fuss and commercial intent, working for the individual but out into localised communities.

Through the agricultural practice of crofting the possession of land remains one of the most significant factors in Highland social relationships. Key to this was the 19th-century re-organisation and redistribution of the bulk of the Scottish Highland population away from inland areas and to the coast in order to harvest the sea. From this, the crofting system of agriculture emerged. Given the rapidity of these fundamental shifts and the depth of feeling associated with land, it is unsurprising that older attitudes continued to prevail among the emergent tenantry. Prior to the 18th century, in the clanship era, the land served to stabilise and cement social arrangements with access to land, as a form of patronage and drawing on kinship bonds, existing as a customary right within the clan and held as a belief by the land-working tenantry regardless of any question as to whether the custom actually



Figure 4.

extended to this grouping. Ultimately, as the crofting system emerged over the course of the 19th century, the remembered notion of what it meant to have land became manifest in the croft, croft house and crofting agriculture and became means and motif to crofter identity and their protests.⁷

Unquestionably pragmatic but also symbolic, the croft house and its associated land remained central to ordinary Highlanders' sense of self across the 19th and much of the 20th centuries. Indeed, the last phase of the Highland Land Wars arguably did not draw to a close until the mid-1950s. Seemingly inevitably, however, this period was followed, as this last rebellious generation aged and modernising processes took full hold, by slow decline and abandonment of many of the tasks which animated Highlanders' sense of self. There has been a shrinking away, for instance, from use of the common grazings with a concomitant reliance on more individualistic work practices and the in-bye land. These changes notwithstanding, beliefs and cultural attitudes remained largely in place, sustained in part by the survival of Gaelic as an everyday language. Thus, the croft with its small amount of arable land often surrounded by a 'sea' of common grazing or arranged in linear townships is a physical manifestation of the crofting taskscape. The continued importance of access to land (ideally land which had been worked by previous generations of the same family) for the ordinary Highlander is the sensing and affective manifestation of that 'scape'.

The home-made peat shovel, the tangle of rope, the poly-tunnel (see also Figure 5) symbolise and materialise a sense of inheritance from the past that has, over the last decade, come very sharply into focus with the introduction of the largely successful community buy-out legislation that has placed previously privately owned Hebridean estates in the hands of their tenants. Buy-outs are the contemporary manifestation of the historically deep and communally based way of seeing land and which is materialised for our interviewees in shed, sheep and sea.

Identity is made and maintained through a series of relationships, associations and registers. In any manifestation of crofting identity, the critical associations and relationships are those to land and sea and to the flora and fauna which dwelt therein and thereon.



Figure 5.

Fabrics of past, present and future

Here too emerge local visions of DeSilvey's hardscrabble heritage in which the dirt, dust and detritus of past work processes are not 'mess' but a resource for present-day tasks and mnemonic of sense of self.⁸ Whenever and wherever the voice of the crofter is heard, the consistent claim is to land – for, in this instance, poly-tunnel and shed. These signify and materialise the array of beliefs, practices and traditions which shape the ways in which crofters interact with their environment – how they work their land, both now and in the past. The 'croft' that speaks to those whose material 'things' are gathered here is constituted by and through these very particular ways of performing work practices. The sheer physicality, physical presence and affective charge of being in place and part of a complex and much larger 'spatial dance' with other human and non-human performers are the very embodiment of place and sense of self. The actions of tractor, sheep and cattle, boat and lobster pot (to name but a few) cultivate and bring to fruition a direct connection to previous generations who nurtured their own identities in the same soil and on the same water. To work, land and water reconnect the individual to past practices and place work tasks and the intersection of the human and non-human at the centre of localised and spatialised identity-making and maintaining in the crofting taskscape – an engagement with and an expression of landscape as an enduring record of the lives and works of past and present generations who have dwelt within it.⁹

From birth, people's lives are spaced and timed through their interactions with the material 'scape', thus driving the process of imagining the self and a sense of belonging that is rooted in the very fabric of lifespace and taskscape. As it is its own memorial and mnemonic, working the land and sea requires none of the cultural apparatus used elsewhere to draw the past into the present. These work practices further draw upon and articulate a counter-hegemonic sense of identity which is driving the community land buy-outs that are radically re-aligning contemporary Highland



Figure 6.

social relations. Individual and collective memory, based on active and dynamic tasks and the poetics of land and sea, eschews *lieux de mémoire* and refuses to do the work of and actively challenges the ‘stuff’ of the authorised heritage discourse.¹⁰

The holding of land understood, recalled and visualised by those who work it as a valued legacy from previous generations, and the understanding and expression of landscape as palimpsest and mnemonic containing and maintaining traces of the lives and tasks of past and present generations who have dwelt within it, come together as engagement with and expression of heritage from below.

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Notes

1. The croft is material manifestation of a deeply important set of cultural processes. The form taken by the full onset of the capitalist mode of production in the Highlands had two major landscape impacts: the clearances and crofting agriculture. The latter evolved as a small-scale subsistence agriculture in which people lived on the land but not wholly from it. Over time, aspects of the use crofters made of their land fell away but the land and house remained central to their sense of identity. For a full discussion of the issues that this particular history raises and the subtleties at play in this taskscape please see: I.Robertson, *Landscapes of Protest in the Scottish Highlands after 1914: The Later Highland Land Wars* (London: Ashgate, 2013).
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Author biographies