



**People of the croft: Visualising land, heritage and identity.**

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Abstract:	<p>This short photographic essay emerges from the recognition that identity, landscapes, and heritage landscapes in particular, are rarely configured and conceptualised wholly linguistically. An affectual and emotional charge can involve visual and tactile metaphors and mnemonics. This essay therefore attempts to capture aspects of this visuality and material mnemonics whilst recognising the constraints imposed by the written word and the need to ask our interviewees to articulate the 'thing' which most spoke to them of their 'croft'. The heritage landscape that is the focus of this paper is that of crofting agriculture in the Scottish Highlands. 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 sense of localised identity.</p>

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**List of captions**

**Figure 1.**

**Figure 2.**

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For Peer Review

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Figure 1.  
203x152mm (300 x 300 DPI)

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Figure 2.  
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Figure 3.  
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Figure 4.  
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Figure 5.  
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Figure 6.  
299x112mm (300 x 300 DPI)

Peer Review

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9 The croft. A parcel of land surrounded by legislation. A livelihood. Home. Inheritance.

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11 Source and site of conflict. Heritage from below.<sup>1</sup>

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13 **Caption – Figure 1.**

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15  
16 **A grounded context**

17  
18 This short photographic essay emerges from the recognition that identity, landscapes,  
19 and heritage landscapes in particular, are rarely configured and conceptualised wholly  
20 linguistically. Affectual and emotional charge can involve visual and tactile metaphors and  
21 mnemonics. This essay therefore attempts to capture aspects of this visuality and its material  
22 mnemonics whilst recognising the constraints imposed by the written word hence the strong  
23 and wholly integrated visual element. The heritage landscape that is the focus of this paper is  
24 that of crofting agriculture in the Scottish Highlands. Recognising that a sense of inheritance  
25 from the past is a crucial part of the making of a sense of self, the guiding question here is that of  
26 the role played by the family croft and possession of land in local identity formation. What  
27 emerges is a strong sense of inheritance from the past validated by and made meaningful by  
28 work practices and deriving from a very particular land, task and seascape. Together, this  
29 constitutes a heritage from below and a sense of localised identity.  
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44 Unquestionably, a sense of inheritance from the past carries a powerfully affective  
45 charge that draws on, in the particular taskscape under consideration, visuality as it much as it  
46 does verbal memory. This essay attempts to illustrate that sense of connection in a series of  
47 photographs taken in the midst of research practice. All the photographs were taken by David  
48 Webster, as a member of the research team who took a much less active role in the verbal  
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9 interchanges, and looked to a more visual recording mode. David hovered with a camera, while  
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11 Iain explained the concept behind the proposed photographs. The intention was to realise a  
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13 portrait of the interviewees (many who had been interviewed previously) such that they were  
14  
15 portrayed with the material thing that most spoke to them of their 'craft'. All took this  
16  
17 opportunity, though not all wanted to appear in the image themselves. The offer was made such  
18  
19 that Iain sought to not be overly prescriptive - not 'leading' the respondents unduly. This led to  
20  
21 some periods of sustained reflection on the part of the interviewees, but this was the goal. It  
22  
23 was only after people had decided what 'worked for them', in terms of location and artefact that  
24  
25 David stepped in, and discussed practicalities like light, framing and the like, to ensure the shot  
26  
27 worked and that their sense of what they wanted included was at the heart of the image. Here,  
28  
29 then, our participants engage in a task heavy with temporal ambiguity, thinking about the past  
30  
31 they stand amongst, its present state and its possible futures. Consequently, in the inevitable  
32  
33 polyvocality which arises from this exchange, both memory and photograph are  
34  
35 rendered ambiguous and resistant to singular interpretation. Yet in this ambiguity and  
36  
37 discontinuity lies a coherence and connection that is suggestive of enduring, emotional  
38  
39 investments. The event thus captured and the ideas thus engendered, variously connect,  
40  
41 disrupt, but oddly fulfil narrative.

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47 **Caption – Figure 2.**

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49 Seeking equivalent sort of fulfilment in the creative work of representation,  
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51 Berger and Mohr eschewed full textual narratives, preferring to speak 'the language of  
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9 appearances'.<sup>2</sup> We draw inspiration from this approach, linking memory, identity and  
10 lived experience through self-selected photographs. What emerges is a strong sense of  
11 inheritance from the past validated by and made meaningful by work practices and  
12  
13 underpinned by the interaction between identity, collective and individual memory, and a  
14  
15 sense of place deriving from a very particular land and seascape.  
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20 One of the most exciting recent trends in heritage studies has been the turn  
21  
22 towards the exploration of heritages that are local, particular and mundane.<sup>3</sup> This permits  
23  
24 the recognition of the public consumption of the past and interlinked social memory as  
25  
26 fluid and polysemic. The home in this context is understood as minor-key marker and  
27  
28 mnemonic, cutting across the grain of national identity master narratives. The  
29  
30 photographs, pictures and shrines found therein acquire a sacred character as identity  
31  
32 markers and manifestations of heritage from below.  
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37 **Caption – Figure 3.**

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39 Unquestionably there exist tangible and intangible expressions of heritage that  
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41 draw on perspectives from below and which offer the possibility of alternative  
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43 constructions of the past to that of the hegemonic. Homes, sheds and sea clearly  
44  
45 'working' for the couple in Figure 3, thus become counter hegemonic landmarks,  
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47 written into the landscape in support and expression of local identity. As such they  
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49 commemorate from within the lives and thoughts of those otherwise hidden from  
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9 material, then it occurs almost spontaneously and without fuss and commercial intent,  
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11 working for the individual but out into localised communities.  
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14 Through the agricultural practice of crofting the possession of land remains one  
15  
16 of the most significant factors in Highland social relationships. Key to this was the  
17  
18 nineteenth-century re-organisation and redistribution of the bulk of the Scottish  
19  
20 Highland population away from inland areas and to the coast in order to harvest the sea.  
21  
22 From this the crofting system of agriculture emerged. Given the rapidity of these  
23  
24 fundamental shifts and the depth of feeling associated with land, it is unsurprising that  
25  
26 older attitudes continued to prevail amongst the emergent tenantry. Prior to the  
27  
28 eighteenth century, in the clanship era, land served to stabilise and cement social  
29  
30 arrangements with access to land, as a form of patronage and drawing on kinship bonds,  
31  
32 existing as a customary right within the clan and held as a belief by the land-working  
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34 tenantry regardless of any question as to whether the custom actually extended to this  
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36 grouping. Ultimately, as the crofting system emerged over the course of the nineteenth century,  
37  
38 the remembered notion of what it meant to have land became manifest in the croft,  
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40 croft house and crofting agriculture and became means and motif to crofter identity and  
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42 their protests.<sup>7</sup>  
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49 Unquestionably pragmatic but also symbolic, the croft house and its associated  
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51 land remained central to ordinary Highlanders' sense of self across the nineteenth and  
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9 much of the twentieth centuries. Indeed, the last phase of the Highland Land Wars  
10 arguably did not draw to a close until the mid-1950s. Seemingly inevitably however, this  
11 period was followed, as this last rebellious generation aged and modernising processes  
12 took full hold, by slow decline and abandonment of many of the tasks which animated  
13 Highlanders' sense of self. There has been a shrinking away, for instance, from use of the  
14 common grazings with a concomitant reliance on more individualistic work practices and  
15 the in-bye land. These changes notwithstanding, beliefs and cultural attitudes remained  
16 largely in place, sustained in part by the survival of Gaelic as an everyday language. Thus,  
17 the croft with its small amount of arable land often surrounded by a "sea" of common  
18 grazing or arranged in linear townships, is a physical manifestation of the crofting  
19 taskscape. The continued importance of access to land (ideally land which had been  
20 worked by previous generations of the same family) for the ordinary Highlander is the  
21 sensing and affective manifestation of that 'scape.  
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39 **Caption – Figure 5.**

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41 The home-made peat shovel, the tangle of rope, the poly-tunnel (see also Figure 7)  
42 symbolise and materialise a sense of inheritance from the past that has, over the last  
43 decade, come very sharply into focus with the introduction of the largely successful  
44 community buy-out legislation that has placed previously privately-owned Hebridean  
45 estates in the hands of their tenants. Buy-outs are the contemporary manifestation of the  
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9 historically deep and communally-based way of seeing land and which is materialised for  
10 our interviewees in shed, sheep and sea.

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13 Identity is made and maintained through a series of relationships, associations and  
14 registers. In any manifestation of crofting identity, the critical associations and  
15 relationships are those to land and sea and to the flora and fauna which dwelt therein and  
16 thereon.  
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#### 22 **Fabrics of past, present and future**

#### 23 **Caption – Figure 6.**

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

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18 From birth, people's lives are spaced and timed through their interactions with  
19 the material 'scape, thus driving the process of imagining the self and a sense of  
20 belonging that is rooted in the very fabric of lifespace and taskscape. As it is its own  
21 memorial and mnemonic, working the land and sea requires none of the cultural  
22 apparatus used elsewhere to draw the past into the present. These work practices further  
23 draw upon and articulate a counter-hegemonic sense of identity which is driving the  
24 community land buyouts that are radically re-aligning contemporary Highland social  
25 relations. Individual and collective memory, based in active and dynamic tasks and the  
26 poetics of land and sea, eschews *lieux de memoiré*, and refuses to do the work of, and  
27 actively challenges the "stuff" of the authorised heritage discourse.<sup>10</sup>

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30 The holding of land understood recalled and visualised by those who work it as a  
31 valued legacy from previous generations, the understanding and expression of landscape  
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9 as palimpsest and mnemonic containing and maintaining traces of the lives and tasks of  
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11 past and present generations who have dwelt within it, come together as engagement  
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13 with and expression of heritage from below.  
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### 16 17 18 **Acknowledgments**

19  
20 The authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Mary Macleod-Rivett in capturing  
21  
22 the oral histories that lie at the heart of this paper. The interviews upon which this  
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24 paper is based are currently lodged with the University of Gloucestershire.  
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### 34 **ENDNOTES**

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37 <sup>1</sup> The croft is material manifestation of a deeply important set of cultural processes. The  
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39 form taken by the full onset of the capitalist mode of production in the Highlands had two  
40  
41 major landscape impacts: the clearances; crofting agriculture. The latter evolved as a  
42  
43 small-scale subsistence agriculture in which people lived on the land but not wholly from  
44  
45 it. Over time aspects of the use crofters made of their land fell away but the land and  
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47 house remained central to their sense of identity. For a full discussion of the issues that  
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49 this particular history raises and the subtleties at play in this taskscape please see: Iain  
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Robertson, *Landscapes of Protest in the Scottish Highlands After 1914: The Later Highland Land Wars*. (London: Ashgate, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling* (New York, Vintage House, 1995), p. 128.

<sup>3</sup> David Crouch, 'Spacing, performing, and becoming: tangles in the mundane', *Environment and Planning A*, 35(11), 2005, pp. 1945-1960; David Crouch, 'The perpetual performance and emergence of heritage', in Emma Waterton, and Steve Watson, eds., *Culture, Heritage and Representation*, (London: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 57-74; Tim Edensor, 'Mundane hauntings: commuting through the phantasmagoric working-class spaces of Manchester, England', *Cultural Geographies* 15.3, 2008, pp. 313-333.

<sup>4</sup> Bella Dicks, *Heritage, Place and Community*, (Cardiff: Cardiff University Press, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Crouch 'Spacing', p. 1949 and p. 1953.

<sup>6</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Randall, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984); David Atkinson, 'The heritage of mundane places', in Brian Graham and Peter Howard, eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008, p. 285.

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<sup>7</sup> James Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community*, (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1976); Charles Withers, *Gaelic Scotland: The transformation of a culture region*, (London: Routledge, 1988); Robertson, *Landscapes of Protest*.

<sup>8</sup> Caitlin DeSilvey, 'Salvage memory: constellating material histories on a hardscrabble homestead', *Cultural Geographies*, 2007, 14, 3 pp. 401-424.

<sup>9</sup> Robertson, *Landscapes of Protest*; Tim Ingold, 'The temporality of the landscape', *World Archaeology*, 1993, pp. 25.2: 152-174.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Nora, 'Between memory and history: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*', *Representations*, 26, 1989, pp. 7-24.

Preprint Review

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