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The priest, the crofters, and the Uist rocket range

Abstract: This study examines the relationship between land, power, and cultural identity in the Uists, focusing on the mid-twentieth century when a proposed rocket range threatened the Gaelic culture. The Rev. John Morrison, a local priest, led a media campaign to protect the community’s heritage, also commissioning a sculpture of ‘Our Lady of the Isles’ and supporting wayside shrines as symbols of resistance. These monuments embody the community’s resilience and connection to their land, preserving their unique cultural identity amid external pressures. Morrison’s efforts reflect an interplay between land ownership, government intervention, and the shaping of cultural landscapes, with the monuments serving as enduring markers of the community’s past and aspirations for the future.

Keywords: Gaelic culture, Gaelic resistance, Rev. John Morrison, Our Lady of the Isles, Rocket range, Uist.

On the Feast of the Assumption in 1958 and undeterred by torrential rain, 3,000 worshippers climbed Rhueval, the northernmost hill of South Uist to attend the consecration of a new statue to ‘Our Lady of the Isles’ by the bishop of Argyll and the Isles.¹ Local parishioners and clergy were joined by the archbishop of Liverpool, bishop of Leeds and Msgr Jerome MacEachin of Lansing, Michigan. MacEachin, of South Uist emigrant stock was distantly related to the commissioner of the statue, the parish priest Fr John Morrison.² Although the statue and roadside shrines erected in the early 1950s have become regarded as local responses to the near contemporaneous rocket range constructed in Ardkenneth parish, their presence masks a more complex historical narrative.

This article will consider aspects of that narrative, including the historical power of estate and state locally. Those living on South Uist

¹ The spelling of Rhueval used is from the feu charter disposing the land for the statue of ‘Our Lady’ in 1958.

² *Glasgow Herald*, 15 August 1958, 8; 16 August 1958, 6; *The Scotsman*, 16 August 1958, 6. There is no reference in the Lorimer Society Archives, [LSA] to support Burnett’s statement that the dedication of the statue was delayed from 1956 until the Lourdes centenary in 1958. Raymond Burnett, “‘The Long Nineteenth Century’: the Scottish Gaidhealtachd”, in *Out of the Ghetto? The Catholic Community in Modern Scotland*, ed. Raymond Boyle and Peter Lynch (Edinburgh, 1998), 162–92, at 184.

were predominately Roman Catholic, but weight of numbers was not reflected in the power or influence they were able to exert. Attention will be given to the role parish priests undertook to protect and represent their congregations during the second half of the nineteenth century. The focus will then turn to the military policy and power of the British state within its wider post-second world war geopolitical context and international relations. This will include its defence policy, military nuclear capability and the unilateral decision it took to site a rocket range on the island. A concurrent nuclear development took place in the north of Scotland and consideration will be given to the extent of the parallels between it and the military use of land in the Highlands and Islands. These two themes of local and national power frame the third key component of this paper, the power in and of the local community to respond to external decisions. How the local community and its spiritual leaders effected that change foregrounds the paper. It focusses on efforts to protect their island from perceived threats, promoting both its intangible and tangible heritage of local traditions, faith and wider cultural heritage, the land itself and its use.

Insights into these themes were gained from a number of primary sources: estate records, both on South Uist and in the Special Collections of the University of Aberdeen provided the foundations for understanding the power of the estate throughout the period under consideration. The files of the Scottish Catholic Archives, the Congested Districts Board housed in the National Records of Scotland and the Lorimer Society Archive held by the National Trust for Scotland provided different insights, as did those available online from the National Archives at Kew. Contemporary newspaper articles were a rich source of information, particularly in reporting public reaction to the announcement that the government intended to build a rocket range and new settlement at the expense of locals' crofting land. The articles included set piece events such as the local hearing of the Scottish Land Court and public meetings which brought journalists to the Uists. Radio and television coverage of events was more limited, with one film company known to have travelled to South Uist. Little of it could be located and it is unlikely islanders saw footage at the time.³ The background to the construction of the statue of 'Our Lady' has been the focus of a number of articles and a book.⁴

³ Local MP Malcolm MacMillan criticised the government for not beaming a television signal to residents when it was willing to do so 'from Northern Ireland to a few hundred troops stationed temporarily in South Uist for the purpose of the rocket range, funded by defence expenditure.' Hansard, House of Commons debate [HC], 18 December 1957, 580.

⁴ Miranda Forrest, *A Guide to Hew Lorimer, the MoD Rocket Range and Our Lady of the Isles* (Bornais, 2020).

The work of academics and others who sought to capture South Uist at what they identified as a point of cultural and social change in the mid-1950s, and other historiographical studies have been beneficial in achieving a more holistic study.

Key to the historical narrative of South Uist, as with much of the Highlands and Islands is who had power and control over land. What had been a 'society and economy' where clan chiefs were central to a 'system of ideology and behaviour', had radically changed as they 'were slowly forced to think and act more as landlords'.⁵ Their power, based on a relationship which 'bound space through kinship' transformed into one where control over land symbolised the 'power relations' of its landowner, people and politicians.⁶ In the north of South Uist, the local landscape demonstrates this well: to its south west, the statue of 'Our Lady' overlooks Grogarry lodge, the estate's 'big house'. The township of Stilligarry, created in 1880 by proprietrix Mrs Emily Gordon lies further to the south, and south west the stone-enclosed fields of Drimore farm: both these exemplify that this was a landscape of over-population, emigration, clearance, enclosure and exclusion. However, this land had a counter-narrative, which embodied islanders' strong sense of belonging to particular plots, their powerlessness, loss of control and the enforced eviction of ancestors who claimed hereditary occupation. Islanders' religious adherence, their language, Gaelic, traditional culture, society and beliefs were interwoven through these narratives. Local efforts to protect and retain their indigenous culture and way of life were often seen by authority, particularly the estate as backwardness and an unwillingness to accept progress. One example was the attempt to insist on the adoption and application of English as the language of officialdom, education and home. As time passed, these distinct narratives have turned into what Mark Nuttall describes as 'memoriescape', where events and memories conflate, and as John Wyllie emphasised, can often overlap and compete.⁷

Not only did these narratives overlap and compete in the north west corner of South Uist, on a number of occasions they collided. Gerinish, a hereditary tack of Clanranald had been cleared in the late 1820s by his financial trustees to let as a tenanted farm.⁸ In 1907, to relieve congestion

⁵ Robert A. Dodgshon, *Chiefs to Landlords: Social and Economic Change in the Western Highlands & Islands* (Edinburgh, 2019), 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13; Brian S. Osborne, 'Landscapes, memory, monuments, and commemoration: putting identity in its place', *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 33 (2001), 39–77, at 45.

⁷ John Wyllie, *Landscape* (London, 2007), 71; Suzanne Seymour, 'Historical Geographies of Landscape', in *Modern Historical Geographies*, ed. Brian Graham and Catherine Nash (Harlow, 2008), 193–217, at 214; Osborne, 'Landscapes', 44.

⁸ Michael J. MacDonald, 'The new settlement at Gerinish', http://www.uist-rc.org.uk/uploads/8/6/4/3/8643927/the_new_settlement_at_gerinis2.doc (accessed 3 November

the Congested Districts Board bought the farm from its owner, now Lady Gordon Cathcart and divided the farm into crofts. Less than two generations later, though, the government announced its intention to build a rocket range and the crofters were threatened with ‘clearance’. In consequence, apart from the impact on individuals, families and the wider community, the proposed re-appropriation of land would redraw the physical and cultural landscape. The government interventions over land can be perceived as demonstrating how power had shifted from estate to state. This perception can be bolstered by observing that the rocket range’s radar station on Rhueval is positioned above the statue of ‘Our Lady’. These, though, ignore the responses to the government’s decision, in particular those of the predominately indigenous Roman Catholic parish of Ardkeneth, in which Gerinish is situated, and their priest, Fr John Morrison. Fr John was an islander and a Gaelic speaker who was ironically nicknamed ‘Father Rocket’ because he became de facto ‘Leader of the defence movement’ through his fronting the media campaign in which islanders were joined by amongst others, anti-nuclear campaigners, conservationists, academics and their member of parliament.⁹

In stepping forward to represent his parishioners, Fr John reprised the role priests on South Uist and Barra had played as defenders of their faith communities when threatened. In 1851, the *Elgin Courant* reporting the movement east of a party of ‘Barra Highlanders’, noted jocularly of the strength of Roman Catholicism in the outer isles: ‘it would appear that the Reformation had never penetrated to Barra!’¹⁰ The comment had substance: most islanders on Barra and South Uist were Roman Catholic adherents and native Gaelic speakers.¹¹ However, though in the majority, their ability to influence decisions affecting their daily lives was severely constrained: in reality, the estate exercised a monopoly of power over those on its land. South Uist had been part of Clanranald’s domain: chief and clan were Roman Catholic until Ranald, brought up a Protestant by

2019), now available via <https://web.archive.org/web/> Gerinish was one of six farms let by the trustees of MacDonal of Clanranald in 1828; Alexander Og Macdonald claimed the clearance was later, when ‘Mr. Gordon’ bought the estate. Report of the Royal Commission (Highlands and Islands, 1892) (Edinburgh, 1895), 969.

⁹ *Manchester Guardian*, 8 March 1957, 7. One islander described Fr Morrison as ‘one of us’. He was born into a crofter-fisherman’s family at Kilpheder.

¹⁰ *Elgin Courant, and Morayshire Advertiser*, 14 February 1851, 3, reprinted from the *Inverness Courier*, n.d..

¹¹ In the 1881 census, 96.1% of the total population of South Uist and Benbecula spoke Gaelic. In 1951, it was 89.5%. Kurt C. Duwe, *Gàidhlig (Scottish Gaelic) Local Studies, 3: Uibhist a Deas & Beinn a’Bhaoghla* (South Uist & Benbecula, 2005), 8–9. http://linguae-celticae.de/dateien/Gaidhlig_Local_Studies_Vol_03_Uibhist_a_Deas_Ed_II.pdf (accessed 2 August 2024).

his mother, became landowner following the '45.¹² He gave leases to non-Catholics and this has been viewed as 'the first step towards ... Protestant estate managers and lease-holders (overseeing) an almost uniformly catholic tenantry'.¹³ The result was that the latter lost whatever positions of power they previously held within the clan. Emigration from the outer isles, prompted by the difficulty of sustaining life and livelihood, and often enforced or assisted by the estate was a regular occurrence. Following the purchase of South Uist in 1838 and Barra in 1840 by Colonel John Gordon of Cluny, and particularly during the proprietrixship of his daughter-in-law, Emily, later Lady Gordon Cathcart between 1878 to 1932, the denominational adherence of tenantry and their pastoral leaders became more obviously symbolic of differences in attitudes to land management, language and wider improvements. Initially, these played out within a relationship where tenants had little or no security of tenure and were dependent on the estate for house and land. However, as the state broadened political participation and increased opportunities for more individuals to become active in public life, the dynamics between estate and tenants began to shift.

One early piece of governmental legislation intended to increase local self-governance was the Education Act (Scotland) 1872. Previously, decisions on schooling were the prerogative of the heritors of the parish and its minister: now anyone with an annual rent of at least £4 and who paid the school rate was eligible to elect the newly created local school boards.¹⁴ The establishment of a non-sectarian compulsory education system included provision for the teaching of religious education and observance. If parents objected to how religion was taught, they could invoke a 'conscience clause' to withdraw their children. Géraldine Vaughan's two contrasting perspectives from urban west central Scotland offer an insight into the challenges school boards faced, illustrating that denominational differences came to the fore in civic life. She contrasted where Protestants objected to Catholic control and where the latter complained that Protestant-controlled board schools were dismissive of their faith.¹⁵ On the Long Island, the estate assumed its control of

¹² James A. Stewart Jr, 'The Clan Ranald: History of a Highland Kindred' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1982), 488.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Legislation followed regarding police, public health, local government and broadening the franchise.

¹⁵ Allan W. MacColl, *Land, Faith and the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh, 2006), 108; Géraldine Vaughan, "'Papists looking after the education of our Protestant children!'" Catholics and Protestants on western Scottish school boards, 1872–1918', *IR* 63 (2012), 30–47; Géraldine Vaughan, 'We Pay the Rates!' Catholic Voluntary Schools and the Scottish School Boards (1872–1918), in *A City of One's Own*, ed. S. Body-Gendrot, J. Carré and R. Garbaye (Abingdon, 2016), 163–77. Elsewhere, elementary schools were

decision-making would continue with its representative, the factor, elected to both Barra and South Uist boards as their chairs. An immediate tension arose: the boards had Protestant majorities and although local priests were elected and argued that Roman Catholic children should be taught by teachers of the same faith, their efforts were rebuffed.¹⁶

The restoration of the bishopric of Argyll and the Isles six years later bolstered priests' efforts to support their parishioners. The bishop, Angus Macdonald soon realised that his Long Island diocesan flock was understandably wary of challenging the power the estate had over their lives, should they vote for Catholic representatives. He and his island priests, described as 'warriors in the cause of the Faith' began a campaign which developed into the 'battle of the schools'.¹⁷ The estate, from proprietrix to local factor believed that Roman Catholics were fixated on appointing faith-led teachers rather than the best candidates, whereas the priests saw faith as an essential criterion to their selection and in their teaching.¹⁸ Each board election and teacher appointment became tussles for control. The bishop and priests felt so strongly their parishioners were being treated unfairly that their respective evidence to the Royal Commission chaired by Lord Napier into the condition of crofters and cottars in the Highlands and Islands at least featured, if not focussed on grievances over teaching and teacher appointments.¹⁹ The Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act 1886, passed in the wake of the Napier report gave tenants legal security of tenure over their crofts, shifting the balance of power between tenants and estate. The 'battle of the schools' and the land rights many of their parishioners had gained, encouraged priests to become more overtly active in challenging the assumed power and influence of the proprietrix and her factor.²⁰ They stood for election

established because the Hierarchy thought board schools offered 'limited potential' to provide faith-based education and would either promote the Church of Scotland or encourage secularism. J. H. Treble, 'The development of Roman Catholic education in Scotland 1878–1978', *IR* 29 (1978), 111–39, at 111–13.

¹⁶ Education (Scotland) Act, 1872, section 68.

¹⁷ Edinburgh, Scottish Catholic Archives [SCA] DA23/12–16, cover page of 'Correspondence relating to the "Battle of the Schools" in Barra & Uist 1878–1889'. 'They contain some interesting matters which illustrate the enormous powers enjoyed by factors and estate minions. Some of Bp A's letters are hard hitting, thus we should revere these our warriors in the cause of the Faith.'

¹⁸ S. Karly Kehoe, *Creating a Scottish Church: Catholicism, Gender and Ethnicity* (Manchester, 2010), 132.

¹⁹ Report of Her Majesty's Commissioners of Inquiry into the Condition of the Crofters and Cottars of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland (Napier Commission) (Edinburgh, 1884). Eight priests gave evidence to the commission, including the bishop: five were from the Long Island estate.

²⁰ By 1903, every board school in South Uist had a Catholic teacher. Treble, 'Roman Catholic education', 116.

themselves and encouraged their parishioners, now also able to vote by secret ballot in the newly created, openly elected parish councils and county council, to support fellow Roman Catholic candidates to these and school boards.²¹ Greater influence and control of school board decision-making was not in itself sufficient to ensure that island youngsters were taught by teachers of the faith: teacher vacancies in what was to many a remote place, with the challenges of location and island life, could prove difficult to fill. However, through ecclesiastical networks, graduates of the Roman Catholic female teacher training colleges at Mount Pleasant in Liverpool and Notre Dame in Bearsden were encouraged to apply when vacancies occurred. Those encouraging them apparently accepting, notwithstanding local pupil-teachers, that there would be less Gaelic spoken in the classroom, with its consequent impact on local culture.²² The estate did not give up power or influence easily: it also had a long memory. One priest, Fr John MacKintosh at Bornish had a particularly fractious relationship with the estate: allegedly caught poaching, Lady Gordon Cathcart and her husband complained to Bishop Smith. He eventually promised to move the priest when a vacancy arose.²³ Fifteen years earlier, Fr John had been instrumental in setting-up the Stoneybridge branch of the Highland Land Law Reform Association, the factor claiming he ‘pulled the wires’ during local land agitation.²⁴

Even after crofters secured the right to the ground they occupied and worked, there were calls for more land to sustain the then overcrowded population. Across fences and walls, often built as rent in kind, was farm land from which their ancestors had been dispossessed by the proprietor and which they claimed could help alleviate the problem. On South Uist, crofters made applications to the Crofters’ Commission to have farm land

²¹ G. S. Pryde, *Central and Local Government in Scotland since 1707* (London, 1960), 18.

²² Jane McDermid, ‘What to do with our girls? The schooling of working-class girls in Scotland, 1872–1900’, *History of Education Research* 71 (2003), 28–39; Bernard Aspinwall, ‘Catholic teachers for Scotland: the Liverpool connection’, *IR* 45 (1994), 47–70. Aspinwall listed seven English and four Scottish graduates of Mount Pleasant College who taught on the Long Island in the later-nineteenth century: Kehoe, *Creating a Scottish Church*, 134; Frederick G. Rea, *A School in South Uist: Reminiscences of a Hebridean School Master 1890–1913* (Edinburgh, 1997); Tom O’Donoghue, ‘The Role of Male Religious Orders in Education in Scotland in the Decades Leading up to the Education (Scotland) Act, 1918’, in *A History of Catholic Education and Schooling in Scotland: New Perspectives*, ed. Stephen J. McKinney and Raymond McCluskey (London, 2019), 81–102, at 94.

²³ SCA, DA42/67/1, Bornish-correspondence relating to complaints about Rev. John Mackintosh, 1898.

²⁴ Aberdeen, University of Aberdeen [UoA], MS3600/1/15/7/2, Letter to Lady Gordon Cathcart from Ranald Macdonald, 7 August 1884.

apportioned.²⁵ The commission and the more recently created Congested Districts Board, which Fr MacKintosh petitioned on his parishioners' behalf, were tasked with finding ways to reduce congestion including purchasing land to re-purpose as crofts, but neither had power to force landowners to sell.²⁶ Locals at Iochdar in Ardkenneth parish petitioned the board to divide the 3,100 acre farm of Gerinish, symbolically occupying it in 1901. There were protracted negotiations with Lady Gordon Cathcart and further unrest before the government took entry in 1907, and allocated land to twenty crofters and families.²⁷ Though described as the 'new settlement' by Ardkenneth priest, Fr Donald Walker, it was the re-instatement of croft lands cleared by the trustees of Clanranald in 1828.²⁸ The resumption of crofting on Gerinish, later enlargements and the post war division of Drimore and Drimsdale farms, also following raids were important local markers in the return of land to later generations of those cleared from it, even though the estate decided who occupied the 'new' crofts.²⁹ These examples, education and land were not simply historical in the abstract nor perceptual; they contextualised how crofters worked the land, the claims they and their predecessors had over it, as well as the role their pastoral leaders took in the public sphere to protect and uphold their faith, heritage and culture. In her consideration of the history of faith and its use of Gaelic on South Uist, Kathleen Reddy concluded that 'Catholicism and forms of Catholic religious expression have been a marker of identity' of its people.³⁰ The markers which identified and shaped the community recalled multiple layers of endurance, challenge and defence of its faith and place.³¹ The land itself was a tapestry of division and occupation which had been hard fought, a place where Gaelic was widely spoken as the language of choice at home, in the community and the liturgy.

²⁵ For example, to enlarge crofts by taking land from Ormiclate farm. Daliburgh, South Uist Archives [SUA], Letter to William MacKenzie, Secretary, Crofters Commission from Donald Paterson, 1 October 1895.

²⁶ The Congested Districts Board was created following the report of the 'Deer Commission' in 1895, though its recommendations were not specifically enacted by government. Ewen A. Cameron, 'The political influence of Highland landowners: a reassessment', *Northern Scotland* 14 (1994), 27–45, at 33.

²⁷ Bob Chambers, 'For Want of Land: a Study of Land Settlement in the Outer Hebrides, Skye and Raasay Between the Two World Wars' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Aberdeen, 2013), 185, 199–200; Macdonald, 'New settlement'.

²⁸ Macdonald, 'New settlement'.

²⁹ Chambers, *For Want of Land*, 200.

³⁰ Kathleen Reddy, 'Ùrnaighean nan Gàidheal: Text and Context of Gaelic Prayer in South Uist, 1880–1960' (unpublished MRes thesis, University of Glasgow, 2017), 23.

³¹ John Watts, *A Record of Generous People: a History of the Catholic Church in Argyll & the Isles* [Watts, *RGP*] (Glasgow, 2013), 123–29.

These markers of identity did not necessarily equate to any insularity on the part of the parishioners of Ardkenneth or the wider Uists. Forty-five men from the parish made the ultimate sacrifice during two world wars.³² In the immediate post-war period, the British government needed to renegotiate its relationships with wartime allies, Empire countries and colonies. Academic studies have considered how individuals and communities were affected by the policy and decisions of the state. Both in Linda Ross's study of the impact nuclear developments at Dounreay had on the local community and Jonathan Hogg's *British Nuclear Culture*, oral and unofficial narratives provide perspectives from those whose lives were affected by events and decisions many miles away.³³ The release of official papers has enabled historians to appraise government policies and how they determined relations with other nations. These, considered alongside the record of parliamentary business in Hansard reports offer insights into how key decisions were taken and received, as well as the detail the government willingly shared publicly. Other analysis has been undertaken into how events often determined or influenced the motivations and decisions of politicians, including, for example, Britain's relationship with the USA in respect of nuclear capability, events around the Suez crisis and the nation's financial position.³⁴

Britain's nuclear policies were greatly influenced by how the war concluded and its geopolitical consequences.³⁵ Lewis Betts has debated to what extent its defence policy reflected the 'nuclear belief systems' of decision-makers who believed that as a 'great power', Britain needed to acquire its own weaponry to 'deter Moscow and to influence Washington'.³⁶ They did so regardless of the burden it would put on national expenditure and the wider economy.³⁷ It also proved to be difficult to control costs: by 1953 a review of defence spending predicted

³² <http://warmemscot.s4.bizhat.com/warmemscot-ftopic4204.html> (accessed 22 February 2022); now available via <https://web.archive.org/>

³³ Linda M. Ross, 'Nuclear Fission and Social Fusion: the Impact of Dounreay Experimental Research Establishment on Caithness, 1953–1966' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of the Highlands and Islands, 2019); Jonathan Hogg, *British Nuclear Culture: Official and Unofficial Narratives in the Long 20th Century* (London, 2016).

³⁴ As examples, W. Scott Lucas, 'Divided We Stand: the Suez crisis of 1956 and the Anglo-American "alliance"' (unpublished PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, 1991); Lewis D. Betts, 'Nuclear Belief Systems and Individual Policy-makers: Duncan Sandys, Unmanned Weaponry, and the Impossibility of Defence' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of East Anglia, 2014).

³⁵ Betts, 'Nuclear Belief Systems', 8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, quoting A. J. R. Groom, *British Thinking About Nuclear Weapons* (London, 1974), 576.

they would ever-increase and needed to be curtailed.³⁸ That year, recognising that the developing atomic industry was not best managed by a government department, the Cabinet decided to create an independent body, the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA), to be responsible for developing both military and civilian nuclear uses.³⁹ While the bill to create the UKAEA progressed through Parliament, the government announced that a new fast 'breeder reactor and experimental research establishment' would be established at Dounreay in Caithness.⁴⁰ The nation's financial reserves had become so depleted that the Treasury suggested to Chancellor Harold Macmillan that American aid might be sought, though this was not progressed. Despite the financial pressures, in line with Prime Minister Winston Churchill's 'defence through deterrents' policy, the 1955 Defence White Paper included the construction of a fusion bomb and an intermediate range ballistic missile.⁴¹ As Britain assessed how best to respond to Egypt's nationalisation of the Suez canal in 1956, its need for American aid was discussed once again.⁴² Britain, France and Israel concluded they should take control of the canal area by military occupation. The USA was particularly vocal in the condemnation which followed, conscious it would otherwise be unable to rebuke the Soviet Union, which had just invaded Hungary.⁴³ There was a run on the pound in the stock markets: the Treasury and Bank of England concluded that devaluation would be necessary. Only after Britain and France agreed to withdraw their troops did Britain, with USA support obtain a loan from the International Monetary Fund.⁴⁴

The inherent friction between international relations, defence, and the costs and time required to develop weapons resulted in apparently awkward juxtapositions. On 27 July 1955 recently elected Conservative Prime Minister, Sir Anthony Eden told the House of Commons he had

³⁸ Geoffrey C. M. Skinner, 'Anglo-American Relations, 1939–1958' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 2018), 303.

³⁹ Kew, National Archives [NA], Cabinet, 14 January 1953.

⁴⁰ HC, 1 March 1954, 524.

⁴¹ Skinner, 'Anglo-American relations', 320–22; HC, 1 March 1955, 1893–2012.

⁴² Eamon Hamilton, 'Sir Anthony Eden and the Suez Crisis of 1956: the Anatomy of a Flawed Personality' (unpublished MA Res thesis, University of Birmingham, 2015), 87.

⁴³ Pnina Lahav, 'The Suez crisis of 1956 and its aftermath: a comparative study of constitutions, use of force, diplomacy and international relations', *Boston University Law Review* 95 (2015), 1297–1354, at 1344; Office of the Historian, 'The Suez crisis, 1956', <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/suez> (accessed 25 October 2024).

⁴⁴ James A. Boughton, 'Was Suez in 1956 the First Financial Crisis of the Twenty-First Century?', *Finance and Development: a quarterly magazine of the International Monetary Fund* 38 (2001), available on line at <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2001/09/boughton.htm> (accessed 2 August 2024); HC, 4 December 1956, 1050–68.

invited Soviet Premier Nikolai Bulganin and First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev to visit Britain in an effort to reduce the Cold War strain between East and West, the first top-level official Soviet visit in thirty-nine years. Paradoxically, the same day in the Commons Minister of Defence Selwyn Lloyd announced that to counter perceived threats from the Soviet bloc, the government had decided to site a guided missile training range on the Uists. Newspapers reported both stories without comment, *The Times* on the same page, *The Scotsman* in neighbouring columns.⁴⁵ Soon, though, the implications of the decision became a recurring media story as reports emanated from Parliament and the Uists: constituency MP Malcolm MacMillan challenged the government's rationale for its location. His questions included asking which other 'less populated' places had been considered, 'what acreage of land and what number of crofters and others will be adversely affected; and whether he (the minister) has considered the objections of many local people and others to the project?'⁴⁶ The government's response was that an overseas range would be too impracticable and costly, with the necessity of basing service units abroad. It maintained the islands were the only suitable location: they were remote, had large open spaces and no centres of population near, and were close to open water where foreign powers would find difficulties in observing tests.⁴⁷ It took nearly two years before the Air Ministry revealed the other sites considered but found deficient: 'Lewis, Cardigan Bay, Shetland, the Moray Firth, the Pentland Firth, the Bristol Channel, East Anglia, Libya and French North Africa'.⁴⁸

The government's insistence that cost and logistics precluded rocket testing being undertaken abroad ignored its other recent decisions. In 1952, Britain had detonated its first atomic bomb at the Monte Bello islands off the north west coast of Australia.⁴⁹ Other tests were to take place at Woomera and across a large area of northern South Australia between 1956 and 1963, displacing Indigenous peoples from their homelands.⁵⁰ A subsequent Australian royal commission accepted that

⁴⁵ *The Times*, 28 July 1955, 8; *The Scotsman*, 28 July 1955, 7.

⁴⁶ *Glasgow Herald*, 28 October 1955, 8; HC, 25 October 1955, 545.

⁴⁷ Betts, Nuclear Belief Systems, 55–6.

⁴⁸ *Glasgow Herald*, 9 April 1957, 9.

⁴⁹ Atomic Energy Act 1946; UK atmospheric nuclear weapons tests, Factsheet 5: UK programme (undated), on line at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/82781/ntvfactsheet5.pdf (accessed 2 August 2024); HC, 23 October 1952, 505. The Australian government agreed to the tests taking place.

⁵⁰ *Tribune*, 5 November 1946, 5; *Mercury*, 13 March 1953, 2; Keith Suter, 'British atomic tests in Australia', *Medicine and War* 10 (1994), 195–206, at 195. The site was known as Maralinga. The Australian tests were highlighted in an article on Britain's rocket developments. *Glasgow Herald*, 17 August 1955, 6.

major nuclear tests could not take place near Britain's heavily populated areas, commenting that because of 'the politics of the minor trials', homeland radioactive contamination was unacceptable.⁵¹ One British military witness, challenged by the commission's counsel about why minor trials could not have been held in Scotland's remote areas offered his personal opinion, 'I doubt if the people owning the estates in Scotland would look on that with very great favour. They are interested in pheasants and deer.'⁵² The commission did not ask whether the government had investigated the feasibility of using its existing remote firing ranges, including at Cape Wrath.⁵³ The inference from the military witness was that there was no point in even mooted the idea with landowners, but the reality was different on the Uists when the government identified its site for a rocket range. South Uist estate owner, Herman Andreae complained publicly that he had received no advance warning of the government's proposals, though civil servants claimed he and the proprietor of North Uist, the Duke of Hamilton had been informed.⁵⁴ Later Andreae said he had 'received the categorical imperative that he had to hand over his land': his views are interesting given that two years earlier he had unsuccessfully advertised the whole estate for sale.⁵⁵ Fraser MacDonald opined that 'the Hebridean seascape was the obvious option from the outset, having previously been considered for various military projects in the preceding two decades.'⁵⁶ The Minister of Defence nonetheless recognised the 'local difficulties' of 'the wholesale destruction of crofting town-ships, the use of the range sea area by trawlers and various "religious sensitivities".'⁵⁷

The near contemporaneous decision to site a nuclear reactor and research establishment at Dounreay in the national interest did not

⁵¹ The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia (Mr Justice J. R. McClelland), vol. 1 (Canberra, 1985), 402, 404.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 405.

⁵³ Cape Wrath had been used for gunnery firing 'since the beginning of the last century'. DTE Scotland, Public information leaflet (n.d.), 13, on line at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/43345/dte_info_leaflet_scotland.pdf (accessed 2 August 2024).

⁵⁴ *Glasgow Herald*, 28 July 1955, 7. The estate archive is mute until after the government announcement. Correspondence between the Air Ministry and Ministry of Defence on 20 July 1955 stated that landowners, the South Uist sporting syndicate and Inverness County Council were forewarned. Forrest, *A guide*, 18.

⁵⁵ *The Scotsman*, 29 July 1955, 7; *Glasgow Herald*, 5 April 1957, 8; *The Times*, 22 July 1953, 4; 13 August 1953, 12; 24 March 1954, 8.

⁵⁶ Fraser MacDonald, 'The last outpost of Empire: Rockall and the Cold War', *Journal of Historical Geography* 32 (2006), 627–47, at 634 references PRO AIR 19/723, Secret memo, Ministry of Defence, June 1955.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

experience the same ‘local difficulties’.⁵⁸ As with South Uist, the government’s process was ‘decide-announce-defend’.⁵⁹ However, whereas the MP for the Western Isles, Malcolm MacMillan questioned the government’s decision, his Caithness counterpart, Sir David Robertson mounted a ‘one-man advocacy campaign’ to his party colleagues in government, the local civic and wider community, intended to achieve a positive decision for his constituency.⁶⁰ On Uist, military staff would be posted and their families accommodated in a new self-contained village, but those operating the reactor would be civilian staff who applied to relocate, potentially for considerably longer periods, allowing families to integrate more easily within the local community. One example of the impact of an increased population in Caithness was construction of the first Roman Catholic chapel in Thurso.⁶¹ Apart from large acreage, proximity to the sea to cool the reactor and discharge effluent, and abundant fresh water, the location required ‘labour supply and the amenities of community life’ close-by.⁶² The government assessed that Dounreay was the ideal site, having the ‘further advantage that development should greatly contribute to the revival of the Highlands’, employing ‘600 men, of whom about half will be recruited locally.’⁶³ Both developments were distant to large centres of population, their ‘siting and safety’ having ‘a direct link between risk and location’.⁶⁴

Distance from conurbations was a shared requirement, but there was a key difference between the land identified by the government for both developments. At Dounreay it was unoccupied and already state-owned, whereas much of the South Uist land identified by Air Ministry surveyors was crofting land over which crofters had security of tenure.⁶⁵ Under-Secretary for Air, Ian Orr-Ewing stated later that initial surveys were carried out ‘in conjunction with the local interests’ in summer and autumn 1953.⁶⁶ Supposedly a ‘surreptitious “preliminary site reconnaissance”’ at the time, the grazing clerk at Gerinish ascertained their purpose and Fr John apparently learned of the plans.⁶⁷ While security of tenure for crofters was a defining element of the Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act

⁵⁸ Ross, ‘Nuclear Fission’, 77.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Linda M. Ross, ‘Dounreay: creating the nuclear north’, *SHR* 100 (2021), 82–108, at 83.

⁶¹ Ross, ‘Nuclear Fission’, 305.

⁶² HC, 1 March 1954, 524.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Ross, ‘Nuclear Fission’, 49, 60.

⁶⁵ Section 5 of the Atomic Energy Authority Act 1954 gave the UKAEA power to compulsorily purchase land.

⁶⁶ *Glasgow Herald*, 8 March 1957, 10.

⁶⁷ Fraser MacDonald, ‘Paul Strand and the Atlanticist Cold War’, *History of Photography* 28 (2004), 357–374, at 370; Watts, *RGP*, 212; email from Rev. Michael J. MacDonald,

1886, on 6 May, the Crofters (Scotland) Act, 1955 changed the statutory protection from the crofter to their croft holding.⁶⁸ This legislation also gave crofting landowners the right to apply to the Scottish Land Court for the resumption of croft land for local benefit.⁶⁹ The landowner had to demonstrate that the ‘reasonable purpose’ to which land was resumed would either benefit the croft, estate or public interest. Examples cited in the act included housing, tree, allotment and other planting, and the construction of roads or harbours.⁷⁰ Subsequent successful applications by the landowners of North and South Uist, in conjunction with the Secretary of State for Air showed that the court embraced within the definition of public interest the resumption of land in the national interest, even though the act made no mention of ‘military projects’.⁷¹

On South Uist, initial reaction to the government decision was positive: the prospect of employment was welcomed, the loss of croft land apparently accepted. Fr John was among those supportive of the range development.⁷² Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Defence, Lord Carrington and ‘Defence Chiefs’ visited the Uists for what the estate factor described as primarily ‘psychological purposes – to soften down any local opposition and to assure the crofting population that very little disturbance to crofting land would take place’.⁷³ During their visit, the party made it known that it was intended to build a new settlement on the island. The factor told his lordship that the estate would strongly resist the proposal, an objection supported by Msgr MacKellaig at Daliburgh. Lord Carrington surprised the factor, telling him that ‘the Eochar Parish Priest’ (Fr John) welcomed the idea of a new ‘boom town’ in his parish, something the latter later repudiated, describing it in distinctly racist tones as comparable to ‘the colonialists in Africa. The black people were good enough to polish the boots and do menial tasks, but not anything else.’⁷⁴ The number of personnel and families expected to live on South Uist fluctuated: a self-contained settlement of up to 4,000 service personnel and families, with its own school, church, shops and other facilities was mooted, then it was suggested that over 2,000 ‘airfield staff, the fighter squadrons, and the men under training at the rangehead’ would be housed

29 August 2019; Seonaidh MacLean, *Falmhachadh Uibhist (Deserting Uist)*, Trusadh 2, 4, Mactv for BBC Alba (2009), broadcast 22 February 2010.

⁶⁸ Iain F. MacLean, ‘Recent developments in crofting law: what Highland practitioners need to know’, 22 October 2012, available on line at <http://www.terrafirmachambers.com/articles/RecentDevelopmentsInCroftingLaw.pdf> (accessed 2 August 2024).

⁶⁹ *The Scotsman*, 7 May 1955, 9.

⁷⁰ Crofters (Scotland) Act, 1955, 12(1).

⁷¹ *Glasgow Herald*, 14 March 1957, 7.

⁷² *The Scotsman*, 15 August 1955, 6.

⁷³ SUA, letter to H.A. Andreae from H. D. McIntyre, 27 February 1956.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*; *West Highland Free Press*, 16 February 1979, 3.

on Benbecula, with a further 600 'operational, technical, (and) administrative' permanent staff on South Uist.⁷⁵

The scale and implications of the development become obvious to crofters by unexplained survey activity 'on their land and around their homes'.⁷⁶ They and Fr John reacted negatively, while 'island humour' suggested that a reunion would be arranged in Fife the following year.⁷⁷ Ongoing lack of consistent information fuelled locals' fears. Malcolm MacMillan later protested that in June 1956:

the Ministry of Defence said that the range would be a strip of land of 1,700 acres, but a month later, in the Inverness County Council's planning Committee, Lord Lovat said that the project will mean opening up the country, with the development of roads, schools, housing and modernisation.⁷⁸

The Land Court was subsequently informed there would be 840 military, and 300 wives and families.⁷⁹ MacMillan had been told by the Secretary of State for Air that rather than travelling from Benbecula daily:

they and their wives and families should be housed as near as possible to their work. A site for their accommodation on South Uist will be sought which will affect the crofting communities as little as possible. The north end of Loch Bee seems to be the most convenient locality, but the site will need to be surveyed and discussed with the county council and others concerned before a final decision is made. A new road will probably be constructed between the site and the rangehead and the main island road.⁸⁰

A year later, the Air Ministry intimated that the 'residential site' at Ardnamonie would 'completely destroy' six crofts and affect three others, the Land Court hearing having been informed that of the ten crofts affected, the majority of houses would be retained, while 'most' of the inbye land would be required for the range.⁸¹ A contractor, Wallis & Co, was appointed to construct the new settlement shortly before the development was scaled down in 1958.⁸² Given that information changed, with different implications locally and often only shared in response to questions, it is perhaps not surprising it created angst. Fr John's public

⁷⁵ HC, 19 April 1956, 103.

⁷⁶ *Glasgow Herald*, 17 August 1955, 7; 14 March 1957, 7.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ HC, 10 February 1958, 69.

⁷⁹ *Glasgow Herald*, 9 April 1957, 9.

⁸⁰ HC, 19 April 1956, 551.

⁸¹ *Glasgow Herald*, 10 April 1957, 11; 11 April 1957, 9; 6 April 1957, 9.

⁸² *The Scotsman*, 15 August 1958, 1.

responses to the situation islanders faced and the dangers the range posed to the community were made despite the guidance he and his fellow priests on the Long Island received from their bishop. His counsel was that they should avoid speaking to the media, but if they did, to take care what they said. This was something Fr John interpreted broadly, saying later, 'I communicate with the bishop on other matters, but not on this one. Probably one day he'll telephone to excommunicate me.'⁸³ Estate factor McIntyre disparaged Fr John's 'one-man affair' which he thought must have made him 'the most unpopular man ever to reign in any position on the island for many years', and which had resulted in it and his fellow islanders being 'a complete laughing stock' for his prevarication over the development, changing his position five times.⁸⁴

Fr John would have challenged that assertion. He claimed that 'the whole west coast is up in arms': it was not his campaign, nor a denominational issue, but 'one of principle', 'the People versus the Government', and that he was following the 'tradition here ... that the clergy are the leaders.'⁸⁵ He convened what became a heated and protracted large public meeting, framed by the fact that locals were already employed, and 'trucks, tractors, cranes, bricks and cement (were being) delivered daily' to construct workers' huts.⁸⁶ It culminated in the crofter attendees declaring unanimous condemnation of the threat to their homes and crofts, but unlike some previous protests over land locally, they agreed to protest peacefully. There was strong support for crofter's son Dr Mackinnon's declaration that 'we don't want to meet an enemy with sticks.'⁸⁷ Calum MacLean from the University of Edinburgh's School of Scottish Studies reported that an 'old man ... made a moving and impassioned speech in Gaelic, "All his life he had struggled to make a livelihood on his croft in Iochdar and to bring up his family, but now his whole world seemed to be crashing about his ears."⁸⁸ Behind that emotion were wider concerns of the 'threat to the Hebridean way of life and the crofters security of tenure'.⁸⁹ The croft was not in itself the issue, but the particular croft, as the elderly crofter alluded to at the meeting. It represented his "'lineage" territory, the tiny, finite space within which much of one's history is located', a 'fundamental referent of personal

⁸³ Fr Calum MacLellan, *Falmhachadh Uibhist*; *Time*, 1 April 1957, 67.

⁸⁴ SUA, Letter to C. G. Elbra from H. D. McIntyre, 6 March 1957.

⁸⁵ *The Times*, 28 February 1957, 4; *Glasgow Observer and Scottish Catholic Herald*, 19 August 1955, 1; *Time*, 1 April 1957, 67.

⁸⁶ *Glasgow Herald*, 8 March 1957, 7; *The Bulletin and Scots Pictorial*, 12 February 1957, 4.

⁸⁷ *The Times*, 18 August 1955, 4; *Glasgow Herald*, 18 August 1955, 5.

⁸⁸ *The Scotsman*, 11 August 1959, 6; *The Scotsman*, 12 August 1959, 6.

⁸⁹ *The Times*, 18 August 1955, 4; *Glasgow Herald*, 18 August 1955, 5.

identity', as well as a spatial 'anchor' 'symbolically and ideologically' providing 'a sense of cultural continuity' amid the flux 'of modern economic and technological life'.⁹⁰ The proposal also potentially directly affected Fr John's way of life as the Ardkenneth church croft was within the boundaries of the range. Fr John's opposition was attuned to this assessment that the presence of such a large influx of 'Rocketeers' threatened irrevocable damage to the foundations of daily island life, its culture and language, all key markers of the spirit of the place. Civil servants speculated whether military personnel posted there might remain to 'colonise' the region: Ross considers that as with official commentary relating to incoming civilian personnel into Caithness, the use of such language on their part was the rhetoric of a 'colonial hangover'.⁹¹ Had Fr John been aware of the speculation, though he might have been more pointed in expressing his already strong views that the range was 'a devilish thing' and an 'octopus whose tentacles are beginning to crush the life of the island'.⁹²

Fr John's campaign did not gain universal island support, nor endear him to the estate. The estate factor reported that he understood Fr John had 'been reprimanded from higher sources' for 'creating such a furor (sic) and drawing such attention to himself and the religious aspect', not to mention the 'annoyance' he had created with the 'Protestant community in the Grogarry area' over the nearby erection of the statue to 'Our Lady'.⁹³ However, proprietor Herman Andreae believed that there was no need to worry, but accept his being annoying because 'he will one day blow himself up'.⁹⁴ There were claims of a generational split, with 'everyone under 30' supportive of the development because it would bring 'excitement' and work.⁹⁵ One islander in his twenties advocated change, graphically describing the situation as a choice between 'tradition and money'.⁹⁶ He referred to the potential incomers as 'foreigners', but Fr John and those locals against the development found support from an eclectic loose coalition of other 'foreigners' on the mainland. Some recognised that the cultural landscape was under threat: Dr James Caird of

⁹⁰ Fiona Mackenzie, 'Where do you belong to?': Land, Identity, and Community in the Isle of Harris, Outer Hebrides, Scotland', paper, Department of Geography, Carleton University, Ottawa (1998), 2–3. MacKenzie quotes Anthony P. Cohen, *Whalsay: Symbol, Segment and Boundary in a Shetland Community* (Manchester, 1987), 108.

⁹¹ Ross, 'Nuclear Fission', 292, 293. She quotes NRS, DD12/3059/461, I. S. Montgomery, Scottish Development Department to Bishop, Department of Agriculture Scotland, 1 March 1956.

⁹² *The Times*, 2 February 1956, 2; *Glasgow Herald*, 18 August 1955, 5; 5 March 1957, 7.

⁹³ SUA, letter to H. A. Andreae from H. D. McIntyre, 27 February 1956.

⁹⁴ SUA, letter to H. D. McIntyre from H.A. Andreae, 26 March 1957.

⁹⁵ *Manchester Guardian*, 8 March 1957, 7.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

the University of Glasgow led Honours geography students in a ‘Domesday survey’ to study the island prior to ‘the atomic age’ arriving with ‘an influx of alien population and the availability of new occupations.’⁹⁷ Calum MacLean was concerned to record the islanders’ folklore before their lives would change irrevocably. His colleague at the School of Scottish Studies, Hamish Henderson became a mainland ‘resistance leader’ against the development.⁹⁸ The Religious Society of Friends; An Comunn Gàidhealach; the School of Scottish Studies itself; Edinburgh University Friends of Uist Association; and the London South Uist Protest Committee of the Executive Staffs no. 1 (London) Branch of the Association of Supervisory Staffs, Executives, and Technicians were amongst the many organisations which condemned the development, and *Life and Work*, the magazine of the Church of Scotland denounced the high-handedness of Whitehall for not consulting those affected prior to making the decision.⁹⁹ An Comunn Gàidhealach was particularly concerned about the influence incoming English-speaking children would have on their local Gaelic-speaking counterparts.¹⁰⁰ Five ‘Celtic scholars’, professors at the University of Oslo wrote to *The Times* to express their concern for the ‘Gaelic character’ of South Uist and other islands.¹⁰¹ Other newspaper correspondents included Sir Compton Mackenzie and actor James Robertson Justice, who played the island doctor in the film of the former’s novel *Whisky Galore*: they jointly decried the ‘premature lunacy’ the range represented in the race to the moon. Self-professed Roman Catholic and Gaelic speaker Moray McLaren described the range ‘a British Peenemunde’, the World War Two German rocket development and launch base. Poet and activist Hugh MacDiarmid, called on ‘all Scots worthy of the name’ to fight legally and ‘extra-legally’ if necessary, against its realisation, while Hector McIver from Shawbost on Lewis likened the proposal to a letter penned by Sir John Moore about his Highland regiment – ‘how best can you destroy a secret enemy than by making his end conducive to the common good.’¹⁰² Fr John’s campaign received support from Scottish Nationalists and others whose motivations he regarded as being imbued with the

⁹⁷ *Glasgow Herald*, 18 October 1956, 6.

⁹⁸ Fraser MacDonald, ‘Doomsday fieldwork, or, how to rescue Gaelic culture? The salvage paradigm in geography, archaeology, and folklore, 1955–62’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29 (2011), 309–33, at 310, 326.

⁹⁹ *Glasgow Herald*, 4 March 1957, 8; 25 March 1957, 5; 24 April 1957, 83; 28 September 1955, 8.

¹⁰⁰ *An Gaidheal: the Gael* 52.5 (1957), 18.

¹⁰¹ *The Times*, 4 November 1955, 5.

¹⁰² *The Scotsman*, 8 August 1955, 6; 12 August 1955, 6; 11 August 1955, 6. McLaren was a writer and broadcasting executive.

‘myth of romanticism’.¹⁰³ He rejected the latter as his arguments were rooted in the realities and heritage of island life.¹⁰⁴ In Caithness, where the local press supported the development of Dounreay, the *John O’Groat Journal* derided the ‘few outsiders’ who were ‘doing their best to keep the pot boiling ... (and should) ... leave the people in the rural areas to form their own opinion for themselves and make their own protests if they so desire.’¹⁰⁵

Fr John recognised the value of keeping most ‘outsiders’ onboard and embraced those prepared to travel to demonstrate their support locally. The meeting he convened in March 1957 was addressed by nationalist Wendy Wood, John Bannerman, the previous Liberal parliamentary candidate and Malcolm MacMillan, the sitting Labour MP.¹⁰⁶ Fr John refused to let the ministry’s resident engineer speak, and MacMillan reported that one nationalist speaker sported six inches of plaster on his forehead, having had ‘some difficulty, the previous night, in finding his way along the unaccustomed Hebridean roads ... (which MacMillan associated with) an old saying that on a dark Hebridean night in Benbecula one is apt to see even a white horse through a glass darkly.’¹⁰⁷ He likened the meeting to one which Sir Compton Mackenzie ‘in his best, or worst, and most profitable burlesques of the Western Isles could not have done any better.’¹⁰⁸ Others, with family or other connections also put pen to paper. The ‘Paisley bard’, expatriate South Uist poet Donald MacIntyre was concerned about the island becoming a target for foreign powers: in ‘*Òran nan Rocaidean (Song of the Rockets)*’ he wrote, ‘The rockets of destruction/ that came from America to kill us all. If they come to the tiny island of Uist/ we’ll all be dead if war begins ...’¹⁰⁹

Negative reaction to the range was very broad-based. Simon Campbell-Orde, honorary secretary of the Highland Society of London, founded by ‘elite Highlanders’ to promote and support Highland traditions and culture, protested on behalf of its committee of management about the ‘adverse effect’ the range would have on both these and

¹⁰³ *Glasgow Herald*, 4 March 1957, 8.

¹⁰⁴ *Glasgow Herald*, 4 March 1957, 7; 5 March 1957, 7.

¹⁰⁵ *John O’Groat Journal*, 15 March 1957, 2.

¹⁰⁶ Wendy Wood also opposed the Dounreay location for a nuclear reactor in 1953. Ross, Dounreay, 84.

¹⁰⁷ SUA, Letter to C. G. Elbra from H. D. McIntyre, 6 March 1957; HC, 7 March 1957, 593.

¹⁰⁸ HC, 7 March 1957, 593.

¹⁰⁹ *Falmhachadh Uibhist; Gilbert MacMillan Òrain Dhòmhnail Ruaidh Phàislig (The Songs of Donald MacIntyre, The Paisley Bard)* (2013) <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/91607/1/91607.pdf> (accessed 2 August 2024).

the ‘welfare of the people.’¹¹⁰ South Uist’s former county councillor, Charles Cameron complained that no surveyor had been interested to ask locally how the range would ‘fit in to the island’.¹¹¹ The Crofters’ Commission recognised that ‘large scale development schemes’, such as at Dounreay and Uist ‘upset the rhythm of local life’, brought inter-generational tensions and ‘the flush of easy money’ short term, albeit that some of it would be invested in homes and land.¹¹² The commission stated its intention to ‘devise a programme’ to ‘maximise the long-term economic benefit’ the rocket range would bring to Uist, and it also encouraged bodies involved in promoting Gaelic to ‘devise ways to strengthen the old culture so it may not suffer.’¹¹³ An ‘ex Crofter-Fisherman’ from Barra who incorrectly claimed he was the only ‘native’ to have written to *The Scotsman*, supported the development, scathingly commenting that ‘when the crofters start to eat grass, they will become economically independent’.¹¹⁴ Crofter’s son Neil MacPherson of Haddington encouraged by the prosperity the range offered, countered the views of ‘Edinburgh Highlanders’ and asked that governmental efforts to achieve peace continue.¹¹⁵ Surprisingly, neither the Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland nor the National Trust for Scotland, both prominent campaigners against Highland glens being dammed to produce hydro-electricity made any public comment: there they had argued that the land and its natural assets were more important than what Jill Payne described as its ‘utilitarian’ use, ‘necessary for the benefit of the majority’.¹¹⁶ Though the government did consult them both and a number of other bodies, it is unclear whether they regarded the South Uist landscape as predominantly man-made or other reasons were more important: no newspaper reportedly sought their comments.¹¹⁷ Given the extent of news coverage and public reaction to the development, the *Glasgow Herald* and *The Scotsman* both took editorial positions, the former calling on the government and islanders to ‘work successfully towards the prosperity and content of the

¹¹⁰ *The Times*, 31 August 1955, 11; Katie L. McCullough, ‘Building the Highland Empire: the Highland Society of London and the Formation of Charitable Networks in Great Britain and Canada, 1778–1857’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Guelph, 2014), ii. The Campbell-Ordes were previous proprietors of North Uist.

¹¹¹ *The Scotsman*, 16 August 1955, 8.

¹¹² *Glasgow Herald*, 4 June 1957, 4.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *The Scotsman*, 24 August 1955, 9.

¹¹⁵ *The Scotsman*, 10 August 1955, 6.

¹¹⁶ Jill R. Payne, ‘Land-use and Landscape: Hydroelectricity and Landscape Protection in the Highlands of Scotland, 1919–1980’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Dundee, 2008), 183.

¹¹⁷ *Glasgow Herald*, 8 March 1957, 7.

island.’¹¹⁸ *The Scotsman* criticised the government’s proposed compensation and the impact the range would have on the place and islanders’ inheritance: the editorial reminded islanders and others that Naboth refused the recompense he was offered for his vineyard saying, ‘The Lord forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee.’¹¹⁹

The editorial’s biblical quotation may well have heartened Fr John: prior to the government’s announcement, he had initiated an ecclesiastical mission to renew his parishioners’ faith focusing on their vernacular language and public witness. To Fr John, adherence, heritage and the common life were inextricably intertwined. His mission emulated those of his local predecessors, of whom Fr Allan MacDonald is particularly remembered for using Gaelic during worship.¹²⁰ Fr John took opportunities to reinforce that cultural narrative tangibly and spiritually. The collection of 700 local artefacts representing the island’s cultural identity which he amassed in the 1950s and 1960s today underpins the collection at Kildonan Museum.¹²¹ In 1952, he successfully proposed to Archbishop Godfrey, the Vatican’s Apostolic Delegate to Britain that the Virgin Mary be called *Moire ro Naomh nan Eilean* or ‘Our Lady of the Isles’.¹²² By giving the Virgin Mary a local ‘persona’, he bolstered what Brian Osborne called the ‘geography of identity’ – the emotional pull a place and its culture have on its people.¹²³ Responses to that emotional pull were people and location-specific: thirty years earlier in the industrial parish of Carfin in Lanarkshire, the priest, Fr Thomas Taylor sought to ‘weld together a disparate community’ locally and further afield by creating ‘an open-air Basilica to the Mother of God’.¹²⁴ Over 200 ‘mostly Irish (but also Lithuanian) miners’ volunteered to construct a grotto which was inspired by and dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes, and was to become a ‘Scottish place of pilgrimage, with French inflections’.¹²⁵ On South Uist to bolster locals’ identity, Fr John instituted the practice of a small statue of ‘Our Lady’ being taken house-to-house in Ardkenneth and

¹¹⁸ *Glasgow Herald*, 19 August 1955, 6.

¹¹⁹ *The Scotsman*, 15 August 1955, 6; 1 Kings 21:1–15.

¹²⁰ Rea, *A School in South Uist*, 46.

¹²¹ Kildonan Museum: Taigh Tasgaidh Chill Donnain, celebrating South Uist’s cultural heritage, <https://kildonanmuseum.co.uk/kildonan-museum> (accessed 2 August 2024).

¹²² Michael J. MacDonald, ‘Our Lady of the Isles’, 25 November 2017, <https://www.rcdai.org.uk/www.rcdai.org.uk/articles/our-lady-of-the-isles.html> (accessed 2 August 2019); Watts, *RGP*, 212, translates her title as ‘Mary most holy of the Isles’; and elsewhere as ‘Our Lady, Queen of the Isles’, *Glasgow Observer and Scottish Catholic Herald*, 19 August 1955, 1.

¹²³ Osborne, ‘Landscapes’, 40.

¹²⁴ Alana Harris, ‘Astonishing scenes at the Scottish Lourdes: masculinity, the miraculous, and sectarian strife at Carfin, 1922–1945’, *IR* 66 (2015), 102–29 at 104, 106–7.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

Bornish parishes. This encouraged the occupants and their neighbours to meet in fellowship to recite an evening Gaelic Rosary, taking the faith into the common life of the community.¹²⁶ On 8 September 1953, the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Pope Pius XII issued an encyclical, announcing that 1954 would be a Marian year to venerate the Virgin Mary during the centenary of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception.¹²⁷ Fr John determined to embrace the Pope's suggestion that the Catholic faith could be 'revived' by creating public shrines to the Virgin Mary, encouraged their construction at roadsides to link up the villages of the parish.¹²⁸ In their doing so, Fr John was able to demonstrate his parishioners' public devotion in the daily life of the parish. The first shrine, completed on the main road beside Ardmore lochan, was dedicated on the Feast of the Assumption in August 1954.¹²⁹

Locally, and in print it has been suggested that the shrines were placed to become intentional monuments to demonstrate the distinctive faith and language of the local community to incoming contractors, the military and their families.¹³⁰ This contention does fit the timescale of pre-announcement surveys and the encyclical, but is only fully valid if Fr John both knew the plans in sufficient detail before the official government announcement and was able to put his strategy into action as a result. The shrines were erected over a period and certainly the shrine on the road from Loch Carnan harbour, built to service the range, by its prominent location would be obvious to passing servicemen. Fr John's next and most ambitious project as a symbolic public expression of faith, was the erection of a statue of 'Our Lady', which would physically dominate and watch over his parish. In 1954 he commissioned Hew Lorimer to design and erect it on Rhueval.¹³¹ The rocket range put its location into doubt and Fr John's campaigning interrupted fundraising.¹³² Initially it was believed the statue could be erected at its chosen location, though 'War Office planners' regarded it as a potential "beacon" for submarines or aircraft, where 'spies ... in the guise of pilgrims' might come.¹³³ Fr John responded that the statue would be a 'constant reminder

¹²⁶ MacDonald, 'Our Lady of the Isles'.

¹²⁷ 'Fulgens Corona: Encyclical of Pope Pius XII, proclaiming a Marian year to commemorate the centenary of the definition of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception', section 22, http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_08091953_fulgens-corona.html (accessed 2 August 2024).

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ *Glasgow Observer and Scottish Catholic Herald*, 27 August 1954, 5. Twelve were planned; one, at Stilligarry was not completed.

¹³⁰ Watts, *RGP*, 212.

¹³¹ Descriptions of its height varied between twenty-five and thirty feet.

¹³² Burnett, *The long nineteenth century*, 184.

¹³³ *Glasgow Observer and Scottish Catholic Herald*, 19 August 1955, 1.

to people engaged in testing weapons of war, that there are better things in life.’¹³⁴ He refuted suggestions that its erection ‘was other than a side issue’ but if it became necessary to re-locate it, islanders would ‘accept the decision graciously’.¹³⁵

The location of the statue became part of the wider media story. Fr John’s opposition to the range brought the press to his presbytery door and telephone (Carnan 243), and financial donations towards the campaign, so much so that he was ‘as busy as a member of Parliament in an election’.¹³⁶ Although a district councillor, he was criticised for his involvement in local politics, something one islander rejected as ‘poppycock’: ““(T)he priests know more of the world than we crofters do. Father John is both one of us and a priest.””¹³⁷ As previously mentioned, it is unclear to what extent he was aware of the government’s intentions, but he knew how to take the initiative. The Scottish Office had arranged for its Under-Secretary of State to be visiting him when the decision was announced in Parliament. Fr John left his visitor to take a ‘phone call from a newspaper reporter seeking his reaction to the announcement. Re-joining the politician, the latter advised him that ‘two minutes ago something of very great import to the future of Uist was announced in the House of Commons’, to which Fr John interrupted to say he already knew a rocket range was to be ‘built on the machair behind (his) church. He thought I had the second sight.’¹³⁸ Fr John worked to make the most of media interest: when Queen Elizabeth toured the Hebrides in August 1956, the royal party visited South Uist. Her itinerary included both the proposed rocket range site and St Michael’s Ardkenneth where she viewed a maquette of the planned Rhueval statue, treading the balance between state and local interests.¹³⁹ The media recognised that local responses to the proposed rocket range were sufficiently newsworthy to take television cameras to Uist: British Pathé News carried a story, *Rocket Plan Angers Islanders* and the BBC recorded a television programme in a similar vein.¹⁴⁰ Independent Television intended to fly crofters to London for a special programme where their objections to the range would be broadcast.¹⁴¹

The media did not unquestionably accept the arguments from South Uist. The *Manchester Guardian* thought the stushie a ‘storm in a quaiçh’

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *The Times*, 18 August 1955, 4.

¹³⁶ *Manchester Guardian*, 8 March 1957, 7.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*; *Glasgow Observer and Scottish Catholic Herald*, 19 August 1955, 1.

¹³⁸ *West Highland Free Press*, 16 February 1979, 3.

¹³⁹ *Glasgow Herald*, 15 August 1956, 5; 16 August 1956, 5.

¹⁴⁰ *Glasgow Herald*, 28 March 1957, 9.

¹⁴¹ *Glasgow Herald*, 7 March 1957, 9.

and the *Glasgow Herald* questioned whether the local community was ‘prone to xenophobia and resistant to change.’¹⁴² The *Guardian*’s assessment appeared to discount the call on the Secretary of State for Scotland by the priest at Daliburgh, Msgr MacKellaig and Rev. M. Macdonald, the local Church of Scotland minister to hold a public inquiry because the community thought it was the victim of ‘broken promises’, fuelled by how much land the Air Ministry wished to resume. Tactically astute, Fr John timed protests to raise the objectors’ profile prior to the meetings of the Scottish Land Court.¹⁴³ It was claimed that at least fifty-four crofters had received resumption notices and islanders believed the total acreage required, 1,389 acres was considerably more than originally expected and were it resumed, would result in the ‘end of crofting’ locally, even although 550 acres would still be ‘available for controlled grazing.’¹⁴⁴ However, the *Guardian* claimed the land required was unchanged and that the strong negative reaction to the resumption notices was because the Air Ministry and landowners had failed to ‘explain adequately’ the effects on crofting land and how much would be resumed.¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Fr John knew, or was well-advised on how to obtain publicity and keep the issue in the public eye. He deployed pithy ‘one-liners’ to gain press coverage: ‘it would need the British Army to get the crofters off the land’ and following a meeting of mothers at Daliburgh to discuss the effects of incomers which he convened, he commented that they ‘feared for (the morals of) their daughters’ from the incoming military.¹⁴⁶

The most surprising media story emanating from Ardkenneth presbytery was the announcement that should their objections be ignored, Fr John and his parishioners would emigrate to Canada en masse.¹⁴⁷ It played to the portrayal of crofters being once more ‘dispossessed’, as an evocative word as ‘cleared’, this time not by the estate but by the state.¹⁴⁸ As Annie Tindley showed, ‘clearance’ has become a ‘portmanteau word, a spark for a whole set of political and emotional responses’: Fr John alluded to these when he predicted that emigration from South Uist resulting from state evictions ‘would cause a

¹⁴² *Manchester Guardian*, 6 March 1957, 8; *Glasgow Herald*, 5 March 1957, 5; 28 March 1957, 9.

¹⁴³ *Glasgow Herald*, 4 March 1957, 7; 6 April 1957, 9.

¹⁴⁴ *Glasgow Herald*, 4 March 1957, 7; 14 March 1957, 7; 6 April 1957, 9.

¹⁴⁵ *Manchester Guardian*, 6 March 1957, 8.

¹⁴⁶ *Glasgow Herald*, 6 April 1957, 9; *Manchester Guardian*, 7 March 1957, 4.

¹⁴⁷ *Glasgow Herald*, 4 April 1957, 8; *The Times*, 19 March 1957, 8. *The Irish Times*, 1 April 1957, 6, reported the emigration would be to New Zealand.

¹⁴⁸ Hansard, HC, 10 March 1958, 584; *Evening Times*, 27 September 1955, 9.

revolution in Scotland.¹⁴⁹ Following the government's announcement he had raised islanders' concerns that 'they may lose their crofts, whether by eviction or by "voluntary" emigration.'¹⁵⁰ His proposal was as audacious as its potential to re-awaken the bitterness felt locally about the clearances from South Uist and Barra in the 1850s by then owner Colonel John Gordon of Cluny.¹⁵¹ During her ownership between 1878 and 1932 his daughter-in-law, Emily Gordon Cathcart, held the consistent belief that emigration was part-solution to population congestion: her lasting wish was that the Long Island estate be sold and the proceeds used to support those wishing to emigrate. Until 1958 her trustees advertised loans locally at a low rate of interest to 'assist intending emigrants from these Islands to settle in the British Dominions, Colonies, or Dependencies'.¹⁵² Fr John's proposal also risked bringing to locals' minds the more recent and controversial emigration schemes of Fr R. Andrew MacDonell in the 1920s and 1930s, supported by the Canadian government.¹⁵³ He did garner ecclesiastical support at home, but the then incumbent of Ardkenneth, Fr William Gillies was one of at least two Uist priests critical of MacDonell's schemes because they resolutely objected to his targeting Catholic tenants, who landowners thought to be 'undesirable', and also because of poor organisation by 'the touch of the hand who presumably guides these matters', which had resulted in settlers' 'expectations' not being met.¹⁵⁴ Fr John's scheme, though, was a chimera: he subsequently stated there no intention for it to come to fruition.¹⁵⁵ Nevertheless, it gained the attention of politicians from the Scottish diaspora. Canada's Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, a local MP commended the islanders' 'good taste' to wish to continue their way of life on the Newfoundland coast.¹⁵⁶ The archbishop of Newfoundland and members of the Canadian Parliament

¹⁴⁹ *The Times*, 9 September 1955, 3; Annie Tindley, "'This will always be a problem in Highland history": a review of the historiography of the Highland clearances', *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies* 41 (2021), 181–194, at 182; *Time*, 1 April 1957, 67.

¹⁵⁰ *Glasgow Observer & Scottish Catholic Herald*, 19 August 1955, 1.

¹⁵¹ Eric Richards, *The Highland Clearances: People, Landlords and Rural Turmoil* (Edinburgh, 2000), 219–24.

¹⁵² Paul Strand and Basil Davidson, *Tir a'Mhurain: the Outer Hebrides* (London, 1962), 121.

¹⁵³ Marjory Harper, *Emigration from Scotland Between the Wars: Opportunity or Exile?* (Manchester, 1998), 101.

¹⁵⁴ Marjory Harper, 'Enigmas in Hebridean Emigration: Crofter Colonists in Western Canada', in *Canada and the British world*, ed. Phillip Buckner and R. Douglas Francis (Toronto, 2006), 198–214, at 206; Marjory Harper, 'Crofter Colonists in Canada: an experiment in empire settlement in the 1920s', *Northern Scotland* 14 (1994), 69–107, at 100.

¹⁵⁵ Mary Bremner, *Falmhachadh Uibhist; West Highland Free Press*, 16 February 1979, 3.

¹⁵⁶ *The Times*, 19 March 1957, 8.

with Scottish connections were supportive, and the island of Boularderie, off Cape Breton was mooted as their new home, particularly as it was a 'jealous guardian' of Gaelic into which South Uist settlers would readily assimilate.¹⁵⁷ Canadian MP Allan MacEachen, though, called on all 'Highlanders in this house' to campaign to dissuade the British government of its plans.¹⁵⁸ *The Times* reported that the islands off Newfoundland were unsuitable for colonisation and Sir Compton Mackenzie suggested Ireland a better alternative.¹⁵⁹

Not content with writing to the press, Mackenzie used satire to disparage and poke fun at officialdom's response to local objections over the fictional rocket range proposed for his Little Todday. In *Rockets Galore*, he 'invoke(d) the spirit of Dean Swift to turn the ink into vitriol', portraying a government which offered the 'necessary finance' to crofters to emigrate to Canada.¹⁶⁰ Employing the same fictional characters and islands popularised in *Whisky Galore*, Mackenzie's islanders voiced his criticism of 'ever more greedy bureaucracy' using the power of resumption in the public interest and decried the powerlessness of the 'Land Commission' against the cloak of national interest.¹⁶¹ Little Todday ultimately and somewhat fancifully thwarted the range construction by the apparent discovery of a new, pink seagull. It may have been whimsical, but on South Uist the Nature Conservancy Council [NCC] petitioned the government to minimise disruption to wildlife while it progressed designation of Loch Druidibeg as a National Nature Reserve.¹⁶² Designation had been underway since 1949 and when the estate was marketed for sale in 1953, the NCC expressed interest in purchasing the loch, the adjacent mountain, Hecla, and some machair, but seller Mr Andreae had responded there was no need as he already cared for it as a reserve.¹⁶³ With changed circumstances, the NCC made clear the loch should be 'satisfactorily defended against encroachment from the Guided Missiles Range'.¹⁶⁴ It successfully lobbied the government to mitigate disturbance to the wildlife and their habitat, persuading it not to site the range control on Hecla, but on Rhueval where

¹⁵⁷ *The Times*, 26 March 1957, 9; *Pictorial*, 19 April 1957, 10; *West Highland Free Press*, 16 February 1979, 3.

¹⁵⁸ Canadian Parliament, House of Commons, 22 March 1957, 2600.

¹⁵⁹ *The Times*, 26 March 1957, 9; *Pictorial*, 19 April 1957, 10.

¹⁶⁰ Compton Mackenzie, *Rockets Galore* (London, 1957), 144–145; *The Scotsman*, 17 August 1958, 8.

¹⁶¹ Mackenzie, *Rockets Galore*, 144–45.

¹⁶² *Glasgow Herald*, 4 March 1957, 7.

¹⁶³ John Love, 'Druidibeg: the early years', *Teachd an Tir* 16 (2002), 9.

¹⁶⁴ SUA, Letter to Mr Hill, Higgs and Hill from C. G. Elbra, 10 April 1957; SUA, Letter to H. A. Andreae from H. D. McIntyre, 1 May 1957.

it thought ‘the areas to be taken would not interfere with the nesting of birds.’¹⁶⁵

While the NCC lobbied in private, Fr John operated mainly in the public domain. His media efforts bore some fruit: overnight negotiations following the first day of the Land Court hearing on Benbecula elicited from the Air Ministry what the *Manchester Guardian* described as a ‘guarded, complicated and vague statement’ sufficient for the majority of South Uist objections to be withdrawn. The lochdar common grazing on the machair would not be included, but ‘Ardmonie’ crofters were still against the range as their land was designated for staff accommodation.¹⁶⁶ The ministry agreed that no crofter would pay rent for grazing land not fenced off on the range and once the actual requirements were assessed, surplus land would be returned: it was also ‘very conciliatory’ about roads in Gerinish.¹⁶⁷ Employment opportunities including the possibility of local apprenticeships were touted, and any Sunday working would be only for essential maintenance. BBC Television’s subsequent *Behind the Headlines* programme claimed that locals predominantly regarded the range as ‘a good thing’ because it offered employment opportunities and gave them a role in supporting ‘national defence’, quite different to the initial divide between those against the development and those who foresaw employment opportunities and wider progress.¹⁶⁸ Fr John’s response to the statement was that as crofters accepted the concessions and were prepared to see the range built, he was ‘resigned’ to its construction.¹⁶⁹ Achieving agreement also enabled him to re-focus on his most ambitious public project, the erection of the statue on Rhueval.¹⁷⁰ His public prominence during the campaign had brought considerable work, ‘innumerable officials, lawyers and visitors (and) hundreds of letters’ worldwide. That profile also gave him opportunities to encourage Catholics and others to ‘share’ financially in the project and ‘give honour to Our Blessed Lady’: there were suggestions that up to six replicas of the statue would be erected in Nova Scotia by Hebridean emigrants to face towards Scotland.¹⁷¹ He also had time to source ‘a Lourdes centenary medal, some shells from

¹⁶⁵ Love, ‘Druidibeg: the early years’, 9; *The Scotsman*, 5 December 1957, 6. The NNR was created on 8 July 1958, following the purchase of the loch and 2,577 acres for £1,800, John Love, ‘Druidibeg NR-part II: the first decade’, *Teachd an Tir* 17 (2002), 8.

¹⁶⁶ *Manchester Guardian*, 10 April 1957, 7.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*; *Glasgow Herald*, 10 April 1957, 7.

¹⁶⁸ *Glasgow Herald*, 28 March 1957, 9; 17 August 1955, 7.

¹⁶⁹ *The Times*, 11 April 1957, 6; *Glasgow Herald*, 10 April 1957, 11.

¹⁷⁰ *Glasgow Herald*, 16 August 1958, 6.

¹⁷¹ Kellie Castle, LSA, Letter to Hew Lorimer from Fr John Morrison, 24 August 1957; *Catholic Standard*, 1 November 1957, 4. *Glasgow Herald*, 15 August 1958, 8.

the Sea of Galilee, and some earth from the Roman catacombs' to place in its foundations.¹⁷² When there were renewed local objections to the range in March 1957 the estate factor thought it was partly because the radar station and boundary fence would be close to the statue's site.¹⁷³ Although there was general agreement as to where it was to be located, an adjustment and permission to be on site were given in June, and the estate only formally sold the land to the Diocese on 8 October 1958.¹⁷⁴ Its consecration took place the day following the government's announcement that it had awarded the major construction contract for the range.¹⁷⁵

In many respects, the award of the contract could be read as signifying that the state had prevailed in building its intended rocket range. Its power was intact and it had achieved its original aims. The concessions it made simply reflected the inevitable fine-tuning of its requirements and did not reflect any sign of weakness of its position. The government had successfully fended off attempts to stop the development. These included ongoing calls for a public inquiry, amongst them Fr John who claimed that the government was denying the crofters their democratic rights, and an unsuccessful motion in the Commons by 170 members of Parliament.¹⁷⁶ It had rebutted claims of any 'double-crossing' of the community, stating that had there been 'substantial objections' it would have convened an inquiry, but none had been received by the relevant bodies.¹⁷⁷ However, this reading of events ignores the conflicting messages received on South Uist at the time. It was difficult to make sense of official decisions: locals working on the development were paid-off in July 1957 when the RAF formerly took over Benbecula airport. In August, the Land Court gave the Air Ministry permission to use 1,860 acres of crofting land. Within two months it became obvious that a conversation was being held elsewhere but not being shared locally when the contractor, Higgs and Hill 'shipped all their heavy equipment out' and paid off its island employees.¹⁷⁸ On 31 October the Commons was told that the 'whole rocket range project was being

¹⁷² *Catholic News Service* – Newsfeeds, 11 August 1958, 121.

¹⁷³ SUA, Letter to C. G. Elbra from H. D. McIntyre, 6 March 1957; Keith Graham, 'The Rocket Range Cases', in *No Ordinary Court: 100 Years of the Scottish Land Court*, ed. The Scottish Land Court (Edinburgh, 2012), 114–5.

¹⁷⁴ LSA, Letter to Hew Lorimer from MacArthur, Stewart and Orr, 10 June 1958.; SUA, Feu charter by Herman Anton Andreae in favour of the trustees of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Argyll and the Isles, Site for statue at Rhueval, South Uist, 1959.

¹⁷⁵ Higgs and Hill Ltd had been involved since 1955. *Glasgow Herald*, 15 August 1958, 7.

¹⁷⁶ *Glasgow Herald*, 27 March 1957, 7.

¹⁷⁷ *Glasgow Herald*, 24 September 1955, 7; HC, 25 October 1955, 545; *Glasgow Herald*, 13 March 1957, 7; 1 April 1957, 8.

¹⁷⁸ HC, 10 February 1958, 582; 20 November 1957, 361; 10 February 1958, 68–72. *The Scotsman*, 5 December 1957, 1.

re-examined in the light of the need for national economy and of the latest developments in defence'.¹⁷⁹ The government attempted to spin the official narrative: Minister of Defence, Duncan Sandys claimed credit for 'bringing industry to the Highlands' including Dounreay, only to be ridiculed by Malcolm MacMillan for his conflating it with the Hebrides. MacMillan called for the government to make 'some kind of restoration of the social and economic life of the Uists' given the 'disturbance, chaos and confusion' it had caused.¹⁸⁰ Eventually, on 4 December having faced questions about potentially abortive expenditure of £500,000 on preparatory work, the government announced that because of changes in defence policy and affordability, testing would be shared with existing facilities in Anglesey and Aberporth, and the capital cost of the scheme reduced from £20m to £5m.¹⁸¹ Only surface-to-surface missiles would be fired and land requirements would be 'greatly curtailed'.¹⁸² *The Scotsman* criticised the government, publishing a 'limping history of this unfortunate scheme' under the headline, 'Bang becomes a fizzle'.¹⁸³

In the wake of the government's volte-face, it decided to pay compensation to both the crofters still affected, as well as those included in the previous plans but whose land was no longer required. It also announced that it would not use any powers of compulsory purchase.¹⁸⁴ No new settlement would be built and no crofters would be cleared to create the rocket range. *The Scotsman* criticised the government for 'exciting the maximum criticism' and suggested that islanders might not 'relish selling their heritage for a smaller mess of pottage than was originally offered'.¹⁸⁵ Equally critical, the leader in the *Glasgow Herald* described the islanders as pawns 'in a game of high strategy', declaring the government's actions were another example of giving 'colour to the common Scottish belief that in London they neither know or care about feelings across the border'.¹⁸⁶ The clerk of South Uist District Council hoped the decision would result in an 'appreciable reduction in disturbance'.¹⁸⁷

¹⁷⁹ HC, 4 December 1957, 579.

¹⁸⁰ HC, 20 November 1957, 578.

¹⁸¹ *Manchester Guardian*, 5 December 1957, 1; NA, Cabinet Office, Memorandum by the Minister of Defence, 26 November 1957; HC, 4 December 1957, 579. A Ministry of Defence spokesman expected the total cost not to exceed £1.5 million, in addition to the £500,000 already expended. *Glasgow Herald*, 5th December 1957, 9.

¹⁸² *Manchester Guardian*, 5 December 1957, 1.

¹⁸³ *The Scotsman*, 5 December 1957, 6.

¹⁸⁴ NA, CAB 195/17/1, Joint Intelligence Committee, meeting, 28 November 1957.

¹⁸⁵ *The Scotsman*, 5 December 1957, 6.

¹⁸⁶ *Glasgow Herald*, 5 December 1957, 11. The leader article coupled the rocket range announcement with the Army Council's refusal to fund the kilt as the regimental dress of the amalgamated Highland Light Infantry and the Royal Scots Fusiliers.

¹⁸⁷ *The Scotsman*, 5 December 1957, 1.

Inevitably, the press speculated about the real reasons for changes to government policy. Suggestions included the importance of the machair to crofters, sustained local opposition, and crofters unhappy with the low level of compensation determined by the Land Court threatening to picket the land being developed. One journalist questioned whether locals' intentions not to take work connected with the range or seek an ex-gratia payment for the disruption had been wise.¹⁸⁸ Locally, Fr John's campaign was regarded as the key factor in the government's decision.¹⁸⁹

The narrative of the response by the local community and its MP to the rocket range is one of rejection and resistance. This was in stark contrast to Caithness where the local MP, authorities and press promoted and welcomed the benefits of an incoming nuclear industry. Caithness was described as a 'place apart', an epithet equally applicable to South Uist.¹⁹⁰ Both communities' relative location and accessibility had created a 'robust, closely-knit, self-reliant 'community' which in the case of the former was regarded by one local who returned to a key post at Dounreay to be 'independent to the point of being insular in its outlook, but shrewd, hard-working and hospitable.'¹⁹¹ At the forefront was Fr John's campaign which successfully encouraged majority media acceptance of the narrative. His legacy is his tenacity, certainty and persuasiveness, though he was not always successful in the latter. His determination to realise his ecclesiastical mission aspirations were not embraced by his clerical neighbours: when Lord Carrington referred to the Ministry withdrawing its objections to the statue being erected 'on the hill at Drimore', Msgr MacKellaig said, 'That's not my pidgeon [sic] anyway', a response which those accompanying the former thought 'peculiar'.¹⁹² The minister of the island's Church of Scotland complained that the statue and those by the roadside were an act of 'defiance to the Protestant community', which would damage previously harmonious denominational relationships.¹⁹³ Fr John retorted that Catholics would not object if Protestants wished to erect a statue of their own, an either unthinking or provocative comment.¹⁹⁴

Fr John's campaign against the rocket range caused the local estate's factor and owner to regard him as a nuisance, though they differed about how to deal with him. The circumstances were different, but in

¹⁸⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 1 September 1958, 3.

¹⁸⁹ Christina Hall, *Tales From an Island: To the Edge of the Sea/Twice Around the Bay* (Edinburgh, 2008), 101.

¹⁹⁰ Ross, 'Nuclear Fission', 112. The local press made no reference to Caithness being remote or different.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, 114. Ross quoted locally born Donald Carmichael, Dounreay's general secretary.

¹⁹² SUA, Letter to H. A. Andreae from H. D. McIntyre, 27 February 1956.

¹⁹³ *Glasgow Herald*, 15 August 1958, 8.

¹⁹⁴ *Belfast Telegraph*, 18 January 1958, 8.

reinterpreting the role his predecessors undertook to be advocates for their parishioners threatened with punitive action by authority, then the estate and now the state, Fr John was well-placed to offer guidance and leadership to his congregation and wider community: his voice carried weight locally, with the media and some officials. What the estate did not recognise was that as a holder of public office and faith leader, faced with few details from the authorities about their intentions, it was unsurprising that Fr John's position changed in response to new information. Neither did it recognise the breadth and range of supporters his campaign amassed, nor its impact further afield. In Parliament, the local MP responding to suggestions that the Western Isles might become another Cyprus, noted that both had priests who were figureheads of protests against the policies of the British government. MacMillan remarked that Archbishop Makarios had been recently exiled for supporting the anti-British guerrilla campaign of Eoka, the Cypriot terrorist organisation, while 'popular and respected local priest' Fr John had 'managed to escape the Seychelles perhaps because the Government imagine, like good Sassenachs, that the Western Isles are equally far away and inaccessible.'¹⁹⁵

MacMillan's description of Fr John being well-liked reflected the views of many locals, though it did not necessarily equate with how they felt he represented them over the rocket range. His certainty of view and purpose could make it difficult for parishioners to challenge him to his face. When crofters met in March 1957 to renew their objections to the extent of land required, 'about 30 islanders' supported Fr John's proposal that they should call for the range to be completely rejected.¹⁹⁶ However, only three of the twenty crofting families affected in West Gerinish supported their priest's campaign.¹⁹⁷ With the mandate he had from the March meeting, Fr John shrewdly timed protests immediately before the hearing of the Land Court which resulted in the islanders obtaining official commitments to reduce the extent of land required, promise employment opportunities and compensation, sufficient to gain approbation from crofters and his concluding the campaign. That success, though given his comments of reluctant acceptance, perhaps reflected that he realised that his role as strategist, spokesperson and 'leader of the resistance' had also ended. His fortitude, conviction and commitment were key to what the campaign achieved, both practically and in its demonstration of 'power from below'.

Fr John framed the campaign around mitigating damage to the community's cultural heritage, endangered by the intrusion of the

¹⁹⁵ HC, 7 March 1957, 588, 627; *Glasgow Herald*, 8 March 1957, 7.

¹⁹⁶ *Glasgow Herald*, 5 March 1957, 7.

¹⁹⁷ Bremner, *Falmhachadh Uibhist*.

‘Rocketeers’ and their families. He also recognised that the latter could become islanders’ new neighbours. His campaign was seemingly not personal: when invited to attend the premiere of *Rockets Galore* a fortnight after crofters had erected ‘roadblocks’ to prevent construction during a row over compensation, his guest was his ‘very good unofficial friend’, but ‘official enemy’, Mr J. R. Brown, the same resident engineer he had barred from speaking at the public meeting described above.¹⁹⁸ Fr John highlighted the risks and impact he believed the range would have on crofters’ way of life and their hard fought occupancy and control of land. To him, the landscape was not only a memoryscape, but one lived in daily by their often direct descendants, who in turn were its custodians for future generations. Key was the public proclamation of the faith and protection of the culture of his community. Symbolically claiming the land by siting religious monuments prominently within the parish, Fr John sought to bound and bind its community and wider landscape together, nourishing the rootedness of the predominant faith and Gaelic culture. He so successfully re-purposed these shrines to signify resistance to the rocket range that today their construction and the campaign are regarded as synonymous. The distinctiveness of the place and its people continue to be accentuated by the physical, cultural and faith markers or symbols which Fr John instituted: the daily home visits of the small statue, the wayside shrines and the annual service on the Feast of the Assumption to ‘Our Lady’ at the Rhueval statue.

These overlapping and competing storylines, and icons which symbolise power and land use, populate today’s Ardkenneth landscape with strikingly contrasting and obviously different functionality and aesthetics. The rocket range’s radar station, an unintentional monument to state power and military might is physically juxtaposed above the statue to ‘Our Lady’, an intentional monument to faith and local culture. However, as Fr John declared, it is the latter which gives South Uist a ‘claim to distinction other than the dubious one of being Britain’s “Rocket Island”’.¹⁹⁹ The plurality and impact of these tangible markers in the island’s cultural landscape add to the complexity of reading and understanding the island’s biography of place.

NEIL BRUCE HOLDS AN MLITT IN THE HISTORY OF THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS. HIS MAIN RESEARCH INTEREST IS THE LONG ISLAND ESTATE DURING THE PROPRIETORSHIP OF THE GORDONS OF CLUNY AND LADY GORDON CATHCART.

¹⁹⁸ *The Bulletin and Scots Pictorial*, 29 September 1958, 9.

¹⁹⁹ *Glasgow Herald*, 15 August 1958, 8.