

Roots for Living column - Big Issue

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Roots for Living

A Occasional Column in *The Big Issue in Scotland*

by [Vérène Nicolas](#) & [Alastair McIntosh](#)

Roots for Living is an occasional column that we wrote together for *The Big Issue in Scotland*. A descriptive index for them all is given below. Note that the actual published titles to the column are usually made up by sub-editors to fit in with other material in the magazine, and so are not necessarily our own.

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No. 1, Issue 361, 7 February 2002, p. 11, "We all have a part to play in fighting injustice".

It took place in Edinburgh last week, and it was billed as a “Cuban Burns Night”. The Counting House in West Nicolson Street was resplendently decked out with pictures and quotes from the Bard and, of course, from the great *Che* – Ernesto Che Guevara Lynch.

Yes, Lynch! Che’s grandmother, Anna Isabel Lynch, is said to have been born in the far west of Ireland. She emigrated to South America, fell in love with a man called Guevara, and their child was Che’s father, Ernesto. A 1969 interview quotes Ernesto saying: “The first thing to note is that in my son’s veins flowed the blood of the Irish rebels.”

The Gaelic that Anna Isabel likely spoke would have been reasonably intelligible in the Hebrides. Scotland and Ireland of old were not separated by the sea but joined by it in a cultural continuum. The oceans were a superhighway for sailing ships, plying their trade along with genes, scholarship, faith and music.

We could almost look on Che as a fellow Scot. He was certainly a fellow Celt. But so what where he came from! For, as he wrote to a woman in Morocco sharing the same surname, “I don’t think you and I are very closely related, but if you are capable of trembling with indignation each time that an injustice is committed in the world, we are comrades, and that is more important.”

So, that’s the camaraderie by which Ceilidh and Salsa united in Edinburgh last week: poetry, justice, and the Revolution.

“I was telling you that to be a revolutionary requires having a revolution,” said Che Guevara in 1960.

And that’s our problem in Scotland, isn’t it? We don’t have a revolution. Yes, we have poverty, violence and injustice, but we struggle to get our heads round changing it.

After all, Che’s sort of revolution had its downside. “War,” as he said, “is always a struggle in which both contenders try to annihilate the other.”

Rabbie Burns’ achievement was to show that poetry, too, can cut the darkness, but without cutting people up. The Bard deplored those who “murder men, and give God thanks.” He yearned for a revolution where “the world would live in peace, man/ the din o war wad cease, man.”

Whilst not exactly a pacifist (he sent two pistols to the French Revolution), Rabbie could see that it wasn’t enough simply to hack back the branches of oppression. His “Tree o Liberty” needed more than blood-nourished soil to take root. In *The Vision*, he looked to the feminine qualities of the “Scottish Muse”. She offered, as he put it: “To give my counsels all in one,/ Thy tuneful flame still careful fan;/ Preserve the dignity of Man,/ With soul erect;”.

Che Guevara, too, thought about deeper roots for living. He reflected on the origin of the word, “radical”. In a 1960 “People’s University” speech, he said: “A *radical* is nothing less than that – one who goes to the roots. Those who do not see the roots of things, those who do not aid people’s security and happiness are not radical. This revolution is determined to eliminate injustice at the roots.”

Elsewhere, Che admitted, although it embarrassed him slightly, that being radical meant going

deeper than just fighting wars. The Brazilian popular educator, Paulo Freire, quotes him as follows: "Let me say, with the risk of appearing ridiculous, that the true revolutionary is guided by strong feelings of love. It is impossible to think of an authentic revolutionary without this quality."

Just four years before his early death, Che concluded that revolution entails: "a need to undergo a complete spiritual rebirth.... The change in consciousness does not take place automatically.... The alterations are slow and are not rhythmic; there are periods of acceleration, ones that are slower, and even retrogressions."

Here, then, is the famous Cuban revolutionary hinting that the most difficult part is changing ourselves. Given that the only "revolution" worth having is that which shifts from injustice to right relationship, it makes potential revolutionaries of us all. Yes, that requires working to change social and economic structures. But equally, it invites inner transformation.

No. 2, Issue 363, 21 February 2002, p. 11, "Access to *our* land is important for everyone".

It was the shite that most shocked him. Ali had his dignity. And this had gone too far: "Shite! F'ing shite – everywhere!"

The trip to Iona had started at dawn. Crossing Mull, he'd felt like the brooding emptiness of the place had crept into his soul.

Ever had your stomach pumped? Well, imagine the whole of the Isle of Mull connected up to your innards. Imagine miles of uninhabited nothingness sucking you out like the last gurgling swirl of a bath down the plughole.

At least, that's how Ali felt as he got out of the bus for the Iona ferry.

"It's only sheep shite," someone said. "Just wee balls of chewed-up grass. Vegetarian, man! Not like dogshite on the pavement!"

Well, city kids' first experience of the country is often like this. If your only window on nature has been a TV up a high-rise flat; if your only view has been a tombstone landscape of other tower blocks; then first contact with wild Scotland can freak you out.

The bus arrives, say, on a Saturday night. The Sabbath is a day of shock. Monday may see a burst of courage - to "get the hell outa here". Tuesday brings gritted survival determination. Wednesday, and you're starting to have a laugh, because you're achieving things physically outdoors. Thursday, and you maybe experience nature's beauty in ways you never thought possible without getting off on something. Friday cements a sense of profound community with the team. And then it's Saturday again.

In Ali's case, Saturday saw us manhandling him in tears back onto the bus. Iona had opened up a previously undreamed sense of freedom. Now he wanted nothing less.

Some people love the city with its culture, buzz, work and communities. Others, like Ali, get trapped. Yet too often the countryside's been "nae fur the likes o us". As the rent-striking Carbeth Hutters have found out, the rich seem to like maintaining urban-rural social apartheid.

This past week has seen the Scottish Parliament much criticised for time spent on foxhunting and land reform. Newspapers have been peppered with letters from a certain social class: one that, previously, relied on powerful influence, and dismissed protest as a vulgar pursuit of the great unwashed at Faslane.

From a line of fortresses between Perthshire and West Sussex, they've been generously telling our beyond-the-pale MSPs to focus, instead, on matters closer to home - like urban poverty!

Well, Parliament, actually, is doing precisely that. The reforms will help give land to the people. It will make country life and access more of an option for rural and urban folks alike. At present, just 1,000 owners control nearly two-thirds of the private land. They milk it for agricultural subsidies; they ranch it for recreational killing. They arrogantly say the natives couldn't run Scotland themselves!

"Don't forget you need an awful lot of money to run a Highland estate," said landowner Christopher Bourne-Arton on the BBC. "You either own a Highland estate or you run three Ferraris, six racehorses and a couple of mistresses - I mean, the costs are much the same."

True enough - but only when it's run as a rich-man's hobby estate and tax-dodge. The economics change if the land is used, instead, to overcome the crazy prices for a housing plot that monopoly ownership creates through artificial scarcity. That's why the people need land - for rural resettlement options, productive forests, wild nature and things that give life.

"When I look out my window all I see is concrete," said a Glasgow mother to one of us. "We're crammed like sardines into council flats. It's an unnatural environment that causes stress. Getting out into the country changes all that. The space ... gives you a sense of who you are. You just relax, and become your self."

And that's why Parliament's pursuit of the fox-hunting classes matters to us all. Land reform can benefit everyone. It's about the freedom to discover our selves. It's about belonging to Scotland. "You can't own the land; the land owns you".

No. 3, Issue 365, 7 March 2002, p. 11, "Communities benefit from including women".

A few years ago one of us spent an amazing year working in Ballymun on the north side of Dublin. At that time the very name of this peripheral housing scheme spelt "poverty", and Dublin City Council decided to do a Gorbals job on it.

As the planners, architects and contractors moved in, the people were to get decanted out. The high-rises would be levelled and Pleasantville would spring up instead.

The residents were delighted at the prospect of improved homes. But none of the planners were actually from the area. And they were all men! They knew much about structural engineering. But when it came to the layout of a kitchen, or the design that makes for a vibrant and neighbourly community, they had no idea.

Well, in Ballymun there happened to be a Women's Resource Centre, and they weren't having it! They held public meetings and insisted on participation. "At that time, we knew that we didn't have the skills and jargon to engage with the officials," said the Centre's Co-ordinator, Kathleen

Maher, “but we had a vision of what was good and healthy for the children in terms of safety, open-space and amenities.”

“Women are the wisdom of the community and family,” she continued. “They are a central element in the regeneration programme. They have a real sense of the surroundings and landscape because they are both using them every day in some ways, and are prevented from using them in other ways.”

The first thing these women realised was that they lacked confidence. They weren’t taken seriously because they couldn’t speak the planners’ language.

Undeterred, they went out and got the skills! The Women’s Resource Centre organised European-funded training courses in planning, architecture and social policy.

These training courses revolved around people’s living environment. It was popular education at its best. It enabled folks to tackle complex issues because the relevance to their day-to-day needs generated strong feelings and high levels of motivation.

In the end, two local women were co-opted onto the panel of experts. Together with the planners, they worked to rebuild Ballymun without ripping apart its rich social fabric.

Here in Scotland, there has been similar community regeneration work led by women.

We asked Cathy McCormack, an activist from Easterhouse, why it is that women often play such a prominent community role.

“They feel a deep sense of responsibility for their children and the future,” she said, “whereas men have been conditioned into thinking their role is to earn money. However, when that option’s not open to them, many men lose their identity and lose their way.”

That’s not a new observation in Scotland. No less a figure than Hamish Henderson, who wrote the *Freedom Come all Ye*, has puzzled over the state of Scottish men. In a famous paper called *The Women of the Glen*, he says: “The really baffling question which must surely occur to anyone reading the history [is] why was it the women, rather than the men who offered such resistance?”

Henderson pins the answer on cultural colonisation. He says it was the men’s culture, and men’s pride, that was broken by the events following Culloden. The women’s world was less visible, and so a “hidden world of matriarchy, exercising power indirectly” continued to resist various oppressions.

Scotland today still needs that strength. We need to redress the gender deficit whereby a malesteam mainstream denies women’s unique contribution. We need this for effective social inclusion policies. And we need it to build communities where women and men can stand united as equals.

Such is feminism put into practice. The great thing is that men benefit too. For as Adomnán, the 9th abbot of Iona wrote in 697 AD: “If you do not do good to my community on behalf of the women of this world, the children you beget will fail [and] scarcity shall fill your larder.” So watch out!

No. 4, Issue 367, 21 March 2002, p. 11, "True Scots seldom fit the tired, old mould"

In the run-up to Devolution, we were involved with a major project called *People and Parliament*. Indeed, the *Big Issue* generously ran a full page with its three research questions about identity, vision and political process for the Scottish people.

This produced a historical snapshot of Scottish attitudes on the eve of a new millennium. Most of the sentiments expressed would be a credit to any nation. But we also found a downside.

We found that white Scots generally described themselves as being open and hospitable to the stranger in their midst. However, this was often not the actual experience of black and ethnic minority Scots.

For example, a group of Muslim women in Midlothian said, "We wish to be a part of Scottish society [but] feel excluded by the society in which we live." Young Chinese Scots complained about racial stereotypes boxing them in to the catering trade.

Most damning of all was a group of African women in Aberdeen who said: "We feel like strangers, unnoticed, unseen, unheard, alienated, dehumanised, invisible in the scheme of affairs but visible enough for racial attack...."

Later, we personally got to know some of these African women, and they're fantastic vibrant people! You'd not want to see a Scotland without their likes. And yet, their experience of living here has been deeply mixed.

Well, that's a situation that needs sorting out. It led us into doing more research, this time with colleagues at Edinburgh's Centre for Human Ecology. The report came out two years ago and we provocatively called it, *Who's a Real Scot?*

In it we interviewed 27 black and ethnic minority groups. We found that every one of them experienced racism in Scotland – yes, every one!

Many were folks who'd been born here or had raised children here. Scotland was their home, yet their experience showed in statements like, "The seat beside me is always the last taken", and, "When the children feel discriminated I feel sad."

Asked what they wished of Scotland, many asked simply to be respected in both their Scots and their ethnic identities. As one young woman described such dual identity: "I enjoy being a bit of both. I like to mix my dress, I wear both Western and Pakistani. It's the same with food and music."

Or, as Prince Emmanuel Obike, a member of the project's multiracial steering group put it: "Look at me! I'm Nigerian, I'm Scottish and I'm Jewish! That's multiple identity for you, and that's what it means to be a real Scot!"

And quite right too! These were "new Scots", willing to make a rich and colourful contribution. They looked towards a Scotland in which, "We will be celebrating brownness"; a nation where,

“Our identity would be seen as positive point [without] always having to justify being Scottish”.

So, how do we get there? How do we overcome the disabling prejudice that “real Scots” are white? How do we deliver Robert Burns’ inclusive humanitarian vision, “for a’ that an a’ that”? How do we shift from mere toleration to warm acceptance?

Psychological research suggests there’s a little of the racist in us all – white and black alike. It comes from insecurity, but it falls away the more we understand the suffering racism causes, find common values, work together for shared achievement and stretch out the hand of friendship.

“Friends who are indigenous Scots give us a sense of belonging” – many of these new Scots – true Scots - told us.

There’s the importance of Scotland’s “sacred duty of hospitality”. That’s what gives life to the nation.

(Both reports mentioned here are on the web.)

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