

# Civic MacBough Goes To Town

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## Introduction: Mackay Country

The ‘assets’ over which social movements in the Scottish Highlands and Islands have most famously acted in the past two hundred years are usually summed up in one word: land. In recent years however this conceptualisation has been broadened to include concern over ‘intangible’ assets too. These are things which cannot be bought and sold such as language, poetry, the aesthetics of land and sea, stories, histories, songs and even ‘heritage’ (Braunholtz-Speight et al. 2011)<sup>2</sup>. This intervention provides a brief history of one social movement which emerged a decade ago in the north west mainland of Scotland: The Mackay Country Community Trust Ltd (MCCT). Their events sub-group is called Family MacBough. I begin by describing MCCT’s emergence and purpose, and then develop a vignette of the cultural and economic conditions which these people are confronting. This serves to tell the story of how and why Family MacBough went ‘to town’ to participate in the Civic Geographies session, and what that meant to Mackay Country activists.

Mackay Country, or Dùthaich Mhic Aoidh, comprises the communities in the north west corner of Sutherland in mainland Scotland, encompassing the civil parishes of Eddrachilles, Durness, Tongue and Farr. Historically the boundaries have varied and at times reached as far south as Lairg. In 1828 the remnants of the Reay Estate, comprising the last of the lands owned by the Mackay Clan Chief,



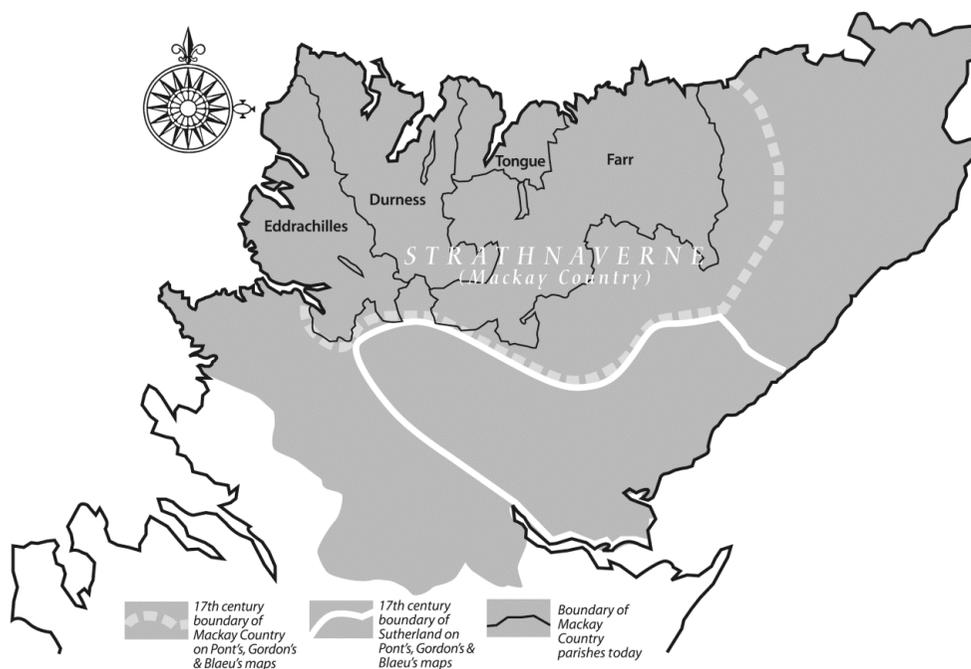
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<sup>2</sup> It is clear that these other kinds of assets, described by practitioners as ‘intangible assets’, have been the subject of protest and activism in the past several hundred years. A good example is the Gaelic language itself.

Lord Reay, were sold to George Granville Leveson-Gower, Marquis of Stafford, and Elizabeth, Duchess of Sutherland, proprietors of The Sutherland Estates. Figure 1a illustrates historic boundary shifts and the current civil parish boundaries. Figure 1b indicates what is known about the extent of land owned by Clan Mackay today<sup>3</sup>. The contrast is striking.

Mackay Country today has a population of 2,600 people and, at less than one person per square kilometre, one of the lowest population densities in Western Europe. In ‘development industry’ terms, this area is defined as ‘fragile’. The average household size is 2.2 persons; 48.7% of the population is aged 45 years and over; population and school rolls are falling and household incomes are 17% below the Scottish average<sup>4</sup>. The name Mackay Country comes from the Gaelic placename which is still used by older generations and Gaelic speakers of any age – Dùthaich ‘Ic Aoidh. This translates in English as Mackay Country but translations are always approximate and naming is never simple, given the naming of places in relation to neoliberalist accumulation by dispossession (see Berg 2011). MCCT’s aspiration is to resist such dispossession on behalf of the collective, by means conventional and abstract, including taking virtual possession.

*Figure 1a. A sketch summary of Mackay Country boundaries past and present (MacPhail 2006).*



<sup>3</sup> The hereditary peerage of ‘Lord Reay’ persists but has no current connection to Mackay Country. The 14<sup>th</sup> Lord Reay died on 10<sup>th</sup> May 2013. His obituary is informative in terms of historical circuits of colony and capital - <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/10057082/Lord-Reay.html>

<sup>4</sup> Based on 2001 Census figures: population fell by 121 people (4.4%) 1991-2001.

Figure 1b. Land currently understood to be owned by Clan Mackay. This sketch is from the Mackay Country website, supplied by an individual who researched Clan Mackay land. The 'little parcel' is beside the village of Reay on the Caithness border<sup>5</sup>.



Resisting the Highlandism which has negatively constructed a people and their place as undeveloped and undevelopable, the object is to offer alternatives, through what Spivak calls multiple 'speech acts' (Butler and Spivak 2007; Pittock 1997). While these attempted speech acts generate many words, their principal medium is non-representational embodied activity. Travellers' histories, geographies of song, arts, crafts, routes and stories, old and immediate: all of these indicate the new sorts of paths to travel. Ingold (2011: 147) proposes that

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.mackaycountry.com/>. For information on Clan Mackay, contact Strathnaver Museum where there is a Clan Mackay Room: [www.strathnavermuseum.org.uk](http://www.strathnavermuseum.org.uk)

‘traditional knowledge’ does not derive from a memory time-capsule: instead, from “a relational perspective, by contrast, knowledge subsists in practical activities themselves, including activities of speaking”. Such is the spur for the civic interventions under the project of Mackay Country. The group’s formal aim as described in The Memorandum and Articles of Association is “To provide a structure to allow the development of partnership between the communities and community groups operating in and comprising Mackay Country”. They are concerned with everyone who lives in Mackay Country today, and in Clan Mackay only in instances where that pertains to local and global histories (Grimble 1993).

This article draws on MCCT reports, working documents, events programmes, materials documenting events and volunteer discussions, my own participant observation as a volunteer and contractor, delivering projects, and my academic work on the role of culture in development in this region. The author is hence positioned as part of this evolving MCCT research alliance. My writing is a blend of auto-ethnographic and other methods<sup>6</sup>. The vocabularies and conceptual debates around ‘civic geographies’ are new to the MCCT’s committee and volunteers. The invitation to participate in AC2012 precipitated a self-conscious engagement in these means of expression and debate. MCCT did not self-identify as being an exemplar of counter civics, unsurprisingly, given that groups of this sort in this area do not presently deploy their aims and position through rhetorics of civic insurgency. MCCT’s subtle tenacity in that regard only becomes visible if one sets the group’s existence, utterances and speech acts within a context illuminated by knowledge of the history of Highland underdevelopment (Withers 1992: 155). Not everything can or need be said in words.

*Figure 2. The Bough Tent in Melness on the Kyle of Tongue in north Sutherland. Summer in the Straths project, May 2007. Photo by Family MacBough. Mackay Country Archive (SIS).*



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<sup>6</sup> Other active MCCT volunteers and committee members reviewed drafts of this article and the final version.

## Mackay Country and Family MacBough

Mackay Country is a group which actively seeks to remake place via cultural means and research activity, to facilitate economic regeneration in the locality (Ray 1998). In 2006 the group embarked upon a project for *Highland Year of Culture 2007* called *Summer in the Straths*. It involved a team learning to make the travellers' tents, or bough tents, starting with cutting and setting (shaping) hazel boughs in the winter (MacPhail 2013). During early summer 2007 the team, including tinsmith and craft metalworker Arthur Dutch, covered 150 miles along traditional travellers' routes led by two of the last people brought up in that itinerant trading lifestyle in Sutherland, Essie Stewart and Alec John Williamson. There were ceilidhs at known ceilidh sites and every school in the area was involved in *fèisean* – small group work exploring Gaelic and English storytelling, songs, tinsmithing, blacksmithing and the domestic and working lives of the traveller families<sup>7</sup>.

Mackay Country's involvement in Civic Geographies focused on this work about the Ceardannan (Summer Walkers), and included their bough tent, tinsmithing and itinerant storytellers<sup>8</sup>. This team has informally become a Mackay Country sub-group since 2008 on account of their annual events, education programme and commitment to each other. They have become known as Family MacBough<sup>9</sup>. I ran *Summer in the Straths* and have managed Family MacBough activities since then. Hamish Henderson said that the travellers were the settled population's libidinous alterego (Gunn 2010). In north west Sutherland the Ceardannan were and are considered part of 'the community' and accorded respect in that capacity whilst also being 'othered'. Perhaps 'the other' within to some extent, with the regular travelling routes forming pulsing veins through intractable territories. Today's activities by Family MacBough have rather unwittingly re-tched those trajectories with new and different functions in terms of goods and services, but again (or still?) embedding people in an area with less than one person per square kilometre into networks of conversation and belonging. In terms of civic geographies, this does indeed serve to mesh place, space and selves – dynamically conjuring boundaries through these perambulations punctuated by carnivalesque events. The securities sought by these activities are regional economic betterment; strengthening ties between and within disparate remote communities of place; an altered sense of place in place; an attempt at the same for those looking in from 'the outside' and an inclusive, opt-in, set of local identities. In the context of dominant

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<sup>7</sup> These Sutherland travelling families, the Stewarts and the Williamsons, are tinsmiths and famed storytellers who passed on news, songs and pipe tunes as well as providing essential goods and services.

<sup>8</sup> Every other written source uses the term 'bow' tent. Once we had to move into a written form, we used 'bough' instead of 'bow' because that accords better to the spoken form used by the Stewarts and Williamsons. Essie takes specific issue with the name being said in the same way as 'bow and arrow' as opposed to 'the bough of the tree'. Different areas and families take individual approaches to tent design, construction and vocabulary. Written accounts are relatively new and the sounds will vary according to local and group accents.

<sup>9</sup> Founder member Calum Millar coined the term 'Family MacBough'.

loss-based accounts of Highland history which revolve around Clearance and equate migration with trauma, asserting that movement is the constant and is a creative force is a ‘speech act’ which has the power to rework everything from the ground up. This is an innovative long term manoeuvre in the bid to secure a better future in and for this area<sup>10</sup>.

*Figure 3: The last family group to travel in Sutherland were brothers John and Peter with sister Katy Williamson, Assynt 1978. Notice the boughs and canvas in the cart. Photo courtesy of Willie Morrison.*



### Academic Harmonisation?

For Mackay Country there was a poignancy in the fact that the organisers invited non-academics into the heart of conference to break and create new ground in terms of research practice and process (Pain et al. 2011). My original involvement with Mackay Country as a group came in 2003, developing across the years (see Mills 2013). I was a Mentor for The Scottish Community Action Research Fund (SCARF)<sup>11</sup>. MCCT selected me to help them develop a research

<sup>10</sup> A 2004 MCCT Research Brief (Ebb and Flow) stated: “The history of the Gaidhealtachd is a history of movement. [...] As a research topic migration is uniquely inclusive. Everyone either has family who emigrated out of Mackay Country or family who emigrated into Mackay Country.”

<sup>11</sup> A community organisation could apply to this programme for help in assessing their community needs, carrying out research and creating or implementing development plans.

plan which they had called *The North West Sutherland Academic Harmonisation Project* – clearly destined for greatness, and perhaps even some sort of future twinning with other fans of fine titles such as... The Royal Geographical Society, incorporating The Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IBG)? MCCT's principal aim was to find out about and get access to as much academic research about the area as possible. Within the academe it is often not well understood that individuals without a university email address do not have access to on-line journals, e-book libraries and the wealth of source data available on-line for university research. When you add the significant matter of geographic disadvantage, it becomes clear that engaging with academic literatures is far from simple from within Mackay Country<sup>12</sup>.

In 2003, the initial aim was reworked more fully as follows:

For too long MacKay Country has been described and defined by lack, emptiness and problems – lack of people, lack of transport, lack of jobs, lack of services, lack of young people. When places are constantly defined in this negative way it has a pervasive effect on local people's view of themselves, their capabilities and **their possibilities**. Why would young people return to a place which has come to be known as only this? By working with local communities and drawing on historical and contemporary materials relating to MacKay Country, we want to change that. We want to collectively forge a new local identity which focuses on dignity and self-confidence for both individuals and communities. It is from this position that local people can best tackle local problems – the future is the hostage of our imaginations (Lansley et al. 2003).

The resultant project was called *Back to the Future – learning about the past in order to shape the future*. Since then Mackay Country has created part-time work or self-employed contracts for up to a dozen people annually and has provided training in fieldwork, research and archive skills. Those people have gone on to create their own small businesses locally or have used these skills in other employment<sup>13</sup>. Family MacBough came later and is just one aspect of this work. The large proportion of younger people actively involved in delivering Mackay Country work is unusual for a history based organisation, but that is principally on account of the bough tent based activities. These also shifted the gender balance to include a team of 'boys'. Until that point 95% of Mackay Country delivery was by women.

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<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/regeneration/pir/learningnetworks/cr/casestudies/casestudy124SCARF>

<sup>12</sup> The National Library of Scotland is 300 miles. Highland Council Library Service and The Highland Archive Centre are 100 miles. UHI has a growing library for students.

<sup>13</sup> This year the Gaelic projects and transcription business, *Facal*, created by Mackay Country fieldworker Catriona Macleod and her partner Alasdair Macleòid won joint first place as Gaelic Business of the Year: <http://www.facal.co.uk/index.html>

From *Summer in the Straths*, we learned many things. The daunting practical task was to assemble a team who could learn to cut boughs and build a tent, but were also able live for a month in tents in constant public view from morning till late at night. There is no 'green room' in a bough tent. We had 1,600 people visit our campsites for ceilidhs, casual and school visits in four weeks. We learned that Summer Walkers is a good translation of Ceardannan because you walk the roads from April to October within the area your family works. The cart is for the canvas and the kist; the tin working kit; the haberdashery goods to sell; the family group's goods and chattels – no one travels in the cart unless they are very infirm. They would get terribly cold sitting still like that. Through metalworking and caring for the tent, it became obvious that these ways of working and moving draw lightly on the resources along the routes and assume that recycling is an everyday way of operating, not a new, campaign-driven, add-on. Through doing and travelling and dwelling and learning we have come to see and feel the place in new ways. As long as MacDonald's (2011) worries over 'salvage geographies' are understood and paid heed, then these histories of the feet and the fireside help us to understand the changing land before us.

At conference we sought to impart some sense of these excitements and puzzles. We brought one end of the bough tent and set it up at David Hume's feet. He duly gazed down at us from his painting. Our projectors threw ten thousand photos an hour at him. We cluttered the space beneath his portrait with items made in tin and bone. Our laminated weather-proof Pont and Gordon maps might have been familiar to Hume from the later Blaeu versions (Withers 2005)? We chattered and wandered and wondered. Essie told her Ossian story. Visiting academics shared their tales. What might 'The Great Infidel' have made of all this?

For us it was intriguing. In advance we were a little afraid of feeling like the human zoo. The joining instructions stated that the Civic Geographies exhibitors were not permitted into any other part of the conference. This disappointed us but in my enthusiasm to make the most of the opportunities I paid £350 for a conference place to make sure I would get to encounter all the riches. That was an act of foolish over-preparation. Once we were installed, the hosting academics encouraged all of our team to wander at will into other sessions. We had some fascinating and complicated discussions with RGS-IBG staff about the difficulties of creating open access journal options. I caught Charlie Withers' Royal Scottish Geographical Society lecture on 'The Enlightenment and Geographies of Cosmopolitanism' with which I was sincerely delighted. This civic geographies experiment created important new aspects for the unfolding story of routes through which 'post-institutional' engagement can rhizomatically develop (Philo 2012).

Figure 4: Selected Mackay Country biographies.



Essie Stewart and Arthur Dutch welcoming Professor Murdo MacDonald at AC2012.

**Essie Stewart** was brought up in the tin-smithing trade and is a key tradition bearer who tells bi-lingual travellers' stories old and new. Essie's stories were learned from her grandfather, Ailidh Dall, in Gaelic. She created the English language versions from these Gaelic originals. Essie has worked with community projects, television and radio productions, academic researchers, traveller children in Liverpool, Manchester and Glasgow and was one of the delegates at the global *Open Roads* Conference, 2000. In 2013 The Royal Scottish Geographical Society employed Essie on their *Stories in the Land* project. <http://storiesintheland.blogspot.co.uk>

**Arthur Dutch** is a tinsmith and craft metalworker with an intricate knowledge of the history of Scottish metalwork design and travellers' histories. He learned his trade from his grandfather in Edinburgh. Their workshop, *Lonsdale and Dutch*, was next door to the artist Sax Shaw's studio. Arthur has worked with a significant range of international artists and designers over the years. This and his high quality renovation and replica work for National Trust for Scotland enabled him to continue his craft. His work includes the Charles Rennie Macintosh designs in the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow.

Essie and Arthur were part of the 'exhibit' at AC2012.

For MCCT, visiting this kind of social space created a need to 'restage' our core aims and presence. That verbal and conceptual 'reframing' was the key entry level requirement for access and presence. This exogenously generated need to prepare and deliver a new sort of 'cooked declaration' initiated an informal 'totting up' of MCCT aims and achievements to date, 10 years after MCCT began focusing

on history and culture to deliver appropriate local development (Scott 1992: 216). The result of that conversational review and the collective aspects of writing this paper is a resolve by the MCCT to hold a conference in 2014 which seeks to revisit their aspiration for 'academic harmonisation' (Scott 1992: 198). The aim is to provide an update on new and emergent research initiatives in Mackay Country. It is hoped that a 'call for papers', from academics and interested practitioners of many sorts, might result in new awarenesses of personal and professional research. In the spirit of reciprocity, the MCCT will proffer an invitation to the AC2012 'Civic Geographies' organisers. Access to scholarly publications, academic research monies and roles is restricted to those with full membership (tenure) within the 'civic university'. This serves an important function, alongside the peer review system, in protecting and nurturing spaces within which to conduct research and achieve intellectual progression as a member of a formal academic community. Tackling the disbenefits of that system, alluded to here, is a complicated matter relying on new means of maintaining high academic standards whilst also creatively blurring the hard edges of membership and participation, both disciplinary and social. Individual academics, research councils and specific journals such as ACME are actively exploring different means to achieve that. The AC2012 'Civics' event is one such experiment. In this article the experiences of a community group also seeking to identify, through experimentation, successful strategies for reciprocal research alliances has been set alongside that story.

### **Acknowledgements**

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