

GUEST COLUMN



CALUM MACLEOD

Who amongst us doesn't love a Gaelic sign? You've doubtless got your own favourite. Mine marks the road running through the Bays of Harris on the island's south east side to Roghadal and the ancient burial ground of the MacLeods of Harris surrounding St Clements Church.

Of course Roghadal's also accessible via the A859, partly double-tracked thanks to EU funding and winding sedately along Harris's picture-postcard, community owned west side. In summer that's a trip along the kaleidoscope coastline of multi-coloured machair, golden beaches and turquoise-tinted sea celebrated in countless smartphone snaps on social media.

The Bays road doesn't do sedate. Instead, it offers an altogether more Presbyterian driving experience, full of unforgiving hairpin bends, blind summits and sudden, stomach-churning rollercoaster plunges; a sort of Route 666 for the unwary traveller to be navigated with humility, unquestioning faith and no little trepidation.

The road doesn't do picturesque either. There's a repressive rawness to the landscape into which the townships — from Leac a Li to Fionnsbhadh — are hewn. It's a quality captured in the Reverend John MacLeod's contemporaneous contribution to the first Statistical Account of Scotland (1791-99) in which he described the area as "indented all along with harbours, bays and creeks and [exhibiting] to a spectator at sea the most barren aspect, appearing to be a continued bare rock. Near the shore, however, a few green patches are to be seen, brought into culture by the laborious industry of the inhabitants".

Not that the Bays' first inhabitants arrived there through choice. Landlordism cleared them without ceremony or compunction from the island's west side and beyond to make way for sheep and cold coin. The injustice of that enforced displacement echoes through the centuries in Reverend Alexander Davidson's testimony to the Napier Commission

when it convened in Obbe one spring day in 1883: "It is most unnatural that man should be chased away to make room for sheep and deer; that the land should lie uncultivated when men are perishing for lack of food."

Times have long since changed even if much of the Bays' landscape has not. It has proved as stubbornly resistant to Lafarge Redland's corporate gravel pit as to Lord Leverhulme's grandiose early 20th century plans for the island that vanished like soap bubbles in a Hebridean gale. Nevertheless, some notable developments are afoot and the Bays may yet become part of the quiet ownership revolution that has placed the estates of North and West Harris — and most of the rest of the Western Isles — in community hands. What might the Reverend Davidson have made of the Bays' community's modern day efforts to add further momentum to that process?

Whether or not the Bays' inhabitants succeed in their land ownership ambitions, that Gaelic signpost — with its carefully marked distances between townships — is a reminder of a fragile, remote-rural community's right 'to be'. Amid the cacophony of media chatter seeking to undermine and ghettoise the legitimacy of Gaelic as a language and culture, that seems to me to be something worth cherishing. It's a right to which the community clings in the face of deeply embedded socio-economic challenges associated with an ageing and declining population, few job opportunities, limited local services and poor infrastructure.

The signpost — and all it represents — is a reminder too that any Scottish Government plans to reverse decades of targeted development assistance to uniquely fragile areas in the Highlands and Islands by centralising its governance in a single, re-booted version of Scottish Enterprise would be a regressive step. It would also be a curiously contradictory move on the part of an SNP Government that places such rhetorical emphasis on community empowerment.

Who knows what changes may lie ahead for the Bays of Harris in the years and decades to come? All I do know is that the road beyond that Gaelic signpost has meant different things to me over the years. It's been the coffin road I travelled as a sixteen year old, following the black Ford Granada estate doubling up as the island's hearse as it brought my mother's body to Fionnsbhadh before her funeral. It's been my escape route to the mainland for an education that my father and I both knew made it unlikely I would ever permanently return.

Much later it was the redemption road that drew us closer together in his final years. Sometimes it's a ghost road, stirring memories of my youth and the way things used to be. More than anything, it still feels like the road home.