THOMAS Speed Fisher Forsyth of Scoraig, who died on May 9th, was a crofter and, as the founder of the organisation of Egg Trust, the community organisation that bought the island of Eigg in 1991, a pioneer of modern Scottish land reform.

In 2010, he was invited to a festival that involved a 12-hour journey down south. What with age and a tight train connection, he only just made it in time. Speaking from the podium, he held up a pocket watch. "It seems," he said, "that here you live by deadlines. Where I come from, we live by life lines. That captures his life.

He was born in Dundurn. His mother, Mary, taught off a croft, and his father, John, managed coal mines in the Black Country, but always on the periphery where the family could live closer to nature.

He went to school at 16, completed national service in 1951 in the Royal Navy, where he was in the Chatham gun crew. His love in the Chatham gun crew. His love of nature led to a diploma in horticulture from the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh.

When he went to Iona in the 1950s, he met George MacLeod, who had rebuilt the abbey. MacLeod appointed Forsyth youth secretary for the Iona Community, in charge of running camps for boys at Camus on Mull.

Tom's God, however, resided more in nature than the Iona Community. His signal failure to get either the miscreant lads, or himself, regularly along to church led to a sturdy ultimatum. "Either you join the Church," said MacLeod, "or that's it." "That's it," came the reply.

But MacLeod was one more ahead. He shoehorned Tom into a new position with Jane Balfour Owen at New Harmony, Indiana. Here, the industrialist Robert Owen of New Lanark had earlier built a utopian "community of equality."

When MacLeod later visited New Harmony, he said: "How about you, with your Quaker tendencies, as Warden of Iona Abbey?"

An astonished Mr Forsyth dug up a 24-page "manifeste" for a "whole community" there. Vegetable gardens, baking bread and fishing would interface with the teachings of Thoreau, Merton and the Desert Fathers. It was all too much for some of the dog-collared clergy. Instead, Mr Forsyth adopted 10 abandoned crofts at Roigh/ribachd on the Scoraig peninsula, south of Ulbost. There, with his first wife Ray Speer, he raised Ferguson, Morag, Floris, Aaron, and David. With no road or electricity, their "back to the land" way helped to open up fresh vision for crofting and renewable energy.

This was not to forget the big world outside. Rather, as he later wrote, it was "to become more fully human". But, "little did I dream of what sort of break in/ down/ through I was to go through to become fit for this vision."

In short, he fell "madly in love with a neighbour's wife and, in the course of purging the recurrent drug of high sân, he set fire to Scoraig's abandoned Free Presbyterian church.

After a night in Diagwall jail, he was referred to Craig Dunain, hospital's legendary psychiatrist, Martin Whitting, who said Whitting, in a cheery conversation. "I'll put you down as ... religious mania." Once back on Scoraig, the Dunedonnell kirk minister walked in, and offered him the laying on of hands. Painfully helped, Mr Forsyth saw that he'd "wrestled with the angel, been to hell and back."

He had been purged of his old self, his false self, that had led MacLeod and others to view him as a "blue-eyed, whitened sepulchre and too-good-to-be-true, neurotic do-gooder." He felt now "at the commencement of life proper."

Around 1974, he parted ways with Ray (who remained a lifelong friend), married Alice Buchan. They rebuilt a croft house on the Scoraig peninsula, and ran "Samhainn" as an acclaimed retreat centre.

One day, while steeping champagne at Lennondow, the baronial hall of the Duchess of Hamilton, he found himself talking to Lady Ursula Burton. "Eigg is for sale," he told her. "The jewel in the heart of the Hebrides." "Well," said this deeply spiritual woman, "Why don't we form a trust and buy it out?"

Forsyth would often say: "That was the moment of conception of the Isle of Eigg Trust. At a baronial banquet..."

Eigg was a community in decline by the time it returned to the market in 1991. Together with some accompanics, funded by his wife's stone-dying work, Tom Forsyth registered the Eigg Trust.

A Mark II version of his 1950s Iona exhibition for a revival of the culture of Gaelic arts, spirituality and ecology. "When a shoot is gained on an endearing green of the root must meet the green of the stalk. The green, or cambium, is the only living and dynamic part of the plant. In the cultivation of human beings the same is true."

The manifesto envisioned the island's Italianate Jodocka Jodock becoming a Life Centre, where "bank managers would enrol to learn dry-stone dyking, adrenalin would shatter sheep and lawyers mark out the byre."

With a gladly mineable, the penniless land trust was launched from Edinburgh's plush Balmoral Hotel. The journalists could scarcely contain their amusement. One newspaper ran a cartoon of financiers flocking out the byre. Another spluttered that the dastardly trustees "admit they would sue to see the land on land ownership changed and the concept of landlords abolished."

They laughed, but over the next six years the islanders stepped into the breach. They raised £1.6 million, bought Eigg at a price suitably, composed down with market spoil, set up the more fit-for-purpose Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust, and have gone on to surpass all of the original manifesto's hopes.

What role did Tom play? One example will suffice. Shortly before the birth of Joe Mac, his sixth child, with his wife, the artist Dilsen van Slyke, the couple went to rebuild the Well of the Holy Women on Eigg. Their action seemed to symbolise the cleansing of a wailing; one too long blocked in Scottish history.

Tom loved to quote the verse from Proverbs: "Without vision, the people perish."

His influence was largely one-to-one, through the eyes of the fully human. Shaping, that refused deadlines.

Sharing, that threw out lifelines.

ALASTAIR MCINTOSH

When George Bruce wrote his elegy for steam trains (complete with reference to Chekov) he could not have guessed that nostalgia for the steam age would lead to a revival of the steam engines, at least on special lines, and even occasionally on the national network. He would have been delighted.

LAMENT FOR THE PASSING OF THE HISSEING OF THE STEAM TRAINS
for Jennifer

Now the grandfathers tell their grandchildren, there was no thing like the hiss of a steam train.

Waps of white steam over wheatfields, encircled drops rose glistening into the blue, wreath boldly over masque snows. When they cut down the Cherry Orchard steam trains were heard.

Now that steam trains are gone we should give up hissing for joy, as we do the ripe cornfields as we passed in summer winds, as do the bell heather in light air trembling as we passed by the gillen, as we do the soft small waves on the shingle beach under a quiet moon.