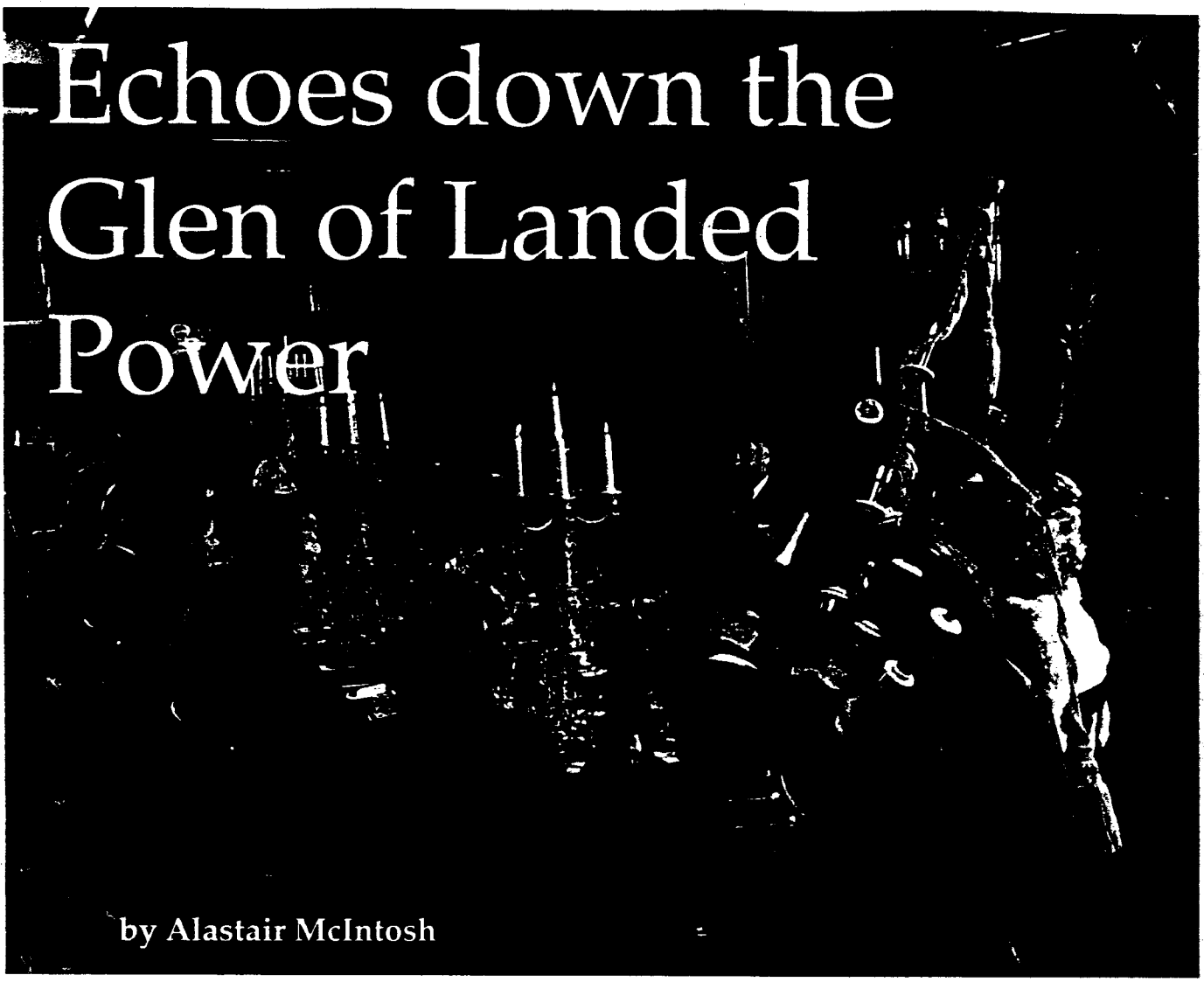
Echoes down the Glen of Landed Power



by Alastair McIntosh

It was 1977 back home on the Isle of Lewis and I still remember the look of hurt surprise on the admiral's wife's face.

The admiral was stalking on the mountain above us. I was at the oars, skilled now, young, but a ghillie of seven summer's experience.

We'd been talking about war. She looked to me for rhetorical reassurance: "There isn't very much violence in our society these days, is there?"

I lifted my finger and pointed to the mountain. Any moment now the stillness would drop to the rifle's crack.

The admiral's wife turned back to her fishing, silenced. Slightly ashamed, it was clear the cut needed softened. I was complicit too, through employment, I said, and of course, we do need to cull stags.

But culling was not what drew men away from the affairs of state or commerce. Culling does not account for the urge to own such allegedly loss-making places.

A single gunshot from under the crag signalled precision kill. The blast ricocheted down the glen. A century or so earlier this place had been totally cleared of its time honoured inhabitants. Where children once played amongst the rocks and rushes, a mere handful of us now killed for fun.

If you want an insight into the psychology of wealth and landed power, get a job as a ghillie. The boat becomes an analyst's couch. The life of the guest unfolds to the rhythmic lapping of metaphoric waters on larch keel. The rod's every cast is a mantra.

So what makes a person want to be rich, powerful, and above all, landed? The question is one of profound importance, not least in the Scottish Highlands where a 1976 study showed that one-third of private land is owned by just 35 individuals or companies.

In my experience many of the gentry are individuals who would appear to fit the description given by Alice Miller and other therapists, of the wounded child. This is the child whose "primal integrity" has been violated through not being loved *for itself.*

Instead, love was dependent upon conformity to authority, on performance and giftedness. This produces an adult with deep-seated unconscious

anxiety as to self-worth.

John Lennon spelt it out in his *Working Class Hero*: "As soon as you're born, they make you feel small; by giving you no time instead of it all; 'till the pain is so big you feel nothing at all . . . ."

But whereas with working class people the violence of frustration stays mainly within the self or the home region, with the rich its reach can be global. Thus Lennon concludes "There's room at the top, they are telling you still; but first you must learn how to smile as you kill; if you want to be like the folks on the hill."

Typical gentry of my acquaintance were often surrogate parented by nannies. In late infancy they got sent away to austere public schools.

I can recall one Lord of the realm saying that they actually liked the old-fashioned iron-railing beds at Grimersta Lodge because these reminded them of Eton.

Such schooling was education for regimentation. It was strong on punishment "for your own good," emotionally disengaged ("stiff upper lip;" "uptight"), and largely lacking in gentle male and female role models.

Back home, acceptance of the child was contingent upon conformity to Father's authority. This typically included the expectation of early potty training, "being seen but not heard," displaying the "toughness" of "big boys don't cry," educational competition through exam success and playing field discipline.

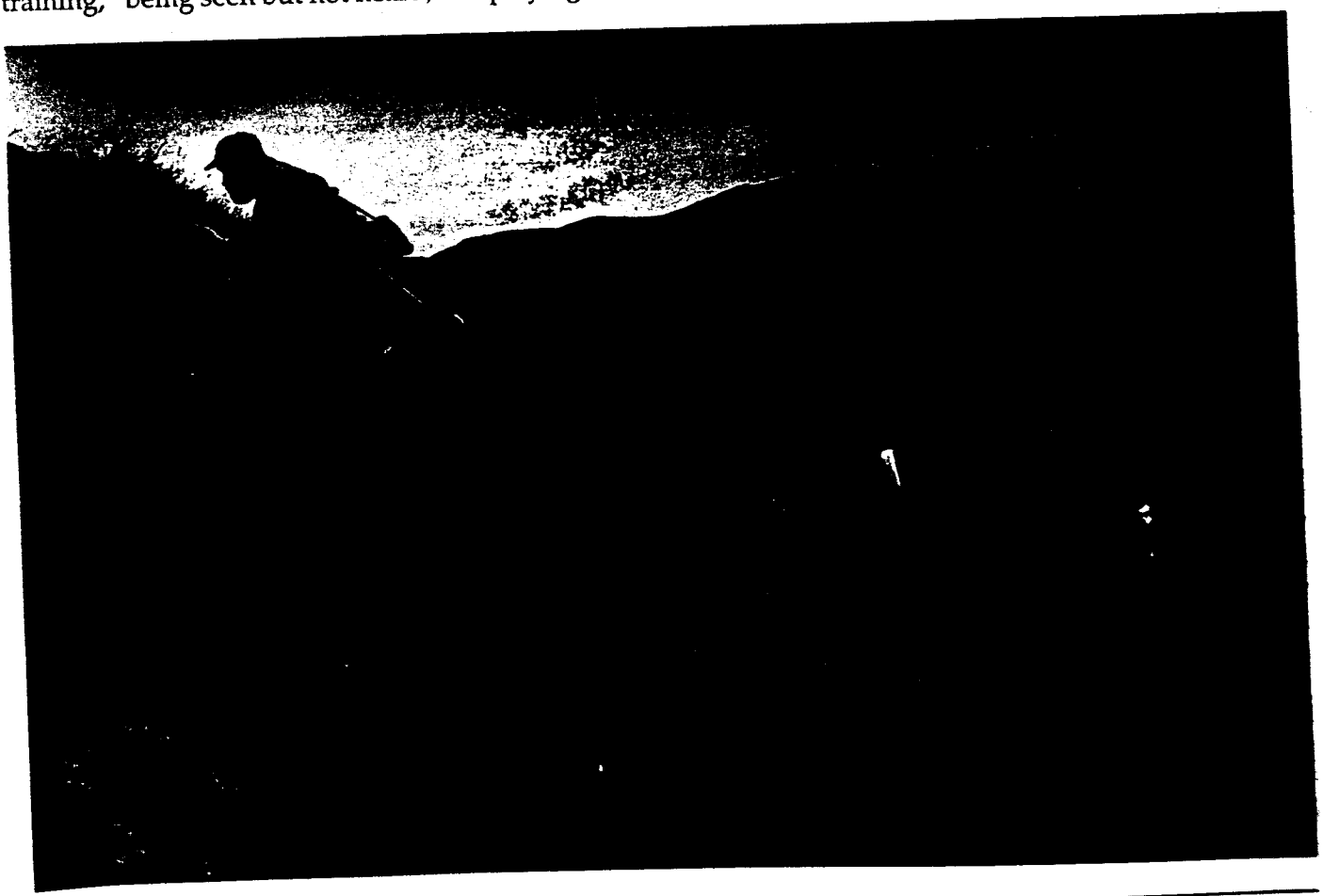
In later life such a psychological launchpad translates into military achievement, success in the professions or old-monied industry, property accumulation and an etiquette towards others which, as the former minister Alan Clark candidly told Desert Island Disks, means "you can get away behaving badly in a lot of ways if you are courteous on the exterior."

In his book, *To Have or to Be*, psychologist Erich Fromm analysed the deep poverty of the rich. Such people need to "have" in order to "be." The sense of soul is undeveloped. Lack of a centred self results in behaviour that is self-centred.

The ghillie's day is filled with snippets of discourse which reveal the substitution of money for relationship. "Who ***is*** he? ***Is*** he ***anybody***?" one might ask the other.

"Oh, he's ***quite somebody***, "comes the reply, "... he's - such and such a company, or landed property, or network of potentially lucrative connections."

Like the worst sort of priest claiming to be sole mediator between humankind and God, many lairds bolster their sense of ***being somebody*** through the control given by land ownership. This is a theft of that sense of responsibility, stewardship and even



virility which comes from direct relationship with place. A theft of what traditionally made and sustained communities of right relationship with one another and nature.

The laird does not see that the more he puts himself up in community, the more others feel put down. Claiming to be "King of the castle" creates its corollary of "the dirty wee rascal." As land rights campaigner John Murdoch wrote in 1873, "We have to record a terrible fact that . . . a craven, cowed, snivelling population has taken the place of the men of former days."

Any sudden deprivation of monied props around the self leaves behind a lost child exposed to frightening emptiness. This is why the "sin of property" potentially damages oneself, and not just others. It is why the laird deserves a certain compassion when made to face up to the reality of the social distortion he creates. It is why the rich young man went away sadly when Jesus told him to give it all away.

The consequences of "buying a stairway to heaven" extend far beyond such "collector's items" as small Scottish islands. In lairdship we may be looking into a psychological icon of huge cultural significance.

Probably the most psychologically perceptive work on the Scottish land question is the bilingual community arts produced book, *As an Fhearann: from the land*.

In amongst essays on Highland colonisation and freedom struggles, there is a photomontage of President Reagan peering out of a TV screen at the Callanish stones. Seeing it always makes me think of Alice Walker's line: "Regardless. He has filled our every face with his window. Our every window with his face."

Another picture features NATO exercises at Stornoway airport. And in yet another, General Curtis le May is shown shooting deer in the Scottish Highlands, in 1967. The same man who ordered the dropping of the Atom bomb on Hiroshima.

My mind returns to the memory of the admiral's wife's pained silence. She knew what I was thinking. It had little to do with culled deer. My mind amplifies her husband's rifle crack. Over and over. It rolls down and far out beyond this secluded glen.

"There isn't very much violence in our society these days, is there?"

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