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≡ Defining Stewardship ≡  
*Human Accountability and the Care of Place*

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## Abstract

The subject of land stewardship (and the broader topic of ‘environmental stewardship’) is a primary social and environmental issue. This dissertation examines the implications of the word and concept in the twenty-first century regarding individual and collective responsibility. The study group are a selection of participants in a yearly ‘festival of stewardship’ organised by the Centre for Stewardship in Falkland, Scotland. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, the author explores the history and current understanding of the word stewardship as it relates to land and commodities ‘under human care’. The primary consideration shall be to examine one’s personal obligation for stewardship and how that relates to community (e.g. Do we have a choice to become stewards or are we all, of necessity, stewards at some level?)

# ≡ Chapter One: Introduction ≡

## Introduction: Some Justification

The concept of stewardship has a direct bearing on how people care for (or neglect) the *place* they are in; depending on who is given stewardship and how people consider their responsibilities as stewards, a place can either flourish for all living things that depend on it or fall into disrepair. However, the question for humans is to what extent do we intervene in the natural processes of the world; what is our responsibility; what falls in our domain? This is, of course, a question with no definitive answer; for thousands of years humankind has struggled with (and over) the dominion of nature. It is simultaneously a civic and a religious question—deeply personal and openly public. To what end do we tinker with the ‘natural world’ and who or what gives us the power to do so?

Though my intention from the outset of this study was to provide a far-reaching and widely applicable definition of stewardship, I quickly saw that is too grandiose a goal for a MSc dissertation.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as it *is* such a personal concept, a truly comprehensive study would need to address the ideas and needs of people all across the planet. Instead, I examine a small subset of people attending the Centre for Stewardship’s annual Big Tent Festival in Falkland, Scotland (who are ostensibly concerned with the subject). So perhaps I will not find *the answer* by pursuing this line of research; but this is not the point of a graduate dissertation (and, as I discuss in the text, might be essentially counterproductive). Also, I’ve had to take care in the writing of this dissertation not to be overly self-reflective in my analysis. Though I am an American, unfamiliar with British understanding of wealth and class and not from what one would call a ‘landed’ family, I am from a somewhat privileged background. It is easy to project either sympathy or reflexive guilt into the process of writing on a topic such as this.

Wendell Berry, in his collection of essays entitled *The Art of the Commonplace*, sets out a number of ‘terms and limits’ that define the relationship we have with land (and, by extension, all living things). Number four on that list is: “People are motivated to care for land to the extent that their interest in it is direct, dependable, and permanent.” (Berry 2002, p195) Human Ecologists often discuss the ‘sense of place’ a person or group of people maintain (or lack). To make a broad

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<sup>1</sup> This, after my advisors gently made me aware and I realised others have written far more capable assessments.

generalisation, as people become less connected to a sense of place, care (or stewardship) of a particular place diminishes in importance. My assumption before researching the topic was that one may assume most people have little *specific* impetus for stewardship. Though the term is bandied about at all levels concerning the environment, I sense that most of us have a poorly defined concept of stewardship as it applies to ourselves or our communities. I assume that, without an understanding of this individual level of stewardship, people cannot fully address the micro- and macro- environmental issues at hand (whether the people in question are considered stewards themselves or are holding to account those who have been appointed as such).

I propose that stewardship is *the* central concept of environmental and social awareness. Without a clear understanding of our personal and civic responsibility to a given place other considerations are moot. If I do not have a concept of how I can personally care for a place or hold others accountable a broad range of social and environmental ills may befall it. A secondary consideration of this research is how, through the concept of stewardship, one might be brought back to both a connexion to place and implicit responsibility for its well-being (and, by extension, one's own). How can one develop this either through a personal sense of stewardship or (alternately or concurrently) how can the 'official' stewards encourage this in others? It is also particularly important to establish terms of discourse for 'the environmental debate'. The word stewardship is used in various ways with often ambiguous (or even conflicting) meaning.

This research does not aim to necessarily prove the above suppositions or fully answer how to develop a sense of stewardship. I do hope to raise some questions concerning this and, perhaps, through the interviews and literature review, give my reader some tools to consider this topic as well.

## A Primer on Stewardship

The term ‘stewardship’ has evolved to mean many things in disparate contexts. Before I begin to use the term ‘steward’ haphazardly or present the definitions of my interviewees, let us examine an existing definition and explore a bit of linguistic history. The *New Oxford Dictionary* defines a steward as:

(1)...a person employed to manage another's property, esp. a large house or estate. (2) A person whose responsibility it is to take care of something.

ORIGIN Old English *stīweard*, from *stig* (probably in the sense [house, hall]) + *weard* [ward.] The verb dates from the early 17th century.

I realise an entire dissertation could be based on the semantic turns of such a definition. I will attempt to not stray far into such explorations in this essay; however, we are exploring an idea based on the understanding of a *word* and it is useful to begin with an accepted definition. The balance of human activity is based on our ideas and how we communicate them (though I suppose it could be argued that we might have innate tendencies toward either conservation or destruction<sup>1</sup>). Since the ‘living out’ of a word like stewardship has consequences for both humankind and the world around us, a discussion of its semantics is pertinent. This is also why the topic falls within the realm of human ecology; it is at the core of how we relate to each other and the world around us.

Concerning the definition above—first, what is *property*? This is where the question of power immediately comes into play. A discussion of stewardship must begin with the underlying question of individual power; an individual with the best intentions cannot act as a good steward if his or her power to make wise decisions is hindered or non-existent. The question of property is particularly alive in the Scottish context; a great deal of my literature review, though it might not particularly pertain to the research at hand, was connected to land reform and ownership in Scotland. This is discussed more specifically in the section *Titles, Landlords and Feudalism*.

The notion of property, as we in a free market system understand it, implies that one has a certain say in what happens with the land or commodity in question. *Ownership* gives an individual or group of people *rights* to take certain actions

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<sup>1</sup> For an argument against, see the work of Dr. Paul Elrich; his supposition is that few of our actions are based on genetics and are nearly all cultural.

concerning that land or commodity and dispose of it as one pleases. As ‘we’ have not devised a commonly agreed definition for good stewardship, the right of ownership is not based on the judgement of whether an individual meets these criteria. Instead we have agreed that heredity, wealth and oftentimes *force* are the basis for possession. The paradox is that this apparent inequity is so etched in our collective psyche that we seem unable to consider another way of organising and operating (or alternative suggestions are met with dismissal as either idealistic or Marxist). Perhaps the limitations on ‘good stewardship’ are not entirely environmental (e.g. that we have inherited land that is too damaged to salvage) but a failure of imagination; we have inherited a damaged *mindset* that is difficult to change. There is a larger question seeded here concerning economic and political systems that may or may not lend themselves to stewardship; governments, communities and individuals are constantly faced with decisions that may make good fiscal or political sense but do terrible environmental harm (or vice versa).

Returning to the definition, what is meant by *care*? Who has the power to define what is careful and conservative? In my literature review the term *paternal* appeared repeatedly; the parental role is often assumed when we discuss our care of the Earth. This language is most apparent when religion is invoked; we were given a task by God and stand *in loco parentis* to care for creation. However, this only provides a basis for care not a definition of it; to define it, we must ask what good parenting consists of. Are parents essentially nurturers or disciplinarians? Also, and perhaps more importantly, are we even in a parental role? The maternal imagery accepted by many cultures implies the earth itself is the parent.<sup>1</sup> This, again in the religious context, is also heavily dependent on the understanding of the intention one’s god has for the Earth; we will discuss this further in the section *The Role of Religion and the Weight of Words*.

Also, what does *employment* imply in this case? It prompts yet another comment on power; it is assumed that the one who employs will dictate the scope of the steward’s activities. Who charges the steward with his or her duties and places limits on them? What is the steward employed to do; does his or her role necessarily imply an active intervention in natural processes? In the opening paragraph I stated that a place can ‘fall into disrepair’ if its stewardship is not well attended to. But does this attendance imply the steward puts his or her

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<sup>1</sup> This is also something I’m not able to consider in-depth here though it would make a fascinating study. We say *Mother Earth*; yet act in ways that are domineering. What does this imply about family structures and the gender roles we have accepted in society?

hand to the plough and alters nature to some 'productive' end? Or might it mean protecting a place from that very thing? My interviewees, as noted in some of their quotes following, were of mixed opinion concerning this. Some felt the best stewardship was 'hands-off' and some would advocate intensive human involvement.

So, considering this, I propose the two main components of any definition for stewardship are:

- Who is the ultimate decision maker? And, closely connected,
- what are the limits placed on the steward (by either external means or a belief system)?

My assumption is that many people feel little responsibility to become stewards because they are disconnected and dis-empowered. They (or we) have neither the physical or conceptual means for proper stewardship. In this context, human nature tends toward either fatalism or anger. "I will toss down this litter on the ground because, what can I do, there is no way I or anyone else can clean it all up." Or, more pointedly, "I do not have the means or 'right' to care for the place I am in; so I cannot see any future for myself or my descendants. I will live in despair and resort to violence." On a personal note, this is language I have heard among people I've worked with from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to urban Philadelphia; they feel two steps removed from a sense of place and belonging because they have no security in it. They know both that they are not the decision makers and they have severe social and economic limits placed upon them.

## Methodology

My methodology is qualitative—based on semi-structured interviews and literature review. I am exploring the history of a concept and its current understanding among a group of people concerned with it (though, of course, part of my implicit argument is that everyone should be concerned with stewardship); I attempted to explore the idea with those who define themselves as stewards as well as those who might assume they have only a limited connexion with the term. A qualitative approach to this topic address the conceptual understanding of a research group.<sup>1</sup>

I had, at first, considered a wide-ranging research into the history and current understanding of stewardship. However, as our earliest extant records deal with taxation and management of land, my literature review would have encompassed all of written history! Instead, I've chosen to specifically focus on a small group of people who self-select as stewards of some sort and explore what the term means to them and, by this, hopefully extrapolate how the concept is evolving.

I was introduced to the Centre for Stewardship during one of the core module classes for the MSc in Human Ecology; over the weekend we spent at the Cfs, I began a discussion with several people there about the idea of stewardship. Subsequently, I continued the discussion with Mike Small and Ninian Stewart (the programme and general directors). This association with an organisation that is specifically committed to considering and promoting the idea of stewardship gave me a solid footing to begin my research; however, I recognise it that their ideas may not necessarily mirror that of the general population (either locally in Falkland or beyond).

I have examined the way participants of the Centre for Stewardship's Big Tent Festival consider the idea of stewardship. (Again, covering the spectrum from personal stewardship to a larger, more community based idea; how does the word bring people together in an 'iconic' way for events such as the festival and in support of organisations like the Centre for Stewardship?)

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<sup>1</sup> Concurrent with my research, a group from the University of Saint Andrews is working with the Centre for Stewardship on the quantitative side of the topic (studying fiscal stewardship and accounting practices). See <http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/sasi> for more detail.

To gather data, I performed a series of interviews at the festival itself (both arranged and impromptu<sup>1</sup>). The interviewees fall into three categories:

1. Those who self-assess as 'stewards' or who have been given that title and see themselves as actively participating in a form of stewardship.
2. Those who fill the role of steward but do not necessarily define themselves as such.
3. Those who, in a particular circumstance, neither define themselves as a steward nor see the role of steward as their responsibility (e.g. in relation to a piece of land or commodity).

Regardless of whom I interviewed, I began the discussion by explaining the aims of my research and asking if it was acceptable to conduct an interview and use the material for my dissertation; I then asked for that person's definition of stewardship and how it applies to their own life. I followed with questions pertaining to how they felt either empowered or dis-empowered to be stewards according to their definition. Of the people who were presenting lectures or had booths at the festival (about half of the twenty or so interviews total), most described stewardship as it pertained to the topic or organisation they were representing.

Except for the more formal interview with Ninian Stewart, all were obtained over the weekend of 26-27 July 2008 at the Big Tent Festival in Falkland, Fife. All interviews were audio recorded with informed consent; none of the interviewees asked me to protect their identity. I have generally transcribed interviews as they were spoken; however, I have made minor edits and grammatical changes to clean up the quotes in the translation between spoken and written English. I have attempted to maintain a sense of what the person was intending in all instances.

As I am attempting to discern themes and terms that emerge from the interviews, I am using what amounts to a Grounded Theory process (though I realise my presentation probably does not strictly express the full method as described by Glaser, Strauss, et al.<sup>2</sup>). Since I have a relatively manageable amount of data, I did not use a software package that specifically generates a Grounded Theory matrix to analyse the information. Instead, I used a program called Scrivener<sup>3</sup>; it is intended for long documents and the organisation of data via keyword. Fol-

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<sup>1</sup> Four interviews were arranged beforehand; fourteen were impromptu.

<sup>2</sup> See bibliography

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.literatureandlatte.com>

lowing the interviews, I transcribed and noted keywords throughout. From these I noted 'generative themes' and recurrences of specific phrases or terminology (I am defining 'generative themes' here as topics within the discussion of stewardship that I observed to be of particular interest to the interviewees; ideally, I would have also brought the interviewees together after interviewing them separately and invited discussion among them to produce another refined set of themes).

Were I to pursue a PhD thesis or a book-length work, this topic would provide a substantive amount of material from texts and further interviews. (There would be ample opportunity here for a massive Grounded Theory matrix.) However, I've chosen to limit my scope to produce a 'tidy' thesis within the limits of time and allotted length. My background is documentary production and this dissertation will inevitably read as such. I hope there is no fault in that; indeed, I hope that I am able to clearly relate the stories of the people I've interviewed in a narrative fashion. Though I did preparatory reading for the dissertation and, of course, refer to other works, the bulk of the text is directly from interviews performed for research. This is the 'alive' expression of what these people are living out and it is my aim to make that apparent in the writing. That is a challenge in such a short document as the topic itself and the experience of my interviewees are vast.

Two authors to note specifically are Wendell Berry and John Black. Berry is widely known and readily available in trade bookstores; he has written extensively on the issues surrounding stewardship (though I could have pulled text from almost all of his non-fiction writing, most of my references for him are from a collection of essays entitled *The Art of the Commonplace* compiled in 2002; I've read several of his works and would suggest this volume as a good introduction to his writings). John Black is an apparently little known academic from the University of Edinburgh (or was; he is apparently retired). However, his short book *The Dominion of Man* was the most concise and clearly elucidated summary of stewardship (and the connexion to belief) that I've found. Though it is now nearly forty years old, his presentation of the topic is still pertinent (he even describes what is now called 'carbon footprinting'). This is either encouraging in that people have given these issues some thought and we've now resources to draw from when most needed—or, conversely, the problems were set out clearly forty years ago and nobody took much notice.

## ≡ Chapter Two: Discussions ≡

### The People and their Themes

Several generative themes or terms recurred throughout the interviews (after a while, I began noticing them and had to refrain from cocking an eyebrow during the discussion lest it startle or influence the interviewee—*Ah ha! heritage! There that word is again!*). The themes are broadly four categories which I will explore in separate sections:

1. Landlords and feudalism
2. Personal and community connexion to the land
3. Religious beliefs (including historical semantics of terms regarding stewardship), tradition and ‘the soul’
4. Personal understanding of stewardship and what responsibility that entails

I was fortunate in that, interviewing even a random sampling of people at an event such as the Big Tent Festival, I was almost guaranteed a ready-made set of worthwhile research material. In nearly all instances the interviewees had given thought to the concept of stewardship and how it applied to them personally.<sup>1</sup> This allowed me to readily keyword the data and pursue a straightforward analysis of the interviews. Most of the exhibitors or lecturers I spoke with related their specific perspective as it pertained to the idea they were presenting at the festival. Everyone I approached readily assented to an interview and seemed genuinely interested in contributing to my research.

Several of my interviewees were academics or writers who have honed their definition of stewardship and can readily articulate it. Others were just ‘normal’ people attending the festival; however, this lack of academic credentials did not lessen their ability to discuss the topic. Some of my most informative quotes come from people who are explaining how they live out stewardship rather than

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<sup>1</sup> Though, surprisingly, one of the *exhibitors* stated, “I think stewards are the people at the football match who are directing the crowd of people...but perhaps stewardship doesn’t fully mean that. Of course, when I was in school and we had a general knowledge course, we were asked to write an essay on euthanasia—and I, I mean, break the word down—I spent an hour and a half writing about the youth of Asia rather than controlled death. But I have a suspicion that stewardship might have something to with eco-living and sustainable life.”

discussing it as an abstraction. Perhaps my most pointed discussions were with Ninian Stewart, the current keeper (or steward) of Falkland Estate. He, as a ‘titled’ steward, has considered this word as it was used historically, in the present and what it may mean in the future from a very personal standpoint.

### Connexion to the Land: Individuals and the Community

One of the primary concerns voiced by my interviewees was our perceived dis-connexion with the land (either their own or society in general). This was discussed in relation to consumer culture—how does the pursuit and consumption of manufactured products alter our perception of the natural world? Davie Philip (champion skateboarder in the eighties, now part of the Cultivate Eco-village in Ireland), was particularly concerned with how humankind integrates into the place we occupy: “I think a challenge we face right now with the population we have and the level of consumption we have is that humanity does not fit the planet. So how do we fit the planet? [We] look at how natural systems work and feed into that. Instead of a linear ‘make waste and dump’ society, how do we cycle the things we need; I think the idea of how we fit the planet is one of the most crucial things we do over the next decades.”

How does a society decide what is necessary to accomplish or what is too much? Davie continues, “Where do we need to make interventions where they are needed and how do we decide with sensitivity? Rather than being outside and just protecting, we need to look at how we can engage with the land.” John Black, in *The Dominion of Man*, points to the origins of this separation far before consumer culture or industry: “With the development of tools, first for hunting and later for agriculture, his [man’s] ability to change his surroundings increased, and he began to see himself as in some way apart from the ecosystem on which he depended.” (Black 1970, 9) The level or perhaps the definition of engagement was another question; the ‘apartness’ or distinction between ‘man’ and ‘the natural world’ is a major consideration in this debate. To some, humans should seek the minimal level of involvement possible and let nature be. To others, this sort of disengagement seems parallel to the alienation of consumer culture—that separating man and nature would disassociate humankind even more and cause further damage to both.

One person’s engagement with the land may be considered meddling to another. Or it might be that one person’s deep engagement seems superficial to another. Much of this depends on the perspective of the speaker; “It almost certainly

means something different to a farmer”, said John Fraser, an organic farmer with a forty acre holding in Burnorrachie. “I would say that people who take an interest in the environment have more of a connexion with plants, trees, farms, food...but the general population in the city have lost that connexion through the years—especially in Britain where the farms have become very large and there are hardly any people working on them. At one time there was always someone in your family that had some direct connexion with the land but now we’ve become very urbanised and have lost a strong connexion with the land which is really to the detriment of society as a whole.”

However, I have spoken with city dwellers who challenge that assumption; though they live in an urban environment, they may maintain strong ties with a home in the country or a childhood spent on the farm and consider themselves deeply rooted there. As John continues, he notes a growing awareness of environmental issues in the city, “...it is changing; it’s come through the knowledge of the planet and how we are all interconnected. Anything somebody does is connected with everything else and it comes right back to people bothering about what they are eating. There have been lots of media programs on the food we eat and where it comes from; people are now taking it a step further and looking on the personal level. They say, yes I want to eat good clean food and then they look at their greater environment.”

Ninian Stewart discussed how Falkland estate has evolved in regard to locally produced food: “With food we are, in a way, at an earlier stage; but we are at a profoundly important point. Over the last fifty years or so, farming has gone in a particular direction which involves less people working the land, less concern of farmers to think about what they are doing as they grow food and more focus on industrial farming to basically grow crops to go on the back of a lorry. Falkland estate has gone along with that trend; the farm itself employed a dozen men fifty years ago to where it is now contracted out and seen as a small farm in the great order of things.”

The broader question is how does one decide in what particular state to keep such a place? Is it a nineteenth century sporting estate of historic importance or a place that must more importantly serve the needs of the current population (both human and non)? Ninian continues discussing food, which he sees as a central concern: “We are looking at how to provide food from this particular land and landscape for local people...we are beginning to look at how we can develop a different relationship with local people; this, in some ways might

move a lot a people from those who merely walk over a landscape to people who have a sense of where their food comes from...we have to ask, what is really important about this field? Is it about the future, is it about providing a place for cattle or is it about the house and providing a place for people to enjoy and walk over?"

Food and fuel are, perhaps, the primary demands we make on land. Daniel Gates from Reforesting Scotland related his view on how stewardship is reflected in Scottish forestry: "You can see it quite commonly in Scandinavia, particularly in forests, most people in Scandinavia will own a bit of forest or work it, produce their own fuel there—or, even just getting out a bit on the weekends. We don't have that connexion here in Scotland. The average person here just buys products from the supermarket and is completely divorced from forestry or farming. The way we build our houses; the way we use our energy; we would like to see more of that connexion and responsibility to encourage people to look after more of it themselves."

The day before the Big Tent Festival I attended a Transition Town<sup>1</sup> meeting. Many attendees of this meeting and the festival itself seemed heartened that there is a new discussion between town and country that takes into account the needs of both—rather than one having to suffer the demands of the other. I observed a demographic mix at the festival; people of an apparent middle and upper class background were talking about environmental and stewardship issues with the 'granola hippie crowd'. Everyone seemed at ease and ready to associate with one another. This is, perhaps, a consequence of the venue; the people choosing to come to such a festival might be more open to breaking down distinctions of class or ideology (and I suppose it's conceivable that these people might not associate *outside* such an event). However, it did seem like the idea of stewardship brought a wide range of people together. I'm not sure if this is merely a superficial link or something much deeper; as it was a venue with 'stewardship' emblazoned all about, it's likely that the people attending and exhibiting would have something to say and share with each other. Though this sharing might not extend beyond the opportunity for commerce on the part of the exhibitors—and the desire for an organic sausage and good music for the attendees. This is not something I was able to breach in conversation in the limited time I had to establish a relationship of trust with my interviewees (as I thought it might seem insulting or patronising if I was indelicate).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.transitiontowns.org>

There was much discussion concerning the struggle over resources (particularly energy resources and, by extension, everything that is directly tied to our needs for energy). The general assumption (not necessarily among my sample group), fed by our cultural indoctrination into a competitive society, is that we must essentially fend for ourselves. However, Colin Tudge, who writes on the intersections between social ideology and the environment, proposes a different way: “What people remember about Darwin is this idea of competitiveness; but I think that is also a misinterpretation [on Darwin’s part]. It may be what he actually said but it’s a misinterpretation of what the world is about. The Universe is basically co-operative rather than competitive. But what is very clearly in Darwin’s writings is this idea of all creatures being related in the deep past.” He then gestured to the trees near where we sat for the interview. “Once you see other creatures as your relatives, one’s perspective on them changes—or it should do. So not only seeing apes as one’s kin, but even these trees; of course, if you look at the biochemistry, we are very similar. Stewardship should spring from the idea of family.”

This is, perhaps, where the barriers between class, race and gender may break down. If one is able to see all of nature as kin at some level, then the social constructs we assume are exposed as illusory. This may be the basis for what I’m observing in the free association across demographic boundaries; stewardship, as an essential concept, does not recognise them. The environmental movement has been criticised (from outside and within) for its middle-class origins and focus; this was a particular point of discussion at the Transition Town meeting. However, the basis for this criticism seems to be dissipating (either from the self-awareness of it or, more pointedly, from a growing general awareness of the issues at hand). What I don’t feel I’ve fully ascertained is whether the barriers are actually falling or whether the middle-class people involved are projecting (perhaps inadvertently) the idea amongst themselves that their cause is widespread. (It would be plausible for people with money to construct an isolated image of ‘something great is going on here’; I would have to determine the actual long-term effects of the festival and the operations of the CfS to obtain a clear picture.)

This movement (or these movements) are crossing over barriers because, I think, they concern no one issue; they extend across a spectrum “...it’s not just that you have your farm and are trying to produce as much as you can”, said John Fraser; “You are trying to create something that can live on. Where we started, there were hardly any trees and hedges. So one of the first things we did was

plant them and you know that you are doing something for the future as well as producing food and trying to improve the land.” Wendell Berry in *Home Economics* speaks of “small featured terrain” made over generations by people who are closely involved with every aspect of it. (Berry 1987, 33) It is the idea of improvement that drives many ‘hands-on’ stewards to farm, plant, arrange or alter the land on which they live. From where does this mandate come? Other than altruism, the desire for gain—or a feudal bond—what compels people to change the earth under their feet?

### The Role of Religion and the Weight of Words

The role of religion and one’s system of belief was voiced several times in my interviews and appears repeatedly in literature. Several interviewees noted that their formative ideas concerning stewardship came from church or a religious upbringing. However, most said that early definition has changed or been augmented by experience; “I first heard it in Sunday School but my understanding has evolved into a broader definition that considers the earth as a whole”, said Davie Philip. “I think the strictly religious understanding is a very narrow view of stewardship.” Though I did not ask specifically, I am assuming all of my interviewees come from a Christian background (or are ‘products of a Christian Nation’ in that they all are from the United Kingdom). Of course, a comparative study on how different beliefs define stewardship would be especially informative for anyone wishing to comment on the issue widely. Of more particular interest would be how people of widely varying belief systems, whilst living among each other, can find a common language of stewardship.

This interplay between religious belief and stewardship is key to understanding the active role people take in their environments. This seems to be true regardless of whether a particular person openly ascribes to a belief system or is merely inculcated into a society which is heavily influenced by it. The mechanism of society, if designed and set in motion by people who believe a certain way, is bound to effect those in the future who may not necessarily hold to those beliefs.

How are these beliefs passed from one generation to the next? Some of them are directly linked to written ideas; these are the boundaries placed around stewardship by the legal and political systems of a people or their literature. Some beliefs are transmitted in a more ethereal way; “In Scottish tradition people will talk of *tradition bearers*”, says Alastair McIntosh, Scottish writer and fellow at

the Centre for Human Ecology; "...and I think that is an even deeper level which you find in some of the bards, the poets, the songwriters and so on. Where, in a sense, the soul of a place—the soul of a people—is communicated through those who use the arts to express stewardship. Not over it but from within it; you have to be very humble in this kind of looking at things otherwise abuses of power come in." Berry, in the essay *People, Land, and Community*, notes that, "A healthy culture holds preserving knowledge in place for a long time. That is, the essential wisdom accumulates in the community much as fertility builds in the soil." (Berry 2002, 189) The tie here between culture and the land was echoed several times in both my interviews and literature review.

Religion tends to transcend all levels of interaction; it is not wholly expressed in visual arts, literature, law, music or any of the many components of a functioning society. Because of this umbrella of influence it is, of course, one of the most powerful tendencies of human nature. Though there are various examples of secular governments and attempts made to minimise the influence of religious thought in society, the hold of belief is tenaciously strong.<sup>1</sup> The image of an ideal society, as portrayed in religious literature, is often projected over 'the real world' by adherents of a particular faith. If the belief implies that the world is or should be paternalistic and that people are meant to act in a domineering manner toward each other and the earth, this is the interpretation people will forward as a means of social interaction. This is the understanding they will have of how the universe works (regardless of any scientific basis). The writer Colin Tudge proposed:

I don't think in terms of, well, one comes back to clichés—'living in harmony with nature' and all that. I think one of the interesting things is that to properly live in harmony now [considering population and the current environmental situation] we really have to understand it [science], which among other things means you have to be the best possible scientist—a very good ecologist. One has to bear in mind that ecology should be a serious science and not waving your arms in a *new-agey* kind of way. But, of course, what happens is that science gets corrupted by the view that we should not live in harmony with nature but somehow rise above it. I think there are two aspects to that; one is just about greed and that we will do what we like and who cares, the gung-ho anti-steward attitude. But there is another view that goes right through Christianity that it is our

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<sup>1</sup> I don't mean to imply this is completely negative; only that humanity tends to hold tightly to its traditions and beliefs once the energy is expended to make them. The inertia of belief, if harnessed, can either do great good or harm. However, our track record is not so admirable on the 'good' side.



or that agriculture, science, art and technology should never advance. But they were to advance in sympathy with creation itself and for the good of all its creatures. Our lordship is the lordship of stewards.” (MacLeod 2002, 12) Michael Northcott in *A Moral Climate*, repeatedly stresses that, according to the Christian scriptures, man is created in the image of God and thus maintains a common ancestry and shared dignity. “In imaging God they [humankind] have a unique species vocation to care for the earth through labouring upon it, and to promote integrity and justice in the exchange of the fruits of their labours...human actions which mirror divine justice affirm and sustain the wholeness of creation, while human injustice causes oppression and misery not only among the children of men but among the beasts of the field and trees on the mountains.” (Northcott 2007, 163-64)

However, even if one acknowledges there is a scriptural mandate for keeping the earth, the further question is how does one interpret ‘divine justice’? Where is the Biblical blueprint of Eden (or, where within any given scripture is the way clearly manifest)? We return to language and the semantics of stewardship; concerning Christianity, we are attempting to live out a language from two thousand years ago (as orally passed down, written in other languages and then translated again into our own) in the twenty-first century. There are bound to be contradictions there that will struggle for reconciliation despite the best textual criticism. If even recent law and policy regarding the internet and biotechnology cannot keep pace with changes in society, how then can a belief system that supposes to cover the moral compass of human existence? How will the language of belief conflict with the language of science (especially when one language often demands an abrogation of the other)?

Inter-religious conflict is the topic of another dissertation; but how might we propose to bring people of differing beliefs together on the topic? What attempt may we make to work through the barriers and baggage of our language pertaining to stewardship? Kimberly Brace, a PhD student studying sustainable development had this to say: “It’s almost as if we don’t have the right rhetoric to use (one would not self-identify as a ‘sustainable developer’) we need to come up with something people can identify with; steward is a good word but it’s got so many different connotations that it’s a very difficult one to apply to a person. ‘Environmental manager’ sounds like a job title; it’s a difficult one to resolve and I don’t know that we will. But that’s the good thing about it, everyone has their own ideas to bring to the table; when you get all these people to discuss this concept that is so big the ‘amorphousness’ does help bring people together.”

Perhaps then the idea is not to propose a universally applicable definition of stewardship; instead, if one could persuade the world to ‘come to the table’ and openly discuss the needs of our planet, there might be more opportunity in dialogue than definition. Tony Hodgson of the International Futures Forum noted the difference between an ownership society and a holistic one—where the language and idea of stewardship is not based on the value of a thing but how all things work together:

The word steward implies that one does not *own* and in a capitalist society *ownership is everything*; so stewardship is a difficult perspective for most people to adopt because we are deeply inculcated that ‘if it’s mine, I can do what I like with it’ mentality. But, in an uncertain world, ‘ownership’ is up for grabs—it doesn’t mean the same thing as what we’ve assumed. Stewardship is a holistic concept; good stewardship is always looking out for the whole on any scale and trying to be responsible in the micro, meso and macro levels. I think the deeper meaning is more reflected in indigenous societies; I’ve been recently studying the Peruvian shamans and their language of *Pacchu Mama*, the Mother Earth. Whereas we got thrown out of the Garden of Eden and have been fighting nature ever since, in those societies nature is the provider, the mother, the being in whom we live and have our being. Stewardship without a paradigm shift in capitalist views, or communist views, or all the ‘usual’ philosophies—to me, putting stewardship in those is going to miss the point.

Michael Northcott, in *A Moral Climate*, proceeds a step further and considers how materialism negates any sort of ideology or contemplative thought altogether (emphasis in original): “The modern age, with its invention of electric light and automatic mechanistic devices, also exceeds any predecessor civilisation in its substitution of the activities and business of making over contemplative rest. And so *having* takes precedence over *being* in modern political economy in a way that is more thoroughgoing than any predecessor culture. And industrial humans increasingly experience their identity in terms of the things that they have acquired, instead of their *being* creatures.” (Northcott 2007, 186) Several interviewees expressed a concern that the momentum of consumer culture may be too great to stop ‘in time’—that our desire for things may outstrip all our supposed values and ideals. We have a desire for a more balanced culture that recognises intrinsic over economic value; however, our education and mode of living does not encourage such thought.

How do we transition out of a society where stewardship is increasingly based on monetary value? Tony continues, “I don’t know what the new paradigm is—

but I know we need one; so a constant checking of what the foundations are in which we are placing this idea of stewardship is important. The thing about this new paradigm is that it will certainly include a gift economy or gift transactions; where the reason things are done is because of where it fits in the scheme of things not what its cash value is or how it contributes to our various prides and vanities.”

“Ownership and control are two issues that need to be addressed because they can be easily overshadowed”, says Nick Wilding, director of the Centre for Human Ecology; “Take an indigenous perspective where, of course, nobody can ‘own’ any land and then you take a feudal perspective where one has a God given right to oversee and manage the land for the feudal underlings (and I think there is still an attraction to that in some stewardship courses); then you take a modernist stewardship perspective where you start making businesses and then look at the stake-holder involvement—then you take a participatory perspective. There is clear ownership of the land with the feudal perspective, though the ownership resets with God; God has given one the right to give and hold forth the land. There comes from that this phrase that the steward’s role is to ‘take, to hold and to pass on.’ I see this as an essentially feudal concept; which the reality is that most land is owned and we might be able to engage with this system by moving toward community land trusts; especially if that trust had a voice that was not necessarily human (talking into account the ‘natural’ inhabitants of the land) one might be able to return to some sort of indigenous viewpoint. But I don’t think you can get away for the fact that land is now ‘owned’; we just have to diversify the management and holding of it.”

So perhaps we are not ready to abandon the idea of ownership; what then are the options for transitioning from it (or at least moving toward a healthier understanding of it)? How does one communicate an idea that is so deeply tied to the ‘ownership’ society? Several of the interviewees commented on this; Kimberly Brace explains some of the difficulty: “I think that trying to extend the concept of stewardship to a wider audience is quite difficult because it seems to be tied up with land; if you try to, say, extend that concept to an urban base, you might be better to use a concept like sustainable development even though that comes with all those issues of ‘what does it mean; it means everything.’ It’s just that, again in the Scottish context, (I won’t comment on England) stewardship has all the paternalistic influence of care, passing on, religion.”

Are we then 'stuck' with a word that has too much history; can it become useful and relevant now? "I'm not sure many people have an idea of the origins of the word," says Tony Hodgson. "I think part of the task is putting the meaning back into it. We need to inject a lot more 'baggage' into it so it takes on a more profound meaning." All words have an origin and then evolve; so too do the social and political structures under which we live. However, when these two combine and the words we use to describe society begin to shift meaning, there is ample room for confusion (or, more positively, room to open up a much richer understanding of roles and definitions). One such shifting word is 'landlord'.

## Titles, Landlords and Feudalism

No matter with whom I speak in Scotland concerning stewardship, the topic of land reform, land ownership and landlords inevitably comes into the conversation. Opinions are mixed concerning the role and legitimacy of titled landholders and the significance of wealth and landholding in Scotland is an ongoing and sometimes contentious topic. Perhaps the balance of monetary and political power still rests with those who hold wealth and land; however, the power to engage in a conversation concerning this is now open to all. Landlords, as they were the ones with uncontested political clout, once defined all the terms. Now, as individuals and communities realise their ability to expand the confines of the discussion, there is a significant shift and broadening of power.

There is also a gradual change in the way landlords see themselves (or, perhaps more critically, how they present their role). There are certainly plenty of stereotypical examples of the landlord who comes up from England over the weekend in his Bentley to shoot grouse whilst plebeians idyllically farm his land. However, there are alternative examples of landlords who engage with their communities and offer a positive contribution to it; then, of course, the question is what does a positive relationship entail?

Annie McKee is a PhD student at Perth College studying the relationships between landlords and local populations; "I would like to explore where there are positive relationships between landowners and the local communities. [This would be] where there is a lot of interaction and a mutually beneficial relationship; where there is a constant consultation and the landowner isn't just the boss; where he, she or it (in the case of a trust or company) is an equal partner of the community and there is a good level of democracy. But, if you are a landowner you are not voted in; that's where the relationship issues are a bit more

complicated. It's not the same now as it was in the 17 or 1800s but there is still a feudal attitude that goes through Scotland." She continues more specifically concerning the estate hosting the Big Tent Festival, "In some places, such as here [in Falkland], the landowner has been very positive in involving the community in the estate and what it means. But in other places nobody even knows who they are in the community. In both places, the landowner has this huge role over people's lives and where they live; so there should be a positive relationship. It's more than being benevolent and paternalistic, it should be a two way thing and shouldn't be on the whims of just one person." Ultimately the question becomes not what the relationship is between landlords and tenants but what is our understanding of ownership; is the influence of one person over other people's lives justified because he or she 'owns' the land beneath them?

The current Laird of Falkland Estate is Ninian Stewart; he provides a case study of how the role of a landlord might evolve.<sup>1</sup> The Centre for Stewardship is connected to a trust commissioned by Ninian's father to manage the estate (the trust was originally closely connected to the Stuart family but is gradually changing over to more local control). He still holds the title of keeper; however, is no longer the legal owner of much of the estate itself. This is an arrangement that has many benefits to landholders as, in giving over land into the hands of a not-for-profit trust<sup>2</sup> they retain a great deal of power without the tax burden of outright ownership. However, that may be a somewhat cynical view of the idea; the commission of a trust may also be a vehicle for shifting down control of a place to the local level. It depends, like so many of the issues surround this, on the goodwill of the people involved; it is not something that can be readily enshrined in a legal code. However, the laws are changing and seem set to change further as food and fuel resource pressures become more apparent (and people gain a sense of self-empowerment and determination).

Ninian himself has mixed feelings about the title he holds. "I have been resistant to taking on the laird role or 'the Lordship' as one might say; I've chosen to re-define that. That has been helped by the actions my father took in leaving the estate to a trust. So I am not, by and large, the 'owner' now and mainly act for the legal estate trust as a steward and have come to value that notion. I think part of valuing that notion comes from the name which I hold of *Stewart*; origi-

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<sup>1</sup> Though, obviously, this is a very context specific observation. Neither he, nor anyone I spoke with suggested this is a comprehensive solution to 'the landlord issue'. It is also a work in progress as there are generations of history to work through and then consider what might come in the future.

<sup>2</sup> Of which the board is often solely composed of family members.

nally the Stewarts of Scotland looked after the kingdom for the king till they in turn grabbed the crown for themselves. That, in my view, rather lost them the right to be the *steward*—the notion of owning and stewarding are different. A steward is supposed to be for the community at large or for the next generation.”

Alastair McIntosh questions the power structure involved regardless of well-meaning people: “I would much rather have a benign feudal structure than a malign one that you see in so many Scottish Estates. But to me it is a bit problematic when land ownership, having been advised by PR consultants, that to call themselves landowners or lairds is a negative thing start shifting to using the word ‘steward’ and, as I say in Ninian’s case, that has considerable justification. But, it does carry the question of what are the power dynamics of that? But I think that is part of the ambivalence of the world we live in where nothing can ever be perfect and we have to sort out the hand of cards we have been given in the way we discern to be most fitting.”

If the words are so malleable, who then has the power to shape them? “Historically, in Scotland, the private landowner has been the key decision maker and driver of change in rural areas”, says Annie McKee. “If you ask private landowners to define ‘sustainability’ they will say, ‘well, sustainability really means stewardship to us.’ Sustainability and sustainable development have more of a holistic sense whereas stewardship is more of a defined concept in this context.”

Nick Wilding, who lives in Falkland (as a tenant of the laird) and works closely with the Centre for Stewardship, also considers the placement of power but questions how a community can take a term like stewardship and make their own definition of it (e.g. how the power to define the term can be more widely distributed): “Stewardship seems to be an umbrella term that quite a wide constituency can find a place in. And I think that in that is both its strength and weakness. As I work for social change, I’m interested in how strategically stewardship might be used to shift a system to re-localised more democratic communities—participatory, bottom-up economic systems where resilience is built in. I think stewardship comes in handy if you are in a place where there is a direct connexion to the land or there is a particular place one is stewarding. But the question is who is doing the stewarding; and therein lies the weakness of the term because I don’t think there is necessarily anything in stewardship itself that points toward a democratisation of decision making. Although that would be where the evolution of the term needs to take people.”

Is the social environment then driven by language or does language change because of changing social realities? Colin Tudge marks a distinction between the mode of landholding in Europe, which tended to coalesce power into the hands of a few, and land ownership in the United States which (ideally) provided land for the many. “The distinction between feudalism and personal ownership [in the Jeffersonian sense] is interesting and, I think, the reason the United States broke away from Europe—they had enough of the feudal model.”

I asked a couple of my interviewees a ‘devil’s advocate’ question; do they think there is room for a ‘new feudalism’—a revision of the old feudal model that retains some of the same titles and positions but gives more power to the individuals living on the land in question? Most of my discussions tended toward a power division that would outwardly appear anarchical; however, there is an underlying realisation that some people do not necessarily *care* what happens with the land around them. It seems likely that many people would rather someone else take responsibility for it (though the argument against this would be that the cause of this ambivalence is a disconnection from place). Annie McKee compares the ideas of people concerning landholding with the actual laws in effect: “This is one area in particular where, though the legal standing of landholders has changed greatly, the mindset of people (landholders and residents) lags behind. It can be a new feudalism; in Scotland, feudalism has been abolished but you wouldn’t know that from the way things are run. It’s still the same attitude. Maybe in a couple generations that will change because of the laws; but the power structure is still there.”

I asked Ninian if he had considered the possibility that the position of keeper (the officially titled steward of the estate) might eventually become defunct. Has he prepared by giving over control of the estate to the local people?

That’s a very good question and for me, as a community worker to trade,<sup>1</sup> it’s something I’ve tried to do a lot of over the past few years and, to be frank, struggled with. One tries to give voice and, in a sense, give ownership to a wide group of people while, at the same time, make practical decisions on how to move forward a place and actually do something. We have done some work trying to build a [local] sense of ownership and involvement [but] I think there is a separate question on how to manage the assets of the estate...what we are doing in Falkland is risky [from a landowner’s perspective]. Some landowners would feel threatened [by such a system] because what we are doing is about losing control. I think it *is* risky; for me

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<sup>1</sup> He holds a degree in social work.

those risks are worth taking but need to be quite well thought out. One has to gauge the appetite for taking on control; I think, for example, on the Isle of Eigg, there was a real desire [from the community] to take on responsibility. My guess is that, in terms of land reform, that in some places there will be an appetite on the part of the community and it will be the clear thing to do. I have openly advocated that some parts of the estate be put into community ownership; however, in mooting this with people, I get the sense that, because people can come onto the estate and see it as their own now, there is not necessarily a desire to take it into legal ownership. So there is not that energy there that a community needs to run such things.

He carefully rides a balance here between both sides of the issue; on the one hand, he seems dedicated to maintaining some semblance of the historical role his family has played (if not strictly the position they filled in the past). On the other hand, there is an opening of the language to include others in decisions that directly effect their lives and the land around them. The question still remains concerning who appoints the steward(s) and who will take up the role?

Kimberly Brace makes a distinction between the role of steward and the idea of stewardship; she would apparently not feel comfortable taking on the title of steward as it would denote a certain social role and set of powers: “If you use the word with landowners, what they are describing is very paternalistic. I would think of Stewardship and the term steward as two different things [in the Scottish context]; a steward is a specific person who has a direct impact on the land and the people that live on it. I wouldn’t consider myself a steward because I don’t have that sort of influence.”<sup>1</sup>

“You do get feudal overseers who actually behave rather well with a great sense of personal humility and respect for their fellow human beings”, says Colin Tudge. In *Scotland: the Land and its Uses*, James McCarthy implies that the modern environmental movement may owe more to the ‘evil landlords’ than one might readily acknowledge: “The earliest conservationists were probably the kings and their nobles anxious to protect their game and hunting quarry by passing laws to protect hunting forests.” However, he continues, “Protection was almost always to conserve a resource for human use, and it was not until the 19th and 20th centuries did the notion of protecting nature for its own sake

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<sup>1</sup> She was the only interviewee who specifically said, “I wouldn’t consider myself a steward.” All the other interviewees articulated some place or thing they stewarded (and, Kimberly, on some further questioning, did acknowledge there are things in her life she essentially stewards).

arise seriously...many of the first nature reserves in Scotland owe their existence to the survival of these estates....” (McCarthy 1994, 139)

“One might say that, if everyone who was a feudal landlord was benign that would be all well and good”, says Colin Tudge. “And, in a sense, it would; but of course, the lairds have so much power it is a terrible thing that humankind should depend on their whim because they could equally well be a really nasty exploitative person. So people need security; one would think that a democracy as envisaged by Jefferson would provide that sort of security—but it doesn’t because individuals can behave very badly.”

Nick Wilding suggested that a definitive definition of the word stewardship might not be a requirement for its use; it may be that a lack of definition is what makes the idea so durable and useful. “It’s a word that opens up space for creative dialogue where different perspectives can meet and engage—there is space for conflict in there and it’s okay to have that. Is there a language of power that stewardship opens up? If I want to catalyse a rapid transition to resilience, what does stewardship have to say? Is there a set of concepts and thinking around stewardship that would helpfully inform a movement toward resilience? It could be that the structure of a feudal landed estate is actually a resilient structure; it’s been around for hundreds of years.” Daniel Green, in *To Colonize Eden*, asks a similar question when evaluating the care of great estates in Britain; if a place has been precisely tended according to a master plan for hundreds of years, is there not something positive to be said for the structure undergirding it? “...The parks with their avenues and arboretums and lakes and follies and vistas, the carefully planned coverts, copses and woods, and the surrounding fields, which have been drained, marled, limed, mucked, fertilised and cultivated into their present fertility—all provide evidence of a stewardship that has been exercised at a level no longer to be found elsewhere in the world.” (Green 1977, 116) However, Nick cautions, “You are in danger of relying on a benevolent dictatorship; but you could argue that it prevents huge amounts of development on the land and protected it. The question is, given what’s coming in the future, does that sort of structure still have a place in society? Could it serve us well? But the ‘new feudalism’ has to be a more democratic structure.” So it’s not merely to revise the meaning of language; there must be a much deeper change in the purpose of the structures and the role of people involved.

Daniel Gates proposes this democracy must take into account the needs of both land and residents. “The land and the environment and people should basically

be in harmony; if you are working for the environment you can actually be working for people as well because we both need the same together. Traditionally, it's been rather top down and feudal and we would like to see it more inclusive and everyone see that it is their privilege to use the land and use the products and by making that connection see that it is a self-perpetuating cycle."

Is there something though that is innately destructive in human nature? Are we assuming that devolving power to a group of people will be necessarily less destructive to the environment (and each other) than holding in all in one person? Nick continues, "...the people involved have to consider not what is just good for me or my family or the Lord's treasury. I don't think 'straightforward' democracy necessarily delivers that—especially in a culture that is so distanced from the land and a relationships with one another. We no longer have a sense of what is healthy; from what is going on here to the Maori tribes that, now that they have their land back, are cutting down the forests and building casinos."

When asked what the qualities of a 'good steward' might be, Annie McKee replied: "A landowner can be absent but a steward implies a presence and role in the community; branding themselves as a steward gives them some identity in the community—a positive identity as stewardship is inherently optimistic. People that own land are, rightly or wrongly, stereotyped. It's the biggest battle that a landowner has to face—to get away from the fact that their ancestors were so powerful that they just got rid of people on their land and didn't give a damn—very un-stewardlike." Daniel Green in *To Colonize Eden*, has this to say concerning Scottish landlords in particular: "Scottish landowners, justly or otherwise, have inherited rather more unpopularity than their English counterparts...they recently [The Scottish Landowner's Federation in the 1970s] proposed a change in the description of their business from 'landowner' to 'land steward', so emphasising their status as custodians rather than owners, of the soil." (Green 1977, 158)

How does the appointed steward deal with his or her ancestry and does a current change in semantics and action absolve one from the burden of it? Ninian considers this:

I think the role of steward is one that needs to be by appointment; there is something about discerning who the best steward is which should be regardless of inheritance. I think, and this is where I haven't resolved the question, there may be something else which is about the long term role of people who carry the history. Perhaps it

is about blood and ownership in a wider sense than the legal—how people can continue to have a place. I think there is something I hold and carry because my ancestors have been here for a long time which is still an important contribution to the future of the estate. I think that's a set of memories, interests, heirlooms, stories that can help to add value to the future. In that sense an acknowledgement of that in some formal way can add value. I don't know how you build that in to a new structure or new framework that allows communities to have a real sense of involvement and ownership in the place. Whilst there will be areas where the family that have owned and kept in a sense forfeit their right by being bloody minded and keeping others out. I would be interested in hearing about more community ownership models that can thread both together.

### Personal Understanding, Identity and Responsibility

Though the word 'community' appeared many times during my interviews, equally apparent were words related to the role of individuals and the importance of personal responsibility. No matter what lack (or abundance) of power and wealth, most of my interviewees articulated that stewardship is fundamentally a personal task. Daniel from Reforesting Scotland said, "We tend to talk about communities and land; [stewardship] is a good word but it needs to be on an individual basis where everyone can take part." It is this concrete individualisation that seems to give real life to the idea and practice of stewardship.

There was also some discussion that signals a shift in the definition of ownership; though the ownership of land and commodities is still of great importance, the *ownership of ideas* is fast becoming primary. "If you encourage people to have their own definitions then they are taking ownership and responsibility of the idea", said Kimberly Brace. "If you have ownership over any concept it is a step toward behaviour change. There are always going to be different understandings of it; if stewardship is a concept that you want to extend then it will be come broader and broader and a bit like sustainable development. If you talk to different people about stewardship they will come out with core themes that will be similar: caring for something, passing something on...the *something* will be different; it will be cities, it could be anything but the central themes will probably be very similar."

If we abstract stewardship from a particular thing, what is left conceptually to build upon? Isleen Hazeldyne, a mother and resident of Falkland had this to say, "It's not really about defining it; it's about preserving in a way—anything new that I create, I need to do with both a sense of yesterday and tomorrow. I need to

have a sense of it moving in to the future in a positive way. It wouldn't have meant a lot to me four or five years ago; but, since I've had children, I've felt much more of a need to think about stewardship and see everything as more of a joined together whole." Several interviewees spoke of this 'interconnectedness' and how the idea of connexion between themselves, each other and the 'natural' world compels them to become stewards; it is a life outlook informed by shared unity. "To understand these questions, we need to understand how western man thinks about his environment", says John Black in *The Dominion of Man*. "What is his attitude to his surroundings...his relation to other people and, equally important, to the rest of animate and inanimate nature; his relation to the whole of his external world—in other words, his place 'in the scheme of things.'" (Black 1970, 20)

"From what value system are people speaking into the concept", asks Nick Wilding. "I don't think it is just semantics; you have to work really hard with stewardship to get beyond an objectifying concept of anthropocentric relationship with nature. If you get to its root, it's still humankind taking some degree of control over managing nature. There is a philosophical difference between that approach and a 'power with' starting point; I think they can meet, but the baggage of stewardship is still that of 'man's dominion over nature' no matter how much you try to say it's not. There is a huge inertia embedded in our political, cultural and religious systems that tend to re-enforce this." But is all that momentum necessarily negative? Wendell Berry, in much of his writing, pulls from the resource of belief and tradition to parse out the best of human activity in relation to nature; there is a resource there to draw deep from. "And so in our wish to preserve our<sup>1</sup> land, we are not without the necessary lessons, nor are we without instruction, in our cultural and religious tradition, necessary to learn those lessons...we have still, though few and widely scattered, sufficient examples of competent and loving human stewardship of the earth." (Berry 2002, 200)

I sat for some time to speak with a group of woodworkers at the festival who came to demonstrate craft skills and sell furniture. They spoke of living out the role of stewards as an integrated part of life and practice: "We refuse to be put in a box; we are not categorically *hippy*; we are not categorically *humanistic*; we are not categorically *green*; we are not categorically *ecologists*. We *are* fundamentally part of *humankind*. The cause and effect of every act is important to us as the practitioners; the way we make our furniture is our stewardship. We take care of

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<sup>1</sup> Though I suppose the use of 'our' here does suggest anthropocentrism; however, this is not overt in most of Berry's writing. Perhaps, again, we merely lack a proper language.

that from the woodland right through to the workshop. We take care of and engage our customers through that form of stewardship; we then go back out and ‘replant’ that. We are hardcore stewards; it’s important to us that we communicate that and the best way to do that is through demonstration in our work. We know where things come from and what energy has been expended on it.”

Ninian discussed the importance of maintaining craft in a place that was so evidently shaped by skilful people (in connexion to the paragraph above, made by skilful people living in and concerned with a particular place). “We are still at an early stage, but there are some important themes that I think have relevance beyond ourselves. As a whole, the assets we’ve focused on with a view to making them more accessible and relevant to the community...there is an interest in looking back to traditional craft but also looking forward to how the idea of craft practice might have a role in the future (in terms of ‘re-skilling’ communities). The other element [of the estate] we’ve worked with is a landscape that has evolved over millennia; over the past thousand years it has had a whole range of land uses. We’re doing work to restore the landscape and discover some of the things that have happened in the past and how it will live on into the twenty-first century.”

One of the woodworkers, Paul, spoke of the importance of passing down *skill* as a means of stewardship (again, with an emphasis on the ownership of ideas): “There is a lack of education to take one in the direction of stewardship; it’s not just the mainstream stuff; If I can learn, it’s good to pick up my thing and pass it on to someone else. Skills that I pick up, not just the practical but the mental and compassionate skills, can be passed on. There are people out there with the generosity to lend and teach [craft] skills. But it’s a minority and needs to be expanded on; everyone needs these skills. People just need to bring interest and enthusiasm as a learner. Everyone has a trigger that will set them off to a new ethos.”

I should note here ‘passing down’ does tend to imply a transmission of knowledge from an older generation to a younger one; however, several of my interviewees noted that they learn equally from people far younger than themselves. Annie considers how the idea of legacy encourages stewardship: “I would define it in terms of sustainability—of passing something on and keeping it safe for the next generation. I think of it with a theme of positive legacy and intergenerational equity so that something is carried from one generation down the line.” Ninian describes it in terms of a conversation—or a dance: “Stewardship is a

conversation from one generation to the next; not just from older to younger but both ways. I think that is very important in today's world. Stewardship cannot be a static concept; it's a dance, it's really about movement. It is about drawing from the past, adding value to the present and passing it on into the future. You can live that out in different ways: if one is talking about the land one can talk about drawing from the history of the land, adding value to it, and passing it on into the future. Or you can look at the raw material of a place, making something beautiful from it and passing it on to others. My place in the world is to do what I can in the way that I do it; but it must always be in regard to the person or land I am talking about and it must always be about passing it on—it must be about how one plays one's part and moves it on."

What are some ways of educating people about their responsibility to steward (in a consumer culture or in the transition out of it)? Ally, a designer and arts-educator, spoke of changing the idea behind product design to something more collective (similar to the Open Source software movement): "It's kind of like shepherding, so perhaps not taking ownership of something but taking care of it and 'herding it' in some way—looking after the direction it is going in. I'm interested in changing the profile of what design is from being an ego-driven profession to a collective based issue where ideas of authorship no longer exist. It comes up surprisingly little in [arts] education; I'm asking how we can get educators to talk about these things with their students because these students are going out into the world and designing more products for landfills. I'm asking how we can 'embed' ecological literacy into student's minds so they can recognise that it exists—that's the first step to doing something about it."

## ≡ Chapter Three: Findings ≡

### Sharing at the Smorgasbord

I was not particularly surprised at either the content of the interviews or the themes that came of them. What was expected, though it continues to fascinate me, is the personalisation of this idea; each of the people I spoke with had his or her own particular definition of stewardship—unique, but equally valid. In my interview with Nick Wilding, we debated whether we *should* aim for a unified definition of stewardship—would having such a definitive definition help or hinder the discussion? He stated, “It’s a word that opens up space for creative dialogue where different perspectives can meet and engage.” Annie McKee echoed this idea: “everyone should have their own definition for it or it will not go forward.” It’s akin to discussions of faith and religion. We tend to seek out concrete answers and want creeds to pledge ourselves to; but, once we make a certain vow, the conversation is likely over. Once we’ve become the devoted adherent, there is always a risk that we become static in the search. Also, and more pointedly, we tend to exclude or rebuke others if they do not agree to the same definition.

Most of my interviewees eventually reached into metaphor that brought the conversation back to belief and value concepts; the drive toward stewardship seems to come from a spiritual root (whether this denotes a structured belief or some manner of innate altruism seems open to discussion). Colin Tudge set out the range of this: “One could say it’s about our [humankind’s] responsibility for looking after the rest of the planet; I think that’s a bit high-handed. I start from the position that all morality is rooted in three precepts. One, *personal humility*, this is the sort of universal ‘prophet based’ as taught by Mohammed [pbuh], Jesus, Krishna [etc.]; the second is *respect for other human beings and other creatures* (one could say other sentient creatures, but why not just say other creatures); and the third is a *sense of reverence*—you could say for God, you could say for nature, you could say for the Universe as a whole. To me stewardship is what you get when you apply these things to the living world or anything. But that is basically it—how you treat things in the light of these fundamental moral principles.”

This search for ‘fundamentality’ is, I think, inevitable. Most people I’ve spoken with (in the interviews at the festival and casual conversation concerning my

work on this topic) eventually say something to the extent of, “Well, it’s essentially *this*, isn’t it? I mean, if we simplify it, *this* is what we are talking about.” It’s our nature to sort things out to their simplest forms and, though this is a topic that doesn’t readily reduce to an elemental level, we attempt to do so anyway.

Within my research group I did not see any signs of a *fundamentalist* attitude toward stewardship (e.g. people who are fanatical that their own idea of stewardship is the only acceptable one). The discussion is too emergent for this sort of behaviour to present itself; however, like other terms emerging in ‘the green movement’, there is a risk that a certain group (whether they be from within, a government, a marketing firm, etc.) will take up the term and make it their own before a broad discussion can offer up a healthy definition. I think, to avoid this, it’s not necessary or desirable that we rush to put something down on paper; instead, I would recommend the best protection for the idea is to generate a discussion that encourages people to evaluate and define stewardship in their own lives. Far more important than publishing the definitive definition I was originally hoping for is a person or community coming to understand their own role in stewarding the earth.

The context-specific and deeply personal idea of stewardship is what will ‘save the earth’. When I asked Ninian Stewart for his own definition of stewardship, this was his reply: “Stewardship is about holding, keeping and nurturing things that are valuable and important for others—whatever that might be. From a house like we are sitting in to a land like we manage at Falkland to the little things that are important to people whether they are small like the teapot—or cultures, traditions or stories and so forth.” It’s the care for teapots and stories that will save us. For all our pretence to technological power and scientific solutions, it’s the fact that there are people like-minded to the folk I spoke with in Falkland that will heal the many small ills. “Soil loss, for example is a problem that embarrasses all of our technological pretensions”, says Wendell Berry. “If soil were all being lost in a huge slab somewhere, that would appeal to the would-be heroes of ‘science and technology’, who might conceivably engineer a glamorous, large, and speedy solution...but soil is not usually lost in slabs or heaps of magnificent tonnage. It is lost a little at a time over millions of acres by the careless acts of millions of people. It cannot be saved by heroic feats of gigantic technology but only by millions of small acts and restraints, conditioned by small fidelities, skills, and desires. Soil loss is ultimately a cultural problem; it will be corrected only by cultural solutions.” (Berry 2002, 202)

Culture, stories, words—everything comes back to action based on ideas. The several authors I spoke with expressed that they see themselves as stewards of words. Colin said that, “I would like to see myself as a steward; I am a writer—but I don’t want to be an evangelist, but I suppose in some ways, as a writer, I am. I put up ideas and hope that people notice.” Alastair McIntosh, as quoted in the text, mentions the importance of bardic traditions in Scottish culture; it’s the stories of a place that give people grounding in it and point to how it should be cared for in the future. “We need to create a future for the place”, says Ninian; “but in creating a future—for me part of the future is respecting and enjoying and learning from the contribution of our ancestors—much of which is fantastic and some of which leaves us with great challenges. I think, in the end, it’s about balance. Learning from the past is one of the important things we have in Falkland; it’s not unique, but it is rare to have the ability to both look back and take the long view forward.” Stories must be voiced; the land needs a legend to give it life (or, at least, humans need stories to bring out understanding).

I’ve mentioned the term ‘ownership’ several times throughout this thesis. In my opening remarks, I spoke of ‘a sense of place’. I think there is a risk, that I didn’t perceive till the end of this research, of merging these ideas together. A few interviewees spoke of ‘a sense of ownership’; however, there is a real difference between actual legal ownership of land and *a sense of belonging* to that place. I would not place a judgement on which is more or less important; however, I think it’s worth noting the distinction between them as they imply different kinds of power over individuals and land. Perhaps, in a time when there is public discussion over issues of identity, a sense of place is more significant; or perhaps, in a time when questions of food and energy security are in the news, land ownership is the primary thing. I think, though they are distinctly different ideas, we cannot separate the two. To truly become stewards of the Earth, whatever that may mean concerning our actions, we must ‘belong’ to it as much as it ‘belongs’ to us.



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