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*Published in:*  
International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation

*DOI:*  
[10.1177/14657503221099210](https://doi.org/10.1177/14657503221099210)

E-pub ahead of print: 01/08/2022

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication on the UWS Academic Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Burnett, K. A., & Danson, M. (2022). Romance and resilience: the assets and ambition of Scottish 'remote rural' enterprise contexts. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation*, 23(3), 176-187.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/14657503221099210>

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# Romance and resilience: The assets and ambition of Scottish ‘remote rural’ enterprise contexts

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The International Journal of  
Entrepreneurship and Innovation  
1–12

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DOI: 10.1177/14657503221099210

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## Abstract

Assets and enterprise ambitions of rural and island communities are dependent on their context at the margins, “on the edge” where they face greater challenges. Such communities are sites imbued with narratives of place as ‘Romance’ and of people as ‘Resilience’. The sustained, resilient, and emerging enterprise and innovation activity within their commons are indicative of deeper aspects of the contextual foundations of enterprise in social and cultural narratives and the materiality and lived experience of community itself. Case studies exemplify the necessary adaptability of the often ‘romanticised’ geography, environment, and historical economies by the small yet resilient entrepreneurial communities of Scotland’s remote rural places, revealing how romance and resilience are experienced by entrepreneurs and their markets. Community empowerment through land reform and animateurs applying forms of social capital are key in the overall framing of entrepreneurial ambition contexts. The narratives of enterprise in these remote rural historical places yet culturally defined spaces speak to a realignment of periphery, the margin, or edge as enterprise arenas of the commons: embedded social foundations of place and people, their expanding ambitions for community assets and the commons. They promise a generative, international and entrepreneurial ‘growth mindset’ of social, economic and symbolic capital ambitions.

## Keywords

animateurship, the commons, community empowerment, enterprise, islands, social capital

## Introduction: Enterprise and innovation in ‘remote rural’ Scotland

What constitutes the assets, and the enterprise ambitions, of Scotland’s remote rural and island communities is a nuanced and often charged context. Such communities – located “at the margins”, “on the edge” – are sites imbued with narratives of ‘romance’ and of ‘resilience’. Our first contention is that in drawing attention to these discourses – that is, the narratives, textual imagery and dialogues that are produced, circulated and impactful – we might offer insight to current Scottish remote rural enterprise and community assets context. Our second related contention is that Scotland has significantly facilitated governance or subsidiarity, most especially with respect to community empowerment, and this has impacted on the nature of both the defining of ‘remote rural’ assets and local scale

community enterprise ambitions. Scottish Government policies of reappraising and facilitating more collective community wealth and assets was/is stimulated by notable “grass-roots” activism as *necessary* local responses to deep historical socio-economic challenges. Consequently, we contend that remote rural and island communities are at the forefront of realising community empowerment ambitions; they provide important examples of a *historical place and culturally defined* enterprise growth mindset in

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regard of rural assets, entrepreneurial stewardship and community ambition more broadly.

The scholarship and work on rural enterprise and entrepreneurship by colleagues, not least by Ged McElwee, offer valuable tools for comparative analysis and key critical insights informing of rural enterprise “of the margins”, and “at the edge” in north-western Europe more generally. In contributing to this ‘Festschrift’ Special Issue, we begin with a brief review of McElwee’s work as it informs our account here. His individual and collaborative contribution is significant in the shared space of critical rural enterprise scholarship more widely, informing also more specific geographies, including Scottish contexts. Articulation with our own research includes not least: (i) the shared community values of interdisciplinary scholarship; (ii) the necessity of a politically aware field of critique; and (iii) that the retaining walls of historically-aware analysis be maintained such that the continuity of ‘longer view’ research to interrogate and validate rural enterprise research now and for the future is collectively championed. McElwee’s varied and incisive research often favours the research lens of the rural as political. People and power, humanity, are centrally placed within much of McElwee’s output with a clear embrace of the possibilities that both interdisciplinarity and internationalism have offered the field of enterprise research. His individual and collaborative work (notably here Somerville) on *community* is one such focus informed productively by a questioning of terminology:

“There are a variety of interpretations, however, of the nature of community enterprise, of its potential for future growth, and of its significance for human well-being. Much depends on what is meant by community itself, but also on what types of enterprise are to be regarded as properly community ones.” (Somerville and McElwee, 2011:317)

Understanding what constitutes the nature of the *social foundations* of enterprise ownership and control is also noted as an important framing context to our discussion that follows:

“[...] it suggests that maybe we should not classify enterprises into different sectors (private, public or third sector), but rather we should characterize them in terms of the social foundations of their ownership and control, e.g. based on families, communities, workers, consumers, shareholders, governments, supporter networks, [...] Basically, for any given enterprise, it is necessary to establish its social foundation in order to identify what kind of enterprise it is.” (Somerville and McElwee, 2011:318)

Furthermore, in regard of how success is afforded through inspiration, McElwee, Smith and Somerville

(2018: 174) conceptualize *animateurship* “as a distinct process which operates by inspiring others to take entrepreneurial initiatives and action.” These aspects (community, social foundations and animateurship) are noted as further informing of our account below.

Following this introduction with its outline aims, and our brief expansion of Ged McElwee’s work above, a literature review provides a thematic framing of Scotland’s ‘remote rural’ enterprise contexts as one of countering challenging legacies, and current negotiating of complex narratives of both ‘romance’ and ‘resilience’. In our own consciously interdisciplinary approach, attention is drawn to the discourse and textuality of Scotland’s ‘remote rural’ enterprise and assets context. We consider this especially apt whereby an appreciation of researching and accounting for rural enterprise contexts as *variously* envisioned, debated and experienced, is a position increasingly championed not least by McElwee himself. Focus then turns to Scotland’s ‘remote rural’ enterprise policies, institutions, and governance. In particular, we discuss policy innovation and ambitions of what are considered and valued as assets but also, and more currently, as ‘the commons’. As descriptive illustration we offer the islands of Eigg in the Inner Hebrides and Unst, Shetland as two case studies. Each case exemplifies the circulating and impactful ‘romance’ and ‘resilience’ discourses that frame ‘remote rural’ enterprise in and of place. Each is representative of deeper entrepreneurial policy initiatives of growth and competitive success whilst expressive of Scottish localism, community empowerment and ‘collective’ remote rural resilience. Drawing on our textual media and narrative methodology appreciation of how rurality enterprise is mediatized (a complex ‘meta-concept’ that not least invites historical critique of change over time, as well as appreciation of the impact media have on our everyday social fabric of rural enterprise as well as macro level agency and ambition), narrative extracts and textual data are detailed in regard of assets and ambitions. Finally, brief overarching commentary and reflection, and a revisiting of our shared articulation with McElwee’s impactful scholarship, is offered by way of summary discussion and conclusion.

## Literature review on challenging contexts

Remote rural places of Scotland, notably the highlands and indeed the various offshore island communities to the north and west, have been positioned and experienced as ‘margins’ and peripheral in socio-economic terms for a considerable period of modern history (Burnett 2017; Danson 2022; Danson and Burnett 2021a, 2021b). It is only in recent decades of the late twentieth century that there has been significant reassessment and indeed a realisation of a bespoke sustained economic policy of dedicated support and development. Through sustained ‘locational’ policy for the Highlands and Islands region, coupled with a

national assertion of rural and remote rural empowerment, Scotland's highlands and islands have countered the not inconsiderable social, economic and political legacies of being particularly designated economic "backwaters", with "fragile" (indeed "unsustainable/irreversible") demographics. Crucially in the long view of historically informed lived experience "from within", this is a region that has suffered from considerable degrees of entrepreneurial stagnation. Such designations and accounts have impacted heavily on the remote rural regions of Scotland for many decades. An upsurge in Scotland's national transformative vision of devolved power, coupled with empowerment facilitation within the rural regions and the islands especially, has been key to an enhanced and expanding enterprise and economic confidence. Furthermore, the complex re-assertion of the valuing of the highlands and islands places and its cultures (notably Gaelic i.e. the Gàidhealtachd) as singularly and especially valued underpinned an urgency albeit historically ongoing' of both policy and praxis to further invigorate, build confidence and sustain rural and island communities across the region (Scottish Government 2021a, 2021b). Entrepreneurship (of various kinds) was and is key here to community sustainability and enterprise (McElwee and Smith, 2014; Somerville and McElwee, 2011; Fortunato, 2014). Social, cultural and economic capital – the social foundations of the communities of the islands and remote rural margins - is generated within (and as a result of) the region's own knowledge exchange economy too – education, research, policy, media - where an enhanced business of enterprise growth is itself evidence of a broader maturing of economic success (c.f. North and Smallbone, 2006). This business of enterprise enhancement itself draws down and contributes to Scotland's remote-rural distinctiveness of integrated interdisciplinary focus and appreciation of the need for policy, research and praxis for entrepreneurial success of the region "as a whole". Research provides historical context and opportunity to reassert the significance of remote rural success as one not predicated on chance or individual largesse but rather on the importance of in-situ appreciation of socio-economic fragilities, contextual cultural histories and material realities of island and remote rural Scottish geographies.

Repositioning more firmly the rural "margin" and "edges" as places and spaces of significant innovation, creativity and ambition is increasingly championed "from within", not least by education and research. Furthermore, the enhanced digital platforming and proliferating mediatisation of rural enterprise activity, that is ever-widely accessible and inter-textually rich, is well noted. 'Romance' and 'resilience' narratives are produced variously. Particular tropes, motifs and accounts of rural enterprise ethos, process, and realities offer a constructed rural intimacy of the 'insider-view' for external consumption, a sharing of place, production and people involved. Such fields of

focus are not for expansion in this paper. Our intention is simply to highlight the increasing complexity (and complexities) of *how* rurality is discoursed in "edge" and "remote" contexts in regard of narrative (storification), textual mediatisation and its accounting. Innovation, enterprise and ambition narratives are underpinned by national policy, but related mediatisation interfaces are also notable in the remote rural context in regard of socio-cultural discourse and narratives of enterprise and production margins and boundaries as powerfully in and of local place and people (communities and their assets). This materiality, a degree of enterprise intimacy and 'lived experience' of innovation and resilience speaks to broader sociocultural and political contexts of Scotland's small nation coalition of local, regional and national community "commons" coalescing in various yet highly connected spaces. As already noted, the challenging context of Scotland's rural regions, with particular attention to the situation of remote rural and island regions, is a key legacy here and we expand on this further below.

Scotland's own historical policy of rural enterprise and innovation informs current ambitions and sustainability and resilience policy agenda. In this regard the highlands and islands region dominates. Narratives of 'highland and island' allure, alterity and difference (i.e. romance) are complexly entwined (MacDonald 1998) within policy and promotion narratives. Beyond (to the south and east) of the highland and islands region significant sites of rural innovation and enterprise development proliferate across Scotland in (Davies, Michie and Vironen, 2012). At the heart of any discussion of Scotland's rural categorisation and status remains the issue of land (economic, cultural, ecological and political). Ideological questions of land ownership in Scotland remains a key field for debate, activism and animation. Deep inequities persist in Scotland, a necessary backdrop to understanding contexts of land, assets and 'the commons' and critically informing of how enterprise is narrativized as well as its animation and realisation in the remote rural setting (Danson and Burnett, 2021a). Furthermore, like its geology Scotland offers a complex patterning of spatial planning categorisation yet currently under review. Rural, remote rural and the consideration of island and coastal regions in the new national planning framework NPF4 is noted as requiring more nuanced appreciation than that already recognised in NPF3<sup>1</sup>:

"The vision promoted by NPF3 includes a "sustainable, economically active rural area, which attracts investment and supports vibrant, growing communities". The spatial strategy associated with this vision recognises the diversity of rural Scotland, including by considering the distinct needs of remote rural, island and coastal areas. SPP4 takes a differentiated approach to rural planning policy, stating that the planning system should "in all rural and island

areas promote a pattern of development that is appropriate to the character of the particular rural area and the challenges it faces”, and it should “encourage rural development that supports prosperous and sustainable communities and businesses whilst protecting and enhancing environmental quality”. (Scottish Government, 2020:9)

As discussed earlier, Scotland’s rural and ‘remote rural’ places were (and are) frequently represented in policy and cultural texts as “tough” (stagnated) environments for enterprise and innovation yet, with the community buy-out policy firmly established, they offer a useful comparative basis for wider ambitions on social transformation, “big society” (Knox, 2011; Wyler, 2011) agenda, and sustainability ambitions (Winther 2017). Remote rural spaces (places/communities) are significantly represented in cultural and consumption narratives as attractive enterprise arenas for consumption *and* production. They certainly offer affective ‘restorative romance’, for visitors:

“Come and discover the true meaning of the word ‘escape’ by heading to some of the most rural places in Scotland. Everyone needs time to switch off and recharge. Take the chance to reconnect with loved ones somewhere faraway, or simply be at one with nature in wild open spaces. When the time is right, try some of these remote beauties and you’ll be rewarded with the most serene and undiscovered places in Scotland.” (Visit Scotland<sup>2</sup>)

But these “open spaces”, with their communities, offer affective reward for residents and entrepreneurial re-locaters too. Such wild, escape and discovery narratives underpin island and rural businesses in their selling of particularly configured “remote place” assets; consider the added value of enterprise at “the edge” yet via modern technologies of communication (not least transport), increasingly and readily accessible (“be (t)here in an hour!”) yet still a ‘peripheral margin’ of “wildness”, “nature” and “far”. Enterprises often embrace the remote rural USP across various media (screen, print, branding, social media) where storification positions production and consumption spaces of refuge (escape, remote, hidden, distant, ‘no-where’), enterprise alterity, that is ‘otherness’ and difference (Burnett and Danson, 2016). Remote rural product reality is that it needs to be available outwith the hyper-local market for commercial success and sustained growth, however, and effective distribution networks are key. Digital capacity across the remote rural is significantly enhanced in recent times and it plays a crucial role in facilitating growth and market reach (Scottish Government 2021b). The *Isle20*<sup>3</sup> online shopping social enterprise conceived and run from the small island of Tiree is just one innovative example of intra- and ‘inter-island’

entrepreneurial ambition. Here valuable local amateurship and commitment to push product whilst remaining in a collective stewardship of island producer ‘owner control’ of the image is key. Storification of the “family” of small island enterprise products and credentials (i.e. provenance, quality and passion and a valuable degree of ‘islandness’) is generated within linked discourse that is celebratory of rural asset, entrepreneurially ambitious but significantly knowing of island and ‘remote’ context and experience. Weather impacts, and under-investment failings in infrastructure (ferries, air and road) is nonetheless reaching a level of ‘critical failure’ challenges, compounded in significant terms by Brexit.

The Scottish Government’s own comparing and contrasting review of remote and accessible rural areas to the rest of Scotland (Rural Scotland Key Facts 2021)<sup>4</sup> highlighted key messages following their recent ‘Rural Policy Planning for 2050’ exercise (Scottish Government Report 2020) (detailed in the Rural Scotland Key Facts 2021 report). It simply but emphatically states that “Rural Scotland is important” countering historical demographic decline significantly by in-migration, and enhanced accessibility. Furthermore, “Rural Scotland accounts for 98% of the land mass of Scotland and 17% of the population” so the scale of where people live is notably of rural reference. This accelerating trend towards retaining rural population is unquestionably tied to wider acknowledgment of the rural as a “good place to live” with “less crime”, good quality of life, and high satisfaction with one’s environment. The articulations from rural survey respondents are valid although the picture is arguably more complex, not least in regard of crime (McElwee et al. 2011; Smith and McElwee, 2013). Additionally, islands (rural) as “good places to live” is experienced variously by island cultural work entrepreneurs (Burnett 2017; Harling Stalker and Burnett, 2016). Challenges do remain, recognised by Scottish Government and wider research where core inequity issues underlie the area’s often overplayed ‘romance’; these include high costs of living, transport, limited accessibility to services, digital connectivity, higher fuel costs/poverty. Furthermore, the situation continues to be complex in regard of the nature of work (despite generally good employment figures in the accessible rural regions, this is less sustained in the remote-rural areas); employment (low wages/seasonality/precarity); and housing where homeownership is high yet a more complicated picture (not least of sustaining a local workforce) of quality, availability and affordability of rural housing competing on the open ‘rural romance’ and second-home dominated market, both significantly heated post-Covid.

Our previous work on enterprises in island and remote rural areas (Burnett and Danson, 2016, 2017; Danson and Burnett, 2014; 2021b) has demonstrated the need to avoid a simple transfer of sectoral and national strategies and policies to regions considered peripheral and marginal (albeit

with an appreciable querying of these terms). The urban and metropolitan space dominates as the default location for creative innovation and entrepreneurial success but, as work by McElwee and others has significantly shown, this urban spatial bias is not only unhelpful in regard of the rural field of focus but it is also increasingly out-dated (McElwee and Smith, 2014; McElwee, Smith and Somerville, 2018; Somerville and McElwee, 2011).

As introduced above, the peculiar and exaggerated challenges by communities and enterprises living “on the edge” make the unmoderated application of mainstream theories, strategies and understandings to the periphery inappropriate and misleading (Danson and de Souza, 2012). Historical and social developments, and their consequences for the creation of social structures, practices and dependencies necessitate critique of these legacies today. The lexicon of specific concepts dominating lives in the remote rural and island environments include the Clearances (Hunter, 1991), crofting tenure system (Macleod, 2021; Hunter, 1991), marginal- and peripheral-isation (Danson and de Souza, 2012) and external and monopoly control over land ownership, use and management (Danson, 2020; Macleod, 2021; Fanon, 1961). Faced with limited opportunities to address these restrictions on local livelihoods and futures, building on social and economic structures and practices now defining their communities, and realising the benefits of inherent and localised social capital, has been crucial in sustaining remote rural living. Significantly many communities now offer key lessons and sharing of solutions across remote Scotland, and beyond.

Social capital theories describe and analyse how groups in society function through interpersonal relationships, embracing a shared sense of identity, a shared understanding, shared norms and values, trust and cooperation, and reciprocity. Social capital is usually applied to cover the value of both tangible and intangible resources, impacts and interactions of these relationships on these resources, and externally on larger groups. Social capital is often applied in examining the creation and use of public goods where they are generated for a common purpose. Improving and embedding bonding social capital to increase coherence within a community is critiqued in terms of path dependency, insularity, exclusion (Poder, 2011), however. The communities of the islands and remote rural spaces can therefore be characterised as subject to weak or broken networks (linkages) to the mainstream, core and centres of power yet contrastingly have social foundations that rely on local strong ties and interdependencies that meet the challenges of their unique environments (McMorran et al., 2018; Díaz-Pichardo et al. 2012). These latter connections are defined in terms of bonding social capital typically “with a high density of relationships between members, where most, if not all, individuals belonging to the network are interconnected because they know each other and interact frequently

with each other” (Claridge, 2018a). While traditional trading and familial connections would have been around the Scottish seaboard, the geopolitics of the last two or three centuries have reoriented these to be periphery-core so that bridging social capital - the bridges between communities - are often less well-established than might be anticipated. Learning between groups and amateurs located across the north and west to promote the interests of their collective and individual places has been increasingly recognised as an essential stage in regenerating the human and natural heritage of these spaces (as discussed in McElwee, Smith and Somerville, 2018; Somerville and McElwee, 2011). Normally (Claridge, 2018b), bridging social capital is an instrument in progressing the creation and strengthening of linking social capital, where communities can access and negotiate with institutions higher up in vertical power hierarchies. For communities challenged by their physical, historical and social contexts as described earlier, where structures and processes (natural and human) have been dislocated, all three forms of social capital will need to be active and facilitated if resilience and enterprise are to be attained.

Confronting constraints due to poor connectivity in terms of hard infrastructure and transportation (Scottish Government, 2021a; Dressler, 2016), and the weak ties and social networks as outlined above, communities in Scotland’s remote rural and island places face ongoing and precipitative population and economic decline (Copus, 2018). Community development and building resilience are proposed as key means to reverse decline and rebalance economic and social structures (Danson, 2015) but crucially by definition these are challenging existing and historically prevailing powers and dominant actors (Burnett, 2011). Building resistance through constructing and animating new institutions, alliances and other forms of social capital locally offers to break down barriers and obstacles to communities addressing truncated supply chains, growing home markets and otherwise achieving economies of scale and scope. Ameliorating the impacts of monopoly forces and ownership of assets in the area usually necessitates enterprising activities by individuals and by the collective; in the context of crofting communities and legacies of the intangible heritage of the Gàidhealtachd, cooperative attitudes and behaviours are embedded and can inform the local key actors and players in generating local movements for change. Echoing the revelations around innovative and enterprising interventions by communities identified by McElwee et al. (2018) and Díaz-Pichardo et al. (2012), such disruptive entrepreneurship (Schiavi and Behr, 2018) begins the process of gaining the capacities necessary to challenge the traditional powers over assets, structures and processes afforded by monopoly ownership of land (Danson, 2020). As developing the economies, communities and places in remote rural and island areas has been restricted by and dependent on

who *owns* the land and derived land-based activities, explicit and coherent entrepreneurial interventions by the local communities are a pre-requisite for effective change as discussed in more detail now.

### ***A challenging enterprise context: Scotland's 'remote rural' policies, institutions and governance***

Underpinning many of the challenges facing potential entrepreneurs and enterprises in remote rural communities in Scotland are the concentrated and large-scale patterns of ownership of their land. Rather than the small scale and diversified ownership of land which predominates across Europe, a mere 1125 owners hold 57% of Scotland's rural land and just 432 individuals own 50% of Scotland's privately-held land, while public bodies, including the national forest estate, Ministry of Defence and publicly-owned crofting estates account for 12.6%, and the eight largest land-owning charity and conservation bodies a further 2.6% (Macleod, 2021). In contrast to the 750 thousand acres owned in tax havens "posing problems" for law enforcement and tax authorities (Wightman, 2018), communities own but 600 thousand acres or under 5% of the total land area of Scotland. It has been argued that this degree of concentration in ownership in the hands of, often absentee and disengaged, lairds accrues monopoly powers in use and management of the land and local resources with negative effects on the economy, environment and societies at local and national levels (Danson, 2020; Glass et al. 2019). This imbalance in ownership, and so in use and management, stifles enterprise, constraining communities to develop sustainably and for the commons (Danson and Burnett, 2021a). For the last two decades, land reform has been promoted to offer an institutional context to meet these challenges, facilitated by state and higher governmental agencies such as HIE (Highlands and Islands Enterprise), Scottish Government, National Performance Framework, Sustainable Development Goals (Macleod, 2021), but there remain major barriers to change due to geography and other factors.

Successive land reform legislation has aimed to create a fundamental and irreversible shift in ownership and power away from large landowners and towards communities (buy-out). Implementing the right-to-buy a rural estate from a reluctant or hostile owner, or 'laird' can be long and drawn out however, involving legal, financial, planning, conflict resolution and other specialised and perhaps new (and pioneering) concepts for local peoples (as our Eigg case study below suggests). To facilitate this, the infrastructure necessary to empower local communities in this buy-out process has evolved to emphasise the importance of bonding social capital within the area to build a cohesive and coherent case for taking over the land and associated resources. Where the sense of community is weak or

embryonic, this can be a challenging stage in the buy-out process. Bridging social capital has been recognised as essential, therefore, often requiring external expertise and specialist knowledge to complement and animate the community's own efforts to build trust within a more socially heterogeneous place, and so linking social capital through support from public agencies is often crucial. Through the 'Communities and Place Directorate', Highlands and Islands Enterprise offers a toolkit of guides, advice and templates for communities considering managing and owning assets, with information and support over legislation and rights, funding possibilities – especially through the Scottish Land Fund, and lessons from other community land and asset holders<sup>5</sup>. These facilities are complemented by dedicated bodies established by the Scottish Government, in particular the Scottish Land Commission, and by networks of communities themselves such as the Development Trusts Association Scotland (DTAS), Community Land Scotland, Scottish Islands Federation.

These latter bodies encourage and offer learning, sharing of expertise and experience, knowledge and understanding so that bridging and linking capital are progressively established across the more peripheral places and spaces of Scotland. The interactions and capacity being built through these activities is subsequently promoting community buy-outs and empowerment further both in the islands and rural Scotland generally but also within urban and peri-urban areas. These infrastructure and institutional developments are consistent with the Scottish Government's (2021a) National Performance Framework the recommendations of advisory bodies such as the Just Transition Commission (2021), and so ultimately with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. The SDG framework is effectively the foundation of the portfolio of economic, environmental, land reform and community empowerment strategies in Scotland.

The issues of poverty, peripherality, climate emergency and demographics confronting remote communities should be addressed both explicitly through the pursuit of SDG but also by actions across most of the other Goals. As with many of Europe's remote rural, mountainous and otherwise marginal locations but specifically with regard to islands, which tend to suffer these challenges more strongly (c.f. Scottish Government 2021b), it has been recorded that: islands have below average connectivity; below the European average GDP; slower rates of economic convergence; job and career opportunities are low; and there is low quality and high cost of services (Copus, 2018). Similarly, Dressler (2016) has reported that European island characteristics include features of: appreciable levels of social capital – 'closely knit communities'; high values of natural capital; preserved history and culture, and biodiversity; renewable energy potentials (hydropower, offshore wind, wave, tidal energies, biomass, solar energy); goods and services that exhibit significant economic

externalities and so do not receive market pricing (air purification, hazard prevention, groundwater recharge, bioremediation of waste and pollutants, recreation); and higher vulnerability to climate change (islands – sea level rise, storms, extreme temperatures, flooding). These complementary sets of findings by Copus and Dressler confirm the need to apply the thinking behind the SDG framework designed for the periphery, the powerless, the margins of the world to our own areas and communities. Within this context, it can be argued that in terms of both policies and institutions there has been a movement towards communities individually and increasingly collectively gaining powers and power as they experience and share the benefits of each other's learnings and struggles. The Land Reform Acts have moved from the geographical and political periphery towards the centre and core, with manifesto commitments to spread the legislation into urban settings, to supplement aspects of just transition and community asset transfer and empowerment, and for Scottish Government Ministers to be able:

“to issue Public Sale Orders to enforce the sale of part or all of existing large monopolies of land. This would be in the event of them failing such a Public Interest Test, and not promoting sustainable development consistent with local and national policy aspirations”. (Community Land Scotland, 2020)

This does point to a much more radical future for land ownership, use and management than in the rest of the UK and a much closer landscape to that applying in our European neighbours.

### *Enterprise in context: case studies of Eigg and Unst*

Our contention is that the social foundations of “the community” and its *empowerment* are critical in creating the preconditions for resilient and ambitious entrepreneurship exemplified more fully here now in two case studies. As already argued, it is in Scotland's remote rural regions not least the islands that the essence of these foundations are embedded in the deep layers of natural materiality and socio-cultural history, such as the intangible heritage of places such as the Gaidhealteachd.<sup>6</sup> We suggest that the success of “the community” and its entrepreneurship at both individual and collective level is underpinned by a *historical place and culturally defined* ‘enterprise growth mindset’ in regard of assets, entrepreneurial stewardship and ambition. Significantly, an appreciation and the considered deployment of both a local and an increasingly global conception of the commons (natural, cultural, social) provides a politically informed, locally aware, yet consciously deployed *discourse of ‘co-production’* (Farmer et al. 2012) that itself operates as a key animator of remote rural

enterprise ambition “on the edge”, as evidenced in the two small island case studies below.

*Eigg: “powering an alternative economy”*. Wider research on community resilience draws our focus to the key interface between enterprise, social capital and sustainability as Magis (2010) has suggested:

“Studies in socio-ecological systems, however, indicate that resilience includes not only sustenance and renewal, but also occasional transformation. Systems absorb disturbances, that is, changes, to retain their original structures and processes. They also adapt and change in response to disturbances. Sometimes, however, disturbances push systems to thresholds at which minor adaptations are no longer sufficient. Rather, the system must undergo significant transformations.” (Magis 2010: 404)

The island of Eigg is one such example of a ‘system’ that was beyond ‘absorbing disturbances’. The Eigg community had reached “a point of no return” and embarked on a sustained campaign, that was itself highly entrepreneurial, to secure the island's assets in community ownership. This embraced an ambition not only to sustain the island's fortunes as a place where one could satisfactorily (“quietly” and “contentedly”) live and work but also where islanders could “thrive”. The island's community in entrepreneurial terms consisted of both the resident population, with a number of more particular key advocates and animateurs, but also Eigg's enterprise success to realising its “buy-out” status also relied on more transient others (Eigg diaspora, visitors and tourists) and to a network of community support and social investors. These off-island supporters committed not only to Eigg's transformative cause of staging its own ‘hostile’ community buy-out but also many quite literally helped to fund the land transfer.

One of the Small Isles of the Inner Hebrides off the north-west coast of Scotland, Eigg is a place of history, and currently home to a “vibrant community of 100”. Yet by the late 1990s the population had declined to 65 and islanders had suffered for decades with absentee landlords, where security of tenure was denied to all but a few and investment in homes and businesses was at the whim of the island's owner. This was before land reform was introduced to allow those who lived in such places some democratic control over their lives. As pioneers of a movement across the Highlands and Islands, in April 1997 a bid for the island by the Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust, a partnership between the residents of Eigg, the Highland Council and the Scottish Wildlife Trust, was accepted by its then enigmatic German owner. The community had “won the land” to echo the similar struggle of the people of Assynt in Sutherland in 1992.



In Scotland, if communities can raise the funds to meet the market price, they have first option to buy their land when it comes up for sale; in the crofting counties this is a right which can be exercised at any time, which essentially means a forced sale. To attract public sector support, there must be a community body registered to manage the process. The Eigg community buy-out was funded by public and private donations from across the globe. Since then, the Heritage Trust has been managing the island on behalf of the community, assuming responsibility for stewardship of the island, its buildings and natural heritage, and for promoting economic and social development.

Some of the essentials of modern living had been denied to people on Eigg – especially energy. From reliance on domestic diesel generators and coal for very restricted heat and light, the Trust has established its own renewable electricity supply by establishing a local grid run by Eigg Electric. Washing machines, TV and other appliances can now be operated, within limits of 5kw per household – which represents a big improvement on the past. A fast broadband connection is available too. Locals run and maintain the grid, the wind turbines, mini-hydros and the bank of solar panels – and they continue to explore local solutions and training opportunities. Eigg Trading, a subsidiary of the Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust, leases the pier centre – An Laimhrig – to the local store, tearoom/bar and craft shop. New housing, glamping and eco pods, a brewery and bothy project (revamping old estate worker dwellings) are all examples of how the community is evolving in ways that contrast starkly with the neglect of previous landlords. The forces of the lords and lairds, who cleared and then impoverished such communities of rural Scotland, have been progressively tamed by the efforts of Eigg, Assynt and others in remote and fragile places.

Whilst on a short fieldwork trip to Eigg, we found ourselves stormbound for three days. Ferries only land every other day, so this enforced delay confirmed how vulnerable and yet resilient such communities are. That the people of Eigg can take such disruption in their stride is testimony to islanders' resilience generally, but it also demonstrated the capacity to accommodate visitors, to ensure those living alone were kept warm, fed and well. After the storm, the natural beauty of this Hebridean island – dominated by An Sgùrr, a magnificent, lofty hunk of rock circled by sea eagles and a prime place to spot whales and dolphins – complemented the discussions in the eco-centre and at the ceilidh in the café. What was revealed was the rich human capital, the resourcefulness of the people of Eigg and the way in which the residents led by the Trust have grown into managing and developing this community. Work and incomes are critical to the survival of such communities, yet the islanders voted against a fish farm development in line with their Green Eigg eco-commitment.

Saltires, CND flags and anti-nuclear banners are noticeable here – this is an island that pursues an environmentally sustainable approach to life, that voted for independence and to remain in the European Union. Without the heavy weight of the landlord destroying enterprise, activity and vitality, a very different future has become possible on Eigg. While external support and funds have been important in their island's revival, it is the islanders' own energy, animateurship and vision that have turned this place around. An island on the edge, on the periphery of the continent, Eigg considers itself as part of a movement of thinking globally and acting locally: "powering an alternative economy" (Conway, 2021). This is an island of immigration and inclusion – not an insular community, but one actively embracing the shared commons of local empowerment in a wider world. Recently, representatives of the unions for the landless of Brazil came to Eigg to discuss building community resilience through renewable energy projects – and islanders have hosted and visited other communities from across Scotland, Europe and beyond to share knowledge. Eigg, Gigha, Assynt and other community buy-outs have demonstrated what "ordinary" people can do, given the chance. Like the working lighthouse operated by the Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust, the community here stands as a beacon for people seeking reversal of decline across Scotland and in disempowered communities around the globe.

*Unst: "welcome to Unst — The special island at the end of Britain"*. If remoteness is a factor of itself in challenging entrepreneurs, then Unst as the northernmost inhabited island in Shetland and so the UK is especially disadvantaged<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, the "special island at the end of Britain"<sup>8</sup>, Unst lays claim to many "most northerly" UK titles: Muckle Flugga – the most northerly isles in Britain, Skaw beach – the most northerly beach in the UK, and Britain's most northerly church, house and road, and the island can only be reached by plane or by ferry from Yell (Unst Partnership, 2021). The land area is just over 12 thousand hectares and the highest point is Saxa Vord, at 285 m. It is mostly grassland, has impressive rocky cliffs, sandy beaches and blanket bogs, is home to the largest seabird breeding colonies in Britain, and boasts Standing Stones and ancient fortified sites. The main town in Unst, Baltasound, was the second largest herring port after Lerwick. The population of Unst has diminished over the past century, but less quickly than on many Scottish islands. Its high point was 2269 in 1871, while by 1991 it stood at 1055. It had reduced further, to 720, by 2001; and to 632 by 2011. Partly the relatively slower decline could be explained by the location of RAF Saxa Vord, a military radar and early warning centre, at north Unst; when this facility closed in 2005 with the loss of 100 jobs the Ministry of Defence was the island's largest employer. It was estimated that employment declined by

approximately 175 FTEs (49% measured between 2003 and 2007) (Local Energy Scotland, 2012) so that the island's economy stagnated considerably following this (between 1991 and 2007, economic activity in Unst declined by over 50%).

Despite the anticipated further decline and ageing of the population and workforce with this closure, Unst has demonstrated a good deal of resistance and enterprising activity coupled with a strong community spirit. Unst Partnership, the community's development trust, has worked on local development projects and activities which have included a community renewable energy project, the restoration of Belmont House to use as holiday accommodation and venue for weddings and events. Promoting Unst Renewable Energy (PURE), the Wind Hydrogen project, is a community-owned clean energy system based on hydrogen production<sup>9</sup>. The Pure Energy Centre, a private limited company, was formed using the skills and knowledge gained during the PURE Project and has installed hydrogen systems in diverse locations around the globe.

Although crofting remains at the heart of the local economy and community with over 300 crofts, Saxa Vord has been significant in the regeneration of Unst. In April 2007, the RAF Saxa Vord domestic site, plus the road up to the Mid Site, was purchased and renamed "Saxa Vord Resort" by Highland entrepreneur Frank Strang. Strang's company Military Asset Management (MAM) "specialises in the regeneration of redundant or surplus Defence Assets"<sup>10</sup>. The base was converted to a tourist resort and natural and cultural heritage centre. In 2013 Saxa Vord had self-catering holiday houses, a 26-bedroom bunkhouse, restaurant and bar, leisure facilities and a guided walks/evening talks programme<sup>11</sup>. Three local businesses relocated their premises to the Saxa Vord site: Unst Cycle Hire, Valhalla Brewery (though subsequently ill health of the founders meant closure of the business and it was sold to Viking Mead distillery, both enterprises then co-locating to the Shetland Mainland to be closer to the family home of the owner and for logistical reasons) and Foord's Chocolates, Shetland's only chocolatier (whose activities include mail order, a Chocolate Experience café, a shop selling their full range of chocolate selections). Since then Saxa Vord Distillery, the most northerly in the UK, was started by four people and Shetland Reel Gin is distilled exclusively there<sup>12</sup>.

Taking this diversification forward around the transformation of Saxa Vord, the entrepreneur Frank Strang established the Shetland Space Centre Ltd (SSC) there in 2017, proposing that Lamba Ness would make a suitable launch site for rockets taking satellites into polar orbits<sup>13</sup>. In October 2020 the UK Space Agency approved the proposal and Lockheed Martin transferred their intended launch site from A' Mhòine in Sutherland as a UK base for its rocket launches. In January 2021, plans were

submitted for three rocket launch pads<sup>14</sup>. Saxa Vord is now being prepared for both the demolition and subsequent refurbishment of the site to support the Shetland Space Centre development including provision for non-space centre visitors and guests. Accommodation continues to be available for key workers, MoD staff and also staff, contractors and guests of Shetland Space Centre. German rocket maker HyImpulse Technologies has successfully carried out a series of engine tests at the former Scatsta airfield in Shetland this year, acknowledging the local supply chain which supported the work<sup>15</sup>. It is expected to culminate in the launch of a sounding rocket from Unst later this year. The launch facility is planned by 2024 to create about 140 jobs on Unst and inject at least £4.9 m per annum into the island's economy. It will provide a further 70 jobs throughout Shetland, adding a further £2.9 m in gross value per annum to the economy, 150 jobs will also be created through wider manufacturing and support services, altogether meaning the spaceport site could support a total of 605 jobs in Scotland<sup>16</sup>. Children locally, from the rest of Scotland and globally are participating in "astronaut teacher" Mike Mongo's Astronaut Job Camp, hosted from SSC in summer 2021, with fees paid for through a partnership between SSC, together with land conservation and tourism business Wildland Limited<sup>17</sup>.

These developments around Saxa Vord, following the resilience revealed in the investments driven by the Community Development Trust, demonstrate that entrepreneurial activities by individual and social enterprises have been crucial in mobilising bonding, linking and bridging social capital, and in facilitating the integration of local companies into local and global procurement supply chains.

## Discussion and conclusion

Situating the assets and ambition of Scottish 'remote rural' enterprise contexts through research literature and policy contexts, illustrating in-situ knowledge and example via two case studies, this article has explored the sustained, resilient, and emerging enterprise and innovation activity within small island and remote rural communities. As indicative of deeper questions (evolving from our own work on enterprise discourse and textual narrative as how places, process and products are framed as expressive of confidence, ambition and expansion of enterprise), we have highlighted the *necessary* entrepreneurial adaptability to counter both material (literal) and romanticised (symbolic) geographies and economies, and key environmental, cultural and historical legacies. Remote rural and island "proofing", not least post-Covid and Brexit, remain essential to onward overall policy success (Scottish Government 2021a, 2021b).

This article offered two framing contentions. First, that consideration of the narratives and discourse around the assets and enterprise ambitions of Scotland's remote rural

communities offers useful inter-disciplinary context of how such enterprise is informed by ‘romance’ and ‘resilience’ narratives. Second, Scotland has significantly facilitated governance or subsidiarity, most especially with respect to local *community* empowerment and such empowerment again has significantly impacted ‘remote rural’ assets and enterprise ambitions. As anticipated, the research (exemplified in remote rural island case studies) identified evidence of enterprise growth mindset, of place informed entrepreneurial stewardship, collective resilience and asset ambition. Communities, such as Eigg and Unst, provide ample evidence of narratives and practice of both ‘romance’ and ‘resilience’ (as complicit, complex and countering) in the face of remote rural challenges as well as success. Nonetheless, although outwith the remit of this article, we expect the significance of specific contexts and local animators does not necessarily mean this model is replicable throughout Scotland. Our complementary work on regulatory reform of land ownership and ‘the commons’ (Danson and Burnett, 2021a) argues that this model of rural entrepreneurship cannot be implemented in many contemporary communities where monopoly ownership of land prevails (Danson, 2020, 2022), though the peculiar successes in Unst point to complexities beyond ownership alone.

Rural enterprise and entrepreneurship located at what by some may be considered “the edge” of enterprise scholarship as well as assumptions of “no-where” geographies, economies and culture is positioned here for consideration. Scottish remote rural contexts offer examples of community ambition, asset sustainability, and local enterprise innovation for wider knowledge exchange. In adopting an inter-disciplinary perspective in our own work on islands and remote rural places, this account is our shared articulation of rural enterprise as situated, informed by political critiques, ‘everyday’ lived experience and an acknowledging the historical ‘long view’. Celebrating Gerard McElwee’s writings on the rural, the illegal, the marginal and all the other ‘edgy bits’ which have come to characterise the context of his works (McElwee and Smith, 2014; McElwee et al., 2011, 2018; Smith and McElwee, 2013; Somerville and McElwee, 2011) informed this account.

The intersection of marginality and peripherality, where survival and sustainability of people, communities and economies is a daily struggle, and an appreciation of both individual and collective enterprise was explored in the case study context of the particularly challenged small island environments of Eigg and Unst Land reform, empowerment and informed sustainability ambition all underpin development and regeneration activity in these most difficult locations. As we have contended, the discourses of ‘romance’ and ‘resilience’ of “the edge” as exemplified are key elements in the overall framing of entrepreneurial ambition contexts. The narratives of enterprise in these remote rural *historical places yet culturally*

*defined* spaces speak to a realignment of periphery, the margin, or edge as enterprise arenas of embedded social foundations of place and people, their expanding ambitions for community assets and a generative, international and entrepreneurial ‘growth mindset’ of social, economic and symbolic capital ambitions “for all” .


### Declaration of conflicting interests


The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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### Notes

1. Available online [www.gov.scot/publications/national-planning-framework-3/](http://www.gov.scot/publications/national-planning-framework-3/) (accessed 19 March 2021).
2. Currently VisitScotland are blogging on the “8 places to escape to the Remote Rural”, many of which are Scotland’s islands. Available online: [/www.visitscotland.com/blog/holiday-ideas/rural-remote-escapes/](http://www.visitscotland.com/blog/holiday-ideas/rural-remote-escapes/) (accessed 10 May 2021).
3. [www.isle20.com/](http://www.isle20.com/) - “isle20 is an Isle Develop project from the lovely island of Tiree. Isle Develop CIC is a social enterprise committed to supporting small businesses in the Scottish islands”.
4. “Rural Scotland Key Facts compares and contrasts circumstances in remote and accessible rural areas to the rest of Scotland. The Scottish Government acknowledges that key areas of policy such as the economy, transport, education and health can have a particular impact on rural communities and seeks to reflect this in mainstream policy development. While a number of indicators included in this publication report data for 2020, only the indicator on residential property sales reflects the impact that the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has had on the country. For the other indicators reporting 2020 data, the data were either collected before the full impact of the pandemic started to be felt or for the median pay figures they were not impacted due to the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS). The majority of indicators report data for 2019.”
5. <https://www.hie.co.uk/support/support-for-community-organisations/community-assets/>
6. The Gaelic language term relating to the highlands and islands areas of Scotland where the Gaelic language was traditionally spoken and continues to be spoken. The term also refers to an idea of highland and islands as a space and place of historical Gaelic culture and traditions but now also includes contemporary Gaelic arts and cultural practices.
7. Available online: [www.unstpartnership.com/](http://www.unstpartnership.com/) (accessed 10 May 2021).

8. See Shetland Heritage: Unst information leaflet. <https://www.shetland-heritage.co.uk/downloads/resources/geographic/leaflets/Unst.pdf>
9. Available online: [www.unstpartnership.com/unst-a-smart-off-grid-solution.html](http://www.unstpartnership.com/unst-a-smart-off-grid-solution.html) (accessed 10 May 2021).
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12. Available online: [www.shetlandreel.com/](http://www.shetlandreel.com/) (accessed 10 May 2021).
13. Available online: [saxavord.com/](http://saxavord.com/) (accessed 10 May 2021).
14. Available online: [saxavord.com/prospect-of-major-boost-to-shetland-economy-as-space-launch-site-plans-lodged/](http://saxavord.com/prospect-of-major-boost-to-shetland-economy-as-space-launch-site-plans-lodged/) (accessed 10 May 2021).
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16. Available online: [axavord.com/prospect-of-major-boost-to-shetland-economy-as-space-launch-site-plans-lodged/](http://axavord.com/prospect-of-major-boost-to-shetland-economy-as-space-launch-site-plans-lodged/) (accessed 10 May 2021).
17. Available online: [saxavord.com/first-come-first-served-for-this-summer-astronaut-job-camp-at-shetland-space-centre/](http://saxavord.com/first-come-first-served-for-this-summer-astronaut-job-camp-at-shetland-space-centre/) (accessed 10 May 2021).

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