

Transcribed soundbite between artist Lauren Gault and Skye and Lochalsh archivist Catherine MacPhee in July 2024, for [Samhla](#), an exhibition of new sculpture and events across a range of indoor and outdoor spaces in North Skye.

Lauren:

Okay. Brill, right. Catherine MacPhee, could you introduce yourself and talk a wee bit about your many roles, one of which being archivist, and maybe touch on the nature of the Archive importance and the active role it plays in the community?

Catherine:

I can, yes. I'll try and do this slowly for you as well. So my name's Catherine MacPhee, I'm the archivist for Skye and Lochalsh. So essentially this work is to preserve the history of culture, a place and people ensuring the records are accessible and used to reimagine or change our future. For myself, the most important role in this work is within communities all around Skye. And that can be through supporting local groups who are researching or commemorating part of their history, culture or heritage, reclaiming voices and moments over shared histories, often when they're suffocated. It reminded me of the writings of George Orwell of 1984. He wrote about the Silence of Archives, absence of records, and how history is written by the winners.

This can be creating an everyday experience of propaganda. His ideas on historical truth coalesce in two things, the struggle between propaganda and the truth. The need to verify facts through accurate records and necessity of personal memory against state imposed public amnesia. Orwell explored the danger that totalitarian leaders would use their power by distorting historical knowledge through control of records and human memory. So this urgency to get recording is crucial as so much is forgotten quickly. And adding the voices of our communities, for me, is key to capturing emotions during events and embedding cultural stories and histories. Traditional archive formats don't make much space for feelings, not part of the records as they're not verifiable. Facts are the trunk of the tree, but these feelings, emotions, sounds, and vibrations give foliage and colour, shape movement and shadow. I rattled that up early on. Wow.

Lauren:

I mean, some of the things that really stood out there were the present ness of the archive as being rooted in the past, but being really vocal in the present and just the phrase space for feelings is the propaganda I think is really, really interesting as well. So yeah, there's so much in there that I could talk about a lot, but I'm going to get to where we are. Well, one of the things we'll be listening to this will be in Romesdal in Kingsburgh, and we'll have journeyed up the hill and on our way we'll have seen many visible remains of buildings and previous cultivation in the form of, you can probably see some stripes that would denote some lazy beds that would've been there before. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about what the remains that we can see around us today. Tell us about the previous communities who lived here.

Catherine:

Sure. So actually last weekend I was talking about the landscape quite a bit and something I'd said was you can walk anywhere in Skye and it's a journey to the past. Something I was thinking about was the early appearance of humans, the kind of circa 40,000 BC right the way through to the clearances of the 18th and 19th centuries. There's evidence of human occupation, eviction and use of the land, which is almost exposed across the landscape. When we walked around Romesdal, there were the shells of cleared villages. So they can be beautiful, but they're haunting and their remnants of those that came before us. Romesdal Township through some research says it consists of 27 ruined houses and small enclosures, but looking at the maps that we did prior to taking the walk, you

can see a farmstead, that's the L-shaped building that you'll see depicted on the maps and in the landscape.

And there's another one that's got three compartments, which is described as a sheep fold at a later date. But you'll see lots of dykes and stone walls dotted between the lazy beds and the landscape. But I think key for this area is, remember that there were communities of people that lived and worked within the land and on the sea, they kept animals, cows, sheep planting, growing and occupations, I think I looked at the occupations thereafter, the first trip up and there was blacksmiths, millers, weavers, farm workers and there were really early accounts of large quantities of herring being fished from the loch Snizort. So not that far, just down to the coastline. So we know there were large quantities of fish there, but probably not so much today.

Lauren:

Wow. Yeah, I think you can get a sense of, well I certainly did anyway, a sense of the volume of buildings, like a sort of feeling of community through the proximity that all the buildings had to each other. There's a real vividness, and domestic is the wrong word, but a really domestic feeling. It feels sort of like it's quite safe, all inadequate language to describe it, but just a real sense of the human presence.

Catherine:

Definitely. I think when you walk up by the river and look more towards the east side, when you're going in, it feels warm in a nice kind of glen or valley, however you want to describe it, and then dotted all over the place. There'll be Shieling huts, there's a roundhouse further up on the hill and it gives that kind of, for me, it gives the layers on generations of people being there. Not just entangled and clearance, but music, sound, celebration. It's something we often forget when we're going around cleared villages that these were vibrant, happy places for a while.

Lauren:

Yeah, I think that's really important in connecting us to the things that we do, what people did and a lot of presence through absence. They feel very present through these absent things. And I wanted just to focus in a wee bit more about, well, it leads us into the turbulent period in Scottish history where communities were cleared from their land in a process, often involving violence, the general term being clearances, being forced to resettle elsewhere. I wonder if you could tell us a bit about this period in history in relation to Skye and where we are now in Romesdal. It's a very big question.

Catherine:

It's a very big moment in history. So I think the best way to think about the clearances is as an age or an era. The start date and the end date can't be defined. They're very localised to different areas of the islands and across the rest of the Gàidhealtachd as well. It's hard to go into any historical account of the clearances without a deep sense of injustice and a bewildering disbelief how one of the most civilized and prosperous nations of its time could inflict such brutality on its own people and adopt a widespread indifference to their plight. Something about the blame or who caused it or where does this go? It's something that we can't say was it one individual or one person. It touches the shoulders of many, and this is the landowning nobility, the clan leaders whose first concerns should have been for their kinfolk. The very word clan is my kin and my people.

The factors, the taxmen, the agents, they saw this as a vehicle of change for their own gain. Politicians, the gentry and the church itself entered a period of internal turmoil, but which emerged curiously, almost as a bystander. In the Isle of Skye, this is a quote from a book, "It became the property of several proprietors who in the four decades following 1840 would serve 1,740 writs of removal involving nearly 40,000 people, all of whom, whether they were removed or not, had to pay 10 shillings for the cost of summons against them." That's equivalent to two days' wages.

Something I think about a lot is the pain and torment of being displaced. These displaced Gaels, well-documented in prose and poetry and song, but what remains in Romesdal and countless other cleared settlements across the Gàidhealtachd, it's skeletal, these remains of the houses, these fragments of walls, memories, documents as well. Land settlement is a worldwide phenomenon. The removal of people and their cultures continues globally today. The land sustains every aspect of our lives, provides fundamental life support systems and the foundation of our economy and society. It's the place we stand. It's also the place where we eat. It's the place where we make decisions and they don't just affect the land, but also the water, the air and the atmosphere and the life they support. This put lands at the centres of most conversations. Land is important for other aspects of being human. It provides a connection to our place, our history, a space to play, learn and define culture, express spirituality and anchor memories and identity. A while ago we spoke about Alexander Smith when you were visiting the archive and about, I don't know if you ever read that book, but I think a lot about his distrust in nature and the way he writes about it and something he wrote when he was visiting Skye was, "The quick sense of two powers of nature and humanity. A man and a world outside of a man is the root of all poetry."