

## **Yes after No: The Indyref Landscape, 2014-16**

**Elizabeth Ritchie**

The visual, symbolic, and material campaign around Indyref 2014 was distinctive within British politics. It was imaginative, one-sided, long-lasting, and responsive to changing political realities. The Yes campaign's interaction with the landscape was far different from that of ordinary elections or the No campaign. Yes activists interacted with specific places and created micro-landscapes, shaping paint, fabric, and symbolism to suit that place, and making out of it a politicised space. Very occasionally this was resisted or counteracted by No campaigners. With their bodies or vehicles decorated, Yes voters moved through urban, rural, and even maritime, spaces. Occasionally this was done ritually, self-consciously claiming the territory as might a military manoeuvre or royal procession. As the landscape dictated the form and longevity of much of that expression by its texture, topography, and the impact of weather, campaigners imputed a pro-independence voice to particular locations. The prolific stickering, particularly of road signs, turned the expanse of the rural Highlands into a Yes campaign-space. One consequence was that Indyref symbolism acted to challenge the prevailing wilderness aesthetic. It re-politicised a space which the wilderness 'way of seeing' had depoliticised. The stickers and political micro-landscapes in 'natural' locations forcibly made the point that these are peopled places: worked, managed, lived in and travelled through. Those campaigners marked their own existence in a place from which they have been rhetorically excluded. At the same time they blurred the dichotomy between nature and culture, between what is 'out there' and what is 'in me'. Efforts to give, even impose, a political voice are especially significant in a landscape which is objectified and portrayed as 'natural' in the dominant discourse. Indyref was a debate about power and autonomy. Campaigning by politicising the landscape was the latest manifestation of an ancient conflict about control over these spaces.

Key-words: Scottish independence, wilderness, 2014 Scottish Referendum, political campaigning, IndyRef, landscape



*Figure 1: Ben Klibreck, Sutherland (May 2016)*

A few weeks before the Scottish independence referendum of 18 September 2014 I decided how I would vote. That day I drove from Dornoch to Skye for work, in the sweet late-summer sunshine. Throughout the hundred and twenty miles of Highland countryside No and Yes (mainly the latter) stickers and placards clamoured for attention, not only in the towns and villages, but deep in places normally talked of, written of, and advertised as wild, unpeopled, and therefore surely apolitical. On voting day I realised I had almost missed documenting the moment: surely a dreadful omission for a historian of Scotland. I began to carry my camera, embarking on a personal project which I assumed would last a few weeks before the visual evidence disappeared. I was wrong. For months, years, the material culture of the campaign was pressed into my consciousness. It was difficult to walk any street or drive any road, even the most winding single-track arrangement of pot-holes, without Yes whispering or shouting its message. I began to realise that in its grassroots and material expression, this political campaign was unusual. Activists operated on a different scale, physical and temporal. They used the huge canvas of the Highland landscape; reciprocally, the

landscape itself shaped the displays; they created political landscapes on the micro-level of gardens, hotels, crofts, and abandoned quarries; and they resiliently pressed on after defeat, adapting their campaign to new political realities. The landscape remained politicised, adaptive, and defiantly pro-independence. The space I traversed over the two post-referendum years was mainly that of Highland region, with some forays to Argyll and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, specifically Lewis and Harris. My patterns of travel meant I surveyed Sutherland, Ross-shire, and the Inverness areas most intensively, including the small city of Inverness, numerous towns and villages, crofted land, and vast shooting estates. The project examined how, over the two years following the No result, Highland landscapes were utilised, claimed, and indeed shaped the visual campaign around constitution, identity, and autonomy, and how pro-independence symbols and codes were adapted to changing political circumstances.



*Figure 2: Lairg, Sutherland (April 2015)*

The visual culture of Indyref 2014 was different from that of ordinary elections. There are an accepted series of 'signs' used for campaigning. Signs, as defined by

Charles Peirce, can be anything which refers to or stands for something other than itself.<sup>1</sup> In local or national elections colours, names, stylised images, and slogans symbolise political persuasions. These are displayed via placards tied to lampposts, or posters and stickers in the personal and semi-private spaces of car and house windows in an understood ‘code’. A code, according to Daniel Chandler, ‘organises signs into meaningful systems’.<sup>2</sup> While most pro-Union activists campaigned within the conventional code, pro-independence activists developed it by imaginatively, occasionally humourously, appropriating semi-public spaces such as roadside fences and hotels, and the incontrovertibly public territory of quarries, roadsigns, and islands. The manic activity of Yes campaigners contrasted with the relative indolence of No, creating a highly unusual, one-sided saturation effect, particularly noticeable across vast reaches of what is generally considered to be unpopulated Highland wilderness. This essay shall first examine the ways in which humans and environment have interacted, or been thought to interact, in the Scottish Highlands and how independence campaigning disrupted that. I shall then consider the changing liturgy of symbols which were used to claim places and create political spaces across this territory. Then, moving from personal to public, I shall evaluate how this interaction between place and political ideas was enacted in the urban and rural Highlands and Islands.

Landscape is not an objective entity consisting simply of that hill, that peat hag, that path. Denis Cosgrove described landscape as a ‘way of seeing the world’ and of exerting control over it.<sup>3</sup> In response, phenomenologists have suggested that nature is more than passive and objectified, but an active force and participant ‘in the unfolding of life’, in this case in the unfolding of independence campaigning.<sup>4</sup> Both notions are useful in analysing the interaction of campaigners with Highland space. Though some activity treated the environment as a passive backdrop, other actions were shaped by the places themselves. Both challenged the dominant way of seeing the Highlands: as wilderness. Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels argued that in the selection of bits of what is ‘out there’ – in framing them into a particular aesthetic – and in ascribing to them meaning, a place is made into a landscape.<sup>5</sup> Postcards, calendars, holiday snaps, the outrage of letters published in the *Scottish Mountaineer* magazine because the view from a summit has been ‘spoiled’ by wind turbines, and the Scottish Natural Heritage project mapping places perceived as wild evidence the most recent manifestations of a western discourse of wilderness rooted in the Romantic movement.<sup>6</sup> This wilderness aesthetic requires the selection of specific

items (mountains – preferably craggy – streams, stunted rowan trees, lochs, small white houses); it requires them to be framed (literally in the case of photography, but also in the mind and the memory) to exclude evidence of current or historic human activity, particularly if that evidence is deemed ugly or commonplace. Complex places and societies are reduced to a set of symbols while meanings of physical challenge, spiritual refreshment, and nature conservation are ascribed to them.<sup>7</sup> In the interaction with this landscape, the campaign challenged the wilderness aesthetic. This was doubtless felt by many to be incongruous, objectionable, exhausting. It offended against the Cartesian dualities of culture/nature and refused to permit the traveller to escape from ‘civilisation’. Indeed the wilderness aesthetic denies the existence of a population in these places and suppresses awareness of power relations within and about the very land it purports to portray.<sup>8</sup> As Louise Senior observes, wilderness is ‘primarily an aesthetic category which relies on absence.’<sup>9</sup> There is a growing counter-discourse, particularly among residents, which is rooted in a concern for community development built on social, cultural and economic health, and which has a strong historical awareness of oppression and being excluded, conceptually and literally, from the places and resources of the Highlands.<sup>10</sup> These people are wary of a wilderness discourse which interprets the depleted ecologies of sheep- and deer-grazed moorlands, what Frank Fraser Darling called ‘wet desert’, as natural, and which fails to recognise that their sparse remnant is due to deliberate removals of the population.<sup>11</sup> Many involved in land reform and in community buyouts, which endeavour to reclaim land to be operated communally by residents, are deeply political and were vocal Yes supporters. It seems too much coincidence that the Highland ‘wilderness’ was strewn with Yes stickers: visible signs that these places are not deserted and that the people within them have a voice and an opinion. Yes campaigners used the apparently wild Highland landscape to make statements about autonomy and power. Not only did they inscribe their existence and thoughts on the landscape, giving the appearance of it speaking for itself, but their campaigning actions and symbols were shaped by the environment itself: where roads go, the position of trees and gateposts, the writeability of sand, and the paint-worthy surface of rock.



*Figure 3: A painted rock prominently overlooks Fort William (April 2015)*

Unlike elections in which candidate or party names, icons, and colours dominate, the Indyref visual campaign developed a series of symbols – words, flags and historical events – which shifted throughout and after the referendum. The single words ‘yes’, ‘aye’, ‘no’, and ‘naw’ were quickly understood to encompass one side or the other of a complex constitutional debate, and could be stuck or written anywhere. The use of the Scots word ‘aye’ implied that supporting independence was a particularly Scottish position and was quickly countered with

the production of ‘naw’ stickers, both utilising white letters imposed on a saltire-blue background. Displaying a flag, that long-practiced technique of claiming territory, became an explicit statement on the issue of independence (Figure 4). The saltire was co-opted by Yes activists. One friend experienced a mental slippage of the changing symbolism of Scotland’s flag in the supermarket when, momentarily, she couldn’t understand why the meat packaging was displaying pro-independence sympathies. Equally, the Union Jack became symbolic of No. As the political weight of these flags grew heavy, the majority of Scots who carry hybrid Scottish-British identities were required to draw towards one and away from the other. The formal independence campaign, presumably concerned about stirring up anti-English feeling or making crass ahistorical comparisons which could too easily be debunked, steered carefully away from referencing historical figures and moments. This was not the case for much of the public. A camper at Inveroran on the West Highland Way planted a lion rampant emblazoned with ‘Bannockburn’ and ‘1314’ beside their tent. Ferdinand de Saussure points out that the meaning of signs lies in their ‘relation to each other’.<sup>12</sup> Any ambiguity in the fluttering of Scotland’s other national flag, was clarified by these additions. The famous battle where Scots’ king Robert the Bruce defeated the invading Edward II of England was also referenced on the back of a van spotted in Tain, Easter Ross. On one door the date 1314 was underlined by a sword and on the other the date 2014 was underlined by a pen. Presumably to the disappointment of the van painter, the pen had not proven mightier than the sword. Anyone with a basic knowledge of Scottish history could identify the significance. A more subtle and co-incidental historical symbol was adopted after the referendum. Stickers bearing the number 45 on a dark blue background referred to the percentage of independence-voting Scots. These were posted on cars, roadsigns and facebook profiles for months after September 2014. It is a misunderstanding to claim that Bonnie Prince Charlie’s ill-fated efforts to attain the British throne in 1745, long known as ‘the ‘45’ had much to do with Scots versus English or Scottish independence, however this does not mean that the two were not conflated in the minds of some pro-independence activists. The campaign’s visual language was deeply codified and used sophisticated connotations to align the referendum with historical events.



*Figure 4: The saltire attached to a gate in Strathcarron, Easter Ross, could, at any other point, have been a simple declaration of nationality, but in October 2014, it is fair to assume the farmer's political preferences.*

How most people used these symbols to proclaim their constitutional preferences was a heightened version of what is common in general elections. On the most personal level, many staff at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the Gaelic College in Skye, wore lapel badges reading ‘bu chòir’.<sup>13</sup> The same slogan was attached to many more Facebook profile pictures. Private spaces were used for public display. House windows framed modest Yes posters, just like those for political parties in election campaigns. The more daring or confrontational attached an oversize ‘Yes’ to their buildings. Homes in Lochinver and Ullapool used their white-painted wall as background for a giant blue ‘Yes’, referencing the saltire arrangement of colours, while a simple home-made white ‘Yes’ still adorned a stone gable-end in Stoer, Assynt, in 2018. Personal vehicles were decorated with stickers proclaiming affiliation: ‘SNP’; ‘Yes’; ‘Green Yes’; ‘Proud to be Scots,

Delighted to be United'. The bridge of a Stornoway fishing boat was painted with a saltire topped with 'Yes'.



*Figure 5: Jim MacPherson and Archie (March 2015)*



*Figure 6: The Gellions pub company car in Inverness was given a paint job (March 2016)*

The material culture of Yes quickly moved beyond the private decoration of person, house, and vehicle, and into the semi-private/semi-public rural and urban landscape. By Loch Lochy the entrance to Forrest Lodge and Scotia Lodge was supplemented with a large 'Yes', and in Inverness four six-foot-high 'Yes's faced the road to Beauly, pale against the green fence stain. In a remarkable development of the Indyref debate activists created political 'micro-landscapes', often in the form of a set of decorations on private property but facing a public road. At a croft house in Nedd, Assynt, a saltire fluttered beside a quad bike decorated with SNP ribbons, while outbuildings and gates in Inverinate, Kintail, supported saltire bunting and SNP election posters. Without straying beyond the boundaries of private property these displays claimed places for a cause, creating a politically hostile or friendly space, depending on inclination.



*Figure 7: Silage bales at Balblair, Easter Ross (October 2014)*



*Figure 8: Garden gate at Scotscauder, Caithness (August 2015)*

Several hospitality-providers weighed the costs and benefits of converting passing trade to the Yes cause versus losing income from those inclined to Unionism.<sup>14</sup> At Sconser, on the Isle of Skye, the bold green on white advertising on the side of a shed pointing tourists to the Sligachan Hotel was supplemented with a plain 'Yes' which conformed to brand colouring. Most intricate was the micro-landscape created around the Castle Moil Restaurant, also on Skye (Figure 9). The customer enters through white gateposts: one side adorned with the female, bonneted, and be-shawled figure of Caledonia emerging from a saltire, a thistle between her fingers. The opposite side mirrors the saltire and her sea-like blue hair with the message 'vote yes' in case the viewer had failed to comprehend the dense collection of symbols. The rest of the hotel grounds were a display space of flags and signs: a Yes shrine. Such prominent visual displays communicated that these hotel bars, natural gathering points for local communities, were safe spaces for pro-independence political discussion.



*Figure 9: The Yes micro-landscape at the Castle Moil Restaurant, Kyleakin, Isle of Skye (June 2015)*



*Figure 10: Tigh an Cruisb Hotel, Argyll, prominently positioned beside the much-advertised 'Bridge over the Atlantic'. Beneath the Yes a small sign explains the proprietor's reasoning. (October 2015)*

Public spaces for campaigning in Scottish cities were limited to lampposts, windows, and billboards, whereas the rural environment offered space for three-dimensional creativity. Natural features and pro-independence decoration shaped and defined each other. The trees selected to have 'Yes' nailed to them were those bordering roads, for example outside Carrbridge; by Ardchronie near Ardgay; and by Kirkton Farm, Golspie. A large and ancient roadside tree west of Bonar Bridge was sprayed with a large red 'Yes'. Some rock decoration was prominently positioned, particularly one beside the A9 on the Black Isle (see also Figure 3). Although the site is remarkably awkward to access, being half a mile from the nearest place to park, lacking a pavement, and demanding a traffic-threatened trot through rough grass on wet ground, the boulder became a site of symbolic debate. It was decorated with a saltire, then someone who either disapproved of independence or who disapproved of rocks

expressing political preferences, blacked it out. It was not long, however, before the cross of St Andrew reappeared. And so, in 2018 it remains, darker blue over its black undercoat. In Lewis, a large yellow 'Yes' took up residence in a similarly awkward, and therefore well-defended, position (Figure 11). On an island in Loch Lathamul it proclaimed itself to all passersby on the main road between Stornoway and Harris. By early 2016 it was half submerged, and by 2017 it had disappeared, presumably either underwater or into the shed of a Yes voter who had finally conceded defeat.



*Figure 11: Loch Lathamul, Isle of Lewis (March 2016). The colour may have been a reference to the pro-independence Scottish National Party.*

In the development of micro-landscapes ideas, in this case on the issue of Scottish independence, were not just the armchair, internal creation of humans. Rather, as James Gibson theorised, they were created between people and particular environments.<sup>15</sup> A good example of this interaction was at the Slochd, just west of Carrbridge, again on the main artery of the A9. A rather unattractive section of cliff or quarry wall, probably created by road building and converted into an informal layby, was arranged into a political micro-landscape

amounting to an independence shrine. 'Independence Now' and a saltire were painted on the cliff face, while the birch and Scots pines, both native species, held aloft the two Scottish flags (Figure 12). Accessing the trees and cliff face surely required technical rock climbing equipment, not hard to come by in the mountaineering mecca of nearby Aviemore. I suspect it was the result of a night spent putting sporting skills to political use. In the Old Testament, Isaiah prophesied that the mountains and the trees of the field themselves would speak.<sup>16</sup> Yes campaigners' use of natural features like rocks, islands, trees, and cliffs created the effect that the very landscape was crying out for Scottish independence.





*Figure 12: The Slochd Yes Shrine, Strathspey (March 2016)*

Most displays remaining after the referendum were static and semi-permanent. Ephemeral displays were, by definition, harder to capture photographically. Those I saw were exclusively pro-independence and tended also to either claim the landscape or ascribe to it a political voice. In May 2016 a convoy of vehicles circled the northern Highlands by driving the North Coast 500 route, following a line between land and sea: up the east coast from Inverness to Thurso, west to Durness, and south past Scourie and Applecross. The cars, motorbikes, and vans were draped with the usual stickers and flags, symbolically claiming the territory. I watched the procession through Bettyhill and later found the participants enjoying a cup of tea in Tongue's Ben Loyal Hotel. They were walking adverts, wearing blue t-shirts and hoodies emblazoned with 'still yes', and were delighted to be photographed. In a different moment, a beach walk provided an opportunity for an Assynt woman and her daughter to carve 'still yes' and a saltire in the wet sand: an inscription in the landscape only until the sea

washed it flat at the next tide, but captured and posted on Facebook for a wider audience and a digital life.



*Figure 13: Clashnessie Beach, Sutherland (February 2016)<sup>17</sup>*

There was little visual debate. In densely populated areas like Edinburgh there were ‘sticker wars’ where people scrawled ‘No’ across a Yes sticker, or placed a Yes sticker on top of one reading ‘Naw’. Rural road signs, despite their widespread use as Yes billboards, did not host such discussion. I only encountered two sites of debate, one being the previously mentioned over-painted rock on the Black Isle, and the other in the village of Rosehall, Sutherland. This involved at least one No and two Yes activists who created a political micro-landscape through the village. Entering from the east, the driver was treated to an exchange of symbols beginning with pro-union tree décor and ending with a

yes-campaigning home (Figure 14). At least one independence-minded resident remained optimistic despite the result as by 2016 a sticker reading ‘aye version 2.0’ had appeared on the back of a road sign. In a way which would please the disciples of phenomenology, it was the natural and built environment of Rosehall – the over-reaching branches, road-facing garden, bridge, lamppost, and house site, all following the road curves – that suggested the form of political expression.







*Figure 14: A micro-landscape of debate. Rosehall, Sutherland (September 2014)*

The visual impact was of Yes saturation before, but particularly after, the referendum. The effect implied that the Highland population was unilaterally independence-minded. Intriguingly, most stickers on road signs were completely unreadable to motorists or even passengers. In order to photograph many I had to park and walk tens, sometimes hundreds, of yards. In order to place them, the activist had to do the same. The stickers were not intended to be read. Indeed, it was not particularly necessary: everyone knew what the short white word on a round, sky-blue sticker was. The pre-election purpose was saturation: Yes was everywhere; everyone wanted Yes; wavering voters could follow the prevailing Yes wisdom. What was more baffling were detailed messages appearing in such locations. I found fewer stickers bearing relatively complex statements in the Highlands and Islands than in large cities. One in Inverness promoted 'radical independence'. It was placed on a lamppost where pedestrians could consider the suggestion. However, a significant minority of stickers bearing entire phrases in small print were placed where there were few if any pedestrians: 'bairns not bombs: yes: one opportunity to transform childcare' and 'SNP: stronger for Scotland' appeared by a rural road south of Culloden and by the busy A9 at Alness. Perhaps sticking stickers was slightly addictive. Although No carried the day, the proportion of pro-Union campaigning through public display was small. Of that, little remained after voting day. In the two subsequent years I spotted only car and house stickers in Stornoway and Rogart, one attached to a Caithness road sign (Figure 14), and the notices in Rosehall. While the Highlands and Islands was made into a pro-indy landscape, this was dissonant with actual voting behaviours. The saturation effect may account for the shock of Yes voters when the results were announced. 52.02% of Highland voters opposed independence as did 53.42% of those on the Western Isles and 58.52% of Argyll voters.<sup>18</sup> Clearly a dramatically higher proportion of Yes voters had felt the need, or had the ability, to campaign visually across public spaces. Perhaps changing the status quo requires a higher level of determined effort, or perhaps Yes voters were of a demographic (generally younger or more to the left) most familiar with a broadly-based campaigning culture. Left voters, particularly those exposed in their formative years to the demonstrations against Trident, against student fees in the late 1990s, and against war in Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s, are likely to be fairly activist in their approach to political questions.



*Figure 15: A9 near the Halkirk turn-off, Caithness (March 2015). Subtly placed, conventional, with limited visual appeal.*



*Figure 16: Baddidarrach, prominently overlooking Lochinver, Sutherland (March 2015). Dominantly situated, creative, bold, attractive.*

While passions were hot and the implications deadly serious, some of the material culture of the campaign was light-hearted. The pair of women dressed up in flags and Yes material, waiting for the bus in Aviemore to take them to an Edinburgh rally took their politics seriously, but not their personal dignity. In Kinlochleven a Star Trek aficionado pasted up a sticker reading ‘free Scotland and prosper’. ‘45’ stickers were occasionally attached to parking signs to create ‘P45’, the well-known official slip given to workers being made redundant (Figure 17). Mild amusement was gained by positioning round stickers in circles on roadsigns, such as the ‘o’ for Ullapool or on the images of car wheels. Even in this small way the environment, this time roadsign imagery, defined the form of the campaigning rather than merely being a passive recipient of human viewpoints.



*Figure 17: Prospects of unemployment: Dornoch Firth, the boundary between Easter Ross and Sutherland (November 2015)*

The visual legacy of the debate over Scotland’s trajectory and over Britain’s constitutional future had a long afterlife. Unlike during local, parliamentary, or European elections most was not created by political parties so

there was no law to dictate its removal.<sup>19</sup> The pro-independence perspective therefore remained emblazoned throughout the landscape. In the immediate aftermath this remnant appeared dejected, pathetic, and defeated. As it, however, became apparent that the stickers were backed by strong glue; that Yes campaigners were disinclined to remove their creations; and as the material culture was adapted to new political realities, the legacy developed an air of persistence and loyalty to a lost or, at least, a deferred cause. This was reinforced by the new '45' symbol's reference to Jacobitism, long considered a romantic lost cause. Some forms, particularly spraypaint, wore away with weather. The impact of weather and tyres defeated my procrastinating efforts to photograph the 'Yes' on the road east of Bonar Bridge. Adhesive signs on a bus stop took on a ragged appearance as bored passengers, possibly No voters, picked them away (Figure 18). Flags, like the saltire in a Cromarty garden, shredded in the salt wind. Doubtless significance was read into these increasingly tattered sights. However, new signs appeared. In the weeks immediately after the result, Yes voters renewed their stickering (as well as much online campaigning) to challenge perceived BBC unionist bias and the growing sense that British Prime Minister David Cameron's 'Vow' to Scotland had been broken. By November 2014 lampposts at Inverness's Rose Street roundabout were advertising alternative news outlets. New slogans declaring 'The Vow was a Lie' and 'End London Rule' liberally decorated bollards and noticeboards in Invergordon's High Street. A Dingwall resident attempted to keep the government accountable through a daily-changing declaration, at the cost of obscuring nearly all the light coming through an upper window (Figure 19). Yes campaigners adjusted their symbolism to the post-referendum situation, altering the debate and integrating new issues. The British parliamentary elections in May 2015 resulted in some home, car, and garden displays incorporating SNP posters. This post-debate was reinvigorated by what became known as the Brexit referendum: the Britain-wide vote as to whether to leave the European Union. Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon provided new hope for defeated independence voters with her April 2015 statement that a new referendum could be called if 'something material' changed in 'circumstances or public opinion'.<sup>20</sup> This was broadly interpreted to mean that if Scotland voted to remain in the EU and the rest of Britain did not, she would call another independence referendum. A rash of 'Yes2' stickers appeared (Figure 20). A significant number of independence voters wished to remain within the EU (later dubbed remainers or remoaners). New stickers, such as one on a car in Cromarty, combined the issues by placing 'Yes' in the centre of an EU flag. However, it is notable that the Yes-

campaigning Stornoway fisherman also decorated his bridge with an anti-EU sticker. Yes and Remain voters were not necessarily one and the same, particularly in fishing communities. It was pro- rather than anti-independence voters who refused to concede the politicised urban and rural Highland landscape, by not only declining to remove their signs, but by adapting and adding to them, developing the debate about Scotland and Britain's political future.



*Figure 18: Dingwall, Easter Ross (August 2015) By 2016 the sign had been removed.*



*Figure 19: Shanbost and Stornoway, Isle of Lewis (August and May 2016). Possibly pasted on by the same Westside bus route travelling passenger.*



*Figure 20: Syre, Sutherland (May 2016)*

The visual, symbolic, and material campaign around Indyref 2014 was distinctive within British politics. It was imaginative, one-sided, long-lasting, and responsive to changing political realities. The Yes campaign's interaction with the landscape was far different from that of ordinary elections or the No campaign. Yes activists interacted with specific places and created micro-landscapes, shaping paint, fabric, and symbolism to suit that place, and making out of it a politicised space. Very occasionally this was resisted or counteracted by No campaigners. With their bodies or vehicles decorated, Yes voters moved through urban, rural, and even maritime, spaces. Occasionally this was done ritually, self-consciously claiming the territory as might a military manoeuvre or royal procession. As the landscape dictated the form and longevity of much of that expression by its texture, topography, and the impact of weather, campaigners imputed a pro-independence voice to particular locations. The prolific stickering, particularly of road signs, turned the expanse of the rural Highlands into a Yes campaign-space. One consequence was that Indyref symbolism acted to challenge the prevailing wilderness aesthetic. It re-politicised a space which the

wilderness ‘way of seeing’ had depoliticised. The stickers and political micro-landscapes in ‘natural’ locations forcibly made the point that these are peopled places: worked, managed, lived in, and travelled through. Those campaigners marked their own existence in a place from which they have been rhetorically excluded. At the same time they blurred the dichotomy between nature and culture, between what is ‘out there’ and what is ‘in me’. Efforts to give, even impose, a political voice are especially significant in a landscape which is objectified and portrayed as ‘natural’ in the dominant discourse. Indyref was a debate about power and autonomy. Campaigning by politicising the landscape was the latest manifestation of an ancient conflict about control over these spaces.



*Figure 21: Carrbridge, Strathspey (April 2016)*

**Elizabeth Ritchie** is a Lecturer in History at the University of the Highlands and Islands. She has a particular interest in the society, culture and environment of the region and, when not reading, can be found either exploring by bike or foot, or feeding her sheep.

[Elizabeth.Ritchie@uhi.ac.uk](mailto:Elizabeth.Ritchie@uhi.ac.uk)

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Pierce cited in Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 17.
- <sup>2</sup> Chandler, *Semiotics*, p. 147.
- <sup>3</sup> Denis Cosgrove, 'Prospect, Perspective and the Evolution of the Landscape Idea', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 10:1 (1985), pp. 45-62.
- <sup>4</sup> John Wylie, *Landscape* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 159. Here Wylie is condensing the ideas of leading phenomenologists such as Tim Ingold.
- <sup>5</sup> Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels, *The Iconography of Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 1 cited in Wylie, *Landscape*, p. 68.
- <sup>6</sup> For a historical discussion on the problems inherent in the wild land concept see Elizabeth Ritchie, 'Wild Land: Alternative insights into Scotland's unpeopled places' (2017) <http://www.communitylandscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Wild-Land-alternative-insights-into-Scotlands-unpeopled-places-final.pdf> (accessed 10 October 2018)
- <sup>7</sup> Those, professional and amateur, who photograph this landscape usually conform to artistic rules developed in the European tradition of fine art, including the rules of thirds, perspective, and vanishing points. I notice many of my images, particularly figures 1, 7, 10, 14, 17, 19a, conform to these rules.
- <sup>8</sup> My recognition of how the aestheticisation of Highland landscape (particularly the rhetoric of wildness and preservation) renders power relations invisible was due to the work of Duncan and Duncan in the New York commuter town of Bedford. See particularly James S. Duncan and Nancy G. Duncan, 'The Aestheticization of the Politics of Landscape Preservation', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 91:2 (2001), pp. 387-409.
- <sup>9</sup> Louise Senior, 'Becoming Wild: The Contradictory Aesthetics of Wild Land and Wind Farms', *Environment, Space, Place*, 10:1 (2018), pp. 111-33.
- <sup>10</sup> See Community Land Scotland for an articulation of this attitude and activity. <http://www.communitylandscotland.org.uk/> (accessed 1 February 2018)
- <sup>11</sup> Frank Fraser Darling, *West Highland Survey: An Essay in Human Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955). For how ownership, access to, and usage of this land was 'debated' through the exertion of and resistance to power see: James Hunter, *Set Adrift Upon the World: The Sutherland Clearances* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2015); Eric Richards, *The Highland Clearances* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2002, 2005); Iain Robertson, *Landscapes of Protest in the Scottish Highlands after 1914* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); Annie Tindley, *The Sutherland Estate, 1850-1920* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).
- <sup>12</sup> Saussure cited in Chandler, *Semiotics*, p. 22.
- <sup>13</sup> There is no direct equivalent for the English 'yes'. *Am Faclair Beag* translates bu chòir as 'we should' or 'it is proper'. <http://www.faclair.com>. (accessed 4 October 2018)
- <sup>14</sup> As south of the border the independence campaign was widely perceived as anti-English presumably many English tourists, who provide a significant proportion of Skye's summer income, might have feared the hotel was an unwelcome environment. Proprietors risked losing significant business.
- <sup>15</sup> James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979) cited in Wylie, *Landscape*, p. 159.
- <sup>16</sup> Isaiah 55:12.
- <sup>17</sup> Photo courtesy of Mary MacCormick.

---

<sup>18</sup> Statistics taken from the Electoral Management Board for Scotland and the BBC <http://scotlandreferendum.info/>; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/events/scotland-decides/results> (both accessed 30 November 2017).

Local Government Region	Votes Counted	Turnout %age	Yes %age
Argyll & Bute	63 516	88.2	41.48
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	19 758	86.2	46.58
Highland	165 976	87	47.08

<sup>19</sup> The Electoral Commission requires that political parties remove campaign material within two weeks of an election.

[http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0011/141788/Part-4-The-campaign-LGEW.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/141788/Part-4-The-campaign-LGEW.pdf) (accessed 25 January 2018).

<sup>20</sup> Nicola Sturgeon, Scottish Leaders' Debate, 8 April 2015. Reported on <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2015-scotland-32222806> (accessed 1 December 2017).