

# Scottish Highlands campervan mobilities in pandemic times: Enclosures

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## Abstract

This paper explores the idea of ‘enclosures’ as encircling lines. These include semantic boundaries, insider-outside binaries, and the grey area that includes the technically-illegal and the rarely-actually-prosecuted, focusing on ‘wild’ campervanning in the Scottish Highlands. Also considered are non-enclosures: common grazing, faraway gazes for driving on single-track roads, and alone-time in a campervan that is not easily regimented into work and life. This paper thinks with Tim Ingold’s work on lines, showing how the ‘ghostly lines’ of social imaginaries are changing in light of Covid-19. Lockdowns lead to staycations, which lead to overcrowding in the Highlands. Thus, previously elastic lines are drawn tighter, and grey areas coalesce into lines that are more obviously and more problematically crossed.

## Keywords

*campervan tourism; Scottish Highlands; Scottish land ownership; Right to Roam (legislation)*

## Biography

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At first, I drove the single-track Highlands roads alert –so alert– because of the meandering sheep. Plenty of Highlands cottages still come with common grazing rights, and sheep roam free over the grassy, rocky, tussocky landscape. Even as Scotland’s land ownership remains terribly feudal –half of Scotland is in the possession of just 432 landowners<sup>1</sup> – physical, fenced enclosures are rare. Sheep roam free, and, driving, I drove alert. So very alert.

Soon, though, I realised the sheep were not the problem. Soon, I was driving alert – so alert– because of vehicles that appeared suddenly, around corners, hurtling towards my windscreen on single-track roads as my brain scrambled three things at once. One, read the depth and firmness of the verge, because it is all too easy to end up in a ditch. Two, pull over, instantly, to the left (sometimes, if lucky, precisely at a passing place; but usually not. More often, to reach a passing place, someone has to reverse.) And three, once the flutter of panic subsides, execute the perfect Highland drivers’ wave: one finger, perhaps two, languidly raised from the steering wheel in a slow greeting that means thank you/I see you/you’re welcome, all in one gesture, with

eyes meeting and the hint of a smile, a tiny bow of the head. Enclosed in vehicles we communicated, Highland strangers and Sassenachs<sup>2</sup>, like me, alike.

For this reason, driving in the Highlands was stressful at first, and I learned to look far ahead into the distance, to glimpse approaching vehicles and to be ready, waiting, with my wave and my nod and my smile, tucked into a passing place by the time other vehicles rounded the corner. I grew up in Edinburgh, you see, and had to relearn how to drive in the Highlands. And with practice, I found a rhythm that took its lead from the nods and the waves rather than the always-on alertness that I brought with me from the city. By the time other drivers are upon me, now, I'm ready with my slow, Highlands wave: "I see you" and "You're welcome."

And, having *got it*—leaning into the ways of place— I started taking off in my van whenever I had time off work. Also, sometimes, when I *didn't* have time off. I drove north to write and to think, because thinking and writing, too, are academic work, even though most of what I did in the Highlands was neither writing nor thinking but hiking and camping and resting and being. Somehow, however, this defiant non-writing *enabled* me to write, more and better than any amount of sitting in front of a screen in my office, in the city. So, I camped 'wild'<sup>3</sup>: parking up in my self-built<sup>4</sup>, self-contained campervan<sup>5</sup>, usually on waste ground tucked just off quiet, minor roads, always far from people's houses. There, I read late or fell asleep early and dreamed of that day's hiking or the next. There weren't many of me, either in the sense of gatherings (I went alone) or the sense of others alongside (I rarely saw other campervans).

Four enclosures, then: 'Sassenach' is a semantic boundary that encloses me as outsider. Wild camping, a piece of Scottish government legislation, encloses those activities that fall within the legal right to roam. Land ownership encloses Scotland away from its people. And academic work is enclosed into 'off' and 'on' modalities, because to balance work with life—as we are (neo)liberally urged to do— one must enclose each within a boundary.

But three non-enclosures, too: the sheep roam free, driving necessitates a wide and unbounded gaze, and my time in the Highlands is not easily regimented into slivers of work and life. To write—when 'off', camping in the Highlands— I had consciously *not* to write. Only then did the writing flow, unbounded: past the enclosure of schedule and onto the page.

The COVID-19 pandemic—and the lockdowns that limit mobilities—are changing the enclosures and non-enclosures of Highlands driving. As Sassenachs<sup>6</sup> cannot holiday abroad, many more than usual are renting motorhomes and heading north, racing around the NC500<sup>7</sup> as they saw on *Top Gear*<sup>8</sup>, or otherwise causing Highlands driving to become about tailbacks, blocked roads, speed, crashes, and cars in ditches. Highlands 'wild' camping is changing too, not least as many campsites and public facilities were COVID-closed through the summers of 2020 and 2021. One fallout from this is 'dirty camping'<sup>9</sup>, in which careless (but not car-less) campers leave behind a trail of noise, mess, fire scars on delicate *machair*<sup>10</sup>, and human shit unburied in laybys. 'Dirty campers' block access, leaving locals to deal with the chaos and the unwelcome changes to *their* places and to *their* way of life. Understandably, many Highlanders vocally resent the intrusion. Voices (and *Facebook* groups, and letters to local MPs, and metaphorical pitchforks) are raised against the incomers, who do not know how to drive the narrow highland roads and who wreak havoc with their mess and their noise and their dirty camping. Ban them, many say<sup>11</sup>. Impose restrictions. Levy fines<sup>12</sup>. Another enclosure?

How can I—another outsider, who didn't know, at first, how to drive single-track Highlands roads and who loves nothing more than (illegal) 'wild' camping in my van— how can I critique those who come north to drive the same roads and to wild camp, like I do? I can split hairs about my leave-no-trace ethics, but aren't I part of this problem? In the enclosure-binary of

inside/outsider, I am semantically enclosed as ‘outsider’. There is nowhere *on* this line to be. Enclosures are necessarily binaries with two sides *of* a line: in or out. Citing Jean-François Billeter, Tim Ingold<sup>13</sup> writes of ‘ghostly lines’, which:

[Have] ‘neither body nor colour nor texture, nor any other tangible quality: its nature is abstract, conceptual, rational’. ... Survey lines, such as those linking triangulation points, are of an equally ghostly nature, as are geodesic lines such as the grid of latitude and longitude[.] ... Lines of this sort... have no physical counterpart in the world that is represented on maps. Some kinds of ghostly line, however, can have very real consequences for people’s movements.

Enclosures are the ‘ghostly lines’ of social imaginaries. Semantic boundaries of insiderness and outsidership, in the Scottish Highlands, are negotiated by accent, ancestry, and action. My languid, laconic road-side wave pushes me one way, while driving north and parking my big, white van in (an unseen, local) someone’s eyeline pulls me over to the other side of the line, enclosing me ineluctably as Sassenach. Other. In this way I am *in* the Scottish outdoors and *in* the Highlands. I am *of* Scotland. But the ghostly lines of enclosures –socially negotiated against the foil of changes to mobilities affordances borne of these pandemic times– pushes me *out*. *Outdoors*. But also: *outside* the lines.

## Notes

1. James Hunter, Peter Peacock, Andy Wightman, and Michael Foxley, *Towards a comprehensive land reform agenda for Scotland: A briefing paper for the House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee*, 2013, London: Parliament UK. <https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/scottish-affairs/432-Land-Reform-Paper.pdf>
2. Sassenach comes from the Gaelic word *Sasunnach*, meaning *Saxon*, i.e. non-Gaelic speaking Scottish lowlander. Over time, Sassenach has come to mean ‘English’; it is in this sense that it has become famous through the TV series *Outlander*. But I mean it as intended: I’m a lowland Scot, from a region that always spoke Scots rather than Gaelic. An Edinburgh lass, I’m as foreign in the Highlands as a Londoner would be.
3. Scotland’s innovative Right-To-Roam legislation –including the right to camp ‘wild’ on private land– specifically *excludes* camping in or from motorised vehicles, although this exclusion is often ignored, and campervan/car ‘wild’ camping is tolerated in much of the Highlands (Scotways, *Scottish Rights of Way and Access Society* (2021) <https://www.scotways.com/faq/law-on-statutory-access-rights>).
4. Phiona Stanley, “Crafting a DIY campervan and crafting embodied, gendered identity performances in a hyper-masculine environment”. *Art Research International* 4(1): 351-380. DOI: [10.18432/ari29382](https://doi.org/10.18432/ari29382).
5. It has running water and a greywater holding tank. It has a ‘green’ chemical toilet that I empty once I’m home. I take my rubbish with me to dispose of properly. The only trace I leave is a dry patch where I’ve parked if it’s raining, which it often is. The only thing I take is deep breaths and photographs, carefully vague in my social-media geotagging to prevent an influx of others. I’m careful.
6. In both senses.
7. A 500-mile tourist route called the North Coast 500, marketed only since 2015 as a way of bringing self-drive tourism to the coastal Highlands but now, arguably, too popular a route for the carrying capacity of local infrastructure. As a result, there is some hostility in the Highlands to NC500 tourism (Libby Brooks, Speeding, congestion and protest; 2019, *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2019/may/25/dark-side-scotland-north-coast-500-route-speeding-congestion-protest>; John J Lennon & John Harris, “The North Coast 500: developing tourism in the northern Scottish Highlands”. *Scottish Affairs*, 2020, vol. 29, no. 2, pp. 223-253. <https://doi.org/10.3366/scot.2020.0317>
8. A television motoring show that ran on the BBC from 2002; its presenters and production team moved to Amazon in 2016, where the show was relaunched as *The Grand Tour*.
9. Mark Stephen & Euan McIlwraith, *Dirty camping and how to solve it*, 2020. In BBC *Scotland Outdoors* podcast <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p08mggnt>
10. Dune grassland, common in the northwest Highlands.

11. Stephen & McIlwraith, 2020.
12. While already illegal, car-side camping in wild places is rarely prosecuted, not least as there is very limited police presence throughout much of the sparsely populated Highlands.
13. Tim Ingold, *Lines*, 2016, 50. London & New York: Routledge Classics.