

Between Idea and Experience: Reflections on Place-Based Research in Rural Scotland

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In the preface to [Place Peripheral: Place-Based Development in Rural, Island, and Remote Regions](#) (Vodden, Gibson & Badacchino, 2015), [David Douglas](#) notes that “we have such great expectations of place: intellectually, materially, politically, emotionally, spiritually, and otherwise. We invest in the myth, the concept, the idea, the ideal, and its lived materiality.” Without previously having the specific language of ‘place’, I had unknowingly spent the first decade of my career fundamentally interested in the ‘myth, concept, idea, ideal, and lived materiality’ of different places – and it is that interest that brought me to the University of Guelph to pursue a PhD in Rural Studies with a research program aimed at exploring place-based innovation. Through the generous support of a Rural Policy Learning Commons Research & Exchange Mobility Grant and the mentorship of [Dr. Jane Atterton](#) and the team in the [Rural Policy Centre](#) at Scotland’s Rural College (University of Edinburgh), I was fortunate to spend three months immersing myself in the ideas and experience of place in rural and remote regions of Scotland as part of my effort to develop a comparative case study on place-based innovation and comparative rural policyscapes. This fieldwork was completed in support of my doctoral dissertation and a full case-study summary from this work will be shared with the RPLC in the near future. For now, I wanted to share some reflections on this time with the RPLC community.

As a Canadian, I used to joke with friends in the United Kingdom and Europe that our concepts of ‘remote’ were pretty different; how could anywhere on Great Britain – a 209,331 km² island – feel remote compared to communities at the far reaches of Canada’s 9.98 million square kilometres landmass? This past fall, I found out just how contextual rurality and remoteness are – reminding me that one’s experience of being ‘in the periphery’ depends very much on where you’re standing.

Home-base during my time in Scotland was Edinburgh, where I was exceptionally well-supported by the team at the Rural Policy Centre, with particular thanks to Dr. Atterton, Dr. Sarah Skerrat, Dr. Jayne Glass, Dr. Rob McMorran, and Ms. Sarah Jones. With their support, I also spent time at a number of leading research centres across the country, including the [James Hutton Institute](#) (thanks to Dr. Lee-Ann Sutherland, Dr. Margaret Currie, Dr. Ruth Wilson, Dr. Dominic Duckett, and Dr. Andrew Copus), the [University of the Highlands and Islands in Inverness](#) (thanks to Dr. Philomena de Lima), and [the Centre for Rural Economy at the University of Newcastle](#) (thanks to Dr. Sally Shortall, Dr. Mark Shucksmith, Dr. Ruth McAreavey, and Ms. Hannah Budge), the [European Policies Research Centre at the University of Strathclyde](#) (thanks to Mr. Stefan Kah), and [Highlands and Islands Enterprise](#) in both Inverness (thanks to Ms. Catherin MacNeil and Mr. Neil Ross) and Thurso (Mr. Eann Sinclair). From Edinburgh to Orkney, John o’ Groats to Glasgow, I covered some ground!

Driving on the left-hand side of the road (after 15+ years of learning how to drive on the right-hand side), I covered nearly 2500 km across the countryside, most frequently on single track roads that curved and bucked like rollercoasters through wild Highland terrain. Proving the

importance of being 'in place' to begin to understand place, my field notes from this time are rich, deep, and often reflect both awe at the people and landscapes of rural and northern Scotland (and the loneliness that comes from being 'out of place') as well as reflections on the warmth of people who went out of their way to welcome me 'into place' and the humour in the moments that only seem to come from 'taking the long way' – which I most definitely did. I have videos of backroad standoffs with Highland Cows, traffic jams caused by farmers moving cattle between fields on ATVs, and side of the road recordings of seals lounging while BBC Alba played bagpipe music in the background. I had previously spent a lot of time in Scotland, but only in Glasgow and Edinburgh, as I spent much of my young adult life playing bagpipes competitively, and it was surreal to hear names and music I know as well as I know my own name play on the rental car stereo while sheep crossed in front of me and I looked down steep cliffs to the sea below. A reminder that place is transitive and transformative: the Scotland that I remembered from my teenage years was very different than the Scotland I was experiencing through the investigative eyes of a researcher interested in the 'myth, idea, ideal, and lived materiality' of place.

There were also less romantic insights and experiences: the juxtaposition of the decommissioned nuclear reactor in Dounreay with grazing crofter's cattle and wind-turbines was an interesting backdrop to being stopped by regional police who wanted to know why I was sitting on the side of the road taking photos and notes being one example. Don't worry, they realized I was just a nerd and off down the road I went with recommendations to get where I was going before dark because single track roads built into the highland hills are difficult enough in the daylight (an experience, in and of itself, that lends itself to deep reflection). My photos and notes from this time frame important questions in my research about the what I've come to think of as an 'economic development of dismantling', where the nuclear industry employs a significant number of people in the various industries involved in decades long process of decommissioning the Dounreay nuclear site, in contrast to contentious plans for a space-hub in nearby Melness, and passionate contestation over what the future of the Caithness & Sutherland region looks like – and who gets to decide what 'innovation' will look like in this place now and in the future. It is important and valuable for any of us interested in place-based research to consider what we can and can't see when we are not 'of' a place – what our presence as outsiders might afford us in terms of questions as well as what might be only be accessible to those are as much a part of a place as the extinct volcanoes that dominate the landscape.

As I continue my research, I am layering the generous gifts of conversation and insight shared with the people who welcomed me at every stop along the way with the policyscapes that shape these places, and looking to see what emerges. Over the coming year, I look forward to sharing more of these stories – and aim to do so through future blog posts, videos, policy briefs, and webinars. Neither the research itself nor the current and future knowledge mobilization I hope to undertake as a result would be possible without both the funding support of the RPLC and the mentoring, advice, and engagement of experts within the RPLC network. Thank you, again, for supporting this journey – and all that is yet to come.