

# Emergence of Human Ecology in Edinburgh: an account

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## Introduction

This short paper introduces Human Ecology as I understand it to have evolved in Edinburgh. It focuses on my experience as a student, and is a prologue to work I have built on since 1995 (where this account ends).

## 1972: The CHE within Edinburgh University, and antecedents

In 1994, I arrived at the Centre for Human Ecology (CHE), then a part of Edinburgh University, Scotland, to study for a Masters degree in Human Ecology. I had been attracted by the promise of ‘hand, head and heart’ education in the ‘Scots generalist tradition’, and a yearning to explore ‘the new paradigm’ that had been catalysed by reading Fritjof Capra’s *The Turning Point*, Jonathon Porritt’s *Seeing Green*, Andrew Dobson’s *Green Political Thought* and James Lovelock’s *Gaia Theory* during my undergraduate degree in Modern History, Politics and Economics - and my emerging activism with Green Politics at that time. I’d spent two years teaching English in Japan whilst I was searching for the broad canvas that I instantly recognised as Human Ecology as it was presented at Edinburgh<sup>1</sup>.

The CHE had been established as the ‘School of the Man-made Future’ in 1972 by Professor Waddington, a member of the Club of Rome that commissioned the *Limits to Growth* report that informed the Stockholm Conference on Environment and Development (the first *Earth Summit*) of that year. Professor Waddington, a major figure in British biology, passionately

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<sup>1</sup> I’ve since been amazed to discover the range of interpretations of ‘human ecology’ that have been adopted in academia – from the use of the term as little short of political correcting home economics in minor US colleges, to departments focussing on human health (such as at Free University of Brussels), to strictly materialist interpretations such as Joan Martínez Alier’s definition as ‘studying the resource flows through an economy’ (Martínez Alier, J. and K. Schlüpmann (1990). *Ecological economics : energy, environment and society*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell. . The existing journals of human ecology tend to be rooted in anthropological studies; the 1930s Chicago school of Human Ecology stands as an early post-modern contradiction to this trend. Until I connected with the Integral Institute, I understood the closest living sisters to CHE to be the College of the Atlantic, on Maine (offering undergraduate degrees) and Schumacher College, Devon (offering an MSc in Holistic Science but also drawing on external teachers who emphasize perspectival work).

believed that organisms must be studied as wholes, and had a deep insight into the epistemological implications of the new sciences including the rapid evolution of complexity theory which he championed through the 1960s (Waddington 1977): “A scientist’s metaphysical beliefs have a definite and ascertainable influence on the work he produces”<sup>2</sup>.

Edinburgh was fertile ground for the establishment of such a Centre for the study of part/wholes. As Scotland’s capital and the most anglicised city in Scotland, Edinburgh has long been a battleground between the agenda of modernist educational reductionism and indigenous generalism in a tradition of the ‘Scots Democratic Intellect’ that George Davie, in his *Democratic Intellect*, explains:

“Education became the chief forum of resistance to Southern encroachment, and provided a rallying-point for national principle.... the Scots had an almost religious attachment to their inherited ideal of a culture in which the general should take precedence over the particular and the whole over the parts” (Davie 1961).

The evidence presented to the Universities Commissions (the first sitting between 1826-30) tells the story of Scots’ traditionalists who insisted that philosophy – at least the philosophical roots of psychology – remain a core part of the general educational curriculum. The struggle has continued to the present day, and a contemporary chronicler, Andrew Lockhart Walker opens *Revival of the Scottish Intellect* with an account of the University of Edinburgh’s 1992 decision to freeze the Chair of Scottish history – a time when the clamour for greater constitutional autonomy was at its peak (the Scotland Act of 1998 led to the establishment of the first Scottish Parliament since 1707 ... it is now well into its second term in its new designer-home at Holyrood). Walker asked “How could the University of Edinburgh be so utterly out of touch with public opinion?” (Walker 1994), and goes on to cite “cultural colonisation and a deliberate policy of ‘inferiorisation’ of things Scottish”. One of the reasons that the proposed closure of the Centre for Human Ecology in 1995 aroused such media attention and popular indignation was the resonance of our campaign with a culture still smarting against the subjugation of core cultural values.

There are many other contextualising characters necessary to situate the Scots Democratic Intellect, but I will end my cherry-picking by briefly introducing Patrick Geddes and John MacMurray. It would be impossible to adequately summarise Geddes’ legacy to Human Ecology here. I was introduced to Geddes’ polymath genius by Professor Murdo MacDonald during an early CHE lecture. Every year, during the ‘intro week’, CHE Human Ecology students walk through Edinburgh’s Old Town, past the Outlook Tower, taking in Geddes’ creativity and commitment to urban regeneration design and an educational vision encapsulated by stories of Ramsay Gardens’ Summer Meetings as pan-european gatherings of craftspeople, artists, philosophers, architects, designers coming together to draw out Geddes’ holistic vision of unities of body-mind-spirit and folk-place-work)<sup>3</sup>. I marvelled at

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Walker, 1994. Waddington’s students include Brian Goodwin, complexity theorist and Schumacher College teacher.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Geddes was heavily informed by his internationalism, including close connections with luminaries in India (his children adopted a yoga practice during his time as a City surveyor there). For an excellent introduction to Geddes, see Professor Murdo McDonald’s (a founding Advisor to the CHE) *Edinburgh Review* edition (1992). [Patrick Geddes : ecologist, educator, visual thinker](#). Edinburgh, Edinburgh Review.

Geddes' *notation of life* as his *theory of everything* and have been inspired by Geddes' conviction that universities should be the spiritual, intellectual and artistic centres of their region.

John MacMurray was a twentieth century Scots philosopher who resonates tunefully along Geddes' chord. MacMurray provides a grounded intellectual rigour that helped me to find the emergent field of Action Research and a key element in the continued evolution of the Centre for Human Ecology towards *engaged academia* (see below). MacMurray's precept that "knowledge is for action and action is for friendship" is echoed by Geddes' epithet that "education is not merely by and for the sake of thought; it is in a still higher degree by and for the sake of action." Furthermore, MacMurray was clear that, in a university education, "the education provided must be unified. Behind it must stand a philosophical theory of education which can determine the place of different departments of study in moulding a full human maturity" (Walker, p. 285). Elsewhere, Geddes expands: "If we have any dogma, it is to teach a utilitarianism which treats life and culture as a whole and which may sometimes find the Beautiful more useful than the Useful" (Walker, p. 356).

The CHE, then, rests in a long tradition of which I was completely unaware when I arrived in 1994, attracted by a brochure describing a network hub for activist, as well as academic activity, working on topical issues like nuclear energy, food, and the nexus of concerns first highlighted at Stockholm in 1972 that might be summarised as 'Population, Resources, Economy and Development' (PRED). It rapidly became clear that I had landed into a node in a global network of the emerging field of ecological economics, informed by the Director of the Centre and biologist, Dr. Ulrich Loening. Ul's close collaboration with *Balaton Group* of ecosystem modellers – which was convened annually by Donella Meadows (author of the *Limits to Growth Report*) – had informed the design and content of the MSc course.

## 1989: The emergence of the MSc Human Ecology

In addition to Ulrich's eldership (that still doesn't preclude him from running an eco-sawmill business and playing the 'cello), Alastair McIntosh arrived in the mid 1980s to provide a huge input of creative energy in creating the degree and getting it through the University validation machine. The core modules on the course reflected Ulrich and Alastair's passions. Ulrich's *Principles of Human Ecology* introduced us to systems thinking, ecological economics, the tragedy of the commons, and early complexity theory<sup>4</sup>, all informed by current Balaton Group discussions and the general PRED discourse.

*Environmental Ethics* was Alastair's cognitive *tour de force*. We started with Socrates' hemlock cup and coursed rapidly through the rhetoric of Plato's academy on to a tour of major western philosophies and the mystic Christian, Sufi and Islamic traditions, Jung's contributions to psychotherapy (and James Hillman's critique that *We've had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World isn't Getting Better*) to consciousness studies (Stan Grof, Charles Tart), liberation theology (Paulo Freire, Walter Wink), and arriving at Arne Naess' *Deep Ecology* and the emerging field of ecofeminism (through the poetry of Alice Walker, Caroline Merchant's *Death of Nature*, Susan Griffin, etc.).

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<sup>4</sup> Representing a partial picture of the lower right quadrant in the integral lensmap.

Alastair pretty much lived in the CHE at that time, and took us on holiday with him that included a ‘more trippy than fieldy’ trip on the heels of his activism to prevent Redland Aggregates from mining the mountain *Ronneval* on his native Harris (an action that involved inviting MicqMaq chief Sulian Stone Eagle Herney, of Nova Scotia, to Scotland to offer testimony to the public inquiry on the intrinsic value of the mountain, making the connections to the Scots settlers who had displaced Sulian’s people when they were cleared from Harris in the last years of the nineteenth century). I also remember being particularly shaken by Alastair’s critique of the cigarette advertising industry *From Eros to Thanatos*<sup>5</sup>.

Although the core course input – especially from Alastair – was quite literally mind-blowing, it wasn’t until I trained in Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) that I started to identify my vocation (or *daemon* as James Hillman defines it in *The Souls Code* (Hillman 1997)), and learned skills that resonated with the emergent worldview I’d been cognitively ‘sold’ on. Andy Inglis, a close associate of Robert Chambers (who continues to be a pioneer in participatory action research based at the Institute for Development Studies at Sussex University) did an excellent job in waking me up to the centrality of self-reflexive values awareness in facilitating participatory work. I used this awareness to frame my MSc thesis, an inquiry into the possibility that sustainability indicators might be generated ‘bottom up’ to complement the largely ‘top-down’ Local Agenda 21 process in local government in the UK. I worked with Fife Council, as I was now living and developing community development projects as a member of an intentional community there<sup>6</sup>. To inform my MSc research, I read widely about the human potential movement (for example, including the work of the Tavistock Institute), and attended a New Economics Foundation sponsored training in Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff’s *Future Search* large group visioning approach (an attempt at a practical application of complexity theory).

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<sup>5</sup> I heartily recommend Alastair’s excellent, *Soil and Soul* (McIntosh, A. (2001). *Soil and soul: people versus corporate power*. London, Aurum.

now in its 3<sup>rd</sup> printing, as a summary of the material that shook me root and branch that year. For other papers, including *Eros to Thanatos*, see <http://www.alastairmcintosh.com/>

<sup>6</sup> Whilst living at Craigenalt Farm, Kinghorn, I got together with Tara (we married in 2000), and helped to establish what is now a community-owned and thriving ecological education centre . Check out their website at <http://www.cfec.org.uk>