

irefuteitthus....

cogitative writing, imaginative photography

home essays quotes about contact

Owning Assynt

Gary Hill



"Every self-respecting billionaire should own their own country estate – it's the ultimate prestige purchase."

Caroline McGhie, 'The Telegraph' July 19th, 2011

Beside one loch, a hind's neat skeleton,
Beside another, a boat pulled high and dry:
Two neat geometries drawn in the weather
Two things already dead and still to die.

I passed them every summer, rod in hand,
Skirting the bright blue, or the spitting grey,
And, every summer, saw how the bleached timbers

Gaped wider and the neat ribs fell away.

Time adds one malice to another one –
Now you'd look very close before you knew
If it's the boat that ran, the hind went sailing.
So many summers, and I have lived them too.

'So Many Summers' by Norman MacCaig

Nevertheless, MacCaig would have been keenly aware that others did not appreciate Assynt in the same poetic way as he. For centuries Assynt had been owned in feudal fashion by wealthy absentee landlords who used the region for indulging their pastimes of trout and salmon fishing, grouse and deer shooting with scant regard for the lifestyle or welfare of the crofters (tenant farmers) who had lived there for generations. Worse, in many cases it was the taxpayer who subsidised these playgrounds for the rich as Highland estates invariably make a loss which can then be used to reduce the tax burden resulting from the profits accruing from other business interests. Similarly, corporate away-days, spent shooting and hunting, are also tax-deductible. Estates are also eligible for a number of farm subsidies and grants, again provided by the taxpayer.

In 1913, however, attitudes toward the crofters looked like they might take a turn for the better when William Stewart, who was himself born to a penniless crofting family in the Assynt village of Nedd in the early 1860s, purchased the 24,000 hectare Assynt estate from the Duke of Sutherland, followed a few months later by a neighbouring parcel of land known as Edrachilles. Emigrating to Canada in 1882 with savings of only 10 shillings and starting his new life as a farm labourer then a surveyor, Stewart had gone on to make a fortune working as a railroad engineer in British Columbia, Canada becoming a partner in Foley, Welch and Stewart, then the largest North American railway contracting firm who had built much of the Grand Trunk Pacific, the Pacific Great Eastern and the Canadian Northern Lines. He was also a partner in Bloedel, Stewart and Welch, then one of the largest logging companies in the world.

Throughout his time in Canada, Stewart had maintained the tenancy of his croft at Nedd, which was farmed by his nephew, Donald MacCauley. One of his two sisters also resided all her life in Assynt, in the village of Drumbeg. Although he was well-liked and fondly remembered as 'JW' or 'the General', Stewart's philanthropic vision for Assynt never came fully to fruition. His plans were waylaid by the First World War, when he gave financial assistance to the 72nd Battalion Seaforth Highlanders of Canada and served himself by constructing railways behind the trenches and in Palestine. On the outbreak of war he had this to say to a Vancouver newspaper:

"Rather than my country should be beaten in this great war, I will go back again to day labour and small wages where I began and there are thousands of wealthy Scotsmen in all parts of the world who would do the same."

In 1935, Stewart's wife died, he himself was in failing health, and so Assynt was again put up for sale. Stewart himself died in September 1938 and in a tragic turn of events his daughter and grandson were killed a month later in a car accident on the Glanville Street Bridge in Vancouver. Ironically, Stewart had surveyed the site of that same bridge three years after arriving in Canada.

Two bidders emerged, the Vestey family who had large landholdings in Argentina and Australia, used for rearing beef, and William Filmer-Sankey whose father-in-law was the anti-Semitic Nazi-sympathising Duke of Westminster who owned the Kylestrome Estate which bordered Assynt to the north. The Duke of Westminster, one of the richest men in the world, had a reputation as a playboy and bon-vivant. He had a 10-year adulterous relationship with the similarly anti-Semitic French fashion designer Gabrielle 'Coco' Chanel to whom he gifted extravagant jewels, expensive artworks, and a home in the Mayfair district of London. He also gave her, in 1927, a parcel of land in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, Monte Carlo where she later built her villa. Earlier, the Duke had served under Sir John French, the Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force in the First World War. To perform his duties he equipped himself with a Rolls-Royce fitted with a Hotchkiss machine-gun. After the war he had a naval destroyer converted into a steam yacht. The contrast in attitude between the Duke of Westminster and J W Stewart when serving their country was surely not lost on the families of the men from the crofts who laid down their lives for King and country.

There exists a popular story that the Duke of Westminster intended to buy the estate as a wedding gift for his daughter and son-

in-law but as they had already been married for eleven years and had two children it appears to have been a peculiarly belated wedding gift and therefore untrue. Although Filmer-Sanke won the bid, he soon after split the estate down the centre of Loch Assynt, selling Glencanisp Estate & Lodge to the Vestey family. After divorcing his wife, Ursula, in 1940 and remaining unmarried for two decades, 60-year old William married a 19-year old German woman, Waltraud Wirsching, known as 'Traudel'. They had three children within six years, and both died in Assynt, he in 1985 and she in 2005.

It would be no exaggeration to say that the Vestey family proved to be deeply unpopular with the inhabitants of Assynt for the next almost 60 years. To put it bluntly, they treated Assynt as if it were an overseas colony and the inhabitants as if they were natives. As one crofter put it:

"They'd been used to dealing with native Argentineans and Australian Aborigines, and they were amazed that the local people here wouldn't do what they were told".

So in Australia too, the Vestey family have a terrible reputation, not only for their attitude to land ownership but for their attitude to the people who live on that land. In 1914 the Vestey family business acquired the lease of 93,000 square kilometres in the Northern Territory and East Kimberly district of Western Australia for beef-rearing at an incredibly low rent, so low that in 1980 their rent on the 16,000 square kilometre Wave Hill station, 600 kilometres south of Darwin in the Northern Territory, was only £1,650 per annum. The vast majority of the workers on these cattle stations were aboriginal stockmen from the local tribal communities. Initially they were paid no wages, receiving only food and lodging. Later, when aboriginal workers were paid, they received only 20% of the wage given to white stockmen.

In 1946, the Vestey cattle stations found themselves running short of labour. Concerned, they commissioned a report from the anthropology department of Sydney University. The report was scathing. The aboriginal workers were found to be living in shacks made from scrap iron and sacking. There was no provision for either a regular supply of clean water, proper sanitation or rubbish disposal. Rations were limited to flour, tea, sugar and bits of beef like the head or feet of a bullock. Their working hours were at the discretion of the station manager and child labour was widely used.

Not surprisingly, in 1966 the Aboriginal Lands Rights Movement began on land owned by the Vestey family when, on August 23rd, Vincent Lingiari led 200 members of his Gurindji tribe off the Wave Hill cattle station. They walked to the Victoria River and set up camp where they stayed until the end of the year. The Gurindji plan was to set up a co-operative venture to catch and break in wild horses and to contract their services to the Vestey family for cattle mustering, fencing, branding and other station work. Legally, however, although it was their traditional tribal land, the Gurindji were squatting on Vestey owned land and risked being thrown off the land of their ancestors. Before that could happen, however, the national media ran the story and the Gurindji people received widespread support from a range of organised groups including trade unions, student unions and several church groups.

The strike lasted for nine years and proved very costly for the Vestey family who had to ship in non-aboriginal workers who were entitled to receive proper rates of pay. It culminated in the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976. This act gave the Gurindji and other indigenous Australians freehold title to their traditional lands in the Northern Territory with rights over mining, agricultural and other forms of development. Vincent Lingiari was awarded the Order of Australia and had a federal electoral district named after him. He died in 1984.

Here, the Australian musicians Archie Roach and Sarah Storer tell the story of Vincent Lingiari in a song written by fellow Australian Paul Kelly.

Although the Vestey family had considerably less power in Assynt than the Northern Territory of Australia, consider the similarities in the local perception of their attitude, as described by John MacKenzie of the Assynt Crofters Trust in the mid 1990s:

"Peter Hay [the Estate Manager] was from Ayrshire. He was ex-Army, and he was a game warden in the national parks of Kenya before he came to Assynt. He treated the people here as he would have done the natives in Africa. It was utterly unacceptable. He was a blustering, bombastic individual with a loud voice. His booming voice and his southern accent would engulf a shop when he entered it. People despised him."

And further, speaking of Edmund (Lord) Vestey:

"His attitude to the place is to keep it as it is. He wants to come up here for a month in August and enjoy it as it is. He might come to the summer games occasionally. But he has no involvement whatsoever in the community. Except for resisting development."

Lest it may be said that people who make statements such as these are simply envious of the Vestey family's enormous wealth, consider the patronising tone of this statement from Edmund Vestey in 1993:

"Who was it said, the day central heating comes to the Highlands, that's the end of the Highlander? They're that sort of people."

The sort of people Edmund Vestey represented, on the other hand, can be summarised in merely two words: 'tax-dodgers'. In 1980 it emerged that, by shifting money to overseas accounts, the Vestey family had not paid a penny in UK tax for at least 60 years. Unrepentant in the least, Vestey even had the audacity to claim that by not paying tax, his family were actually doing the country a favour:

"We have certainly kept to the letter of the law. Let's face it, nobody pays more tax than they have to. We're all tax dodgers, aren't we?.....I believe that it has been to the benefit of this country."

According to the Fraser of Allander Institute's 2010 report 'An Economic Study of Grouse Moors' highland estates supported 260 permanent positions (less than 3 per estate) and 445 casual jobs, with a total wage bill of £9.7 million (averaging £13,750 per person; compared to the then Scottish average of over £19,000) and contributed a mere £15.6 million to the Scottish economy. In comparison, another traditional highland industry, that of whisky, employed 35,000 people and contributed £4 billion annually to the Scottish economy as well as managing £10 billion worth of exports. They also paid their taxes.

Preventing the local community from having any say in the development of their own community, however, was the most common complaint made about the Vestey family. Examples include refusing the building of a swimming pool in Lochinver, despite the innovative idea of it being heated by the waste heat given off by the ice plant at the fishing harbour; preventing the Highland Council from developing a site for small businesses; preventing the building of any social housing that could be seen from any property that might be owned by or used by the Vestey family; preventing the building of a new tourist centre in Lochinver; the list goes on and on.

Perhaps the worst example of the Vestey's as unscrupulous landlords, however, involved the case of the cottars. A cottar was a homeless person who had built a house on estate land by their own hand and then lived in it. Under the crofting laws cottars have the right to buy the deeds to their house from the estate and so bequeath it upon their death. If, however, they decide to enter into a formal tenancy agreement with the estate owner, this right of inheritancy is lost. The estate, in effect, then acquires the house for free. The Assynt Estate, through their Estate Manager, were found to have targeted a number of elderly cottars and convinced them into signing formal tenancy agreements. The Vestey stranglehold over the local housing market was made worse by the number of homes that were not (and are still not) available for use by the local people. The North West Demographic Survey of

1989 found that 31% of all the housing stock in Assynt was available only as a short-term holiday let. In some areas this was as high as 50%. Such a situation has dire consequences for local people by reducing the available housing stock to rent or buy, and having the further effect of driving up prices.

In 1989 the Vestey family portioned off the coastal crofting strip comprised of 13 villages into three lots (Torbreck, Drumbeg and Stoer) totalling 9,000 hectares and renamed it the North Lochinver Estate. Only 20 hectares of this newly fashioned estate was not used as crofting land. Nevertheless it was advertised as a traditional Highland 'sporting' estate for salmon fishing, grouse shooting and deer hunting with little mention made of crofting. The description of the estate in the brochure prepared by the agents John Clegg & Company of Edinburgh was particularly distasteful to the crofting community:

"One need only enter Assynt to see the great sphinx-like mass of Suilven to sense the atmosphere of unreality, almost fantasy, which permeates even the character of the people who live there. Mountains such as Quinag, Canisp, Ben More Assynt, Cul Mor, Cul Beag, Stack Polly and Conival all have the immense power to impress, and all serve to emphasise that man himself is perhaps the alien element in this landscape."



Suilven from Elphin

Man himself is perhaps the alien element in this landscape? There is archaeological evidence that humans have lived in Assynt for 10,000 years! As if nature does not include human beings? Whither the crofters, or Norman MacCaig? Or as one crofter observed *"tells you a lot about the bastards, doesn't it?"*

A boy skips flat stones out to sea – each does fine
till a small wave meets it head on and swallows it.
The boy will do the same.

The schoolmaster stands looking out the window
with one Latin eye and one Greek one.
A boat rounds the point in Gaelic.

Out of the shop comes a stream

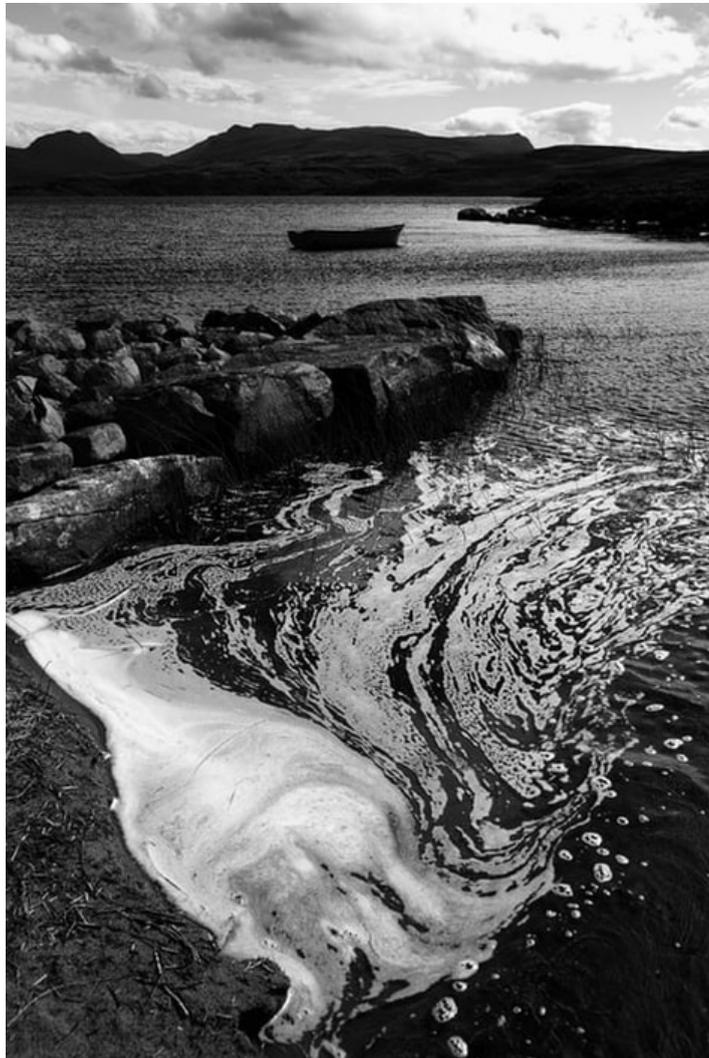
of Omo, weetabix, BiSoDol tablets and a man
with a pocket shaped like a whisky bottle.

Lord V walks by with the village in his pocket.
Angus walks by
Spending the village into the air.

A melodeon is wheezing a clear-throated jig
on the decks of the Arcadia. On the shore hills Pan
cocks a hairy ear; and falls asleep again.

The ten minutes are up, except they aren't.
I leave the village, except I don't.
The jig fades to silence, except it doesn't.

'Notations of Ten Summer Minutes' by Norman MacCaig



The edge of the loch at the end of the day

The eventual buyer was a Mr Zeterburg, a Swedish land speculator whose company Scandinavian Property Services paid £1,080,000. The deal was largely conducted in secret: at no time were the crofters consulted or appraised of the progress of the sale. For the most part the new owner was amenable by his absence. Initially he kept the existing management team for the estate but eventually the responsibility was given to a firm of solicitors in Aberdeen. One event did irk the crofters, however. After

repairing a road to a loch where he kept a boat, Zeterburg then put a locked wooden gate across the road, oblivious to the fact that it was used regularly by the local crofters. They sawed it down.

To the Vestey family owning a Scottish estate of non- or marginally profitable land was no problem. It was something that gave them (even more) social status. An indulgence. Somewhere to go in August. Zeterburg's wealth, however, was in an entirely different league and he needed a return for his money. But Scandinavian Property Services were in no real position to develop the land as a sporting estate because their only income from Assynt was that generated from the crofting tenancies. They soon ran into financial difficulty. In 1992 Scandinavian Property Services filed for bankruptcy with Ostgota, a Swedish bank, as their principal creditor. A London-based liquidator was appointed and the selling agents who had been employed by the Vestey family to conduct the original sale were reappointed. The crofters were not informed of the decision to sell. They only found out because a prospective buyer arrived in a seaplane which became stuck when the tide went out and a local crofter was asked if he'd tow the plane to water with his tractor.

This time the land was parcelled up into seven lots (Torbreck, Stoer, Clashmore, Phollain Bheithe, Drumbeg, Culkein Drumbeg and Nedd; "*names impossible to sound without feeling the poetry and the loss*" as the novelist and poet Andrew Greig aptly puts it) with prices ranging from £38,000 to £200,000, totalling £473,000, or offers over £460,000 for all seven lots. Poignantly, the brochure used to promote the sale was almost identical to that offered in 1989. Again, little mention of crofting, except to say that "*details are available on request*". This splitting of the land into seven lots was of particular concern to the local crofters. Many of the 172 crofts overlapped several of these lots and so a single crofter might find himself or herself having to deal with several landlords, all of whom would be unknown quantities.

This spurred the crofters to register their own company, Assynt Crofters Ltd, with the aim of raising enough money to buy the estate for themselves. Three men led the campaign, Allan MacRae from Torbreck was Chairman:

"My people have been on this land for centuries. It is our land, and we mean to have our land"

as he told a meeting with the liquidators. Back in the 1800s his crofter great-grandfather had been forcibly removed from his land at Ardvar to make way for a sheep farm. His father, Johnny was a local Gaelic speaker, though his mother Cora was English and spoke with a cockney accent; which had no effect on MacRae as he so wisely remarked "*you know hybrids are the strongest plants*". MacRae was an avid reader of the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, whose 1970 book 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' remains to this day a pivotal influence in the struggle for the rights of so many dispossessed peoples. John Mackenzie of Culkein was the Vice-Chair: "*the sheer determination that Allan MacRae displayed that day caused [the liquidator] to think again about the difficulties he was putting in our way*". The third man was Bill Ritchie whose croft was in Achmelvich. He became Secretary. Within three months the trio devised a feasibility study and business plan. In addition to funds raised by the crofters themselves and other assorted local individuals, donations came from abroad, especially from expatriate Scots in New Zealand, Canada and the United States. These individual donations amounted to approximately half of the available monies. Grants and loans were also made available by Sutherland District Council and Highland Regional Council.

The Assynt crofters also devised plans to make the estate as unattractive as possible to potential bidders. In the event their bid failed, they were determined to take legal action based on a judgment in which three judges of the Scottish Land Court gave a radical interpretation of the 1976 Crofting Reform Act. They had decided that crofters could buy their land for 15 times their annual rent and then sell that land to a third party without the estate taking half of any development value, as was previously the practice. In a further attempt to make the land less appealing to those looking to buy a 'sporting estate' the crofters had six tonnes of fencing material flown in by helicopter and built three kilometres of fencing around the best grazing land. By improving the grazing land the crofters would be able to argue that any deer found on that land could be legally culled by themselves.

Initially eleven bids were made but all were rejected by the liquidators Stoy Hayward. Assynt Crofters Ltd were the only prospective purchaser interested in all seven lots of the estate and had offered in excess of £235,000. A second bid of £245,000 also failed. However, a third bid of £300,000 was accepted on 8th December 1992, a mere six months after the idea of self-ownership was first mooted. Allan MacRae proudly stood in front of a hundred people gathered in Stoer Primary School to make the announcement stating, "*My immediate thoughts are to wish that some of our forebears could have been here to share this moment with us*". The celebratory ceilidh was held in the Culag Hotel in Lochinver, and is rightly remembered as a "*right damn wild hoolie*". On February 1st 1993 ownership of the land formally changed hands. The estate is now run by a democratically elected Board of Directors representing each of the thirteen villages within the estate who serve for three years plus two co-opted

Directors with specialist knowledge of fishing and hunting. There are now 182 crofts housing a population of approximately 300 people.

It was a sad day for Assynt when Allan MacRae died in June 2013 aged 73 years, his body was found less than an hours walk from his home early the following morning after he failed to appear at a meeting of the Assynt Crofters Trust. One local was quoted:

"He was one of the few who, when he spoke of future generations, actually meant what he said."

Further legislation in the form of the Land Reform Act 2004 cemented further the right of local Scottish communities to have a say in the future development of the land they call home. The Act provides the right to buy land able to contribute to the sustainable development and well-being of a local community. Once an interest by a local community has been registered, the land cannot be sold without that community's interest being taken into account. A little more than a year after the Act was passed in the Scottish Parliament a newly formed body, the Assynt Foundation, succeeded in purchasing the remaining 18,000 hectares of Assynt wilderness in a £2.9 million community buy-out of the Glencanisp and Drumrunie Estates which including the iconic mountains of Suilven, Canisp, Cul Mor and Cul Beag. This land is far more akin to a sporting estate.

Nevertheless, absentee landlords have yet to be completely eradicated from Scottish soil and in 2010 half of the land in Scotland was owned by 432 individuals. There are, of course, the usual aristocratic holdings such as the 110,000 hectares owned by the Duke of Buccleuch and 48,000 hectares owned by the Duke of Westminster, but these are dwarfed by the almost 650,000 hectares owned by a Malaysian billionaire. The ruler of Dubai, Mohammed bin Raschid al Maktoum has 110,000 hectares, while Kjeld Kirk-Christiansen the Danish former President of Lego has over 100,000 hectares. The Australian mining giant Rio Tinto has around 55,000 hectares as does Mohammed al-Fayed and the list goes on.

Recent events on the Pairc Estate on the Isle of Lewis, directly west of Assynt, attest to a continuing feudal mentality in some quarters. This 11,000 hectare estate comprises 208 crofts and 11 villages with approximately 400 inhabitants. The local crofter's Pairc Trust had made a number of unsuccessful attempts at a voluntary purchase of part of the estate since 2004. Only the common grazing land was sought; it was intended that the 2000 hectares of crofting land would still remain in the possession of the owner Barry Lomas, an accountant from Leamington Spa in England, who inherited the land bought by his family in 1924. Exasperated by refusals to sell, the Pairc Trust invoked their right to buy under Section 3 of the Act in which crofting communities have an absolute right to buy, irrespective of the owner's objections, at a price to be independently set, if ministerial consent is obtained. This consent was obtained in March 2011.

Lomas however has asked for a judicial review in the Court of Session claiming that the Land Reform Act breaches the European Convention on Human Rights. He claims the buy-out infringes his human right to 'peaceful enjoyment of his possessions' (Protocol 1, Article 1 of the ECHR), and that he has a right to "*defence against a deliberately targeted, hostile and political attack on a landlord who seeks to protect the reasonable value of its assets.*" Of course a cynical observer might suggest that the land rental for the 205 MW, 57 turbine windfarm that Scottish and Southern Electricity have proposed to build on the portion of the estate that the crofters wish to buy is the real incentive for Lomas to fight tooth and claw to hold onto the land. Setting aside the pros and cons of such a large windfarm in a wilderness region, surely it is more reasonable, just and fair, that the "*peaceful enjoyment of his possessions*" should not be allowed to take priority over the livelihood, security and aspirations of 400 other individuals, most of whose families have lived on the land for hundreds of years.

Regardless of whether Lomas views Pairc Estate as a source of income from a windfarm or no more than 'somewhere to go in August', his attitude can only be described as both feudal and despotic, with scant regard for the lifestyle or welfare of the crofters, in the best tradition of the Vestey family in Assynt. Hopefully his attitude will be viewed by the judiciary as another example of how wealthy absentee landlords are unwilling to consider the welfare of the very people who live and work on the land. Feudal attitudes toward land ownership can never engender a sense of place in as poetic a way as Norman MacCaig has in his beloved Assynt. A millionaire of an entirely different kind. One with invisible treasures:

All day we fished
The loch clasped in the throat
of Canisp, that scrawny mountain,
and caught trout and

invisible treasures.

We walked home, ragged millionaires,
our minds jingling, our fingers
rustling the air.

And now, lying on the warm sand,
we see
the rim of the full moon
rest on a formal corrugation of water
at the feet of
a Britannia cloud:
sea and sky, one golden sovereign
that will never be spent.

‘Rich Day’ by Norman MacCaig



Trout and invisible treasures



All original images and written content are copyright © Gary Hill 2013. All rights reserved. Not in public domain. If you wish to use my work for anything other than legal 'fair use' (i.e., non-profit educational or scholarly research or critique purposes) please contact me for permission first.
