

VLADI PRIVATE ISLANDS®

ISLAND OF EIGG
INVERNESS-SHIRE

Knight
Frank
INTERNATIONAL

The laird who got Eigg on his face

A LIBEL action in London's High Court ended with the former owner of the island of Eigg losing his battle to clear his reputation as a landlord.

Wealthy businessman Keith Schellenberg bought the Hebridean island in 1975. He promised to regenerate the economy, but *The Guardian* reported the claim that he allowed the property to fall into "wrack and ruin" after "years of neglect".

Mr. Schellenberg denied allowing his property to deteriorate. Asked by his counsel Patrick Milmo QC whether he ever adopted the attitude of being the owner of all he surveyed, he replied: "It never occurred to me to take that attitude. I felt responsibility, but the question of ownership never meant anything to me".

Tenants on the tiny island painted a bizarre picture of their laird, but his own sense of humour helped them. He sent friends a Christmas card portraying himself in a German helmet with a Hitler moustache, his arm lifted in a Nazi salute. He was wearing womens' tights and boots.

Relations deteriorated between the laird and the tenants to the point where, he said, some of them set fire to his pier shed and destroyed his Rolls Royce. He called them "barmy revolutionaries". He described his experience as a highland landlord as "like being a Jew in Nazi Germany". He said that he was not referring to the islanders, but *The*

Guardian. Schellenberg owned the island for 20 years before selling it to a German artist called "Professor Maruma" in 1995 for £1.6 million. Maruma was said to have described caves on the island as being "like a woman's birth canal".

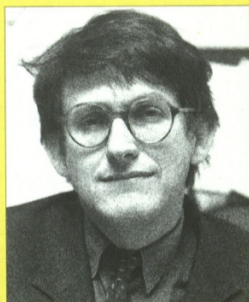
Schellenberg's bid to clear his name followed a report in *The Guardian* which portrayed him as a playboy. The newspaper, in its defence, produced the laird's former manager for tourism. William Mackenzie said that Eigg was like "Alice in Wonderland", and Schellenberg presided over it "like a Mad Hatter". He quit because of the "daily lunacy

in every aspect of the estate's and hence the island's affairs".

The island was eventually bought by the tenants and held in trust. Trustees suspected that the court case might have been influenced by the growing demand in Scotland for land reform. After the 70-year-old former laird lost his action, *The Guardian's* editor, Alan Rusbridger, explained that one of his reader's £1 million cheque enabled the islanders to buy Eigg. The island under Schellenberg's stewardship had become a playground for the rich. "Helicopters would periodically disgorge friends more used to the casinos of San Moritz than the windswept landscape of Eigg. There are evocative pictures of Gunther Sachs, the playboy ex-husband of Brigitte Bardot, and a troop of young women draped in unHebridean lingerie on the lawn of the Lodge."

After the case, Alastair McIntosh, a trustee of the Isle of Eigg Trust, said: "A rich man put a whole community on trial. Had he won he would have gagged the land reform debate. What matters now is to advance with reputable land reform legislation in a spirit of forgiveness of bygone abuse by landed power".

And in a letter to *The Guardian* (May 21), Mr. McIntosh declared: "Had Mr. Schellenberg won his rich man's libel game, a suffocating curtain would have smothered the land reform debate, not just on little Scottish islands, but throughout the British Isles".



■ Alan Rusbridger

Land & Liberty Autumn 1999