

Scene on Radio

Season 5, Episode 8: Last Orders

Transcript

John Biewen: *Season 5 is made possible in part by listeners who've supported our show, and by a grant from the International Women's Media Foundation.*

Amy Westervelt: [speaking with a Scottish accent] Hello! Hello John — no, I'm just kidding!

John Biewen: (Laughs) I like it.

Amy Westervelt: John, we've made a lot of big-picture statements about the colonizing, extracting and polluting West — or Global North, if you prefer. And it's true, the richest, most industrialized countries created the climate crisis — the U.S. and western Europe, joined recently by China. But those countries are not all the same, in their share of the blame or, crucially, in their efforts to change.

John Biewen: Yeah. The United Kingdom gave birth to the Industrial Revolution, and by some estimates is the third biggest historic emitter, after the U.S. and China. But the UK can make a decent claim now to being a leader — relatively? — among the historic polluters in pivoting away from fossil fuels. Or promising to.

Amy Westervelt: Yeah, the “promise” is really important there. [Laughs] The UK was the first nation to put a required reduction of greenhouse gas emissions into law, with its Climate Change Act of 2008. That was huge. It is closing lots of coal-fired power plants and promising to phase them out completely by 2035. And it’s building some of the world’s biggest off-shore wind farms. Britain says it’s reduced emissions by 44 percent since 1990, and it set the most ambitious target of any major economy, aiming to cut emissions by two-thirds by the end of this decade.

John Biewen: Before our UK listeners get too chuffed, climate experts say no nation is moving fast enough, including Britain. The analysts who put out the Climate Change Performance Index, for example, have left the top three places blank in their last several rankings to signify that no country deserves a gold, silver, or even a bronze medal. Nobody’s doing what’s necessary to hit the target of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. But that same ranking, which the Climate Action Network puts together with a couple of other groups, did rank the UK high, fourth out of the 61 emitter countries it examined, behind three Scandinavian nations. The U.S., meanwhile, comes in near the bottom, number 55 out of 61.

Amy Westervelt: Wow. Scotland, that country within a country, has set more ambitious goals than the United Kingdom that it’s part of. Scotland is trying to get to net zero emissions by 2045. And unlike many countries aiming for net zero, Scotland promises to get there with real emissions cuts, not using offsets like paying for renewables in other countries or planting trees while it keeps on spewing greenhouse gases. In 2020, Scotland’s renewable energy industry said it produced

the equivalent of 97 percent of the country's total electricity use. But Scotland and the UK still have big choices to make.

John Biewen: For a long time, the Scottish economy depended heavily on oil. The oil and gas industry still employs tens of thousands of Scots, and even now the country is weighing whether to allow new drilling in big oil fields offshore. That's an outrage to climate campaigners — we're going to talk more about that later. The question is how quickly will Scotland be willing to cut off that flow of fossil fuels, and money.

[Music: Theme]

John Biewen: From the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, this is Scene on Radio, Season 5, The Repair, Episode 8. I'm John Biewen.

Amy Westervelt: I'm Amy Westervelt. This time, one of the northern European countries that is taking the climate emergency *relatively* seriously — at least compared with some other large emitters we could mention. To a lot of us, the transition that the world has to make now, from a fossil-fuel-based economy to one powered by renewables, can seem abstract. Either way, we hit the switch and the lights come on. But producer Victoria McArthur takes us to a small Scottish Highland town where that transition is changing almost everything.

Victoria McArthur: The name of the town is Nigg — it means “notch” in Gaelic. It’s just a tiny notch on the northeast coast of Scotland, jutting out into a North Sea inlet. That’s all there was to it for most of the town’s history, says artist Sue Jane Taylor.

Sue Jane Taylor: The sight of Nigg itself, it was the most beautiful sand dunes and sandy beach. My older brother and sisters remember going over with my mother and father in the passenger boat to have picnics, and that’s what the local people did in the sand dunes.

Victoria McArthur: With the windswept beauty, the local people dealt with isolation and limited life choices. Veteran ferryboat skipper Ronald Young remembers.

Victoria McArthur: So, what would your options have been, you know, like at that point in time in this area?

Ronald Young: Fishing, farming, the forestry, emigration, or join one of the armed forces. That was, I think, that was what you had then.

[Music]

Victoria McArthur: Until...oil. The town lies alongside the Cromarty Firth, 16 miles of deep, sheltered water that provides direct access to the oil fields of the North Sea.

Starting in the 1970s, giant pumping machinery built in Nigg generated energy security for the United Kingdom and delivered more money than anyone in the town had ever seen.

Ken: Because we were working 12-hour shifts at least six days a week, we never got to the bank to cash the checks.

Victoria McArthur: That's my uncle Ken. He got a job at the fabrication plant in its early days.

Ken: A lot of people felt that they needed to spend their wages on a weekly basis, so they would say, 'I don't know what to buy this week.' I always remember one young lad saying to me, 'I don't know what to buy this week. It's either a windsurfer or a computer. What do you think?'

Victoria McArthur: My Aunt Maggie met Uncle Ken, her future husband, at the Nigg assembly plant. Her job — keeping track of documentation for its American and British parent companies — kicked off a career that took her around the world.

Maggie: It was really fun. I loved it. You know, because it was it was such a good environment. And there was lots of people all day. There was Americans, there was Liverpudlians, there was Glaswegians, there was people from Wick, and it was great!

Victoria McArthur: Great times at the plant didn't just change life for the people who worked there. The rush to extract oil and gas made the UK billions and billions of pounds, says economic historian Ewan Gibbs.

Ewan Gibbs: They're making a phenomenal contribution to the British budget. You're talking about five percent of GDP, something like 10 percent of the budget, you know, the UK state's tax take, was coming out of North Sea oil and gas.

[Music]

Victoria McArthur: Let's rewind to hear how all this got started. In 1970, British Petroleum — BP — discovered a giant oil reserve. It was below the seabed, 100 miles off the northeast coast of Scotland. The question was, how to get to it? The company chose Nigg for its geography, not its manpower. Back then, as now, the population barely scraped 200 people. Its port, though, was a perfect place to produce oil rigs — or jackets, as people here call them. American and British engineering companies threw money at new facilities to handle that production and cast a wide net for workers. A university friend of my Uncle Ken's gave him a call.

Ken: Donald just phoned me and said, 'Come up here because people are literally being dragged off the streets to go and work at the Nigg Oil Yard. And the money's pretty good.' And I went, 'sounds fine.' So, I went.

[Sound: Hum of large machinery]

Victoria McArthur: In a 127-acre yard, fabricators built steel platforms more gigantic than any attempted before. These were anchored in the seabed 400 feet down. To get to the oil, the drills had to reach another eight thousand feet below *that*. Jack Shepherd began at Nigg as a welding apprentice on those platforms.

Jack Shepherd: The first one I was involved in was the BP Magnus, which was one of the biggest single floating structures in the world at the time.

Victoria McArthur: A 40-thousand-ton structure built on land to support a drilling tower a thousand feet high. All in the service of extracting from a major new oil field 350 miles offshore.

British Petroleum promotional video: [Music. strings] Narrator: Northern Scotland. Northern Norway. Midway between, 125 miles from Shetland, a new British oil field.

Victoria McArthur: This is a BP promotional video from 1991.

British Petroleum promotional video, Narrator: Although in fifteen years the North Sea has yielded many oil fields, none has been so far north, so deep down, so costly to bring on stream. A vast project, its size echoed by its name: Magnus [grandiose music].

Victoria McArthur: It took a lot of engineering know-how to make that happen. On land, Nigg faced other logistical challenges.

Sue Jane Taylor: You know, we were pretty idyllic, rural, remote almost, in the '70s.

Victoria McArthur: With brushes, paint and pencils, artist Sue Jane Taylor has documented the area's half-century transition from the unspoiled countryside of family memory to a center for industrial assembly yards. Alongside Nigg, there was Ardesier, Kishorn and Arnish, on the Isle of Lewis.

Sue Jane Taylor: And when these yards came, you know, you were talking about 5,000 men, up to 5,000 men in each of these yards, suddenly turning up, looking for work, from all over.

Victoria McArthur: The tiny towns couldn't house them all.

Sue Jane Taylor: Prison ships were brought in alongside the pier near Nigg. People were sleeping in caravans, tents, people were taking them in as well, lodgings. It was, really was, a sort of gold rush feel to it.

Victoria McArthur: Jack Shepherd was a teenager when he started at Nigg in the late 70s. He worked there on and off for almost 40 years.

Jack Shepherd: Pretty much every village roundabout became larger. All the towns in the area expanded, in the wider area as well, because Nigg had a catchment area, I think it was a radius of, it was a 25-mile radius as the crow flies. There's probably nowhere in the Highland region, maybe the far-flung corners, which didn't have somebody or someone with a connection to working at Nigg.

[Sound: Wind, waves]

Victoria McArthur: Some employees gathered each day in Cromarty, the slightly larger town across the inlet. Ronald Young piloted the ferry.

Victoria McArthur: We're standing here looking out at the sea, looking directly across from Cromarty to Nigg, and this is a route that you know extremely well.

Ronald Young: Quite well, yeah, being the skipper of the ferry between Cromarty and Nigg for 28 years, so.... Twenty-eight years ago, we were very busy taking the workforce to the yard for the oil industry back and for — shifts starting at half six in the morning, back shifts coming home at three in the morning. Roughly about forty-four crossings a day. Every 15 minutes, we're going back and forth.

Victoria McArthur: The companies paid for those ferry crossings, bus transportation, amusements for the town's children, and more. Producing the biggest drilling platforms ever built, Ronald says, was worth all that.

Ronald Young: I mean, if you took the product of oil out of the whole equation, what you could refer to as Europe's answer to NASA. I mean, yes, we weren't launching rockets into space, but the magnitude of what was going on was in similar terms. To build something of 34,000 tons and nail it to the seabed and, you know, 50 years later, it's, it's still there and still working. So, it was a huge, huge — as far as the whole of Europe was concerned — it was a massive project. Massive.

Victoria McArthur: Jack Shepherd, the former welder, harbors a bit of nostalgia for the effort.

Jack Shepherd: Nothing in this country will ever be built like that ever again.

[Music]

Victoria McArthur: That's because the abundant oil and gas couldn't last, and didn't. Eventually, the mighty machinery tapped out the easiest wells to reach. Ewan Gibbs, the historian, says the benefits of exploration and drilling didn't last, either:

Ewan Gibbs: I think there is a very just case for arguing that oil and gas resources potential were not realized in Scotland and that they were

mismanaged by the corporate forces that dominated the industry and also by British government policy, which promoted the swift extraction of resources, incentivising that extraction to be as quickly as possible in order to pay off the balance of payments deficit and to pay off national debt.

Victoria McArthur: Necessity forced Scotland to explore untapped energy sources as never before. In the early 70s, the UK economy was a mess. The government at Westminster spent oil profits as quickly as they were made. Many other oil-rich countries set up sovereign wealth funds to create lasting benefits. This didn't happen in the UK, so the benefits were less visible to regular people, and arguably, less lasting. The shift to oil was yet another chapter for a country that's pioneered energy innovations since James Watt modified the steam engine.

Ewan Gibbs: I'm not sure I could have foreseen the dramatic changes that we have seen, particularly the take-off of renewables, which are now economically competitive.

Victoria McArthur: In 2013, when Ewan Gibbs began his work toward a PhD, Britain still derived close to one-third of its electricity from coal. He studies the social effects of transitions like the one Nigg is going through.

Ewan Gibbs: Well, I think there have been some really important achievements in environmental terms. I think the fact that Scotland, though, produces something like its entire electricity output through low-carbon sources is really, really significant — although there's also, then, questions

about other areas of Scotland's emissions that arise from gas heating, for instance, and also the fact that Scotland is arguably an increasingly car-dependent suburbanite society. So there's big questions there, actually, about other sources of emissions.

[Music]

Victoria McArthur: There's a huge boom right now in out-of-town developments to tackle the housing crisis, but as Ewan says, it's in conflict with our climate goals as it forces people to use their cars. There are still a lot of hurdles in our move away from fossil fuels. In the town of Nigg, the end of the oil and gas heyday began when the American engineering company sold its share to its UK-based partner. That company went after the oil that remained and kept the equipment in repair. When the assembly yard lost a contract, everything would stop. And it went on like this for years: times of great industriousness interspersed with absolute standstill. Jack is self-employed now. He works in health and safety. Only some of his work is involved with oil. Like many people I spoke with, he says that fossil fuels played an important role — in the region's past.

Jack Shepherd: We joined the industry at a time where the UK economy was benefiting greatly from the work that was being done. So yeah, it was good to be part of it at the time and it's just a cycle of life, you know?

[Break]

Victoria McArthur: Ewan Gibbs appreciates why many people who remain in Nigg regard that time fondly.

Ewan Gibbs: It's understandable why they feel attached to sectors that's provided that, and which provided them also of a status in the national imaginary. When we think about Scotland's economy, we think about oil and gas, and I think renewables are interesting in that respect, that on the one hand....

Victoria McArthur: Renewables are not only interesting, they're attracting investment. In 2000, three years after a major refurbishment, Nigg very nearly closed its gates for good. Roy McGregor kept that from happening. Here's Skipper and harbormaster Ronald Young.

Ronald Young: It's become an assembly point now for offshore wind turbines, so we're on to our third wind farm at the moment. I think the first wind farm was sixty to eighty jackets and towers and turbines, were all shipped into Nigg, assembled, and then taken out to the field. Moray East was around 100. And this is the Seagreen wind farm now, which is around 120 jackets.

Victoria McArthur: Roy McGregor is a local. He started his career at the yard, arriving straight out of college to help recruit some of the first people to work there. In 2005, he formed the Global Energy Group. And in 2011, he bought the derelict yard at Nigg, and began its slow transformation into a hub for renewable energy. Now, the site is largely a service point for wind turbines.

Ronald Young: We call them jackets, they're, um, steel towers that sit on the seabed with probably the top fifth sticking out, which a wind turbine gets connected to. They're around 19-hundred, two thousand tons each, so they're all shipped here from China and the UAE, assembled in Nigg, and then get towed out by barge, out to the field, and plunked on the seabed.

Victoria McArthur: It's *not* the oil boom. Only about 200 people work assembling the wind turbine platforms.

Ronald Young: But the guys that are employed, there are a lot of them learnt their trades from Nigg in the oil industry. So there's a knock-on effect that when one trade dies, which is the oil industry, a new one comes up.

Victoria McArthur: The University of Glasgow's Ewan Gibbs:

Ewan Gibbs: You know, the fabrication yard in Nigg is now being used for something again. True, its name is not necessarily at the center of the construction of wind turbines by any stretch — is quite important. It is a place

ultimately where components are put together. Now, that's a beachhead that could be built on if the right policies were put in place.

Victoria McArthur: A movement called "Just Transition" may determine some of those policies for Nigg and all of Scotland. It's based on the idea that, unlike the UK's previous energy revolutions, this time we'll try to take communities and workers into consideration. Ewan Gibbs says trade unionists in the U.S. developed the concept during the 1970s.

Ewan Gibbs: Workers had the right to economic security, and they had a right to use the skills that they developed in those fossil fuel sectors. But they had a right to do so in a context where they were making a contribution to an environmentally sustainable society and economy. And that's the basic idea of a just transition. In Scotland it's a term which has now got, effectively, government's seal of approval.

Victoria McArthur: What that will mean in practise is still open to debate. No matter what happens next, ferry captain Ronald Young says, the earlier boom left an indelible mark.

Ronald Young: What it's done for the area, I mean, it didn't drag us into the 20th century. It shot us in there like a rocket, quite fast.

Victoria McArthur: We got drunk and reckless off the proceeds of oil. Now, it's last orders. My Aunt Maggie, whose job at Nigg ended in the '80s, enjoyed the race for oil and gas while it lasted.

Maggie: It wasn't a project that was going to last forever. Everybody's idea was we have to get, you know, actually, out there and get the oil production going. So everybody knew it wasn't going to last a long time. And that was probably part of the, part of the whole deal.

John Biewen: Hey Victoria, thank you for taking us to the Highlands and the Scottish coast.

Amy Westervelt: Vic, I love that image, last call — or last orders, as you'd say at the pub in Scotland. Time to close off the tap and leave that oil where it is, under the North Sea. But you've really highlighted the fact that for some people — in lots of places in the world, Scotland included — the fossil fuel industry has been a way of life and a livelihood.

John Biewen: And that it's important to consider those people — not to use them in bad faith, *pretending* to care about them and their jobs as leverage to prop up an industry that needs to go away for the wellbeing of the whole planet.

Victoria McArthur: But, yes, to genuinely support these working people and help them transition to different jobs, including in the burgeoning renewable energy industries. That's what people mean by a "just transition," which the economist Ewan Gibbs mentioned in the piece. There's work to do in figuring how to make that a reality exactly. But training and opportunities are key, and many people I spoke to who have worked in oil, or still do, agree that renewables are the future. I think it's a reassuring sign of the times that Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth are two of the biggest champions of oil workers who want to do something different.

Amy Westervelt: That's super interesting, because a similar thing is happening in the U.S., where environmental groups are really talking about and looking at how to help oil workers. And here the oil companies like to trot out oil workers who have lost jobs as a result of some kind of environmental policy as their big argument for not doing anything about oil and not changing anything. There has been some resistance from workers too, though, here, and I don't know if you've seen this in Scotland too, but there's some resistance around not wanting to re-train, or sometimes there are hang-ups about finding properly masculine replacement jobs for workers.

John Biewen: Mmm-*hmmm*.

Amy Westervelt: That's a thing, yep. But the reality is that the industry here at least doesn't look after workers at all — I mean, the fossil fuel industry had the most workers exposed and sick with Covid-19 because they refused to improve conditions on offshore rigs or at pipeline camps, and they actually were hiding those numbers

and not reporting them for quite a while too. And you know, companies have been embracing automation for years, which is laying off thousands of workers. They only really seem to care about workers when they're useful props at press conferences.

Victoria McArthur: Wow. Yeah, I feel like we have some similar issues over here in Scotland and the real hope here is that Scotland can pull this off and make the end of oil more dignified than its beginnings. But we're not there yet. We're still dragging the oil industry with us as we push towards those ambitious net zero goals. If we get it right, maybe we can show the world how to make a successful transition to a green energy system.

John Biewen: Right now, the UK government is considering whether to grant a license to energy companies to open a huge new oil field in the North Sea, the Cambo Field. The Scottish leadership hadn't made its clear position on this, but as we record this in November 2021, the Scottish First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, has just made an important statement.

Victoria McArthur: She has. She has just stated categorically that she does not believe Cambo should be drilled. So this is a big step forward because she's previously been accused of sitting the fence with her opinion on this matter. The Cambo Field is northwest of the Shetland Islands in very deep water. It was discovered almost twenty years ago. The main company looking to drill there says the field could deliver 170 million barrels of oil over a 25-year lifespan. It's the kind of project that the government has routinely approved for decades and decades. But yes, given the state of the climate emergency today, the idea of opening a new field

for 25 years of drilling strikes many people as outrageous, not to mention very hypocritical as Scotland and the UK claim to be leaders on climate action. People are watching this very closely and pressuring the government to leave that oil under the sea.

John Biewen: In Scotland's case, Vic, the question of how aggressively to pivot away from oil has ramifications for that long-running debate about whether to declare independence from the UK, right?

Victoria McArthur: Yeah. It's very tied up with our politics. So, a lot of your listeners might remember that Scots held an independence referendum in 2014. The majority voted no, but it was close. It was roughly 55 to 45 percent. The UK's Brexit vote in 2016 helped to ignite a push for a second referendum. A strong majority of people in Scotland opposed Brexit and want to be part of the European Union. So those oil reserves in the North Sea had given Scots confidence that they could declare independence and have an economic foundation. If we hold another referendum, we can't underpin economic independence with oil anymore. So, green jobs are viewed as a key part of Scotland's future. I think the challenge is building resilience into the renewables industry and making sure that communities see tangible, lasting benefits.

Amy Westervelt: That's so interesting. As we record this the world's eyes have been on Glasgow and Scotland and the COP26 climate summit — at least, the eyes of everyone worried about the climate crisis. How has that all looked from Scotland itself? Do you think having this kind of big-deal conference in your country has had a particular impact on the debate there?

Victoria McArthur: Yeah, I think there's been a lot of excitement with the delegates coming from all over the world and I mean, certainly, like, on a local level it's been crazy. I think there's disappointment that we didn't commit to more ambitious targets in terms of oil and gas. That's really been the big question for us in Scotland. There were more delegates from the fossil fuel industry than any other single country at COP26, which is pretty shocking when you think about it. They're not going to get off the stage if we keep giving them the microphone, and at the moment the oil industry are particularly embedded, still, in our politics and decision-making. So that's never going to change the way things are currently.

[Music]

John Biewen: Thank you, Victoria McArthur. Amy, any parting words?

Amy Westervelt: You know, this reminds me of something that happened just before the COP in Glasgow, which was a TED event in Edinburgh, where Scottish activist Lauren MacDonald — she's part of the Stop Cambo group — was sharing a stage with Shell CEO Ben Van Beurden and she was, let's just say, not having it.

Lauren MacDonald, TED event: So, Mr. Ben Van Beurden, I just want to start by saying that you should be absolutely ashamed of yourself for the devastation — [applause] — for the devastation that you have caused to communities all over the world. Already, you are responsible for so much

death and suffering. I'm not even going to appeal to you to change because I know that that would be a wasted opportunity. What I do want to say is that every single day that you've failed to stop making evil decisions is a day that the death toll of the climate crisis rises. You are the one of the most responsible for people for this crisis in the world and in my view that makes you one of the most evil people in the world. No matter what he says today, remember: Shell has spent millions covering up the warnings from climate scientists, bribing politicians, and even paying soldiers to kill Nigerian activists fighting against them. All whilst rebranding to make it look like they care and have the intention of changing. Disproportionately, in the Global South, so many people are already dying due to issues related to the climate crisis such as pollution, extreme heat, and weather-related disasters. This is not an abstract issue and you are directly responsible for those deaths. I seriously—I'm just getting to my question though...

Amy Westervelt: So yeah, there was this big uproar from Lauren and her fellow activists about oil executives being invited to this big climate event in the first place, and I think she's right. You know, fossil fuel executives have been embedded in the COP process since the beginning, and that's probably why it hasn't worked. I think they need to be — they've had a seat at the table for decades, and what they've done with it is flip the table over and throw chairs at the rest of us. So I think that they've shown themselves to not really be capable of negotiating on this stuff in good faith and I think we should look at that evidence and boot them out.

[Music]

John Biewen: Next time: Amy explores a strategy that people are trying in several places around the world to address ecological crises and to protect the planet — an approach that brings Indigenous values into the law.

John Biewen: Victoria MacArthur reported and wrote her piece from Nigg, with additional writing by Cheryl Devall, who is also our stellar script editor for Season 5. Production and sound design by me. Music in this episode by Lili Haydn, Kim Carroll, Chris Westlake, Lesley Barber, Cora Miron, and Maetar. Music consulting by Joe Augustine of Narrative Music. We post transcripts on our website: sceneonradio.org. The show is distributed by PRX and comes to you from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.

Victoria McArthur: So, I heard this story. I didn't see it with my own eyes, but I heard this story that in Aberdeen, where — it was kind of a self-appointed oil capital of Europe at the time — you could see the money when you were in the city. When the first oil crash happened, there was a piece of graffiti that appeared in the city center and it said, "Dear God, give us another oil boom. Next time we won't piss it up against a wall." (Laughing) That to me is like the most Scottish bit of graffiti, ever. But yeah. It says it all.