

*Stories from
the Bagpipes*



*Narratives from
the Scottish Isles
by Robert Alaers*

Scotland, 1971-2000

Berchem, 2025

Cover: Great Highland bagpiper on the street in Edinburgh

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INTRODUCTION

From my earliest childhood till today and for a reason I have long not understood (a magazine, a film, photos...?) I have always been captivated by the northernmost part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, that mysterious land called "Scotland", without ever having set foot on it.

But to visit the land of my craving in the days of my childhood is simply impossible. My parents are not the travelling kind and if, exceptionally, they do pack suitcases it's always to head south: Luxemburg (of all places...), Switzerland (once in a while) and, my mother's dream, the Côte d' Azur.

Everything changes when I become self-supporting, have an income, even possess a car and so am able to paddle my own canoe.

For the fulfilment of my Scottish dream I quite unexpectedly find a congenial soul in the school where I start my career as a teacher, namely my colleague and plastic artist *Armand Petré*.

And so, in the summer of 1971, we set off for the beloved country. We travel in his Renault R4, "my cookie jar", as he calls his deep green vehicle. To spend the night we have an *André Jamet* tent (without an awning) and two sleeping bags, not to starve we make use of a little *Camping gaz* cooker and a simple set of cutlery; food and drinks we'll find on our way. We have some money but we are far from being rich, so the farthermost place we can visit is the Isle of Skye, ferries to the outlying isles being too expensive for us.



A large part of the journey is made in the company of two New Zealand girls, *Beccy* and *Judy Chapman*, sisters, picked up in Dufftown, the heart of whisky country. We have big fun together. But most of all: my dream is coming true!

The year after I repeat the journey, now in the company of my new girlfriend *Ingrid Goosen* (who much later will become my wife), and in my own *Morris 1300* and, as our relation ripens, an



experience several times to be repeated in the course of the seventies and the eighties of the last century. And we make use of more luxurious accommodation as there are hotels and B&B's. Our journeys to Britain, especially to Scotland, will finally culminate in the nineties with travels to the Hebrides, to Orkney and Shetland in our camper "Gulliver" (photo 1991) and in the company of our colleagues *Bob Van den Bempt* and *Nini Cautreels*.

Gradually having become affluent world citizens, we also have another fixed holiday spot, namely the tiny but beautiful village of Fourcès in the heart of Gascony in the south-west of France. Life there is blissful, at times even exciting and I adore staying there. But I cannot deny the emotion that anno 2025, even after an absence of 25 years, my heart still lies in Scotland and probably

will continue to lie there till the end of my days. And that is right away the reason for the writing of this booklet, this collection of Scottish stories and experiences, straight from the bagpipes mouth, so to say...

These stories, initially based on the holiday reports I wrote from the beginning of our journeys, reflect what in a period of almost three decades of visits to Scotland has struck me and continues to strike me, namely the convergence of often antagonistic elements. Basically there is the fascinating natural beauty of the country, together with the hospitality of its inhabitants, in contrast with the sufferings during its tormented history, in short 'la condition humaine' of a country and its population.

These factors constitute a mixture of experiences to release emotions in a man's mind. Indeed, because unavoidably the stories are not always of a pleasant nature: they also and very often deal with poverty, with exploitation, with abuse, with colonisation, with war and violence..., almost inevitably part of the history of Scotland.

For me it was impossible to write down all these stories without putting them in an historical context. Firstly there is the centuries lasting impact of the clan system on the history of the country; secondly, also for ages, come the conflicts, battles and wars with neighbouring England. I hope the reader can have the necessary patience to assimilate an issue that is often quite complex, not to say complicated. The maps I inserted may also be helpful.

This work is originally written in Dutch, but it became soon my intention to translate it in English. I sincerely hope I have been successful in this, but I keep an open mind for all additions, corrections and criticism, of whatever nature they may be.

I wish the reader all possible pleasure in reading this booklet!

Sláinte mhath!

The author

THE HEBRIDES

In 1992 we make our second journey to Scotland in the company of Bob and Nini, the Hebrides already being not unfamiliar to us. As mentioned in the introduction my colleague and friend Armand and I have already made the acquaintance of **Skye** and together with my charming girlfriend Ingrid I have even explored **Harris** and **Lewis**, islands of the **Outer Hebrides**. More and occasionally longer journeys will follow in the summer of 1974 and during Easter holidays in the eighties.

For Bob and Nini the Hebrides, the 'Inner' as well as the 'Outer', are completely untrodden soil. However, we too are due for a more thorough exploration of this beautiful archipelago and indeed, this will be the case during the 1992 and 1997 summers.

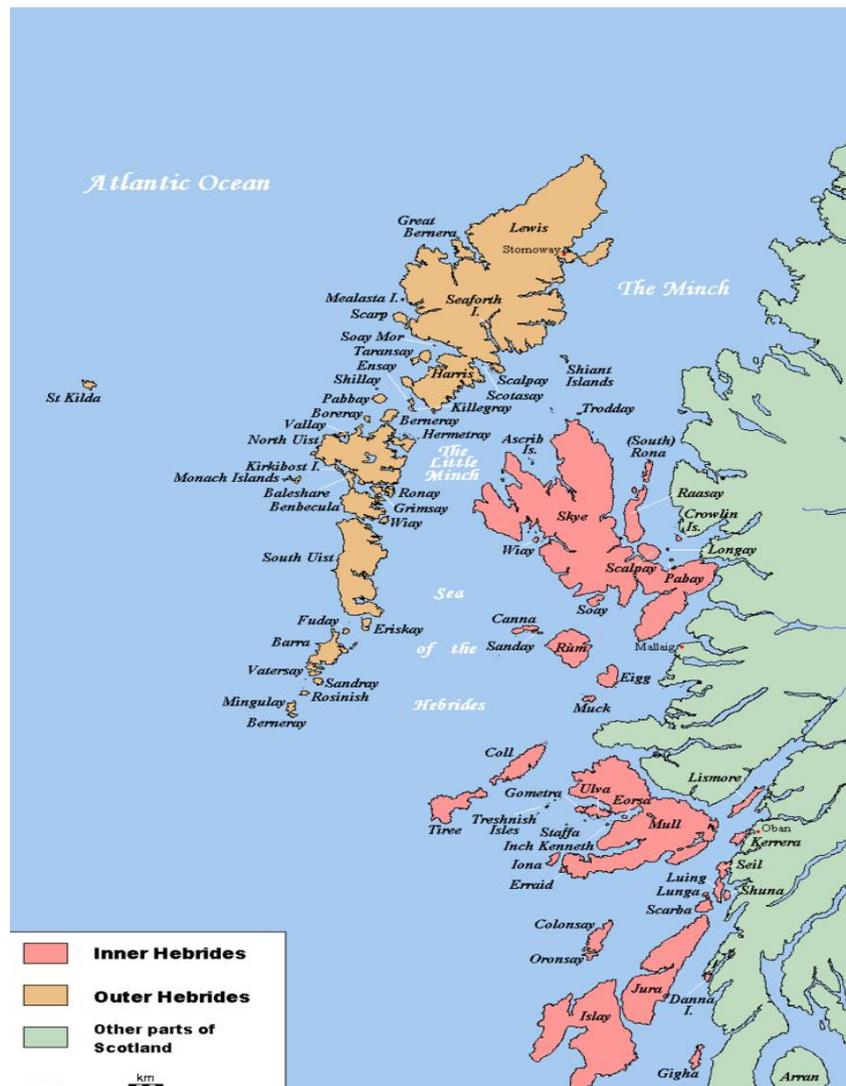
So the **Hebrides**, or, the "Haebudes", as the Roman scholar *Plinius the Elder* in the 1st century CE called them. What the name meant for the Romans we don't know, because it's pre-Gaelic. Anyhow the Romans certainly knew the archipelago, which was proven by the sailing tour around it by one *Julius Agricola* who spoke highly about... its storms.

The islands as a whole are Gaelic since time immemorial and the Norse reign from the 9th till the 13th century can change that only partly. How far southward the Norse influence has reached can be derived by survey of the place names, the so-called toponymy.

"From the scourge of the Normans, please, Lord, deliver us..."

The Norsemen are often depicted as cruel and murderous barbarians and that image is probably not far from the truth. Especially the eastern coast of Britain, simply lying as a bite-sized piece of prey 'at the other side of the water', is a popular target.

Towards the end of the 10th century the raids of the Vikings become unusually intense and fierce. They burn, they loot, they rape and they slaughter or they make the population pay them tributes, in the purest silver, supplied in farm carts, in order to be left in peace. Most of the time they're back shortly after...



Apparently the raiders that ravage the British coast, along with all shores of Western Europe, are Danish Vikings.

In the Western Isles, the Hebrides, and also in Orkney and Shetland, the raiders are almost exclusively Norse Vikings. It is generally assumed that these invasions are less violent than in the south. Here it's more about a search for new land and a better existence, a colonisation by which they are naturally destined to mingle with the population of the places where they land.

We have knowledge of the homeland of these Vikings, namely western Norway, and we also know the number of migrants moving out of that region. On the whole about 22,000 farmers-hunters-gatherers set off sailing unknown and dangerous seas in search of far away, completely unknown but better horizons.

We can wonder what the reason for this emigration might have been.

Fact is, anyway, that contrary to nearly the rest of Europe, Norway in those days is unfamiliar with the feudal system and follows the so-called "odal law". The eldest son inherits all the land of his forefather(s) and leaves his siblings with empty hands. This lack of property inevitably leads to a demographic pressure, with emigration as the only viable solution.

The Norse exodus is a success, at least seen from their own point of view, presumably less from that of the people where they set foot on land. Their achievement is nearly completely due to the



combination of two factors: the unrivalled maritime skills of the seafarers - *Erik den Røde* reaches Iceland and Greenland, his son *Leifr Eriksón* even North America, probably Newfoundland - together with the quality of their boats. The notorious 'drakkar' are fast and flexible ships with little draught and therefore an excellent means to penetrate into the inland and to avoid local defence structures.

Ultimately the former invaders have themselves Christianized and become civilized ¹, though the names of their leaders, e. g. *Magnus Berfætter* ('Bareleg'), *Ketill Flatnef* ('Flatnose'), *Haraldr Blátönn* ('Bluetooth') or *Svend Tveskæg* ('Forkbeard') do not seem to suggest that...

From Norse to Scottish

In the 12th century the Norse society in the Hebrides is repeatedly disrupted by the acts of one *Somerled*, a Norse-Gael kinsman from the *House of Manx*. This finally results in the defeat of *King Håkon IV* of Norway in the *Battle of Largs* on October 2nd 1263 and the end of Norwegian rule in the Hebrides. The subsequent *Treaty of Perth* in 1266 does not really formalize Scottish sovereignty over the isles, but it confirms its control by the creation of a kind of kingdom, known as "The Lordship of the Isles".

This does not bring peace to the isles, on the contrary. The Lords constantly clash with the *Stuart* kings of Scotland. Besides, governance over the country is at that moment already mainly in the hands of the clans, of which the power over the central authority is continuously growing.

¹ Not necessarily a link...

Especially the *MacLeods of Lewis and Harris*, the *MacNeils of Barra* and the *MacDonalds of Sleat* keep a tight hold over the country.

From Scottish to English

By the *Union of the Crowns* in 1603 and the *Union of the Parliaments* in 1707 Scotland, and all its isles, gets formally united with England and comes under direct British rule. The defeat in the *Battle of Culloden* in 1746 definitely buries the last shred of independence of Scotland.

Life in the islands gets more and more difficult, mainly because of the taxes and the restrictions on trade with Scandinavia and the *Hanza*, which for ages was the mainstay of economic life in the isles. Poverty and famine make their entrance in the Hebrides (as in the Northern Isles).

The cultural suppression, the 'clearances' (the eviction of crofters from their land, mainly between 1750 and 1860), the 'pressgangs' (the conscription of young men by the Royal Navy in the 18th and



19th centuries), the countless loss of fishermen at sea and seamen in both world wars do the rest. Many isles, continuously inhabited since pre-historic times, get depopulated. In the 20th century six more have to be evacuated, because life in the isles has become absolutely unlivable. Outlier **St Kilda** (1930, photo 1890) is the most dramatic one, **Taransay** is (for now...) the last one (1976).

Norn, a language derived from Old Norse, has since long disappeared; anyway, it has never known the spread it has had in Orkney and Shetland. In the Outer Hebrides Gaelic survives: anno 2000 52% of the population is assumed to use it as a home language. In the Inner Hebrides on the other hand the Celtic language has made room for a kind of English with Lowland Scots accents.

Recently the development of new small industries and the growth of tourism is a slow turning point in the history of the isles. Agriculture and weaving - Harris Tweed ! - remain popular, also in the 21st century, though quite recently Brexit has reversed these evolutions.

Actually about 28,000 people live in 15 islands of the Outer Hebrides, but the number changes constantly. With the Inner Hebrides included the figure amounts to 45,000. Lately, the growing influx of non-Gaelic speaking immigrants from Mainland Scotland has become a subject of cultural and social controversy.

Furthermore the whole Long Island counts another 50 uninhabited islands.

From 1975 on the Outer Hebrides belong to one of the 32 'comhairles' (council areas) of Scotland, namely the *Comhairle nan Eilean Siar* ('Western Isles Council'). The capital is **Steòrnabhagh** (Stornoway) with about 7,000 inhabitants. The Inner Hebrides, with 36 populated islands, do not belong to this council; they are governed by the *Highlands Council*.



COLUMBA'S FOOTPRINT

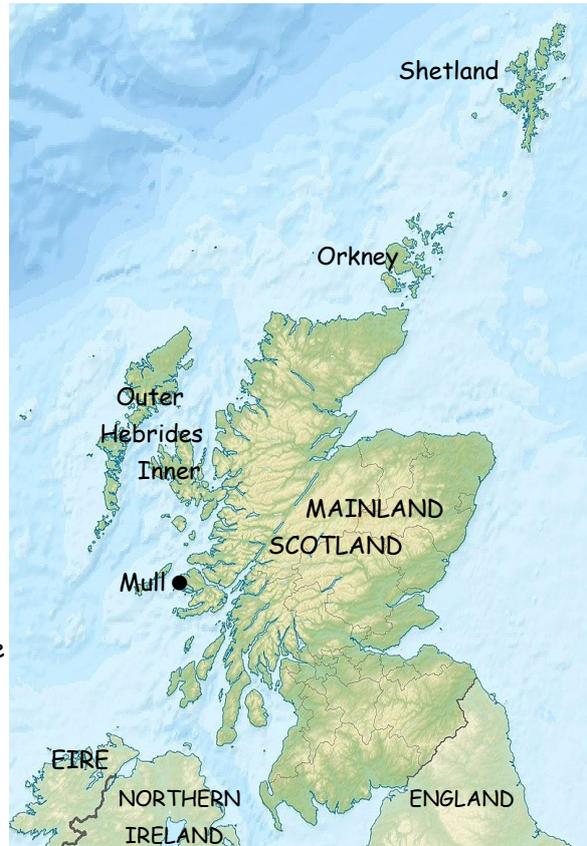
April 15th 1990.

We have crossed northern England and Mainland Scotland and have arrived in Fionnphort on the **Isle of Mull** of the Inner Hebrides. We stay here in a rented camper from *Autohandel Sportpaleis* in Antwerp, a Citroën C 25 Diesel with numberplate HYK 733, a more than 6 meter long vehicle. Rented, because it's a test to know if this way of travelling - "roaming" as experts call it - will suit us. If so, one day we'll buy one ².

Sunday April 15th and that is exactly Easter Sunday - honestly, against our will - and the day we incidentally planned to visit one of the most symbolic places in the history of European Christianity: the **Isle of Iona**, only $3\frac{3}{8}$ sq mi big and situated opposite the westernmost point of Mull.

Car traffic on Iona is not allowed, except for the about 125 permanent residents on the isle, so we have to leave our campervan behind and 'embark' on the foot passengers ferry. In the large group of passengers for Iona many of these feet get properly wet, which leads to great hilarity, because everyone is in a good mood on this day of celebration.

Besides, Iona lying only 1 mile - a nautical one I suppose - away from Mull, the crossing is short and costs only £ 1.80 for the two of us. However brief, the passage is also quite rough and for some of the formally dressed ladies (!) it means a difficult balance on deck of the ferry. However, everything for the faith, right?



Having 'disembarked' and curious about what is going to happen here, we simply follow the crowd. Their first steps lead immediately towards the remains of the 12th century nunnery - a deafening "Alleluia" reverberates there - and then to the chapel, only recently completely renovated. What follows now is an authentic piece of folk theatre. Knock, knock, a sort of *Santa Claus* knocks on the chapel door. Another Santa opens it and asks:

"Who are you looking for?"

"We are looking for Jesus Christ, who was crucified at Jerusalem", the crowd cries out in chorus.

"But I am looking for him too", the second Santa, seemingly surprised, says. "Let's go and find him!"

² Only a year later we will have our own campervan.

Up they go, all into the chapel, again producing a still ear-splitting Alleluia. All of a sudden we seem to be all alone on the island. So let's explore it, helped a little by history and legends.

A long, long time ago, in pre-Christian times, Iona is already inhabited and a renowned meeting place of Celtic druids.

"When Edinburgh was only a rock and Oxford a swamp, Iona was already famous", is an old saying, but apparently not devoid from truth. Originally the island was called "Iowa", Celtic for 'elm', because once it must have been full of elm trees. Medieval monks, however, erroneously copy the name as "Iona", which is Hebrew for 'dove' and 'dove', in its turn, is 'columba' in Latin, also the name of Iona's most famous inhabitant.

This is of course an enormous important symbol for believers, but at the same time a sample of pre-Jesuitical logic...

Anyway, this 'columba' means the start of a completely new chapter in the history of the island.

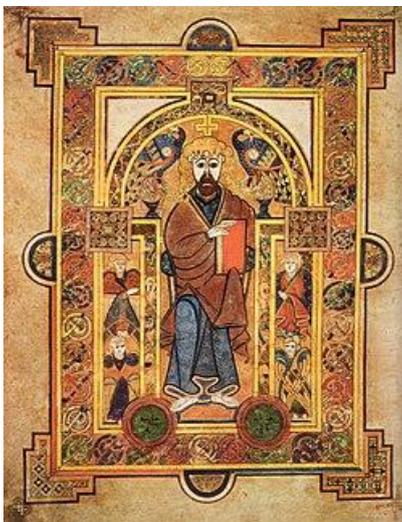
Columba (521-597) is an Irish prince, who after a bloody strife over the interpretation of the gospel (!), repents and swears never again wanting to see a shred of Irish soil. He crosses the Irish Sea, lands onto the Mull of Kintyre, where - up to the reader to believe if this is real... - there is an impression of his feet in a rock: 'Columba's footprint'.



However, considering the position of these imbedded feet, Columba must have been seriously handicapped and must have had great difficulties to walk properly...

From Kintyre the Irish coast is still visible, so Columba and his 12 young disciples - symbolic number ! - travel further north and in 563 finally land on Iona.

Columba immediately founds a church. Apparently in those days it is a habit to build churches in uninhabited islands. Until today it bears the name of "Church of the Culdees" (Gaelic for 'servant'), commonly called the "Celtic Church". For centuries Columba's sanctuary is at odds with *Mother Rome*, such as about the determination of the date of Easter, subjects that in those days - and apparently up to today - people were bothered with...



No church without an abbey. Chronicles tell us that it radiated in culture and riches - the famous *Book of Kells* is told to have been created in Iona.

No church or abbey without a churchyard. It still exists, but the most beautiful tombstones are brought to a museum, to protect them from theft or vandalism. An inventory dating from 1549 records the graves of 4 Irish, 7 Norse and 48 (!) Scottish kings, including *MacBeth*. Notable detail: when the weather conditions

are too rough, the deceased are provisionally brought to Inch Kenneth, a neighbouring island, a 'spare graveyard' so to say...

The reason so many monarchs wanted to be buried here is certainly the sacred soil, but also a tenacious legend claiming that with the next Deluge only Iona will be saved. Three beautiful so-called "Celtic crosses" still decorate the area. Once Iona possessed about 360 of them... ³



The influence of the Church of the Culdees, and the associated Celtic culture is immense: unto deep in England, unto Scandinavia and Iceland, even unto the European continent.

The Celtic Church is a fairly tolerant church, with an eye for the needs and the weaknesses of man, this also causing frequent conflicts with the Alma Mater in Rome.

Presumably the Celtic monks have wives, at least after Columba's time, because he himself strictly prohibits the presence of women and... cows in Iona. Indeed (in Gaelic)...

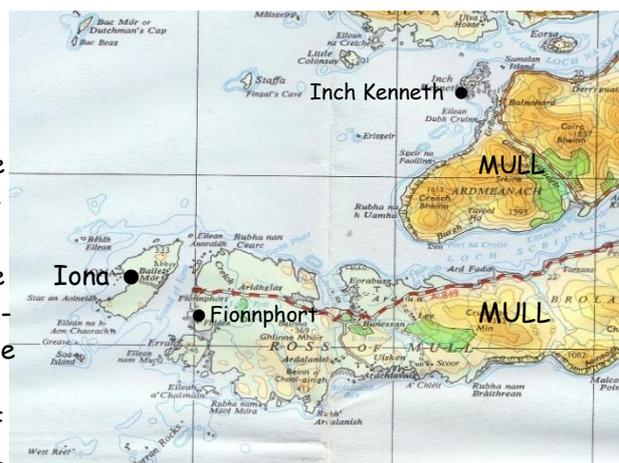
"Far am bi bo bitidh bean, sfar am bi bean bitidh mallachadh!"
"Because where is (a) cow is (a) woman, and where is (a) woman is disaster!"

Women who feel religiously called, are banned to the neighbouring isle of Eilean nam Ban ('Women's Island').

Gordon Grant, the skipper who two years later will bring us to magic Staffa ⁴, has a personal opinion about this:

"Columba was either a male chauvinist pig, or a clever leader who taught his men to swim..."

Between 794 and 986 Iona suffers from at least six devastating raids by Vikings, but in fact the fatal blow on the community is inflicted by the Scottish Reformation of John Knox in the 16th century. Not only buildings, crosses, graves and memorial stones are smashed to pieces and thrown into the sea, but above all the library with magnificent pieces of art and literature, the archives with old Scottish manuscripts, some from the hand of Columba himself are burned to the ground. The knowledge of centuries, "the University of the North", it all ends in flames, except for a small fraction saved by fleeing monks and that now rests in... the Vatican.



In 1772 a visitor reports, that the buildings have fallen to stables for cattle, knee-high filled with dung.

³ In our days the Celtic cross has become the favourite symbol of extreme right-wing, not to say fascist or other dark societies. A pity...

⁴ See next chapter: 'Giant's Boulevard'.

The restoration starts in the course of the 20th century, because even after all those ages the memory of Columba has remained vivid, illustrated by recorded sayings, stories, performed miracles (?), in short... the tradition.

We go for a walk, on our own and all around the isle, because it is really a tiny piece of land. There is a strong wind, but we keep dry. Iona's seafront is simply magnificent, with its clear blue sea, its little inlets, its bright white beaches and the view over the other islands: Staffa, The Treshnish, Gometra, Inch Kenneth and all the tiny outcrops lying between them. Not a person to be seen, delightful !



Iona emits something enthralling and that can not only be its natural beauty. There is more. Is it its past, its rich and pitifully often violent history, I don't know, but there is something that has touched me. Other people here in Iona will call that a religious feeling, but please, save me that, my wife she would me... However, the experience to merge with everything present and happening on this island gives me - and I ponder my words and guard against pretention - a kind of 'cosmic' feeling.

We return to the jetty and go for a cup of tea in *The Abbey's Café*, with a view on Martyr's Bay, that derives its name from the massacre of 68 monks in the year 806. Not a very cosmic feeling, I must admit.

We're having our cup in the 'capital' of Iona, Baile Mhòr ('Big Town'). How many people live in this metropolis? Ten? Twenty? Thirty? Iona appears to have about 125 inhabitants, though. Officially? Even Wikipedia remains silent about the exact number.

Soon we're homeward bound, with on the ferry the same ritual of the difficult balance and the wet feet.



We will return here only once more, two years later, with Bob and Nini, but the spell of this enchanted island, as experienced the first time, does not return. Because of the bigger company, or because of the fact that personal sensations cannot simply be repeated on command? Either way, Iona will remain a place etched in my memory and my sentiment for ever and a day.



GIANT'S BOULEVARD

August 10th 1979 and we start the last week of a long camping holiday in Ireland. Five weeks ago we set off for this holiday with our friends *Eugene* and *Gerda Leys-Billiauws* and their children *Anouk* and *Ellen*, but they have returned home earlier.

The so-called "romantic green Ireland" actually consists of two completely separate states: on the one hand **Northern Ireland**, belonging to the United Kingdom of Great Britain, on the other hand **Eire**, the **Republic of Ireland**, from 1922 onwards as the 'Irish Free State', a dominion of the United Kingdom, and since 1949 a fully independent country.



On this 10th August we cross the border ⁵ from the Republic to 'the North' near Derry ⁶ and we are welcomed by barbed wire, customs in bulletproof vests and soldiers with machine guns at the ready. Anyhow the crossing itself is a very friendly one, with a simple Belgian identity card as a sufficient means to enter the UK.

We pitch our tent not far from Bushmills - hey, that rings an alcoholic bell... - in a beautiful green meadow with the gate invitingly open and since we have known the Irish as a very hospitable folk, this won't be a problem, will it? Why stay exactly here for the night? Well, because tomorrow we want to visit Giant's Causeway, a "geological wonder" they say.

The next morning we're on the spot, unintentionally acting as bit players in a French documentary about this wondrous natural phenomenon, because that is what it really is!

Giant's Causeway (in Irish: 'Clochán an Aifir') is an area of about 40,000 interlocking basalt columns, the result of an ancient volcanic fissure eruption about 60 million years ago. It is located in Country Antrim on the north coast of Northern Ireland about three miles northeast of the town of Bushmills.



According to legend, the Irish giant *Fionn MacCumhail* is challenged to a fight by the Scottish giant *Benandonner*. Fionn accepts the challenge and builds a causeway across the North Channel so that the two can meet. But Fionn hides from Benandonner when he realises that his foe is much bigger than he is. Fionn's wife, *Sadhbh*, disguises Fionn as a baby and tucks him in a cradle. When Benandonner sees the size of the 'baby', he reckons that its father Fionn must be a giant among giants. He flees back to Scotland in fright, leaving behind his boots (see photo)

and destroying the causeway behind him so that Fionn will be unable to chase him down.

⁵ Between quotation marks, because according to the republicans this "border" simply doesn't exist...

⁶ "Derry" for the republicans, "Londonderry" for the loyalists.

Geology tells us a slightly different story.

Around 50 to 60 million years ago, Antrim was subject to intense volcanic activity, when highly fluid molten basalt extruded through chalk beds to form an extensive volcanic plateau. As the lava cooled, contraction occurred and fractured leaving pillarlike structures, which also fractured horizontally into so-called "biscuits". In many cases, the horizontal fracture resulted in a bottom face that is convex while the upper face of the



lower segment is concave, producing what are called "ball and socket" joints (e. g. like in a man's knee). The size of the columns was primarily determined by the speed at which lava cooled. The extensive fracture network produced the distinctive columns seen today.

Much of the *Giant's Causeway and Causeway Coast World Heritage Site* is owned and managed by the *National Trust*. It is one of the most popular tourist attractions in Northern Ireland, receiving over 998,000 - not just a million...- visitors in 2019.

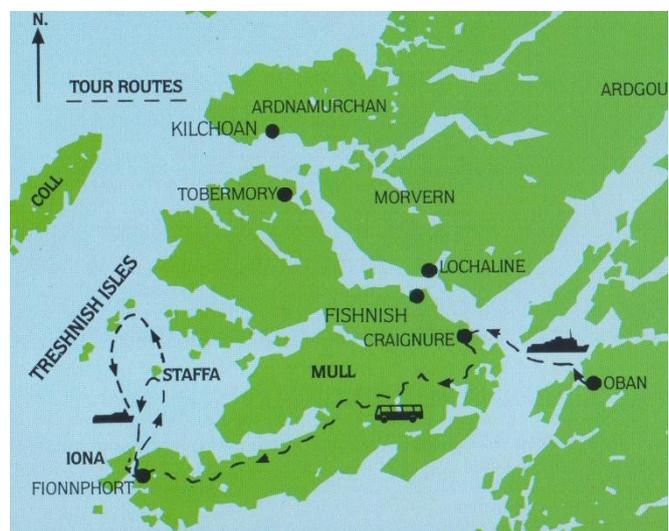
But has the Giant really destroyed his escape route? Because 82 miles to the north in the Atlantic the causeway reappears on the surface, now in the Isle of Staffa. Further survey is necessary...



Almost 13 years later, in the 1992 summer, we make for the third time a tour in the Hebrides and stay again in Fionnphort, not to visit Iona this time, but to embark on a sailing trip with skipper Gordon Grant, on board of his *Laird of Staffa*. Our destination is the Treshnish Isles, but above all... Staffa.

The skies are grey and the view is even a bit misty, but the sea is as flat as a pancake, ideal circumstances for such a trip. On the other hand the slightest swell withholds Mr Grant - as he tells us - to set sail, because the seas can be very treacherous in this region.

The **Treshnish Isles** (etymology uncertain) are a roughly 4 mile long archipelago of small islands and skerries, lying west of the Isle of Mull. The largest island in the group is Lunga ('Long Island'), the flattest... Fladda ('Flat Island'), the most remarkable however Bac Mhòr ('Big Bank'), because of its shape also called "The Dutchman's Cap" (i. e. a Dutch priest's hat). All the islands are of volcanic origin.



Little is known of the history of the isles, but traces of duns (called "brochs" in Orkney and Shetland) may indicate the presence of Celtic checkpoints on the routes to Mull. The Islands are placed under the protection of the *National Trust for Scotland*.

We land on **Lunga**, famous for its big colony of puffins and for its warren of jet-black rabbits. Difficult walking on this hilly isle...

In 1861 all Lunga has to be cleared, the whole population being deathly ill.

When the weather is nice, and/or when the sun sets, the profile of all these isles, seen from Mull, is simply fascinating, an unforgettable view. We've witnessed it under such circumstances two years ago and it belonged to the most magnificent panoramas we were ever able to behold on our voyages in the North. The awareness of the historically burdened background of the region, together with its present desolation, with the traces of a former lively existence still present, only aggravate the atmosphere of heavy melancholy.

And then there is still Staffa!

Staffa (Gaelic 'Stafa', Old Norse 'Stave-ey' for 'Stave or Pillar Island') is a basalt island of the Inner Hebrides about 6 miles west of the Isle of Mull; its area is 82 acres and the highest point is 138 feet above sea level.

The island comes to prominence in 1772 after a visit by *Sir Joseph Banks*, an English botanist and naturalist, who has accompanied *James Cook* on his exploration of the Pacific. Banks and his fellow-travellers extol the natural beauty of the basalt columns and describe all five caves that are present in the isle. The biggest, 246 ft deep, 72 ft high and 45 ft wide, he calls "Fingal's Cave" after the legendary Irish warrior *Fionn MacCoul* ⁷ Before the cave was known by the locals as "An Uamh Bhin", meaning 'The Melodious Cave'. This name will be symbolically taken again when *Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy* visits the cave in 1829 and has himself inspired to compose *Die Hebriden* ('Hebrides' Overture') ⁸.



Indeed, the caves produce the most wondrous sounds. At high tide so much air is compressed in the cavities, that from one of them genuine cannon shots seem to be launched, audible unto the isle of Mull. Not to everyone's pleasure, by the way. One of the abbots of Iona gets so stressed by the deafening 'gunfire' that he moves his cell to Gribun on Mull. But with a favourable wind, the cave may indeed produce fairly melodious sounds.

Banks comes across one single family, living on a diet of potatoes, barley and oat flakes and what their small stock of cattle can produce of milk and meat. Shortly after these braves

⁷ If not our giant Fionn MacCumhaill of Giant's Causeway ?

⁸ Menselssohn himself appeared to be so sea-sick that he never landed on Staffa.

leave the island for good. Since then Staffa is completely deserted, but the traces of human presence can still be clearly seen.



After Banks' disclosure Staffa and its caves become, in the phrasing of the day, "world famous". In the times of the British 'Grand Cultural Tour' almost all English romantic poets and other 'culture carriers' (*Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, Scott, Johnson and Boswell...*), even *Queen Victoria*, have visited the isle.

The story goes that in one of the visiting companies a rather posh lady started to scratch herself, complaining of "that lousy vermin". Upon which a local must have answered her: "Oh, what a shame! To bring it all the way from London!"

We go ashore at a landing place entirely composed of thousands of vertical hexagonal basalt pillars, as if constructed by human hands. From here the view over the island surpasses all expectations and imagination: basalt platforms in all sizes, shapes and even colours, but always evenly regular in presence. Moreover, we are lucky to be here at ebb-tide, so we can walk the platforms all along their surface, even unto the end of the cave. And yes, here the sound of the waves and the wind echoes in our ears like... music.



We stay more than an hour on Staffa, fascinated by an island that indeed with good reason may be designated as "a geological wonder". My satisfaction to have been allowed to witness all this is intensified by the awareness that the circle is finally closed.

Thirteen years ago we could behold the place where the causeway disappeared in the ocean, today we stand where it surfaces. *Giant's Boulevard* does exist!

Dear Reader, now it is only up to you to convince me that the giants have really walked the path!



THE OLD MAN OF SOAP

I am raised with soap. Not that I got this product as my daily meal, of course not, but my mother was a very tidy woman. She carefully looked after the spic and span state of the house and likewise after that of her little boy: a few quick clean-ups during the week and a thorough one on Saturday night, in a zinc bathtub, equipped with a backrest, which was a big luxury in the late forties and the early fifties.

The main product that contributed to this general cleanliness was called *Sunlight*, in Flanders invariably pronounced as "suunleecht". However young I was, the image of those big blocks of ochre coloured soap with rather pointy angles, packed in greaseproof paper and a cardboard wrapper that left no doubt about its content, is still fixed in my memory.

So Sunlight and nothing else but Sunlight !

And then something happens not completely unexpectedly in the context of ruling world politics, but that nevertheless comes upon ordinary citizens with a shock: on June 25th 1950, after several border disputes, the Korean War breaks out. It will last more than three years and will only be ended by an armistice on July 27th 1953; up to today a real peace treaty has never been concluded.

In many western countries panic breaks out, with growing fear for a third world war and the Bad Russian Bear as the frightful enemy. Moreover, with a volunteer army of more than 3000 men Belgium is directly involved in the military action.

People start to stock up and so does my mother: sugar in the first place and other things I can't remember, but one product still stays in my mind: Sunlight soap. My mother has my father, foreman at *Mercantile Marine Engineering* ship repair yard in Antwerp, make a big wooden chest to store all those hoarded provisions, including the soap. This chest still exists and stands now in the basement of our house in Berchem, containing completely other things....

And so, for almost 25 years, till the day I leave the parental home, for me Sunlight soap has continuously been in my mind as a solid treasure of my parents' household.

Many years after my weekly clean-up in that unforgettable Sunlight-bathtub I learnt that there is a company called *Lever Brothers*, that Sunlight soap is part of it and that it is distributed in Belgium by *Savonneries Lever Frères Bruxelles*. In 1930 it becomes *Unilever*, a giant multinational trading in canned goods, groceries, soap and many other things.

Okay, now I know where my mother's venerated soap comes from, but that after all those years I unexpectedly would be re-confronted with it, that is something I could never have imagined.

On July 27th 1992, on our trip to the Hebrides with Bob and Nini, we pass through the Isle of Harris and enter the village of **Leverburgh**. Strange..., "Leverburgh" is a completely un-Gaelic, even un-Scottish name and that is confirmed when we learn that the place, with scarcely 220 inhabitants, was originally named "An t Òb" (meaning 'Bay' and anglicized to "Obbe"). Why then this pure English name?

Allow me, Dear Reader, a deep dive in local Harris history...



For ages the isles of **Lewis** and **Harris** have been the property of *Clan MacLeod*, none the less being split up quite early in two branches: the *MacLeods of Lewis* and the *MacLeods of Harris and Skye*. The former lose their land in 1611 to the *MacKenzies of Kintail*, the latter keep their properties till late in 18th century.

Hereafter Harris and Lewis go through several hands, until the year 1918, when both archipelagos become the property of an industrialist from 16, Wood Street, Bolton, Lancashire: *Lord Leverhulme*, a purebred Englishman, born in 1851 as *William Hesketh Lever*, son of a simple grocer.



The economically talented William throws himself in the soap trade, with a brand he develops as "Sunlight Soap". Shortly after with his brother *James* he establishes the *Lever Brothers Manufacturing Company*. The business shoots up and, to cut a long story short, William rises to the status of member of the House of Lords: *Lord Leverhulme*, the "Hulme" being the name of his wife.

Way back, during his honeymoon boat trip in Scotland, William has fallen in love with the Hebrides and that feeling hasn't waned at all when, 68 years old and one of the richest industrialists of his time, he purchases Harris and Lewis.

Leverhulme is a hard-nosed capitalist, but at the same time a sincere philanthropist. His conviction is that not only the employers, but also the employees should benefit from the blessings of capitalism. One of his projects to improve the material and spiritual conditions of the workers is the creation of the model village *Port Sunlight* in former county Cheshire.

It is Leverhulme's ambition to modernize Harris and Lewis and to elevate the population to a liveable state. He sees no future in traditional crofting, but believes in "reaping the harvest of the sea", together with fish-processing and modern weaving industries on land. After all, Harris and Lewis are the ultimate region for tweed!

He wants to improve the living conditions of the people, but he makes a substantial mistake: he doesn't make sure of the readiness of the people to follow him in his headstrong way of operating, something one could name "paternalistic despotism".

Although acting perfectly ethically and being inspired by the best intentions, Leverhulme totally disregards the mentality of the islanders. For instance he doesn't understand their almost atavistic desire for the tiny proper piece of land, the iconic croft, "the green land of the forefathers". Moreover, all this happens immediately after the end of the *Great War*, with farmers returning from the battlefield, exactly glowing with that dream. Also, don't forget that the Western and the Northern Isles of Scotland have sent a proportionally very high number of men - 1 in 6 - to the war and that the region got back the same share in dead. Lewis counted 1100 fallen combatants.

The well-meaning Lord starts a project in the Stornoway area in Lewis, but has soon to abandon it: enormous opposition, violence, even culminating in land raids. And don't be mistaken: ex-servicemen know how to handle this. The authorities in Edinburgh turn a blind eye...

Leverhulme, disappointed, wends his way towards Harris and the tiny fishing village of Obbe. The place has a natural harbour and a maritime access to the Atlantic as well as to the Minch, the strait that separates mainland Scotland from Lewis and Harris.

Leverhulme has piers constructed, warehouses and fish processing installations built, everything quite gigantic in proportion to the size of this hick town. Anyway, the fish can be exported to the about 400 *MacFisheries* shops spread all over Britain, also belonging to Leverhulme.

For some time the enterprise is thriving, also because the Harris-men are more favourable to the Lord than the Lewismen. But there is also opposition, always coming from the same side...

When Leverhulme has some female typists come over from Port Sunlight, the words howled from the pulpit cannot be more offensive:

"Those harlots and concubines of Lever running openly about the streets of Obbe...".

In 1925 the Lord-Maecenas unexpectedly dies. At about the same time the post-war depression makes its appearance, caused amongst other by the collapse of the herring market. In the shortest possible time the Obbe project caves in too. Leverhulme's next of kin, not in the least interested in the project and its achievements, have the newly built installations - at an original building cost of £ 1,400,000 - taken down and sold as scrap. All that is left of William's enterprise are the huge quays, naked and without any apparent purpose or function...

It must be admitted, also with Leverhulme's staff members the 'love' of the Hebrides has never been very profound. The words of one of them have become notorious:

"Lewis and Harris should be towed in the Atlantic and sunk, just to get rid of the people".

Well...

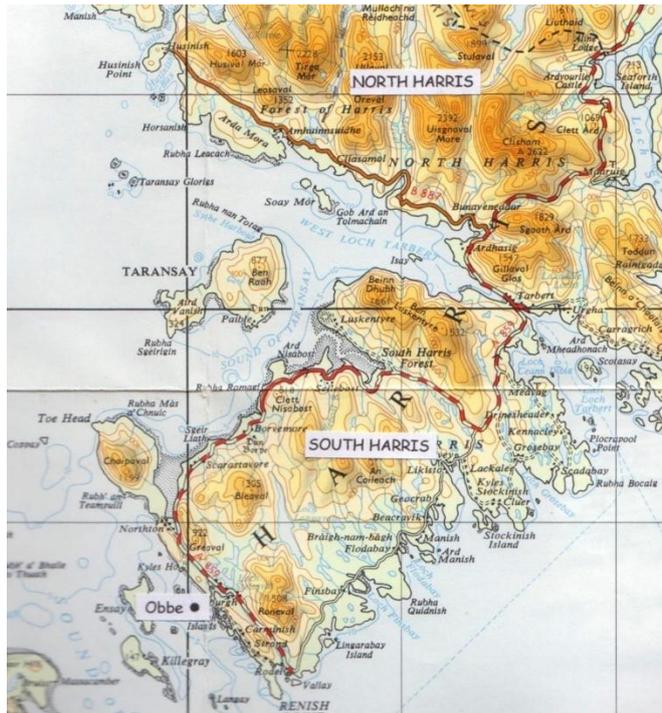
On the other hand, the people of Harris, however grateful to the man they call "Bodach an t-siabuin" [pronounce "savin"] or "The Old Man of Soap", rebaptize Obbe into "Leverburgh". To-day Leverburgh is named again "An t-Òb"...

On that 27th July we find Leverburgh in the state it must already have been immediately after the demolition of the installations in the twenties: neglected, derelict, dirty and... smelling. But under this dump the structure of the quays is actually still intact. Maybe they will serve again one day...⁹.

We don't go for a cup of tea, because the café reeks enormously.

"Of soap...", Ingrid knows.

Soap, yes...



⁹ And indeed it will! In 1996 *Calmac (Caledonian MacBrayne)*, a ferry company operating in the Hebrides, making use of the old quays, starts a ferry service between Leverburgh and Otternish in North Uist.

Never I could have thought, that one day I would find myself back in the place where the man whose creation is so strongly embedded in my memory, has had such exalted ideas.



And finally, about the artefact itself: the last two specimens from my mother's collection, now about 70 years old but still ready to use, are still lying in our basement, be it no longer in that famous wooden chest ¹⁰.



¹⁰ Comment of *Julie Dove-Gallagher*, my kind corrector: "What a lovely story! Really fascinating link. I thoroughly enjoyed reading it and again learning so much. Thank you !" (Fourcès, October 2024).

THE HERMIT OF MINGULAY

August 5th 1997.

With our campers we have settled on Traigh Mhòr ('Big Beach'), both beach and airstrip of Barra Airport (!) in the Hebridean island of the same name.

On disembarking onto the island a few days before, we almost immediately booked an all-day sailing trip along the southernmost islands of the Outer Hebrides, with Mingulay as our final destination. We are a group of ten, sailing in a small boat under the custody of the skipper, a Mr Campbell.

We leave Castlebay under a warm sun and set out to a calm Atlantic, not always to be taken for granted in the Hebrides. We keep close to the coast of the isles, past the majestic cliffs of Vatersay, Sandray (evacuated in 1934), Lingay and Pabbay (evacuated in 1897 after the loss of all menfolk at sea). About an hour later we land at Mingulay. "Landing" is a big word, because the island has no jetty, has never had one, which, by the way, was one of the reasons for the later evacuation.

"Marvellous" is the surprising and admiring comment of one of our passengers, an American, "the Caribbean!". No better word to characterize this godforsaken heavenly outlying corner of Europe! The skipper allows us two hours to explore the island. We already start having our packed lunches, because sea air makes hungry. The view is on the former village of Mingulay, almost completely gone now under the ever advancing sands of the dunes.

Mingulay is the second largest of the so-called "Bishop's Isles", all situated south of Barra. They were called so because once, from the 11th till the 14th century, they belonged to the *Bishop of the Isles*, the ecclesiastical head of the Diocese of the Isles.

Due to the changing influence of successively Celtic, Norse and Scottish cultures discussion has risen about the origin of the name: 'Miughalaigh' (Gaelic) or 'Mikilay' (Old Norse), both meaning 'Big Island' though, and this compared to the other and smaller islands of the archipelago. Anyway, it remains a rather pompous name for a 2½ sq mi big abode in the endless Atlantic...

Mingulay (left under on the map) is not the southernmost island of The Long Island - in fact that is Berneray - but it is the southernmost ever having been inhabited.

After the custody of the bishops, Mingulay between the 15th and the 19th centuries becomes the property of *Clan MacNeil of Barra*. The inhabitants' faith has always remained Catholic, for the simple reason that the 16th century Reformation never reached the southern isles of the Outer Hebrides.



In the 18th and 19th centuries the population mounts from 52 to a peak of 150, mainly due to rising child birth. They live then in 28 cottages. Their life on the isle is remote, but not secluded: their fish is sold in Glasgow and in Ireland and their own food is imported from Mainland.

One may wonder what the reason for the evacuation of Mingulay has been.

The Pabbay disaster has an enormously disappointing impact on the local fishermen, who moreover do not have a safe landing. In rough weather - and that may last for weeks in the Hebrides - casting off and mooring becomes impossible. By the way, "rough weather" is an understatement: in 1868 an enormous tidal wave sweeps all sheep from the 170 ft high Geirum Mhòr island into the ocean. Gradually the island starts to deplete its natural resources (as far as they are still present...).

This is also the period during which the islanders are abandoned by the owners, scornfully called "the absentee landlords". In 1906, one of them, *Lady Gordon Cathcart*, will be convicted for it by court,

"neglecting her duties as a landowner (...) and by her long indifference to the necessities of the cottars driving them to exasperation".

But then it is already much, much too late...

In 1912, after more than 2000 years of permanent habitation, Mingulay is evacuated and left only to... grazing sheep.

Since the year 2000 the island is in the care of The National Trust for Scotland.

My companions stay lingering at the beautiful beach. Despite my vertigo, I take advantage of the situation to go and look for the highest spot of the island. "High" is a relative concept in the Hebrides, because the most elevated point on Mingulay is the 896 ft high Càrnan.

Nonetheless, this hill offers me a magnificent panorama of the largest part of The Long Island.



The nearest land west over the Ocean must be Newfoundland or Labrador in North America, a majestic feeling for a person like me, born with an island-archetype... ¹¹

My next "mountain" is called "MacPhee's Hill" and that place is connected to a very special story.

During the first half of the 19th century *Neil (?) MacPhee* (about ° 1780 - † 1845), factor (steward) of Clan MacNeil - another version of the story describes a ship's boy - is on his

¹¹ Word from Jungian psychology, indicating the concept of an inherited unconscious predisposition, behavioral trait or tendency ('instinct'). For instance an obsession for the sea, for mountains, for volcanoes etc.

way to Mingulay to collect the rents from the crofters and to find out what has happened to them, because every communication with the isle has been disconnected for quite some time.

Barely ashore he finds the whole population dead and hollers this at the crew, still on board. Convinced that the islanders have been struck by the pest - probably rather smallpox - the ship's company sets full sail home, leaving poor Neil behind on the island where all human life has ceased to be.

Every day MacPhee climbs a hill, looking out for a saving ship, but no skipper dares to come



MacPhee's Hill, 2017

close to Mingulay. Nevertheless he persists in his attempts, until finally a year later a ship moors, supplying new people to repopulate the island and taking MacPhee home.

An intervention like this one is not unusual in the Hebrides. In the course of their history other islands too, even the far remote St Kilda, being struck by calamities, have regularly been repopulated.

How MacPhee managed to survive his hermitage, lasting a whole year, remains unknown. Probably sufficient provisions were still present: corn, or sheep that he killed with the tools he found. What he did with the dead islanders equally remains a mystery. To approach them must certainly have involved the risk of contamination.

Due to Neil's indomitable spirit the owner of Mingulay, for centuries invariably a MacNeil, grants him a piece of land and calls the lookout hill after him: "MacPhee's Hill".

On that same hill I am now standing, be it not in search of a saving ship. It is a very special experience to find yourself on exactly the same spot where almost 200 years ago a man daily longed for his rescue and had to go to sleep in deep despair. Until finally the salvation really came...

We sail back to Castebay, still in beautiful weather and enjoying wonderful seascapes. A few days later we leave the Hebrides, at the time not realising that this has been our very last visit to this enchanting archipelago.



ABOUT THE SCOTTISH CLANS

... and what their existence brought about...

The origin

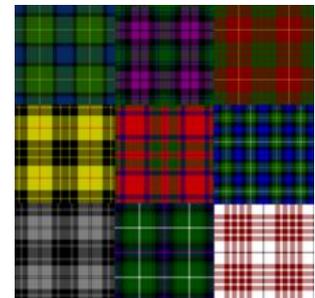
Scotland once knew the existence of about 140 clans, some officially recognized and others not.

It is unknown though when exactly the Scottish clan system found its origin. When in the 5th century the Romans definitely leave the country they have named "Caledonia", different peoples live on the soil of that country, amongst others whom the Romans have called "Picti" ('Painted ones') and "Scoti" ('Celts') from Ireland. These tribes constantly live in major mutual rivalry and conflict. The first recognizable clan system probably originates in the 11th century. The word comes from the Gaelic "clann" and means 'race, tribe, decent, family, lineage', so relationship in the broad sense of the word. The prefixed name "Mac" means 'Son of'.

The then Scottish king *Malcolm III Canmore* ('Big head', 1031-1093) ¹² decides how his kingdom must be organized, namely in a feudal system ¹³, and assigns land, often in larger parts, to the respective clans. This brings about the creation of sorts of 'kingdoms' with steadily growing power and occasionally mutual disputes lasting centuries long, not to mention bloody conflicts. Consequently the clans become less and less accountable to their king. Regarding the constant conflicts between them over territorial claims, one must conclude that the Scottish kingdom has never been an edifying example of unity and stability.

Until today the different clans, or at least the clan names, can be traced back to specific territories, evidently without any real authority or power.

The clan members are recognizable by their 'tartan', a kind of chequered plaid to be worn over the shoulder or to be shown in the 'kilt'. A clan may have different tartans according to the activity of the wearer ('civil', 'battle', 'hunting'...). Tartans are a means of identification, in peace as well as in war times.



The clan system can hardly be called a democratic type of society. It is based on unconditional, uncritical loyalty to the clan chief, however with no further class distinctions. Some have named it "fascism", but "paternalistic despotism" is probably a better name : the chief decides on marriages, on new husbands in case of widowhood, on compensation of lost cattle and horses, on care for old people etc. The clan members have no say whatever in these matters. On the other hand the system provides lodging and shelter, livelihood and most of all... protection and safety, in short a liveable existence. If at least there is no urge for a conflict or a solid battle...

¹² In 1057 he personally kills king *Mac Bethaid*, the inspiration for Shakespeare's 'MacBeth'.

¹³ The feudal system is a combination of legal, economic, military, cultural, and political customs in medieval Europe from the 9th to the 15th centuries. It is a way of structuring society around relationships derived from the holding of land by a 'vassal' in exchange for loyalty, service and labour towards a 'liege lord'. The latter in his turn guarantees protection of the former.

In general the chiefs have a 'ghillie' at their disposal. This is a mostly young servant whose task it is to assist the chief in all kind of matters: at hunting, hawking, deer stalking..., so primarily at leisure in the open. Some ghillies have been known to carry their chief, especially when crossing a river or wading through water. Ghillies..., simple helpers for innocent pleasure, or something more like pleasure boys?



Anyway, the chief and his subjects are no sissies. They are mainly known as cattle and horse thieves and many of the mutual clan conflicts are all about this. The romantic picture of a 'gentle rebel' created for instance by *Sir Walter Scott* in his novel 'Rob Roy' (1817) or *Walt Disney* in the picture 'Rob Roy, the Highland Rogue' (1953) does not in the least correspond to reality. *Robert Roy MacGregor*, though descending from nobility, is a common horse thief. The real MacGregor will revolt against the English, but finally resign himself to their supremacy and swear allegiance to the English King.

Two dramatic events will be decisive for the final detrimental destiny of the Scottish clans (and ultimately of the Scottish population as a whole): the *Massacre of Glencoe* and, about half a century later, the *Battle of Culloden*.

Glencoe - the beginning of the end

First this: **Glencoe** ('Valley of the river Coe') is a beautiful, mighty creation of nature, of volcanic origin, with severe mountain slopes and majestic cloud-wrapped crags. *Charles Dickens* calls Glencoe "...a burial ground of a race of giants".

A burial ground..., yes, that's what it will become somewhere at the end of the 17th century...

The origin of the "Massacre of Glencoe" as it is later named, lies in whether or not an oath of allegiance is sworn to the king. And to understand the significance of this procedure, please allow me, Dear Reader, an inevitably long introduction.



In 1688 the joint Catholic Stuart king of England and Scotland - called *James II* in the former and *James VII* in the latter part of the country - is deposed because of mismanagement and despotic tendencies. This happens during the so-called "Glorious (because bloodless) Revolution". He flees to... *Versailles* in France, where *Louis XIV* grants him board and lodgings and where, in 1701, he dies. James is the very last Roman Catholic sovereign of England, Scotland and Ireland.

Expectations are high, when with a lot of fuss a new king is welcomed, no less than a Dutchman: the former (Calvinist) 'stadtholder' *Willem Hendrik III van Oranje-Nassau* ! Willem is endowed with the thrones of England and Scotland merely by his marriage with the (Anglican raised) *Mary II of England*, the daughter of the deposed sovereign ! Overnight so to say Willem Hendrik becomes *William II of Scotland* and *William III of England*.

However, both have a Catholic background by their common grandfather *Charles I Stuart*. So they are cousin and niece, but one incestuous relation or more is apparently no problem in these days, by no means at royal courts.

The new king, soon denigratingly called "King Billy", wants to gain popularity with his new subjects and accepts the *Bill of Rights*, by which he recognizes the precedence of parliamentary jurisdiction over the ancient divine royal right. Moreover, he proclaims a "General pardon" regarding all previous conflicts of whatever nature they may have been. There is one predominant condition though: his 'absolution' only applies to those who, ultimately on December 31st 1691, pledge allegiance to the new Royal house.

Up the long ladder
And down the short rope
To hell with King Billy
And God bless the Pope
If that will not do
We'll tear him in two
And send him to hell
With his red white and blue

18th century Irish rebel song

Most Scottish clans turn to this royal proposal, which, by the way, will not stop them from going on with mutual struggle, combat, fight and battle, or whatever you want to call it...

Clan Donald of Glencoe, though traditionally favourably disposed to the Stuarts, thus Catholic, likewise resigns itself to the king's proposal. However, due to several circumstances, including a fierce blizzard, chief *Mac-Iain Alastair* can swear his allegiance not sooner than on January the 6th. The king himself is in the dark about this, or better..., is deliberately left in the dark by his councillors.

Not surprisingly ! For a few rabid royalist clans this is once and for all an excellent pretext to settle accounts with the MacDonalds and "to root out the old fox and his cubs". Moreover, the MacDonalds have an awful reputation as - my story is getting tedious...- cattle thieves. In Fort William two professional officers of the English army coldly ordain...

"...you are hereby ordered to fall upon the rebels, the MacDonalds of Glencoe, and put all to the sword under seventy..."

On February 1st 1692 a detachment of 120 *Argyll Highlanders*, loyal to the new king and led by *Captain Robert Campbell of Glenlyon* (painting), marches into Glencoe. Campbell asks chief Alastair MacDonald for lodgings, using the pretext that Fort William is full. Unsuspectingly the chief offers the detachment his own housing, including lodgings, food and drink, diversion and probably, following the morals of the day, more things not appropriate to describe here...

On the eve of departure MacDonald ultimately organizes a huge goodbye party.



In the early morning of February 14th - Valentine's Day in those days is celebrated differently from nowadays... - a giant onslaught takes place. Chief Alastair, barely out of bed, is shot dead in the back and so are, bereft of their clothes, his wife and young children. All 35 members of the clan present in the house are murdered on the spot. In the village a relentless manhunt is held, also for women and children - indeed ! - under seventy. Many try to flee into the mountains, where a number of them will freeze to death by lack of clothing. All cattle is robbed, all houses are burnt, all reminders of Clan MacDonald are wiped out.

And yet..., afterwards, at least from the viewpoint of the aggressor, the murderous attack will

prove to be a failure: 'only' 10 % of the MacDonalds appear to have been put to the sword, more than 300 clan members, including two older sons of chief Alastair, escaped from the death squad.

The "Massacre of Glencoe", as it is called from that day on, has immense repercussions: it determines, up to today, the enmity between Clan Campbell and Clan MacDonald, the antagonism between Catholicism and Protestantism, the dilemma of taking sides in the enduring disputes between England and Scotland and finally the dubious role of the clans in all this.

Queen Mary already dies in 1694, barely 32 years old, King William follows her in the grave 8 years later. The throne passes on to Mary's sister *Ann*, but when she is called home to glory in 1714, a considerable monarchical gap arises. Queen Ann has had no less than 17 pregnancies, but 12 ended in miscarriages and the 5 surviving children all die very young. So now starts the search for a new monarch !

Culloden - the definite demise

Theoretically there are no less than about 50 'pretenders' to the throne of England, Scotland and Ireland, but they are all of Catholic Stuart descent and since 1701 the *Act of Settlement* forbids ascension to the throne by Catholics.

Consequently Parliament has to descend down the genealogical ladder to find an appropriate candidate and finally ends up at a *Georg Ludwig*, prince-elector of Braunschweig-Lüneburg-Hannover in the Holy Roman Empire. As a result of a long series of royal intermarriages "George" is actually a distant descendant of *James I of England and VI of Scotland*, a through-and-through Catholic king (!) already deceased in 1625. Needs must, but a German from the *House of Hannover* on the throne of what is already called the *Kingdom of Great Britain*, that is really unseen !



On the other hand, the old and now deceased († 1701) James II / James VII, deposed by the *Glorious Revolution*, still has a mass of adherents, in Scotland, but also in Ireland and in France, from where incitement against the new monarch is strongly kept alive. On British soil this will lead to two *Jacobite Risings*, known as "the Fifteen" (1715) and "the Forty-Five" (1745). Both will lead to defeats, the latter definitely near Culloden.



The 1715 rising wants to put *James Francis Edward III and VIII Stuart* ("The Old Pretender"), son of the deposed James, on the throne, but the operation fails with the defeat (though officially indecisive) at *The Battle of Sheriffmuir*. James Francis will live another 50 years as a flabby exile in Rome till 1766.

The 1745 rising wants *Charles Francis Edward Stuart* ("The Young Pretender"), son of the former and half-brother of Queen Anne, to restore in his royal rights. Due to his childish and effeminate looks Charles will enter in history as "Bonnie Prince Charlie".

Prince Charlie".

In the beginning the enterprise is surprisingly successful: in the *Battle of Prestonpans* in East Lothian on September 21st 1745 the Jacobite forces defeat an English government army under *Sir John Cope*. The battle lasts less than thirty minutes, is a huge boost to Jacobite morale and establishes the revolt as a serious threat to the British government. "Charlie" further advances to 127 miles from the gates of London, but his army will finally dramatically perish at the *Battle of Culloden* in the Highlands in 1746.

By the Act of Union of 1707 Scotland is already fully incorporated in the Kingdom of Great Britain, but with this battle it loses not only its last shred of independence, but it also goes through the complete collapse of the centuries-old social clan system.



In less than an hour the Highlanders hostile to the English are radically annihilated. The Lowlanders put up with the English are compelled to collaboration in a social structure in which nothing of the former clan 'values' is maintained. Dramatic item: some clans are even internally divided: brothers fight brothers, fathers sons ! Ultimately all clans are losers...

The English repression is relentless. No prisoners made, all wounded finished at the spot, observers of the battle, a tradition in those years..., indistinctly killed, together with women and children innocently on their way to the Inverness market. Bodies are ostentatiously mutilated. There is no name for the brutalities of the winners; their leader, the merely 25 year old *Duke of Cumberland*, herewith gains his name for life: "The Butcher", even within his own ranks...

The killings of people, the raids on fugitives, the burning of houses... it goes on for days, followed by convictions, outlawing, bans, gallows, breaking wheels..., even sales as slaves of the defeated, all this explicitly approved and sustained by the *Free Church of Scotland*.

Bonnie Prince Charlie, then only 26 years old, disguised as a housemaid and helped by numerous Highlanders, escapes to France, after a long lasting odyssey over the Hebrides. He dies as a lonely alcoholic in Rome in 1788, ironically the city where he was born in the exiled Stuart court. He has never seen back his beloved Scotland. Jacobitism will for ever remain a romantic, nostalgic dream...

In August 1992 we pass by many of Charlie's former hiding places and we also visit Drumossie Moor, where the Culloden battle took place. The area is full of signs, flags and other markers of the battle, but similar to many killing fields of times gone by an almost surreal quietness dominates the beautifully flowering heath. It is very poignant to experience the contrast between a now peaceful place and the memory of bygone cruelties, so visually described by *John Prebble*, a Scottish journalist and author ¹⁴.

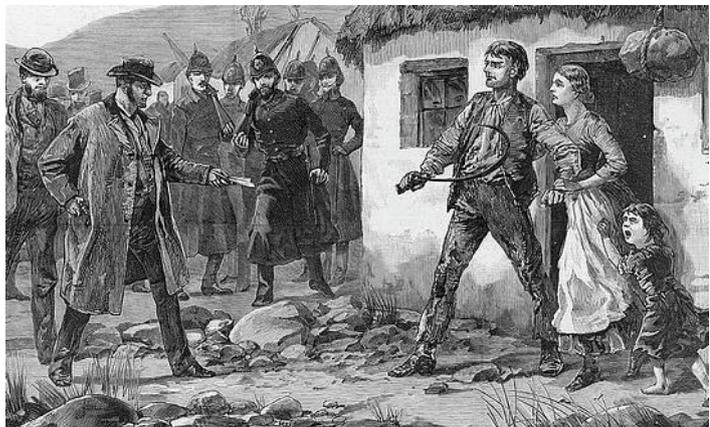
The aftermath

Much wider reaching than the battle itself is the intent of London to completely wipe out the Highlander in his present appearance. During more than hundred years the Scots will be forbidden to expose their tartans, to wear their kilts and to play their bagpipes, at the risk of being banned or even hanged.

Military, legally and socially the clan chiefs lose all power and authority. Those who have sided with the English probably get off the least bad: as brand-new 'lairds' (landlords) they will soon take part in the oppression of those they have once protected.

The disappearance of the far from democratic clan system might have been a blessing for the establishment of a more contemporary society, but the Scots get nothing of any social and economic facilities instead. On the contrary, they stand ahead of 150 and more years of tarnished misery. What comes in the place of possible disclosure is persecution and oppression. The 'clearances', already started in the seventies of the previous century, do the rest.

The Highland Clearances (± 1759 - 1880) is the name given to a system of brutal evictions of thousands of crofters from the land they have in lease. This land is converted into open grazing fields for sheep (and the subsequent wool production), all for the benefit of rich, mainly English landlords. In many cases, with the crofter and his family still



present, the croft is set to fire and the stones of the building are used to fence the meadows (in certain cases to be carried out by the crofters themselves, as it happened on the Isle of Unst in Shetland ¹⁵). The evicted are resettled in barren back-waters of the country, are 're-employed' in Mainland factories or put on ships with far away unknown overseas destinations such as Canada or Australia. Many of them completely languish. Or, as it is put in Gaelic:

"Na làithean nuair a bha caoraich ag ithe fir" - "The days when sheep ate men".

¹⁴ John Prebble, *Culloden*, Penguin Books, 1967.

¹⁵ See further chapter Orkney and Shetland, 'The Dramatic Magic of Fethaland', p. 66..

To this day, this is the major injustice inflicted on the Scottish population ever. John Prebble again writes one of his three immersive books about it ¹⁶.

At the beginning of the 19th century Scotland is one of the densest populated countries in Europe, but at the same time one of the most backward and impoverished.

Some claim that the success of the rigorously Protestant *Free Church of Scotland*, founded in this same era, is merely the consequence of the despondency of the people, after their chiefs have forsaken them and after they were left with nothing else but faith, be it clouded with severity and gloominess. This may indeed be so, because 'the new faith' only gets a proper foothold after Culloden.

By the way, "if every disadvantage has its advantage" ¹⁷, then we must admit that the defeat at Culloden has at least had one benefit: henceforth cattle and horse thieving are radically exterminated in Scotland...

The Highlands today

At the end of the 19th and certainly in the 20th centuries living conditions get better, but another phenomenon arises: neo-colonisation.

You bet, my friend ! Rich (mostly) Englishmen purchase vast pieces of land, known for their unlimited opportunities of...

"... shooting, fishing and all the other rural sports at hand"

... and edge these properties with man-high fences: "*Trespassing will be prosecuted*".

In the summer of 1992 we pass by Garynahine on the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides and become, unwillingly, confronted with the occurrence of one of these constantly more prevalent 'estates'. "*Sporting*" during each of the 52 weeks of the year is offered at a price varying between £ 5,350 and 53,000 a week - you read well ! - to be increased with maintenance costs between £ 1,136 and 8,246, also a week. Perfectly normal, the owners argue, because...

"... you can come with a company of ten, why not?"

Tariffs of the eighties and nineties - again, you read well !

During a former trip to the Hebrides at Easter holidays in 1990 I already talked about this with one *Mrs MacInnes* of Uisken [pronounce "ooshgen"] on Mull, who was so kind to offer us a free place to stay for the night with our rented camper. No one could express it more aptly than this friendly lady:

"The English? First they took our country, then they took our language, and now there back again, bringing in their custom and their money to buy things we cannot afford. That's what I call colonisation! All that's left is our pride, before they 'll take that too..."

Well...

In the meantime: what about the clans?

¹⁶ John Prebble, *The Highland Clearances*, Penguin Books, 1963.

¹⁷ Dear Reader, forgive me this cynical remark, sprouted from the mouth of *Johan Cruyff*, legendary Dutch football player.

Today the names of most of the once known clans are still in use, but only three, with their lairds, are officially acknowledged by the *Lord Lyon King of Arms*, who is the heraldic authority in Scotland: the *MacLeods of Skye* (with seat at Dunvegan in Skye), the *MacNeils of Barra* (with seat at Kisimul Castle in Castlebay in Barra) and the *MacDonalds of Sleat* (with seat at Armadale in Skye). You 'll learn more about them, Dear Reader, in the next chapters.

And finally: what about the Royal house?

The House of Hannover solidly stays in power with four "Georges" (even with one of them going mad...), till the transition to the *House of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha* with Queen Victoria (1837-1901). In 1917, because of the enmity with Germany, that name is changed in that of *House of Windsor*.



THE LAST STAND OF THE MACLEODS OF LEWIS

July 1992. Having made the crossing to Britain from Zeebrugge, having arrived at Felixtowe in County Suffolk and having travelled a week through East Anglia, Yorkshire and southwest Scotland, we now arrive at Oban, ferry gateway to the Hebrides.

We cross to Mull, explore the whole island, make a boat trip to wondrous Staffa, visit mythical Iona, drive down the whole Long Island and are now looking for a place to spend the night in our campers on the island of Great Bernera on the west coast of Lewis. Great Bernera is connected with Mainland Lewis by a 50 yard long and narrow bridge, called by the locals "the Bridge over the Atlantic". And mind, this is geographically perfectly correct!

We halt on an inviting green meadow close to the remnants of what will later appear to be a village dating from the the Viking era: Bosta, overlooking a bright white beach and a few islands not far from the coast, all paradise-like in this beautiful weather.

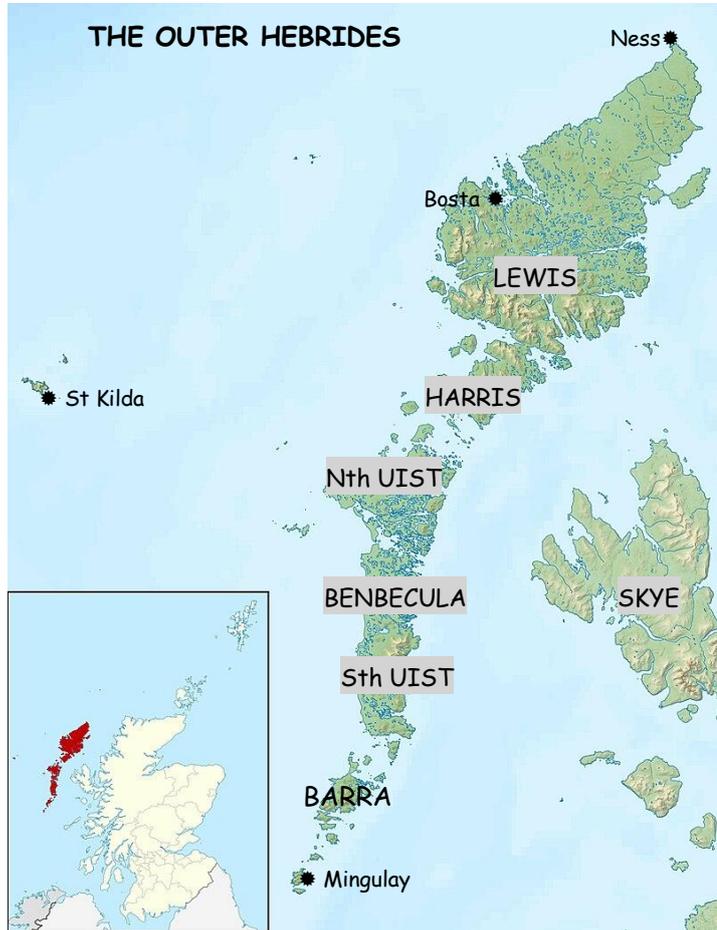
I can hardly suppress a cry of surprise, because we know this place, we have

been here before! It was in the summer of 1974 with our friend Guy, the three of us in my Morris 1300, camping gear on the car roof. From my diary, Sunday July 28th 1974:

"We explore the island of Great Bernera till we reach a place called Bosta, a paradise-like place with a beautiful white beach. With this beautiful weather this coast looks very southern, say Yugoslavian, except that there are no tourists..."¹⁸



In 18 years the place hasn't changed a bit, apart from a camper now standing on the green. Hardly installed I am already on the move, into the inland valley. The profile of what remains of the former habitation points at 'Viking long-houses', what is confirmed by the name of the settlement: "Bolstadir" in Old Norse, meaning 'group of small farms'. Some archaeologists even refer to "an Iron Age settlement".



¹⁸ I had been to Yugoslavia not long before...

On the beautiful long inland slope the remains of the settlement, even covered now by swards, can still clearly be discerned: the stone contours of the former farms, the drystone-walled fields, an unusual big cemetery..., all signs of what once was a lively village community, but what is now completely deserted.



And that has been so for a long time, because Bosta was entirely evacuated in 1878, for once not by a clearance, but caused by the depletion of the peat grounds, for ages the only (fossil) fuel for the inhabitants, trees being scarce on these islands.

On the fork of the roads to Bosta and Tobson there is a monument, the 'Bernera Riot Cairn', in remembrance of one of the very last (planned) clearances. The year is 1874 and at *Stornoway Court* for the first time in their miserable history the crofters are given justice. Moreover their 'factor' (steward) is convicted for his inhuman behaviour towards the tenant farmers. This is a significant turning point in Scottish agricultural and social history !



So far for Bosta (photo bay), Patient Reader, and this long introduction to what I want to share with you about the vicissitudes of Clan MacLeod: about their extended possessions, about their boundless power and about how all this was finally lost. And let it exactly be the isle of Bearasay, lying in sight of us in front of the coast of *Great Bernera*, that has played such an important part in it. Be prepared for a long and not always simple story.

For ages Lewis and Harris have continually been the 'homeland' and property of **Clan MacLeod** [pronounce "mklauwd"]. Besides, in Gaelic Lewis is called "Leodhas". The clan takes great pride in its legendary 12th century forefather *Leod*, who is supposed to be of Viking descent.

Already quite early the clan splits up in two branches, called after the sons of *Leod*, *Sìol Torquid* ('Torquil's Seed') and *Sìol Tormod* ('Tormod's Seed').

The first branch, *Clann Mhic Leòid Leòdhais* ('Clan MacLeod of Lewis') will soon rule over Lewis, the second, *Clann Mhic Leòid Hearadh* ('Clan Lewis of Harris') over Harris and Skye. Today the latter branch of the MacLeods is still 'acknowledged', by way of a fact a merely symbolic signification: already at the end of the 18th century the clan loses major part of its properties.

The former branch, the Lewis one, goes a lot worse even sooner, because in 1611 this clan loses all of its belongings to the MacKenzies of Kintail.

The disintegration of the power of the MacLeods starts with *Roderick MacLeod*, 10th clan chief since 1538. Even in the terms of the day Roderick is an odd man out: he marries three times, has innumerable 'leannán luí' (mistresses), fucks half of the female population of the island and herewith brings into the world an enormous offspring of descendants, some of them more bastard than the others.

Most of them are male and without any exception aspire after the chieftainship of the clan. To make things even more complicated, Roderick has given them the same names: *Torquil* ('Holy Cauldron of Thor'), because that is the historical name of the clan. That this will lead to commotion, a small child knows.

The son from his first marriage, with *Siobhán* ('Joan') *Mackenzie of Kintail*, is not recognized by Roderick, because he is convinced the child hasn't sprouted from his seed. And that may well be so, because *Missus Mackenzie* too flutters around enthusiastically. Consequently the boy is called *Torquil Conanach*, after *Strathconan*, the name of the homeland of the Mackenzies on Mainland Scotland.

The son from his second marriage, with *Barbara Stuart* - mark the royal link ! - is considered by Roderick as his legal successor and is called *Torquil Oighre* ('Torquil the Heir'). Later he will "drown" in a storm at sea, drown between quotation marks indeed, because it happens in dubious circumstances.

In the meantime *Siobhán* has taken off with a cousin of her husband, while her son *Torquil Conanach*, not at all satisfied with the inheritance arrangement, puts his father *Roderick* in jail. Anyway *Roderick* manages to escape and to celebrate this joyful event he engages in a third marriage, now with one of the daughters of the prestigious *MacLeans of Duart*. And yes, what is expected indeed happens: a third *Torquil* is born, *Torquil Dubh* ('Black Torquil'), immediately recognised by *Roderick* as his new heir. The 'black' *Torquil* enters into strife with the oldest *Torquil*, a conflict in which he soon bites the dust.

What happens now is that the future throne of the MacLeods remains empty and that three related parties are interestedly awaiting the outcome: the Mackenzies of Kintail, the MacLeans of Duart and de royal Stuarts. After all, haven't they all supplied Torquils, or what? Even the rather insignificant *Morrison of Ness* keep a keen eye on the situation, because when two dogs are fighting for a bone often a third one takes off with it...

Due to his victory over his 'black' half-brother *Torquil Conanach* is convinced that the battle is fought, but he is counting his chickens before they are hatched. Who appears now on the scene? A *Neil MacLeod*, one of the many bastards of good old *Roderick*. *Neil* resists all attacks of the three pretenders, but has to seek refuge, together with 40 companions, on the isle of *Bearasaidh* ('Bearasay') at the west coast of *Lewis*.

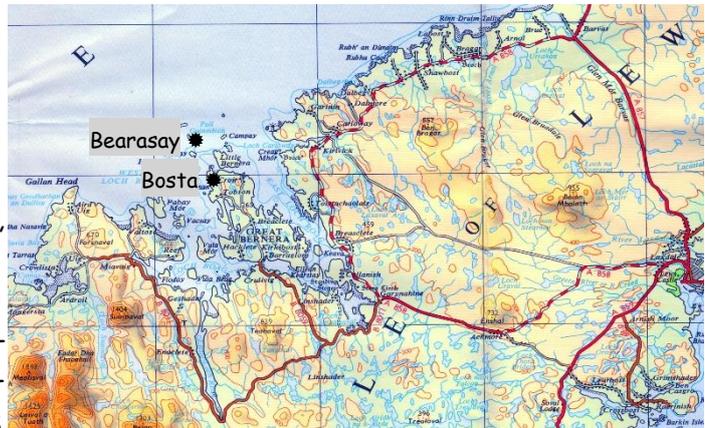
Good heavens ¹⁹ ! *Bearasay*! That is exactly the island we are all the time looking at from our campers! It looks as if it could be easily reached by swimming, but that is very probably a miscalculation: it must at least lie some 5 miles away from the coast.

Still..., to enjoy the privilege of staying here and to be aware of what happened on the spot some

¹⁹ "Good Heavens", that is what the Belgian cartoonist *Edgar P. Jacobs* has his character *Philip Mortimer* always say, when he is highly surprised or alarmed (e.g. in 'The Yellow Sign').

400 years ago, that creates a very special atmosphere. And that is, Patient Reader, the reason that for a little while I must go on with my story.

Neil and his mates are staying on an isle not larger than a towel and have to provide for their livelihood. Therefore, following the standards of the time, they proceed to the noblest form of theft, namely piracy. Indeed, Bearasay lies right in the shipping line to East Loch Roág. How they do it remains unclear, but they seize numerous barques (of which also a Flemish one) and even other pirate ships. In this way they maintain, all circumstances considered, a pretty comfortable life on Bearasay. Indeed, clear traces of human habitation have later been found.



For more than three years they hold out. Anyway, at the beginning of 1613 the "gang of Bearasay" is expelled from its abode in the sea. Neil himself flees to Skye and seeks protection at Dunvegan Castle, the seat of the MacLeods of Harris and Skye. He hopes for a pardon by king *James VI*, but his kinsmen (sic) in Dunvegan extradite him to the judicial authorities. He is convicted of high treason and hanged in Edinburgh in April 1613.

Ultimately all the possessions of the MacLeods of Lewis pass into the hands of the MacKenzies of Kintail, the next of kin to Siobhán, first wife of Roderick ²⁰.

And what about "Old Rory" himself? He dies peacefully in his bed on the isle of Pabaidh Mhór ('Big Pabay') nearby in West Loch Roág in 1595, 95 years old.

This is the story of Clan MacNeil told as simply as possible. But don't forget, Faithful Reader, that in this power struggle eight brothers and half-brothers, true and bastard children, fathers and sons, wives and mistresses... were involved and that this whole story has been an intricate concatenation of faithful and faithless alliances, of ruse and deceit, of intrigues and treason.



The former experiences of this clan are since then far and wide described as

Bosta campers overlooking Bearasay

"The Last Stand of the MacLeods of Lewis"



²⁰ After Culloden the Mackenzies rebaptize themselves into "The Earls of Seaforth", for which, till today, they are derogatorily regarded by the local population.

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE MACLEODS OF SKYE

During my second and Ingrid's first trip to Scotland in 1972, we make a tour all over the **Isle of Skye** (and during one stormy night on Trotternish are simply blown away with our tent...).

Skye belongs to the Inner Hebrides and in those days the island is only accessible by ferries, three in total: one from Kyle of Lochalsh to Kyleakin (the best known), one from Mallaig to Armadale (the longest) and one from Glenelg²¹ to Kylerhea (the shortest and least known). In 1995 the Kyle of Lochalsh ferry is replaced by the 1804 ft long Skye Toll Bridge.

August 10th 1972.

We are touring all over Duirinish, one of the three majestic peninsulas in the north east of Skye, with its awe inspiring Neist Point and its spectacularly situated lighthouse. We do not venture that far, because we are primarily looking for a safe place to pitch our tent, not evident in this rugged landscape with its sinewy single track roads. And though I consider myself a very able Morris 1300 driver - confirmed by my consort... - yesterday by avoiding oncoming traffic I succeeded in steering my 1300 straight into a ditch, fortunately not too much damage involved...

Quite unexpectedly we find a nice place in a green meadow completely meeting our needs near the village of **Dunvegan** (in Gaelic: Dún Bheagain, 'Fort of Beccan'). Moreover it is close to the hotel with the same name, so promising for the night to come. Dunvegan is a fairly insignificant village of hardly 400 inhabitants, but it is world famous for its castle, for more than 800 years now the clan seat of the **MacLeods of Skye**.



The previous chapter, Dear Reader, was all about the MacLeods of Lewis and their final demise mainly due to internal conflicts. Anyway, whether unified or split up, throughout the times and similar to so many other clans, the MacLeods and some of their chiefs have often been of a conflictual, belligerent and violent nature. A few examples of their 'achievements':

- *Iain Ciar* (1330-1392), 4th chief of Clan MacLeod, is described as a "tyrannical and bloodthirsty despot" who is not only hated by his enemies but also by his own clansmen. His wife apparently has their two daughters buried alive in the castle dungeons for trying to escape the clan.

²¹ Mark, Attentive Reader, that the name Glenelg is a 'palindrome', which means that it can be read from front to back and back again.

- *Alasdair Crotach* (1450-1547, "Alexander the Humpbacked"²²), 8th chief of Clan MacLeod, is lauded as "the MacLeods' greatest chief". He is said to have been mutilated by a MacDonald battle axe during the *Battle of Bloody Bay* off Mull (± 1480). This belligerent warlord is feared by many, but has an aesthetic side to his nature: he encourages dancing, poetry and music and forms the *MacCrimmons* as pipers to the MacLeod chiefs, a relationship that still lasts today. "The Crotach" spends the latter part of his final years living as a monk on Harris.
- In 1739 *Norman MacLeod* (1705-1772, "The Wicked Man"), 22nd chief of Clan MacLeod, and others are accused of being involved in the kidnapping of 96 of their kinsmen, men, women and children, with a view to selling them into slavery at £3 per head and herding them onto a ship bound for the Americas. A storm wrecks the vessel off the coast of Northern Ireland but the reluctant passengers are all rescued and most of them settle on the lands of the *Earl of Antrim*, though a few, after great difficulties manage to return to their homes in Scotland.
- And even in our day, in the year 2000, *John MacLeod of MacLeod* (1935-2007), 29th chief, faced with the high cost of repairs to the dilapidated roof of Dunvegan Castle, puts the Black Cuillin, Scotland's most iconic mountain range in Skye, on the market for £10 million. He also plans to build an 80-bedroom hotel and leisure complex near the village with the proceeds of the sale. The plan causes public outrage at the time and has never been completed.

However, contrary to the MacLeods of Lewis, this branch of the clan has survived and we are now going to witness one of its contemporary activities, informed as we are that tonight the *Dunvegan Hotel* organizes a 'cèilidh'.

A 'cèilidh' (meaning 'comrade', 'companion', pronounce "kaylee") is a traditional Scottish gathering during which (mostly) Gaelic folksongs are sung accompanied by dancing. We know the word, but never have attended one, so full of expectations we direct our steps thither.

From the beginning the local cèilidh-night radiates a strong MacLeod atmosphere and appears to be strictly regulated, with a landlord, obviously dressed in the appropriate tartan and kilt, rigorously holding rules in hand. Not a very welcoming atmosphere, but drinks are available anyhow. Food on the other hand is by no means visible.

From 9 PM on the premises are forbidden for children under 15, this immediately resulting in families leaving the hotel or bringing their offspring to bed and coming back.

From 10 PM the beer tap is closed; beer can now only be consumed from tins or bottles, which immediately raises the price from 7 to 12 p. In no time barmen and -women change their outfit and become waiters and waitresses. The guests are hastily chased from the bar to the dance hall, all under the eagle-eyed view of the landlord.

At long last - thank goodness, because our stomachs are seriously rumbling - food is served. It is not very clear what it is: what we think to be a bar of chocolate and two scoops of ice cream appears to be a piece of sausage and a little portion of mashed potatoes. That is all, there is nothing else, so we have to dig in.

In the meantime dancing has begun, enthusiastically accompanied by melodeon and bagpipes. The dancing is far from modern or sophisticated, on the contrary: it consists of wild arm-in-arm and round dancing, not seldom with one of the performers widely sprawled on the floor. Nobody minds, not the other dancers, not the fallen one, not even the strict landlord. Moreover he encourages more guests to take part in jumping around.

²² By the way, as it happens 'leod' means 'ugly' in Gaelic...

But then the 11 o'clock bell tolls, announcing the next point of the rulebook: eating, singing and dancing may continue, but drinking is rigorously banned; sausage and mashed potatoes make it on pints and drams.

This goes on for about half an hour, till a kind of lottery is organized and the landlord broadly smiling announces that the next night dancing will be allowed till 1.30 AM! Loud cheering all around!

We return to our canvas lodgings. Was this now that famous cèilidh? If this has to symbolize and illustrate the fame and renown of Clan MacLeod, well then we call it a non-event, a fart in a bottle. The artificiality of the show dripped off and a few tartans and kilts were not of that sort to reverse it. Cèilidh, at least in the shape we witnessed it? No, not our cup of tea.

From our tent we hear a few drinking companions continue the party in some nearby meadow. Are you sure that this was stipulated in the regulations, landlord?



However, whatever way you look at it, you cannot deny that Clan MacLeod of Skye - "Harris" has long since disappeared from their name - is at the end of the 20th century still a solid name in Scotland. The embodiment of it remains unaffectedly impressed in Dunvegan Castle, their residence and seat on the banks of the loch with the same name. Anno 2024 the castle is inhabited by *Hugh Magnus MacLeod of MacLeod* (° 1973), 30th chief of the clan, though

there are sharks in the pond claiming the chieftainship, even from far away Australia...

And what about the relation of the clan with the Isle of Skye itself? In the course of the centuries a lot of power and property has been lost, Harris being the most obvious example. Are the MacLeods nonetheless still conflictual, belligerent and violent? If, Dear Reader, I may believe the internet...

"... nowadays 'Dunvegan Castle & Gardens' lie in the heart of a 41,000 acres big estate on the island, with the actual generation of owners concerned about nature conservancy, crofting, farm tenure, wildlife, woodlands, historical monuments, peatland restoration and the maintenance of the SSSI (Sites of Special Scientific Interest)".

And about the organization of cèilidhs, of course...



THE LOST PRIDE OF THE MACNEILS OF BARRA

On Wednesday August 6th 1997, 89th birthday of my father, deceased 4 years earlier, during our very last trip with Bob and Nini all over the Outer Hebrides, we arrive with the ferry from Lochboisdale on South Uist in Castlebay on the Isle of Barra, not for the first time by the way.

It's late in the evening, largely after 10 PM, but everything is still open in this ferry terminal town: shops, tourist information, bars of course. The reason is not the arrival of the ferry, but mainly because of the biennial 'Worldwide MacNeil Gathering'. In days long gone by the Isle of Barra has always been the property of this clan, with the local Kisimul Castle as its seat.

As already mentioned before, the **MacNeils of Barra** belong to the three clans that up to today are still recognized by the authorities, whatever content that title may have. Anyway, some 300 descendants of Clan MacNeil appear to have landed on the island: from Britain itself, from Australia, from America, even from Hawaii.



The MacNeils are a clan you certainly cannot accuse of modesty. The clan claims to descend from the legendary Irish king *Niall Noigilallach*, who already died about 405 CE, and has drawn up a family tree that once split up in a 'northern' and a 'southern branch' ²³.

During medieval times - and this is not a legend! - it is a habit for a herald to announce from the tower of Kisimul Castle the end of dinner of the chief, adding the words...

"... that all princes of the earth are now at liberty to dine".

Admitted, one must have the guts...

Even further back in time, the Deluge approaching, a MacNeil appears to have refused the hospitality of forefather Noah, saying...

"No, thank you, I've got my own boat".

Those were the days, my friend!

More recently in Scottish history *Roderick Dhub ('Black') MacNeil* supports the Jacobite Rising of 1715 and as a result his two sons, *Roderick* and *James*, after an exile in France, are condemned to a prison ship, the *Royal Sovereign*.

²³ Recent DNA tests have shown that they are actually descended from Vikings with often no Irish blood involved at all.

The 18th and 19th centuries mean severe hardship to Clan MacNeil clansmen. During this era there is mass clearance from Barra to Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States. During the chieftainship of *Colonel Roderick Gordon of Cluny* (± 1755-1822), notorious for his inhuman behaviour, Barra suffers its first mass clearances: in August 1802 370 Catholic Barra folk, about 75 families in total, are forced to emigrate to Nova Scotia in Canada.

That day in the summer of 1997, the circumstances are slightly more elegant.

The MacNeil Gathering traditionally takes place in the imposing 'caisteal' (castle), completely surrounded by the 'bagh' (bay). By the way, hence the age-old, now anglicized name of the town: Castlebay.

Caisteal Chiseamail or 'Castle Kisimul' derives its name from the Gaelic 'Cios' (tax) and 'mul' (earthen mound), so it is the place where incoming ships pay toll. According to legend it is already the stronghold of the MacNeils from the 11th century on. The fortress dominates the bay in an imposing way, but history tells us a more prosaic story.

It is namely *Alasdair MacDomhnaill* ('Alexander MacDonald'), *Lord of the Isles*, who only in 1427 donates the Isle of Barra, with the castle, to the MacNeils. It remains their property till 1838, when the clan goes broke and the whole estate comes into the hands of Colonel Gordon of Cluny, the infamous clearer.

It will take exactly 99 years, till 1937, for Barra to become again the property of the MacNeils, no less by the doing of the American architect *Robert Lister MacNeil*, officially 45th chief of the clan. Under his chieftainship Kisimul Castle, since long dilapidated ²⁴, is restored to its former glory. The calendar then shows the year 1970.



In 2000 however, Robert's son, *Ian Roderick MacNeil*, 46th chief, transmits the castle to *Historic Scotland*, based on a 1,000 year long lasting lease, with a yearly rent of 1 (one) pound sterling and... a bottle of whisky. Ian dies in 2010, saddling Historic Scotland with...

"... under pledge (...) to maintain the castle for the generations to come".

In terms of maintenance the MacNeils are freed from an enormously costly castle, but they continue to claim it as their seat, e. g. to organize their gatherings. And at the same time they retain their title "of Barra", which is, to put it straight, nothing else but an empty box.

²⁴ Some of its stones even ended up as paving in Glasgow....

Back to the present now.

Hic et nunc in Castlebay a cèilidh' is held, surprisingly not in the castle as one would expect, but in the town's *Community Hall*. We know what a cèilidh is from our first visit to Scotland 25 years ago then, so we are not very interested.

Even for a few MacNeils the "kaylee-kaylee" hassle is apparently a bit too much of a good event, because they have sought refuge in the pub of the *Craigard Hotel*, where there is also music, very good music by the way: Scottish, Irish, Australian... melancholic songs, beautifully sung and accompanied by a drummer and a melodian player. The pub is packed with enthusiastic locals and we too stay captivated almost till midnight.

From time to time what is probably an American head comes peeping from the lounge, loudly giving appreciating comment and disappearing again to 'the posher place'...



Next morning I go for a breath of fresh air on the ferry terminal. The whole town is still sound asleep. Caused by that kaylee-kaylee?

Then the first Americans make their appearance. One of them comes straight to us, uninvitedly introducing himself, with a handshake anyway. "Hi, Frank Turner, North Carolina, retired general of the forces. You Germans?"

When we tell him that we're Belgians: "And what do you do

in Brussels?"

"We don't do anything in Brussels. We're from Antwerp".

"Antwerp? Never heard of..."

"Never heard of???" Main allied army port in 1944! And you say you're an American general???"

He doesn't react to that. "Sent four sons to West Point. Great guys!"

Barra, Castlebay, the gathering..., it doesn't interest him a damn.

"I'm no MacNeil. Wife is. Ancestors emigrated to the New World about 1700. Okay, let them amuse themselves, no harm done...", expressed with a clear undertone of disdain.

We leave the 'general' in his wisdom and return to our campers.

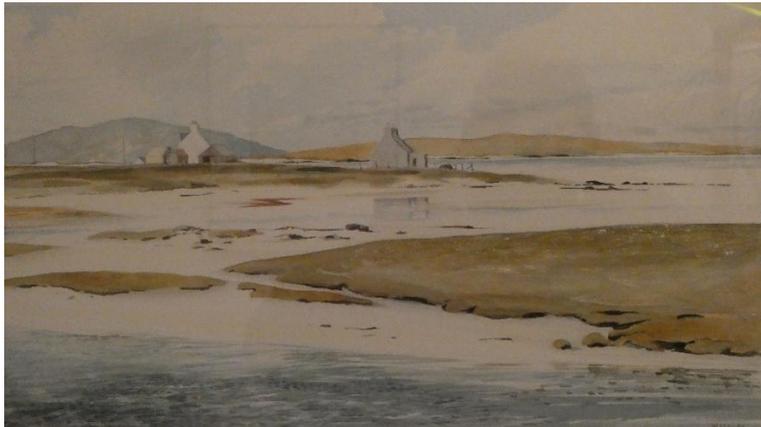
Barra, Castlebay, Kisimul Castle, Clan MacNeil..., they have lived a long and rich history and it leaves me again with a feeling of excitement to be on the spot where it all happened. But what is left of it? An island once the property of a mighty clan, where the clan spirit cannot even be perceived in the majestic interior of an ancestral stronghold, but is only revived by some nostalgic singing in the served out party room of a rather insignificant town...

Nial, where has the pride of your kinsmen gone?



THE VIOLENT WORLD OF THE MACDONALDS OF SLEAT

In the living room of our house in Berchem near Antwerp hangs the reproduction of a watercolour painting by an artist called *William Neill*. It is called "Port nan Long" (Gaelic for 'Harbour of the Ships') and depicts a 'ness' (promontory) on the northernmost point of the isle of North Uist in the Outer Hebrides. The place itself has rather trivially been translated in English as "Newton Jetty", later as "Newton Ferry"²⁵.



We have bought this painting in the summer of 1997, on our very last tour with Bob and Nini over the Outer Hebrides. Why have we purchased this particular picture? Well, there was a very good and even romantic reason for it.



Exactly 25 years earlier, in the summer of 1972, Ingrid and I make our very first big voyage together, to Scotland and to the Hebrides, and one day we pitch our tent precisely on the spot that later will be depicted by William Neill.

It is a beautiful place, with inviting machair²⁶ next to peat dug fields, with the remains of a few thatched cottages. We stay there five full days. When the weather is fine, we

go fishing or collecting cockles and periwinkles, abundantly present on the shore. The rest of our needs we get from a little shop on the other side of the bay which, by the way, you can easily cross when the tide is out, but with utmost caution when you return, because in no time the tide comes in with enormous speed and force.

When the weather is bad, we stay in the tent, read books, enjoy games and play cards or, no one being there to disturb us..., make maddeningly love. Young and wild, you know...

Back to the present.

In 1997 anyway, Newton Ferry is not the place where we buy the painting. That happens way south on The Long Island, in a tiny place called Askernish, endowed with a magnificent beach looking far over the Atlantic.

²⁵ Because indeed a ferry ran between Newton Ferry and the Isle of Berneray, until in 1999 it was replaced by a causeway, opened by *Prince Charles* himself, who for some time had lived as a crofter on the isle. Since then Newton Ferry is renamed "Ottarnish".

²⁶ 'Machair': Gaelic word meaning 'fertile low-lying grassy plain'. It is found on part of the northwest coastlines of Ireland and Scotland, in particular in the Outer Hebrides. The best examples are found on North and South Uist, Harris and Lewis.

When we express our admiration of the scenery to the lady who sells us the painting - William Neill we will never meet - she answers us with a grimace.

"Yes, beautiful it is, but with a cruel history".

And then that story comes...



Back in the early 16th century the MacDonalds of Sleat are once again involved in bitter feuding with the MacLeods of Harris and Skye. One of the clan chief's sons, *Aonghas Dubh* ('Angus Black') has been made prisoner by the MacDonalds. Angus has always been known as a fast runner and one day he is permitted to go for a run on the beach of Askernish. He is namely to be judged by his captors if he can run as well as he could prior to his incarceration and so to be allowed to regain his freedom. He seems to succeed, but is falsely shot in the leg by a MacDonald arrow. The wound is considered incurable and Angus is summarily put to death. All this happens on the beautiful beach of Askernish...

This is only one example of the spirit of violence and lawlessness that for centuries prevails in the ranks of this clan.

Clan MacDonald of Sleat is one of the many branches of *Clann Domhnall* ('Clan Donald') one of the largest of all Scottish clans with seat at Armadale at the peninsula of Sleat in the Isle of Skye. In Gaelic they are also called *Clann Ùisdein* [pronounce "ooshten"], after their founder *Ùisdean* ('Hugh'), the 6th great-grandson of Somerled, the 12th-century Lord of the Isles. Up to today both the clan and its clan chief are recognised by the Lord Lyon King of Arms, who we know as the heraldic authority in Scotland.

Throughout their history the Macdonalds of Sleat participate in several endless feuds with neighbouring clans, e. g. with the *MacLeans of Duart*, but most notably with the MacLeods of Skye and Harris (as recently seen above).

With both sides constantly raiding one another's territories, the feud becomes so vicious that even the common clan folk is profoundly caught up in the middle of the warring parties. Their means of living are reduced to such an extent that finally they are forced to eat dogs and cats to sustain themselves.

Later the MacDonalds make one final strike against the MacLeods, who will consequently lose the possession of Harris.

In the 16th century the clan also suffers from infighting, as the leading members of the clan fight and murder each other and even rape their mutual wives. Stories are known of live men tied up into a sack and thrown into the sea...

Rather surprisingly already in 1625 the MacDonald chiefs are created 'baronet' and in 1776 the 9th baronet for his part is created 'baron'.

In 1739, the 7th baronet is involved in the infamous kidnapping of men and women from Skye and Harris, with the intention of transporting them to the American colonies and

selling them off as slaves. Other prominent men involved are Norman MacLeod, of Skye²⁷, and Donald MacLeod of Berneray.

The clan supports the Jacobite cause in the 1715 rebellion, yet refuses to come out for Bonnie Prince Charlie a generation later in 1745.

By the late 18th century and even till deep into the 19th century, the chiefs, similar to many others, have alienated themselves from their common clansfolk, after having them cleared off their lands. They seat themselves as 'lairds' in northern England and rarely visit the old clan lands. Hence their odious nickname as "absentee landlords".

In 1849, *Godfrey William Wentworth Bosville-MacDonald, Baron MacDonald*, 4th baron and chief of the MacDonalds of Sleat, presides over one of the more notably forced evictions of Highlanders, namely that of Sollas in North Uist.

During the 1830s, tenants had already been cleared from the baron's estates in Skye and during the years 1838 and 1843 1,300 people had been removed from their homes in North Uist, always to be replaced by... sheep.

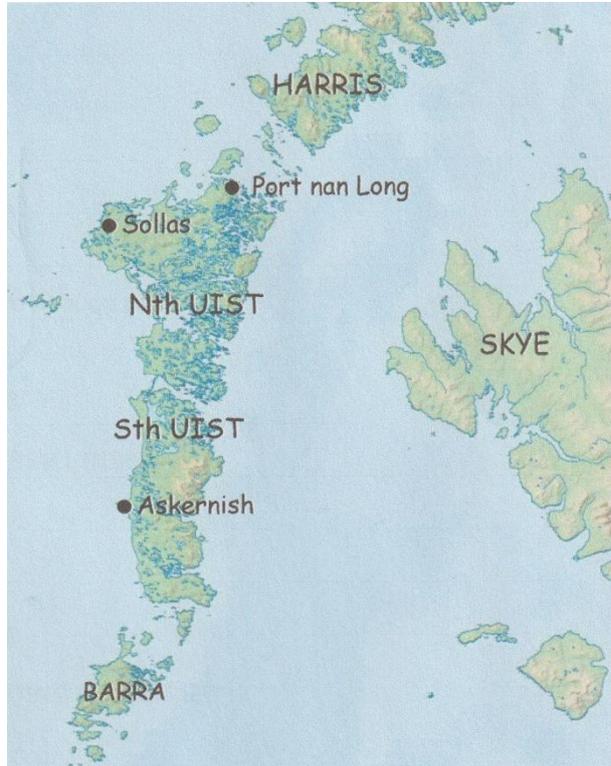
At Sollas, with 700 people involved, rioting breaks out in which the Uist women play a prominent role. Several of the Sollas rioters are arrested and eventually found guilty, yet the jury makes the following written comments afterwards:

"...the jury unanimously recommends utmost leniency and mercy of the Court, in consideration of the cruel, though it may be legal, proceedings adopted in ejecting the whole people of Sollas from their houses and crops without the prospect of shelter, or a footing in their fatherland, or even the means of expatriating them to a foreign one..."

Sollas..., how often have we passed this tiny and quiet township, have run errands, not at all being aware of what once happened here...?

The current chief of Clan MacDonald of Sleat is *Ian Godfrey Bosville-Macdonald of Sleat* (°1947), 17th Baronet and 8th Baron, seated at *Thorpe Hall*, Rudston, East Yorkshire, since the 3rd Baron's eldest son inherited the Bosville estates in the 18th century. So, also in modern times, an "absentee".

The 'heir apparent' is the present holder's only son, *Hon. Godfrey Evan Hugo Thomas MacDonald, Younger of Macdonald* (°1982).



²⁷ See also former chapter 'The Life and Times of the MacLeods of Skye'.

Apparently all is quiet now on the MacDonald front. Anyway, regarding their violent, even cruel history, it remains a question how they managed to become 'acknowledged' as a respectable clan. Maybe because of their loyalty to the English crown, who knows...?



ORKNEY AND SHETLAND

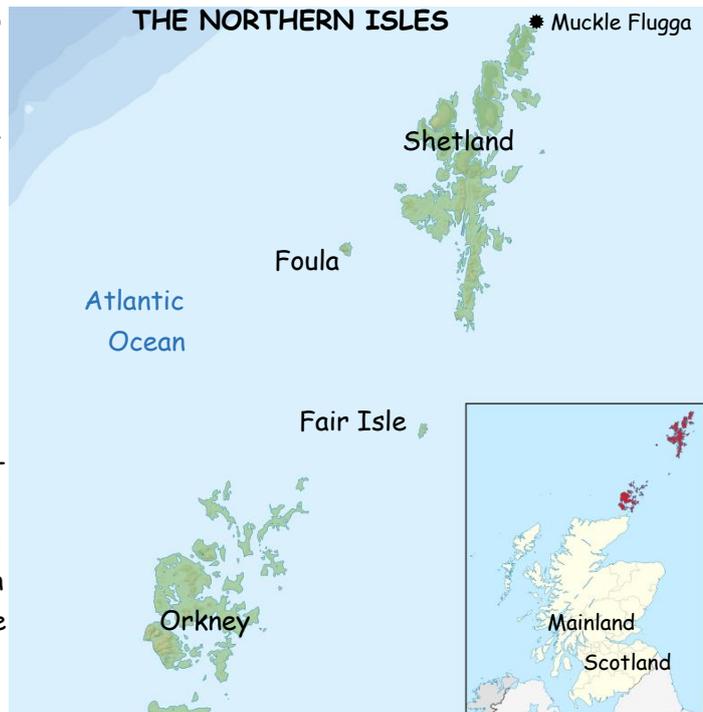
The Northern Isles

First things first. In order not to be stamped as a foreigner, never say "The Orkneys" or "The Shetlands", but just... "Orkney" or "Shetland". The respective inhabitants of The Northern Isles consider their islands as a geographical and cultural unity and not as a random hotchpotch of pieces of rock emerged from the ocean.

That habitation is generally estimated to be 6,000 years old and is derived from successively Neolithic tribes, Celts, Picts, Norsemen and Scots, while in more recent times atmospheric conditions around the isles have supplied new blood: foreign castaways that turn their salvation into permanent residence, it is for all ages.

So till today so-called "Spanish" families have been living on the isles, originating from the Spanish *Armada*, torn to pieces by severe storms around the British Isles in 1588²⁸.

Consequently these isles have a population of very mixed descent and constitute in fact a 'multicultural society' long before the concept was known.



From Pictish to Norse

The Norse era roughly starts in the 9th century, when Norsemen conquer the isles on whom they call "Pettar" (derived from the Roman 'Picti', 'painted ones'), who soon after mysteriously disappear from the scene. It takes not much time for the invaders to colonize all of the Northern Isles.

Information about this does not come from the south of Britain, because Scottish sources, for reasons later in this book to be made explicit, keep completely silent about the Norse 'landnáma' (Icelandic, literally 'land taking') or colonisation.

On the contrary, our knowledge is derived from the *Orkneyinga Saga*, written in Iceland by an author hitherto unknown; it describes meticulously and vividly the lives and deeds of the 'yarls', the sea kings coming from Norway. The Saga covers a period from the first colonisations till the death of king *Harald Maddadsson* in 1206. However, that is not the end of the story, because Norse rule over the islands will spread over more than 650 years. This period is still considered as "the golden age" of the Northern Isles, with their strategic position in a huge North Atlantic Viking Empire, say a kind of *NATO* avant-la-lettre.

Apparently on the Northern - and also on the Western - British isles the landnáma by Vikings from Norway happens less violently than that by Danish Vikings on the east coasts of Britain and in Western Europe. First, there are fewer riches to be found or to rob on these remote islands,

²⁸ See also further chapter 'Spainlanders', p. 83.

often only small outcrops of land in the ocean. On the other hand the soil is fertile and the sea is rich in fish. Rather than massacring the local population, the invaders opt for a relatively more peaceful colonisation with, willingly or unwillingly, an intermingling with the natives, of whatever origin they may be at that time: Celtic, Pictish, Scottish ? Remarkable and at the same time indicative in this context is the fact that, in spite of the high number of newcomers, very few settlements of pure Norse nature have been found. On the contrary, one integrates and assimilates. For instance the immigrants take over the existing manner of housing and pass it on to their descendants. For more than a thousand years, even into the 20th century, the same pattern of housing is maintained: the famous 'longhouses', with in one row connected: stable (with the cattle emitting warmth), living room with fire, sleeping quarter.



At the time of the colonisation the Norsemen come across a Pictish language, the mysterious *Ogham* alphabet; it can be read, but is not understood ²⁹. Very soon however Norn, a derivation of Old Norse, becomes the vernacular. It is now extinct, but until the middle of the 19th century it appears to have been spoken in Unst in Shetland ³⁰.

Anyone in for a little sample from 'Our Father' in Norn? Not so difficult, it resembles English (and other Germanic languages), which is of course linguistically perfectly logical.

*Fyvor o er in Chimeri, halaght vara nam dit (...). Gav vus dagh u dagloght brau.
 Father who is in Heaven, hallowed be your name (...) Give us today our daily bread*

Soon Norn rules all over the Northern Isles. By the way, in the Western Isles, also invaded and colonised by the Norsemen, the linguistic situation is more diversified: as one moves from the north to the south, the influence of Norn diminishes, finally to be replaced by Gaelic as the colloquial language. This happens on more islands and especially on fairly extended parts of northern Mainland Scotland. How do we know this? The answer is quite simple: by toponymy, the study of the placenames (e.g. 'Grimsby', 'Selby', 'Whitby'..., 'by' meaning 'village').

From Norse to Scottish

The way Shetland and Orkney are finally squandered to the Scottish crown is a pretty unconceivable story.

In 1468 *Christian I*, king of Denmark (and shortly of Norway and Sweden) wants to marry off his daughter *Margrete* to the Scottish king *James III*, but to pay the dowry he hasn't two Scandinavian nickels to rub together. What is his solution? Without consulting his *Council of State* (!) he pawns the whole of Orkney and Shetland for 50,000 florins to the Scottish crown. *Margrete* gets her dowry, she marries her James, but Scandinavia once and forever loses its bridgehead to

²⁹ Ogham is an Early Medieval alphabet used primarily to write the early Irish language. There are roughly 400 surviving orthodox inscriptions on stone monuments throughout Ireland and western Britain. The characters are named after various trees so Ogham is sometimes known as the "Celtic tree alphabet".

³⁰ By one *Walter Sutherland*. We visit his farm Skaw in Unst in the summer of 1991.

the West, because the pledge will never be redeemed. The then *Scottish Parliament* doesn't waste any time and four years later it annexes Orkney and Shetland as Scottish territory. The Norse rule over the Northern Isles comes to an end and this for good...

Up to today the matter still rankles with the Norwegian authorities. When in 1967 - thus deep in the 20th century... - Great Britain in a diplomatic memorandum asks...

"... why never had been responded on an offer for peace and friendship dating from 1217..."

... the Norwegian government answers with a wry sense of humour... (translated)

"... that this is completely out of the question, as long as the issue about the statehood of Orkney and Shetland is not settled..."

From Scottish to British

The Scottish era, from 1472 till 1707, can hardly be considered as a new "golden age". Economically the links with Norway are still maintained for about a hundred years, but politically and institutionally the Northern Isles fall more and more under Scottish rule. From 1707 on, with the *Acts of Union*, it is English law that prevails and that means the real end both of Scottish and of what is left of Norse heritage.

The discovery at the end of the 20th century of oil and gas in the waters around this northern archipelago brings some employment and prosperity to the islands, but certainly not to the extent one has hoped for. On the contrary, it rekindles a renewed aspiration for independence.

For Scotland in general and for the islands in particular *Brexit* is a disaster. All European support and subsidies, e. g. for the restoration of little harbours and the modernization of infrastructure - to name only a very few examples - fall away.

Orkney

The origin and the significance of the name "Orkney" greatly remains a mystery. The oldest known name is "Orcas", given by *Pythias of Massilia* (\pm 320 BC)³¹, who is supposed to have seen the archipelago from Dunnet Head, the most northerly point of Mainland Britain. The Roman geographers *Ptolemy* and *Pomponius Mela* (1st century CE) name the islands "Orcades", as does the historian *Tacitus* in 98 CE. A fact is that the biggest of the group, now trivially called "Mainland", is called "Hrossey" ('Horse Island') by the Vikings.



Skara Brae

Orkney consists of 70 islands, of which 18 are inhabited by about 20,000 Orcadians. About 17,000 live on **Mainland**. Thirty years ago 29 islands were still inhabited. **Eday** (\pm 130 inhabitants), **Hoy** (\pm 400), **Rousay** (\pm 220), **Sanday** (\pm 500), **Shapinsay** (\pm 300), **Stronsay** (\pm 350) and **Westray** (\pm 580), to name only a few, are fairly well inhabited and all connected to Mainland by ferries or air lines if necessary. In addition the archipelago counts 85 different breeding bird species and of course an innumerable number of sheep.

³¹ Has he had the occasion to observe orcas, the notorious killer whales?

The most important towns are **Kirkwall**, capital with 8,500 inhabitants, and **Stromness**, ferry gateway to both Mainland Scotland and Shetland, with 2,200.

Orkney is famous for its unusual high number of archaeological sites, ranging from the Neolithic to recent times.

In the tiny isle of **Papa Westray** is located the *Knap of Howar* ('Bulge of Mound'), 5,000 years old and comprising the oldest existing house in Europe. *Skara Brae* (see preceding page) on Mainland for its part is the best preserved house of the stone age.

But those are not the best known ancient monuments of Orkney. *Maes Howe*, 5,000 years old, is the oldest, but most intact burial chamber of Western Europe and even resembles an Egyptian tomb.

Top of the hill is the *Ring of Bro(d)gar*, a stone circle dating from the third millennium BC, followed by its 'brother', the *Stones of Stenness*, probably the oldest henge site in the British Isles.



Ring of Bro(d)gar

The more recently (1st century CE) ingeniously constructed 'broughs' (boroughs, defensive homesteads) of *Birsay* and *Gurness* as sturdy stone watchtowers still guard the straits of Orkney.

Shetland

The Shetland archipelago constitutes the most northerly part of the United Kingdom. At the northeast of the isle of Unst we find a small group of islands called **Muckle Flugga** (from Old Norse 'Mikla Flugey', 'Great Cliffs - or Birds - Island'). The most distant island of this group, 0.4 mile to the east, is the rock **Out Stack** ("Ootsta" in the local dialect). It is nothing more than a barren outcrop³², but it is traditionally thought of as the most northerly point of Britain³³.

The history of Shetland runs as good as parallel with that of Orkney. It is generally estimated that this archipelago is likewise inhabited since the Neolithic, so over a period of 6,000 years. Clear traces of very old housing, well conserved under a thick layer of peat, have recently been found.

The Romans are aware of the existence of Shetland. We know this thanks to good old Tacitus, who in 98 CE mentions "seafaring tribes in Northern Europe". The Romans however never set foot on Shetland, probably scared off by the force of the natural elements.

During a substantial part of historic times the history of Shetland is identical to that of prehistoric times. Till the landnáma by the Norsemen at the beginning of the 9th century that long era is considered as "the dark ages of Shetland", a period in which the mysterious Picts are situated.

³² However connected to a moving story. See further chapter 'Lady Franklin' in 'Remarkable Stories', p. 77.

³³ Strictly spoken not entirely correct: 186 miles north of the St Kilda group in the Hebrides **Rockall**, a desolate outcrop in the Atlantic, is claimed by the United Kingdom as "the full stop at the end of Britain", but this is contested by the Irish Republic.

The Norse invaders call the newly found land "Hjaltland" ('Hilt-of-a-sword-land'), which with a little bit of imagination might refer to the geographical shape of the island. Besides, up to the present day Shetland is still called "Hjaltland" in Iceland.

The Norsemen come across 'brochs' (forts, watchtowers), undoubtedly related to the 'broughs' in Orkney and the 'duns' in the Hebrides ³⁴.



Mousa Broch, Mousa Island

The Shetland archipelago comprises about 100 isles, of which only 15 are inhabited by about 23,000 Shetlanders. The most important part is of course **Mainland** with 17,500 inhabitants. **Muckle Roe**, **Whalsay**, **Bressay** and the more northerly situated islands **Yell**, **Unst** and **Fetlar** count far fewer inhabitants, their number often not exceeding a hundred. The far outlying beautiful isles **Foula** and **Fair Isle** are also inhabited, though in the past their viability has often been jeopardised.

The most important towns are **Lerwick**, capital with about 6,700 residents, **Scalloway**, capital till 1708, with about 1,200, and **Brae** with about 720.

Shetlanders traditionally earn their living from fishing and/or agriculture, mostly sheep farming, with a total of about 80,000 animals and the therefrom arising wool and meat production. Herring fishing, for ages the main economic resource of the islanders, has seriously decreased since the middle of the 20th century.

According to Scottish habits, the farmland is divided in 'crofts', small fenced farming parcels. Farmers practise crofting on their own land, only a few acres in size, and on the 'scattald', the common grazing grounds, mostly poor hilly terrain of low agricultural value.

For many years limited economic perspectives have caused a constant depopulation of the islands. The turning point lies in the middle of the seventies of the previous century, when in the nearby



Bird cliffs at Hermaness Hill, Unst

parts of the North Sea oil is discovered and an oil terminal is built at **Sullom Voe**, a peninsula in the north of Mainland. The construction, between 1975 and 1981, provides employment for 6,000 people. Afterwards gas from sources in the Atlantic will also be stocked in the terminal.

Shetland is renowned for its rich fauna, particularly to be found on **Hermaness** in the isle of Unst. On this most northerly headland of Shetland (with a magnificent view of Muckle Flugga) a large variety of about

³⁴ See further chapter 'Mickey and Minnie Mousa', p. 69.

100,000 seabirds are nesting, breeding, flying, swimming, fishing..., the most spectacular being the gannets and the puffins.



One more time in the history of Shetland the bond with Norway is reconnected, namely in the *Second World War*. Under British supervision Norwegian resistance against the German occupation of Norway is organised from **Lunna House** in northeast Mainland. From the tiny harbour of Lunna, following ancient Viking routes, small fishing vessels sail back and forth between Shetland and Norway, transferring resistance men, weapons and ammunition, setting mines, performing sabotage. By means of this 'shuttle' many threatened Norwegians find a way to freedom. In all this the historic bond between the two countries has played a strong psychological part ³⁵.



³⁵ Described in a captivating book by lieutenant *David Howarth*: 'The Shetland Bus', 1951.

THE HIDDEN SPELL OF SCAPA FLOW

Saturday 29th June 1991, Essen, Belgium, Ingrid's home town. First day of our first big journey with our recently purchased camper van, for obvious reasons baptized "Gulliver".

As the Attentive Reader already knows, as a trial run the year before at Easter we have already travelled through Northern England and Scotland with a hired van, but from now on it's the real stuff, travelling with one's own conveniences. And moreover to Scotland, my heart's destiny !

Exactly ten days later, together with our friends Bob and Nini, we stand at the ferry terminal of **Stromness** on Mainland Orkney. Stromness is a small town, but it is the main gateway to Lerwick in Shetland, 112 sea miles to the north and final destination of our holiday.

We have opted for a night crossing, mainly because of the charm and the excitement of the trip.

Our ferry is the *St Sunniva*³⁶, a slightly old-fashioned but for the same reason still beautiful MV (Motor Vessel). We cast a quick eye on our 'inside 4 berth cabin' and then move immediately to the lounge for the consuming of some alcoholic fluids.

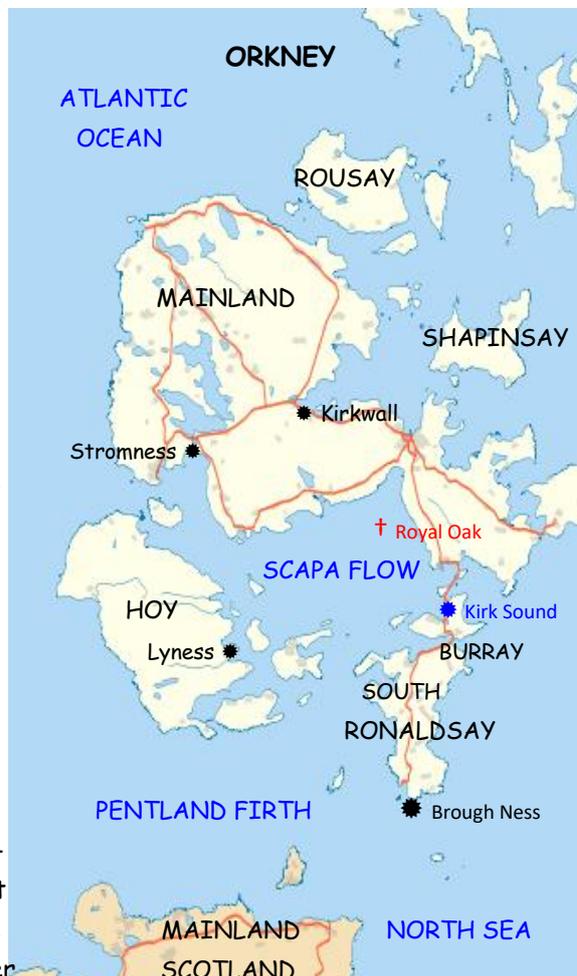
At 10 PM the mooring lines are cast off, the ship leaves the harbour, but to our surprise the captain doesn't take the western passage of the Orkney archipelago, but leads his ship in south-eastern direction through the big Orcadian inland sea called Scapa Flow.

Scapa Flow ! Promptly I aboard *Professor Barra-bas'* magic time machine³⁷ and move back 40 years in time !

From my early childhood I have been fascinated by the name "Scapa Flow". Why? I don't know. By the mystery of the term, the exotism of the sound or the unanswered question of what it might mean?³⁸ Anyway, there must be a reason.

As a child in the years after the Second World War sitting in the company of my father's inner circle - invariably around a bottle of whisky he had brought "from the boats"³⁹ - I have often heard the name drop.

The subject of the then conversations is frequently the war, "the first" as well as "the second". Not surprisingly though, because these men have gone through both of them, one time as children, another as adults or even as soldiers. Next to a lot of other wartime terms and expressions, "Scapa Flow" often turns up. I pretend to be reading a book, but I secretly listen to what is said and I record



³⁶ *Saint Sunniva* is the 10th century female patron saint of all of Western Norway.

³⁷ Regularly appearing in 'Suske en Wiske' ('Spike and Suzy'), a comic book for children.

³⁸ Up to today, no linguist whoever has succeeded in decrypting the significance of this allegedly Old Norse name.

³⁹ But not yet for me...

it all, even not understanding what "Scapa Flow" may mean. It has to do with the war, with water or with the sea, but that is where my knowledge ends. Anyway the sound of it is so beautiful and so mysterious and that must be the reason why I have stored it somewhere in my subconscious. And by Jove, 40 years later we are actually sailing straight through that mysterious water of my childhood days!

Dear Reader, this requires some explanation.

Scapa Flow is now a quiet, almost romantic inland sea of the Orkney archipelago. Quiet indeed, but that has not always been so. How peaceful it may be today, in the course of the latest two centuries Scapa Flow has been just as much the scene of rampant military activity, of fighting and bravery, of drama and bewilderment.

This inland sea gains attention of 'the military' in the days of the so-called *Napoleonic Wars* at the beginning of the 19th century: a sheltered - but vulnerable as well... - bay, with numerous tidal inlets between the surrounding islands. One day it will have consequences...

On the eve of the *Great War* the *British Department of the Admiralty* decides to make the bay its base for the *Home Fleet*, meant as defence against the *German Hochseeflotte* that is continually patrolling around the archipelago.

However, both flotillas get through the war virtually intact, because apart from the (inconclusive) *Battle of Jutland* in 1916, no big naval battles have been fought.

At the armistice of November 11th 1918, 8 months before the official conclusion in the *Treaty of Versailles*, the *German Empire* is already judged to have lost the war. It is compelled to a complete disarmament, with the 72 ships of the *Hochseeflotte*, among which the greatest and the most modern, to be laid up in the waters of... Scapa Flow.

For the *Orcadians*, on their islands living a life in which hardly anything happens, this is an event never ever seen before. Boat excursions and school trips to the ships are organized, an unexpected source of income. For the *German skeleton crews* on the other hand life on board is pure hell: they are neither allowed to go on land, nor to visit their comrades on the other ships. They are far from home, it is winter, it is freezing cold, the food is awful, they haven't got the slightest distraction or entertainment...

On June 21st 1919, after 230 days of endless waiting and also a period during which they realize that the *German case* is lost and that in the *Vaterland* revolution is in the air, the joint crews, with the approval of vice-admiral *Ludwig von Reuter*, decide to scuttle the ships. This is also according to the order of *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, "that not a single Imperial ship should ever fall in the hands of the enemy".

At exactly 12.16 PM the first plug valves are opened, the beginning of what will become a *Dantean spectacle*, loudly applauded by the crews in their lifeboats. In the commotion of the happening though nine *German sailors* lose their lives.



For the Orcadians the scene of what has already become familiar to them changes dramatically: 72 vast ships, following a systematic, almost mathematical scheme, disappear in the depths of "the Flow". They can't believe their eyes. School children on an excursion are thrilled because they think it is all set up for them, an amateur painter sees his subject disappear in the waves before his brush can fix it on the canvas, a coffin in a funeral cortege is left alone in the road, all mourners having hastened to the shore.

Exactly a week later, on June 28th 1919, the Treaty of Versailles is concluded. The German Empire is designated as the instigator and therefore the unconditional loser of the Great War, a disastrous accord agreed over by the winners. It will have catastrophic consequences for the whole of Europe and for the world...

And that is probably one of the themes my father and his friends were talking about, with me secretly listening but not understanding...

In the course of the year 1924 the English start salvaging the wrecks, once built with high-grade German steel. Fifteen years later, in 1939, 65 ships are salvaged. The 7 remaining will never be brought to the surface. Nowadays, lying at low depth, they serve as a recreation ground for divers.

Moreover, in these late thirties the Admiralty has other matters to be concerned about.

Back to the present now.

The St Sunniva having left the harbour of Stromness all passengers retire to the lounge, for rest, for leisure, for food and drinks or for a combination of all this. Bob and I however head for the stern of the ship for the view and we will stay there as long as the St Sunniva softly cuts through the Flow, until cape Brough Ness will be taken and the captain will be heading straight north.

It's midsummer, the days are long, here in the north even extra-long and the weather is fine. Different coloured clouds and a setting sun produce an ever varying view on the firmament. These circumstances, combined with the course of the ferry along the smaller isles of the Orkney archipelago, turn the voyage into an enthralling experience. But above all prevails the feeling to pass through a place that has remained in my memory since my childhood, the excitement to sail over an iconic piece of history that literally lies only a few hundred feet under



one's feet. For me the passage of the Flow on the stern of the St Sunniva that night will remain one of the most moving experiences in all our visits to the Scottish islands.

Besides, the story of Scapa Flow does not end here. So let's move back to the past.

In the run-up to the Second World War Scapa Flow is once more designed as the home base for the Royal Navy, this in spite of those who do not stop pointing at the strategic danger of the many open sea channels to both the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. In these 'sounds' old wrecks have been sunk, but in the course of time these have been

scattered and torn to pieces by erosion and storms. When on September 1st 1939 war breaks out Scapa Flow presents itself as a willing young maiden of pleasure, legs open wide...

And indeed, the inevitable happens. In the night of October 13th 1939 'Kaleun' (Kapitän-Leutnant) *Günther Priem* leads his U-47 submarine with extreme caution through Kirk Sound, the strait between East-Mainland and Lamb Halm. As soon as having entered the Flow, he fires several torpedoes to the *HMS Royal Oak*, a veteran battleship of the Battle of Jutland. She sinks within 13 minutes, taking along with her into death a crew of 833. Since then the ship lies at a depth of 98 feet and can clearly be spotted from the air. It is declared an official seaman's grave and may not be approached by divers.

As quickly as he has entered the Flow Priem disappears in the open sea. From a military point of view, his act is evidence of great bravery, but from a human stance...?

Priem is received by *Hitler*, is awarded the 'Eisernes Kreuz' ('Iron Cross'), writes a book, 'Mein Weg zu Scapa Flow' ('My Way to Scapa Flow'), but in March 1941 near Iceland he will be deep sea bombed to Kingdom Come.



At the Admiralty at long last the penny drops! By order of *Winston Churchill* all small sounds of the Flow will be closed with causeways, the so-called "Churchill Barriers", so as for ever to connect Lamb Holm, Glimps Holm, Burray and South Ronaldsay with Mainland Orkney. The work will be carried out by Italian prisoners of war, who actually build a place of worship with the remains of their material: 'The Italian Chapel'.

Before embarking on the *St Sunniva* we have already made an exploration tour of Orkney, also of the malicious, now closed Kirk Sound. To sail in and out Scapa Flow unharmed, having only a few inches of space left, this blighted Priem really performed a nautical masterpiece, one cannot deny that. Do I have any admiration for that? Not at all! Amazement? Yes! However, for the sake of historical sincerity I am obliged to mention this bold venture objectively.

For the invasion of Norway, meant to start from Scapa Flow at the beginning of the war, the allied forces come too late. Consequently the inland sea will only be used as a base of operations for the guidance of convoys from Iceland to Murmansk, the so-called "suicide run", as the words already imply an enormously risky enterprise involving huge human and material losses.

In 1957 the Admiralty closes Scapa Flow as a naval base. Its military function is taken over by tourism, in particular by scuba diving. Anyway, the scarcely ecological evidence of the longstanding military presence is still blatantly visible, for instance at the former jetty at *Lyness Naval Headquarters* in the isle of Hoy (see picture next page).

The base, and at the same time the whole of Orkney, have always been hated and cursed by the soldiers who were stationed there. Only one example, dating from the Second World War, by one captain *Hamish Blair* (who anyway later denied to have written 'The Bloody Orkneys'):

*This bloody town's a bloody cuss.
No bloody trains. No bloody bus.
And no-one cares for bloody us
in bloody Orkney.*

*The bloody roads are bloody bad.
The bloody folks are bloody mad.
The brightest make you bloody sad
in bloody Orkney.*

*All bloody clouds and bloody rains.
No bloody kerbs. No bloody drains.
The Council's got no bloody brains
in bloody Orkney.*



*Everything's so bloody dear.
The bloody seats are bloody cold.
And is it good? No bloody fear
in bloody Orkney.*

*The bloody films are bloody old.
A bloody bob for bloody beer.
You can't get in for bloody gold
in bloody Orkney.*

*The bloody dances make you smile.
The bloody band is bloody vile.
It only cramps your bloody style
in bloody Orkney.*

*No bloody sport, no bloody games.
No bloody fun. The bloody dames
won't even give their bloody names
in bloody Orkney.*

*Best bloody place is bloody bed
With bloody ice on bloody head.
You might as well be bloody dead
in bloody Orkney.*

Not very nice - to use a euphemism - towards a population that is generally known for its hospitality, which they appear also to have expressed towards soldiers and sailors then present in their isles.

The St Sunniva rounds Brough Ness, Bob and I return to our 'bunks' and I fall immediately asleep, finally satisfied to have found the answer to one of the big questions of my youth.



THE DRAMATIC MAGIC OF FETHALAND

July 15th 1991.

On the same trip as described in the former chapter, the MV St Sunniva, after having completed the passage of Scapa Flow and the crossing to Shetland, has put us ashore in **Lerwick**, capital of the archipelago.

Our final destination is Muckle Flugga and Hermaness on Unst, with its hundreds of thousands of birds, but on that specific 15th we are only about halfway, namely exploring the Northmavine peninsula at Northern Mainland Shetland. Always looking for the unknown and the undiscovered (at least by us...), we are following a dead-end road, rather a track, all the way down to another peninsula, **Fethaland**.

We reach *Isbister Farm*, still carrying its Old Norse name of 'House by the waterfall'. The road used to end here and so it is still marked on the Ordnance Survey map, but with the arrival of a fully automatic lighthouse built by the government in 1977, a new road now leads to the very end of the peninsula. The road is on private ground, but farmer *Douglas Murray* makes no objection for us to continue on it "as long as you take no dogs with you, the sheep, you know. And stay in the car, there's a nasty bull outside".

Only one look at the farm is enough to be convinced that the Murrays live a life of gypsies, but as most Shetlanders they are very kind.

We leave *Gulliver* at the farm ground and we all mount in Bob and Nini's VW-Joker. Anyway, after having passed the indeed nasty looking bull, we leave the Joker also behind and continue on foot. Having arrived in sight of **Point of Fethaland** I have to continue all by my lonesome; the women take a rest and Bob concentrates on his photography.

A last hill to be taken and then in front of me discloses the former and long since deserted fishing settlement of **Fethaland Village**, lying on a promontory between two bays of the Atlantic.

The suggestion to go for this godforsaken place was deliberately mine, because I had already read about Fethaland and I had felt it in my bones that a visit would be captivating.

Fethaland in very remote days is probably founded by Vikings or by their descendants as a 'haaf fiske by', an 'open sea fishing village'. Scandinavian indeed, because the name 'Fethaland' is Old Norse and means 'Fat Land', so fertile soil.



The boats used are invariably the so-called "sixareens" (from the Old Norse "sixæring"), wooden barges equipped with six oars, sometimes with a sail, in fact nothing more but ordinary... rowing boats. For the crews, invariably six men, it means uninterrupted trips of 48 hours, without sleep and living on a ration of oatmeal, cookies and water. The remaining part of the year the fishermen become crofters.



Haaf fishing is really a chancy business, not to say extremely dangerous, so catastrophes will happen: in only one storm in 1832 17 boats and 105 fishermen perish. At one go Fethaland Village is without menfolk ! In 1881 again: 10 boats and 58 men...

Some sixareens end in Norway, others are picked up by ocean steamers. These crews have been lucky, but sometimes it takes them more than a year to get back home, where they appear as unrecognizable spectres.

On top of all that comes the fact that the fishermen, in a wrongly understood respect for the sea, refuse to learn to swim, because...

"The sea gives and takes; you should not defy her by trying to master her..."

... and due to their strict Presbyterian faith...

"The Lord did not make man to live as fish..."

Yes...

In some old villages in Shetland the graveyards have only women's and children's tombs, all the men having died at sea...

The fishermen-crofters work for a 'laird', a local landowner, mostly descending from a former clan chief and not necessarily a nobleman. The fishing lines (sometimes more than 6 nautical miles long !), the hooks and the bait are their only property; everything else, abode, land, boats... belongs to the laird. The men prefer to risk their lives in a storm, rather than to cut their lines, their sole hope for a good catch.

The laird determines the prices and what he pays out in wages is to be spent in the shops that belong... to the laird. Of those who have chosen to go and work in the much better paid whaling business the family is heavily fined.

One example of the harshness of the lairds and of the many notorious 'clearances':

In Fetlar *Lord Arthur Nicolson* (1794-1863) is notorious for having put to fire the houses of his crofters, to have compelled them to build with the remaining stones a mile long wall around his sheep pasture and finally to have put his former 'subjects' on a ship with unknown destination. Up till today the construction is known as "the wall of shame" and the Nicolson name is doomed in Fetlar.

In this same year 1991 we visit Fetlar, walk the endless long wall and stay with our campers at the jetty of *Brough Lodge*, the now deserted and derelict sombre mansion of the Nicolsons. The latest news is that it is put for sale for only £ 30,000, but with an estimated renovation cost of £ 12 million. Anyone for a doomed dwelling?

Christian Pløyen, the Danish government representative in the Faeroe Islands, after a visit to Shetland and Fethaland (1839) reports ⁴⁰ :

"I went into several of the huts and asked leave to look how they were furnished, and I was received by these poor hardy fellows with the utmost civility. The whole was like a great ship, for there were none present but weather beaten seamen, not a woman was to be seen in the hamlet. (...) You will find nothing but some beds made of rude boards, nailed together, containing straw and coarse blankets. On some of these lay men, thrown themselves down in their clothes and enjoyed sweet sleep."

In the same report, about the abuse of exploitation:

"From this wretched state of dependence, from which the Shetlanders are unable to extricate themselves, it follows that as a body they are poor, often miserably so; whilst the landlords live in luxury, and the whole profit of the skill and the industry with which the fishing is carried on falls to the rich, the toil and danger to the poor."

About 150 years later I follow Pløyen's example and in my turn I enter the now stripped dwellings of the descendants of the once so proud Vikings, then fallen to a state of utmost misery. I had already read about it, but that knowledge, linked to my physical presence on the spot is of such a kind as to touch me into my deepest and finest fibres.



After the 1881 disaster the chancy haaf fishing largely comes to an end. Other fishermen and modern fishing companies arrive with better boats and more advanced techniques. Foreign trawlers have discovered the rich fishing grounds of the waters around Shetland and practise deep sea and later also bottom fishing with enormous nets. The fish stock becomes decimated, not to mention the damage caused to the environment.

Fethaland is vacated. The last family to leave is exactly that of the Murrays who exchange Fethaland Village for Isbister Farm in 1944 and hereby conclude a settlement history of more than 1,000 years.

Full of feelings of nostalgia about the historical knowledge of this place as well as of the actual acquaintance with it, I return to my fellow travellers. I mustn't count on any understanding for my feelings, I know that. Ingrid is maybe interested in these matters, but she is seldom moved. Nini

⁴⁰ *'Reminiscences of a Voyage to Shetland, Orkney & Scotland in the Summer of 1839'*, translated by Catherine Spence,

has an outright dislike for history and social stories, the only one who shows some interest is Bob, but possibly he acts so to do me a favour.

I am often laughed at, be it in a good-natured way, for my discovery of an old smugglers' path, my interest in an old road or my excitement to walk a dismantled railroad. These places are then void of any sign of life, but were once thriving and vibrant, with, who knows, histories of human misery or, in the best case, of some happiness.

What do you call such an obsession? Simply an obsession? Or, more professionally, "psycho-mental archaeology"? My spouse has devised a better name, though not to be found in professional psychological literature: "the St Kilda syndrome", after maybe the best place on earth to exemplify this.

St Kilda is an archipelago lying about 40 miles west of the Outer Hebrides and therefore the remotest of all British isles. It consists of four islands of which only one, Hirta, has ever been inhabited (photo 1886). The necessary clearing of the population in 1930 was one of the most dramatic evacuations in the history of the Hebrides.



The origin of the name is a mystery, mainly because we haven't any knowledge of the existence of a saint with that name. Possibly it is a bastardisation of the Old Norse "Skildir" ('Shields'), meaning a natural wall of the Hebrides against the tempests of the Atlantic.



I am fascinated by St Kilda, because it has a captivating history ⁴¹ and it is also, as the descriptions read in Britain, "a place of exceeding natural beauty". Anyway, it is very difficult to get there and in all our voyages to Scotland we never succeeded to do so. St Kilda will for ever remain an unrealizable dream...

So we walk back and thankfully take leave of the Murray family.

Nine years later, in the summer of 2000, on our very last visit to Shetland, our ways lead us again to Fethaland. The Murrays are still alive and kicking, but also more native than ever ⁴².

Again we leave the camper at the farm. Ingrid stays in it, reading. I myself engage in my last walk

⁴¹ I may probably be in possession of all the books that ever have been written about St Kilda.

⁴² Only today, 25 years after our last visit, I discover on Wikipedia (item 'Fethaland') a short recording of Douglas Murray himself as a narrator of former life in Fethaland Village.

to Fethaland Village, back and forth about 6 miles long. The place hasn't changed a bit and still exerts that same magic feeling on me. 3½ hours later I'm back, happy to have been allowed to enjoy for the last time in my life one of the most fascinating land's ends in the British Isles.

Since 1994 Fethaland is registered as "Scheduled Monument" as part of the *Shetland National Scenic Area*. It is also a *Site of Special Scientific Interest*.

All for the best, I hope, as long as they don't ask an admission fee, build a Visitors' Centre or plop down a series of food trucks...



MICKEY AND MINNIE MOUSA

In the summer of 2000, during our very last voyage to Orkney and Shetland, we pass for the second time by **Mousa**. This tiny little island is situated on the eastern coast of Shetland across from the hamlet of Leebitten near Sandwick, village notable for the former existence of a 19th century copper-mine.

In terms of Shetland hustle and bustle it is fairly crowded here, but this is in fact not surprising: the island takes pride in one of the best known archaeological sites of the archipelago, namely Mousa Broch. Daily in the tourist season short boat trips set out from Sandsayre Pier to Mousa to bring people to the broch and to show them a big colony of seals that have chosen the island as their home.



But before we go on, Curious Reader, you must of course be informed of what a 'broch' is.

A **broch** (in Orkney 'brough', from the Old Norse 'borg'⁴³) is a round stone tower mostly about 32 feet high and completely built with the traditional drystone technique, so without a single crumb of mortar, a primitive architectonic masterpiece, fact that cannot enough be emphasized⁴⁴.

Brochs stem from the Iron Age (1st century BC and 1st century CE) and are exclusively situated in the Orkney-Shetland archipelagos and in Caithness in the north of Mainland Scotland. Originally Scotland must have had 200 of them, but some archaeologists determine no less than... 579 places where brochs may have been erected⁴⁵.

Especially in Orkney and Shetland brochs appear in pairs on either shores of a bay or a strait, what probably points at a guarding and defensive function.

It is generally estimated that the brochs, about four hundred years after their construction, exchange their defensive role for a residential one. It is also assumed that in the 6th and the 7th centuries Picts settle in, or build houses with the remains of derelict brochs. In the 9th century the first Vikings, before building their own 'long houses', occupy them in the same way.

In spite of their 'young' age, much about brochs is shrouded in mystery. That is the main reason why people are left intrigued, not only about their history and their purpose, but particularly about the precision with which the brochs are built, as mentioned before: as a wonder of early technology.

Similarly brochs have always been a landmark of the Hebrides, but there they are called "duns" (also meaning 'fortress'), which is at the same time the name for fortifications of

⁴³ Also appearing in modern Germanic languages as "borough" (English), "Burg" (German), "burcht" (Dutch), "borg" (Danish, Norse and Swedish) and even romance "bourg" (French), all originally meaning 'fortress'.

⁴⁴ Eric Linklater and Liv Kjærsvik Schei & Gunnie Moberg write interesting pages about Mousa Broch and its builders.

⁴⁵ It must have been quite a job to arrive exactly at that number...

all kind. Anyway, the origin, the function, the technique..., in brief the mere existence of the Scottish brochs, broughs and duns remains a constant matter of interest, research and discussion in archaeological circles.

The most beautiful and almost completely intact construction is that of **Mousa Broch**.

Hardly any native timber being available, the tower is built with small locally quarried stone, measures 43.6 feet in height, about 50 feet in diameter on the ground and about 40 at the top. The exterior part consists of a double wall enclosing a circular staircase that is lighted by open 'windows' from within, and which leads to several galleries.



At the bottom a number of stone cells provides lodgings and storage cupboards. A natural water source springs from the floor, of vital importance in times of danger; so brochs are almost always found on top of a well. In this way the broch builders, using limited means, succeed in creating a livable and safe dwelling.

The exterior appearance is downright remarkable: the batter of its outer wall gives the structure what is called "an ogee curve", which results in an unusual and surprising elegance.

So Mousa broch, though a bit decapitated, is simply... perfect. And there is more: Mousa Broch is, not surprisingly, part of a twin. More about that in a second...

Sandsayre 'Harbour' remains invariably crowded, the *Mousa Express* continuously conveying tourists back and forth.

We have been on Mousa before, have seen it all, the broch and the seals, so we leave the bustle, but not instantly the area. I want to see a place that almost nobody ever visits, namely **Burriland**, at the mainland side of Mousa Sound. That was once the location of Burriland Broch, the proud twin brother of Mousa Broch.

To reach the place you first have to cross the 236 feet high **Ward of Burriland** and how humble this guarding hill may be, it offers you a magnificent wide panorama, not only of Mousa Sound and Broch, but also of what is left of Burriland Broch itself.



Although dilapidated, with the stones widely scattered around, **Burriland Broch** still stands to a height of 12 feet, occupies a position of great natural strength and has therefore kept something of its former majesty.

Moreover, its overall ground diameter of 55 ft crowns the broch to the widest of all brochs all over Scotland.

Outbuildings are grouped round the broch, particularly on the south, but these are now so ruinous that their general lay-out is very largely obscured.

"Two intact majestic brochs as guardians of Mousa Sound, it must have been a grandiose view in those days", I cannot withhold my amazement.

"Yes", Ingrid stoically replies, "Mickey and Minnie Mousa...".

"Quite appropriate !", I cannot else but consent. Moreover, as a kid I was a fan of Mickey and Minnie comic strips...

But it is not only the presence of the brochs that keeps our attention going. In days not so long ago this area has been the scene of another rich as well as socially dramatic history.

In 1888 at **Hoswick**, west of Sandwick, a school of more than 300 'caain' (pilot) whales is driven ashore and killed. In Shetland the hunt for these mammals has never reached the notorious cruel level that is so typical for the 'grindadrop' in the Faeroes. Here it has always had a rather social function, namely a mark of resistance against the laird, who is owner of the coast and who can put a claim on all catches coming from the sea.

Normally, except in most need, Shetlanders never eat whale. The whales caught at Hoswick are kept by the local population for their oil, a welcome bonus on their poor income.

Brought to court by the laird the crofters win their case, not only against the laird himself, but also against the church, which - as always - had chosen the laird's side and had even claimed part of the 'loot'.

The end of the 19th century is a period of changing times, an era also when the authorities begin to show understanding for the needs of the poor, especially the crofters. In fact it is all too late, but it is the 1886 *Crofters Holdings Act* that finally brings legal rights and protection to a population class that has much too long been deprived of it and has been taken advantage of by the rich and the powerful.

We turn back to the car, passing by the nearby highly ruined **Burriland Township**, also one of the many cleared communities in Shetland. It must clearly having been built with the stones of the dilapidated broch, but it has much faster fallen to ruin than the tower itself. Cows have taken possession of the places where once creatures of flesh and bone have tried to earn a living of whatever kind...

Burriland, even with its forlorn township, appears once again as one of those beautiful corners of Shetland, but those who are aware of the living



Burriland Township

conditions in the former crofter-fisherman communities know that the romantic picture is only a cover-up for a very tough life, holding more miserable than happy moments.

Burrland is not as desolate as Fethaland, but the circumstances are similar and invariably lead to the same impressions of melancholy and nostalgia, the feelings that perfectly converge with the writings of Eric Linklater.

Mickey and Minnie Mousa..., the perfect couple to say farewell to on our very last tour in Shetland.



REMARKABLE STORIES

Rocket Post

Scarp is a tiny (2582 ac) rocky island west of the village of **Husinish**, only consisting of four houses, on the Hebridean island of Harris. At the end of the 19th century it is inhabited by 213 crofters, coming from nearby cleared Harris, working the few pieces of arable land. In 1971 the last crofters leave the island for good.

Tiny and insignificant, but nevertheless in 1934 Scarp is the scene of a remarkable experiment. One may wonder what for heaven's sake a foreigner hopes to find on this godforsaken rocky outcrop, but one *Gerhard Zucker*, a German no less, thinks to have found the solution to break the isolation of the then 100 souls counting population of Scarp. In fact, not only storms and other natural tempests prevent the contact of the Scarp folk with the outside world, moreover there is no telephone connection and the postal service for the island is as good as non-existent.

Zucker designs - and in those years you must indeed be a German to devise this... - a rocket, including a capsule designed to contain letters, parcels and other not too bulky goods that literally can be shot to the 'mainland', in this case Harris.

The idea gets widely known and rouses great excitement all over Britain. The *General Post Office* issues a special stamp, obviously only to be used on the island itself. "Rocket Mail" is born !

A first shipment contains 3,000 letters, some addressed to the *King* and the *Prime Minister*, a few parcels and even a bottle of cod-liver oil. On July 28th 1934 Zucker launches his first rocket. It... explodes, spreading his content half burned over the beach of Scarp. However, Zucker is not deterred, he perseveres with a second and a third try, each time equally disastrous...

Nobody happy, except stamp collectors because of the uniqueness of the postmarks. Apparently fragments of the rocket, together with shreds of the letters, are still to be seen in a local museum.

Utterly disappointed Zucker returns to Germany, where first he is arrested on suspicion of cooperating with the British, but later employed by the Nazis in the construction of their noto-rious 'Vergeltungswaffen' (V-weapons). Consequently, not Harris, but London, Antwerp and other European cities will receive 'rocket post' in the oncoming war.

After World War II Zucker obstinately continues his rocket experiments until, at a demonstration on May 7th 1964 in the Harz, an accident occurs. Zucker remains unharmed, but three other people are kil-led, which is the very end of his rocket dream.



In 2006 on the nearby isle of **Taransay** (uninhabited since 1974) *Stephen Whittaker* shoots a film on the whole experiment, 'The Rocket Post', with the Danish actor *Ulrich Thomsen* as Zucker.

On July 28th 1992, exactly 58 years after Zucker's first launch, we stand with our campers on the slipway of the village of Husinish. We have a broad and beautiful view of Scarp, but are hopelessly waiting for post that apparently will never arrive...

Hebridean soil in Paris

Tobha Mòhr ('Great Spring', 'Howmore' in English) on South Uist in the Outer Hebrides was in times long gone by an ecclesiastical centre from which Christianity spread all over The Long Island.

Today only the romantic ruins of a church, a chapel and a graveyard are all that is left of what once was an important religious place, quite remarkably Roman Catholic as well as Presbyterian ! Indeed, the Church of Scotland never reached the southern part of the Outer Hebrides; the "border line" so to say between the two beliefs has always been lying between South Uist (Catholic) on one side and Benbecula (Presbyterian) on



Howmore former religious centre nowadays

the other. At the time of the Reformation Howmore turned to Protestantism, though 95% of the population of South Uist remained Roman Catholic.

The present *Howmore Church*, built in 1858, is one the few churches in Scotland with a central Communion table , which is, according to experts, "unique". The church is white-harled and used as a landmark by fishermen off the west coast.

However, before we move to our remarkable story, I want to report a far more tragic event.

The nearby **Caisteal Ormacleit** ('Ormaclett' or even 'Ormicate Castle' in English) once was the seat of *Clan MacDonald of Clanranald*, till it burnt down because of venison having taken fire in the kitchen.

In 1838, due to mounting personal debts, *Reginald George MacDonald* (1788-1873), 20th chief of the Clanranalds, an educated and civilized landlord, is obliged to sell the whole of Benbecula, South Uist and Barra to *Colonel John Gordon of Cluny* (1776-1858) from *Cluny Castle* in Aberdeen.

In 1851 Gordon forcibly evicts up to 3,000 people from their Hebridean homes, some handcuffed and even beaten, casting them as cattle on boats to Canada. Gordon's former tenants later claim that earlier made promises of work and even land in the new country were never fulfilled. In literature, the Colonel is described as "one of the richest Commoners in Scotland", but at the same time as "the most hated man in Scottish history" ⁴⁶.

When travelling in the Outer Hebrides one cannot help but pass by this place, and we did so, even several times. Howmore, Ormacleit and their wide surroundings are now places of beauty, peace

⁴⁶ Please consult on the internet 'John Gordon of Cluny - Celtic Life International' and be abhorred by the deeds of this horrible man.

and quiet and this is perhaps the best occasion to report the other and more peaceful story that is connected with them.

When a few years ago in France, in particular in our Gascon holiday village of Fourcès, I started digging in local history, I was met by a remarkable phenomenon in the field of name-giving. It appeared that in the 19th and even still in the beginning of the 20th century a lot of new-born boys were given the first name of "MacDonald" (or "Magdonald"): "MacDonald Duffour", "MacDonald Castandet", "Magdonald Labitte" etc.

A purely Scottish name, a first name no less, in the hearth of Occitan France, how could that be possible !? Well, there is a link, be it quite remarkable.

All these "Macdonalds" appear to have been named after a very popular marshal of Napoleon's army, namely *Jacques Étienne Joseph Alexandre MacDonald* (1765-1840), born in Sedan in a Scottish family, with direct paternal roots in - yes! - Howmore in South Uist. His father even helped Bonnie Prince Charlie to flee to France after the defeat at Culloden.

But how come that a purebred Hebridean islander appears in a French army, you will wonder, Curious Reader? The reason is quite simple: throughout European history the Scots have always been eager to play the English a nasty trick. As easy as blinking...

Maréchal MacDonald is buried at *Père-Lachaise* in Paris, shrouded in a garment of earth originating from... Howmore.

Now isn't that a beautiful story?

Though..., it remains quite difficult to imagine a kitchen scene in which Maman calls her fils to sit down for dinner with the words:

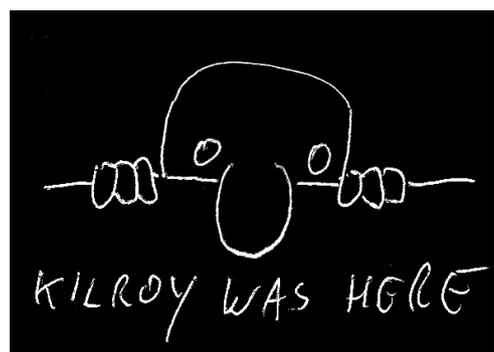
"Viens, MacDonald, viens manger ta soupe!"

Orkason was here

Dear Reader, do you still remember *Kilroy*?

In the eighties of last century you couldn't enter a pub toilet or you were confronted with the meme "Kilroy was here". Not only "here" by the way, because Kilroy was just everywhere, in about all toilets of the western world and apparently not only in the eighties, but in military circles even already during World War II.

For decades innumerable guesses and assumptions have been made to figure out the identity of the mysterious toilet artist, but without the slightest result. Nonetheless, a person with the name of *James. J. Kilroy* (1902-1962), an American shipyard inspector, has really existed. Was he the first to leave his signature after yet another inspection? Either way, "Kilroy" became, and maybe still is, a world-wide icon, but... the author wasn't the first in graffiti history.



I already mentioned the archaeological richness of Orkney. One of the numerous monuments present on Mainland is the big grassy knoll of which the contours are so regular that it can only have been built by human hands: I mean Maes Howe.

Maes Howe (Old Norse for '.....? Hill') is one of the largest Neolithic tombs in Orkney, the mound encasing the tomb measuring 115 feet in diameter and its height rising to 24 feet. It is probably built around 2900 BC and hence dating back to the same era as the stone circles of Bro(d)gar and Stenness, not by chance situated nearby.



It contains a burial chamber that shows a remarkable resemblance with similar tombs of Egyptian pharaohs, so it was probably meant to hold an important person.



The tomb itself is finished with incredibly meticulous precision: the 30 ft long entry is built with flat blocks each weighing 3 tons between which it is impossible to enter even a potato peeler blade.

But there is more...

Maes Howe is being excavated in 1861 and the then archaeologists do not only discover the

(empty) tomb, but also some 30 runic inscriptions dating from the 12th century and very probably to be attributed to Vikings.

Indeed, according to the Orkneyinga Saga here Vikings would have looked for shelter from a long-lasting storm and would have passed their time by engraving... memes, graffiti, intrinsically not much differing from our modern toilet inscriptions.

One of the series of engravings, obviously from the hand of one *Orkason* - because the Normans call the hill "Orkahaugh" - goes as follows:



ÞISAR RUNAR RIST SA MAÐR ER RUNSTR FYRIR UAESTAN HAF

These runes carved the man(who) is the best for the western ocean
rune-carver

Not devoid of some complacency, our rune-carver, don't you think...?

Finally, would Kilroy have been aware of the existence of a 1,000 year old predecessor? Anyway...

Orkason was here !

Lady Franklin

Sir John Franklin (1786-1847) is a British naval officer and explorer who is fascinated by the search of the so-called "Northwest passage", the nautical link between the Atlantic and the Pacific Ocean through the Arctic.

In 1845, during his third attempt to find the passage, his expedition gets trapped in the ice near King William Island (now Nunavit) in Canada. Nobody survives the undertaking: Franklin dies the first in 1847, his crew leaves the ship 10 months later, but all likewise perish, by hypothermia, by scurvy or finally by starvation. There are rumours of cannibalism...

Franklin's second wife, *Jane Griffin* (1791-1875), will sponsor till her death no fewer than seven expeditions to get to know the fate of her husband. In 1850 she gathers eternal fame as "Lady Franklin", when she has herself put down on **Out Stack**, that barren outcrop of rock north-east of Muckle Flugga in Unst in Shetland. Between Out Stack and the North Pole there is, as the crow flies, not a morsel of land, neither of Her Majesty's Empire, nor of any other country; there is nothing else but water, water, water and ice, ice, ice...



Out Stack, to the utmost right of Muckle Flugga, Unst, Shetland

And there she stands, Lady Franklin, bringing an homage to her late husband, defying the weather gods, hands stretched out to the North, sending love on the wings of prayer...

The devil, not in disguise...⁴⁷



The small ancient settlement of **Lund** (Old Norse for 'wood') - though the last tree must already have disappeared long since - is one of the most charming places in the isle of Unst in Shetland: the nostalgic remains of the tiny *St Olaf's Kirk*, a wonderful old churchyard and sweet pastures all around, all with a view on the shimmering bay called Lunda Wick. In the dilapidated wall of the church there is a so-called "leper window" to allow lepers to attend mass from outside.

⁴⁷ Courtesy Elvis Presley.

That is at least our impression when we halt here for the third and last time in the summer of the year 2000.

At the graveyard, inside the roofless chapel, there are a number of old tomb stones. On one of them it is possible to discern an old text written in Niederdeutsch (Low German), so with a little effort intelligible for German and even Dutch speaking people.

"HIR LIGHT DER EHRSAME / SEGEBAD
DETKEN BVRGER / VND KAUFFHANDELER
ZU / BREMEN [HE] HETT IN DISEN /
LANDE SINE HANDELING / GEBRUCKET 52
IAHR / IST [ANNO 1573] DEN / 20
AUGUSTI SELIGHT / IN UNSEN HERN ENT
/ SCHLAPEN DER SEELE GODT GNEDIGH
IST."

"Here lies the honourable Segebad Detken, citizen and merchant from Bremen, who has traded in this country for 52 years, and died [in the year 1573], the 20th of August here in God our Lord, who has mercy on him."

Outside the church there is another grave of a contemporary of Segebad, that of his fellow citizen *Hinrick Segelken*. The Low German text on his slab reads:

"ANNO 1585 DEN 25 IULII / UP S. JACOBI IS DE EHRBARE / UND VORNEHME HINRICK
/ SEGELCKEN DE OLDER UTH / DUDESCHLANT UND BORGER / DER STADT BREMEN
ALHIR / IN GODT DEM HERN ENTSCHL / APN DEM GODT GNEDICH IS."

"In the year 1585, the 25th of July, on St James's Day, the honourable and noble Hinrick Segelcken the Elder from Germany and citizen of the city of Bremen, died here in God our Lord, who has mercy on him."

Segebad Detken is known from written sources about the Bremen trade with Shetland. In 1566, he was robbed by Scottish pirates in the harbour of Uyeasound.

Given the long careers of German traders in the North Atlantic, and the fact that Bremen and Hamburg merchants dominated this trade for over 100 years, it is not surprising that some of these merchants were buried on the islands when they died there. It may also be assumed that these traders once were active within the context of the *Hanse* ⁴⁸.

An historic, beautiful and nostalgic place, but all this, Dear Reader, is actually not the remarkable story I want to report.

Close to the chapel also stands a big ugly ruin, once the proud mansion **Lunda Hall**, dating from the 18th century and connected to a very awkward history.

⁴⁸ The **Hanseatic League** (in German 'Deutsche Hanse') was a medieval commercial network of market towns and harbours in Central and Northern Europe. Growing from a few North German towns in the late 12th century, the League expanded and in the 15th century ultimately encompassed nearly 200 settlements across eight modern-day countries, ranging from Tallinn in Estonia, Bergen in Norway to the Netherlands and extended inland as far as Prussia and Poland.

The consecutive lairds of Lunda Estate are downright hated and despised by their tenants because of their inhuman social attitude. That is not at all appreciated by one of them, who consequently tries to take revenge on his subjects by devising a literally devilish plan. He orders one of his servants to dress up as... the devil and to bust in the church, exactly at the moment of high mass. And so it is done.



Lunda Hall and two safer abodes...

The wild entrance of the 'devil' understandably creates incredible fear among the parishioners who flee the church in the greatest panic.

The impact of the event is of such a kind, that from that day on not another single service will ever be held in St Olaf's Kirk. The laird gets eternally cursed by the priest, Bible in the hand. His name is barred from all registers⁴⁹, Lunda Hall is forfeited and publicly put for sale. In those days the Church still has the authority and the power to do so.

Anyway, Lunda Hall will never be bought by anyone and it doesn't take much time for the building to fall to ruin.

The story of the dressed-up servant is soon exaggerated out of all proportion: it is now *Lucifer* himself who has made his appearance and who has left a footprint of his hooves in the flagstones outside the church...

I want to visit Lunda Hall or at least what is left of it, but a sign keeps me out: "Danger. Do not enter!". I obey, not because I'm afraid of walls coming down on me, but imagine..., you never know what may happen in these cursed surroundings.

Sankt Olaf Kirk, Gravlund og Palae ('St Olaf's Church, Cemetery and Mansion'), one of the most idyllic spots in Shetland, but at the same time not a place to dally about !

The Eagle Bairn

The year is 1690, so we move more than 300 years back in time and we find ourselves near **Uyeasound** on the isle of **Unst** in the very North of Shetland.

It is midsummer and crofter *William Anderson* is busy haymaking, with his newly born daughter *Mary*, wrapped in a shawl, asleep against a freshly put up little haystack. Suddenly a big sea eagle comes flying down on them, seizes the baby in its claws and disappears northward over Sand Wick and the sea.

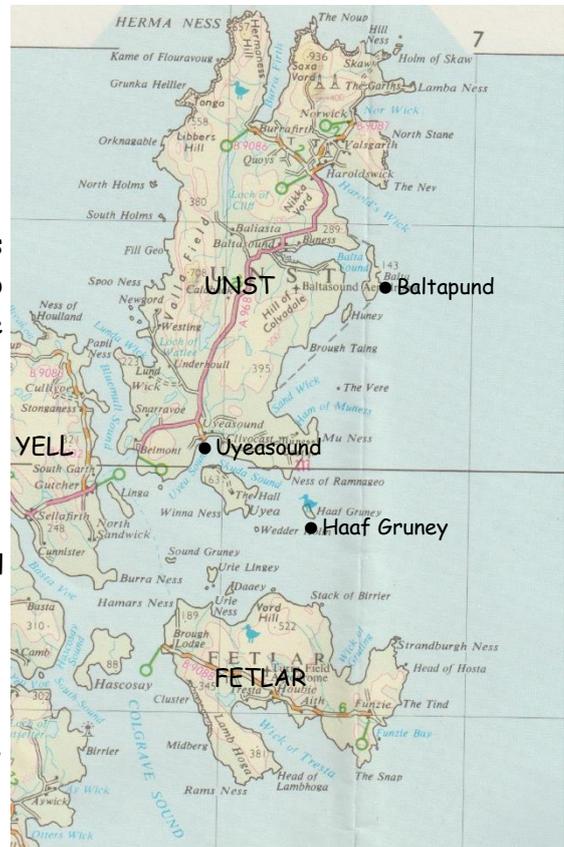
Panic among the crofters !

⁴⁹ That is also the reason why his name is kept unknown to us.

Anyway, with the primitive means of communication of those days they succeed to alarm all the crofters of Unst and even Fetlar and to hasten in group north to Baltapund, a rugged crag near Baltasound where within living memory eagles have been known to build their nests. And indeed, there the men discover the baby, lying in a big nest, still wrapped in its shawl, apparently unharmed but closely watched over by two sturdy strapping eaglets.

Whether by climbing or by descending, for human beings the nest is difficult to reach; the eagles knew what's what when they built their abodes. Moreover, we're in the middle of the fishing season and the best ropes are all on board the boats. Nonetheless, a young boy from Fetlar, one *Robert Nicholson*, who at the time was fishing in the waters between Fetlar and Unst, offers to clamber down to the nest using a hotchpotch of old but still reliable ropes. He chases the young eagles, takes the baby in his arms and has himself pulled up again, just before the parents return to the nest. And yes, Mary is completely unharmed and is taken home in glorious triumph. The story doesn't mention it, but one may certainly presume that to the happy ending a "wee dram" will have been raised to celebrate the happy ending.

This is a strong story and it is not yet ended... Some twenty years later the rescued Mary sure enough marries... her saviour Robert. From the early 18th century till today all their descendants have been known by name and nickname, which is quite extraordinary in a system that is still based on a Norse patronymic tradition. Mary has become known as "The Eagle Bairn" and for a very long time all descendants of her marriage with Robert will invariably be referred to as "Eagle Bairns".



Captain Nicholson, second only to God

By the way, on our first journey to Shetland in the summer of 1991, on the ferry from Toft (Mainland) to Ulsta (Yell) we were allowed to enter the bridge and to join the captain, *Matthew Nicholson*, a very friendly man who taught us everything about the waters (with their orcas!) we were sailing⁵⁰. In those days I wasn't yet acquainted with the eagle story, so I never asked him if he was also an "Eagle Bairn". Anyway, Shetland's most famous wildlife guide Bobby Tulloch (already known to the At-

⁵⁰ Three years later we would meet him again on the same ferry and he would even recognize us.

tentive Reader) is certainly one of them. He plentifully describes the story of "the eagle abduction" in one of his books and ends the text with the words:

"Had Mary been killed by the eagles, the story would never have been written".

Finally, is it a true story?

In any case it has officially been registered as 'The Eagle Bairn', one of the 'Children's Stories' by *Margo Falls* (1954-2014), but on the spot itself every Fetlarer or Unster will convincingly respond positively to that question. There are genealogical indications to prove the truth of the story,



but moreover, sea eagles have historically been known for their ability to abduct in their claws chickens, rabbits, lambs... And what is then the difference with a newly born baby? By the way, this predator instinct has always been the reason why sea eagles were mercilessly hunted, till they completely disappeared at the beginning of the 19th century.

But apparently in 1690 they were still firmly alive, clawing and... kidnapping !

Foula, an Outlier in Every Way

The isle of **Foula** (Old Norse 'Fugley', 'Bird Island' - about half a million birds are nesting here), is an outlier in many senses of the word. It lies 15 n mi west of Walls on Shetland Mainland, it has a surface of 5 sq mi and it counts barely about 50 inhabitants. Nevertheless it does belong to the Shetland archipelago. The island is tiny, but it goes proud of cliffs 1,200 ft high, together with those on St Kilda the highest in the UK, and mountain peaks rising to 1,370 ft.

However that is not all.

Shetland as a whole is fairly lazy in following the rest of Britain in adopting the Gregorian calendar in 1752. Lerwick, the Shetland capital, only follows in 1879, but Foula radically says "No way!" and remains faithful to the Julian calendar, already installed in 46 BC and named after *Julius Caesar* ! It gives in a little, keeping 1800 as a 'leap year', but 'forgets' to do so 100 years later, in 1900. As a result, Foula lives 1 day ahead of the Julian calendar and 12 days behind the Gregorian. By the way, the Russians are sick in the same bed: their so-called "October Revolution" in fact took place in November...



Moreover, the gap gets wider and wider, which means that Foula nowadays lives with a 'retardation' of 13 days compared to real time. The inhabitants observe 'Yule' (Christmas) on January 6th and 'Nyttår' (New Year) on January 13th...

Nobody cares, on the contrary. One of the benefits is, that children attending school on Mainland enjoy two Christmas and two New Year celebrations. Easily taken, is it not?

Was the Almighty aware of the fact, that the Foula folks would mock the holy Christian calendar and does he therefore punish them with a pox plague that in 1720 eradicates 90 % of the then 200 living souls in the island, knowing that an isolated population has developed none whatever immunity against strange diseases?

Finally, Foula is the place where, apart from spoken by Walter Sutherland in Unst ⁵¹, Norn survived the longest in the Northern Isles, till about 1850.



Foula, Da Noup (813 ft)

Foula, small but brave in that endless Atlantic and, along with St Kilda, one of the places of my unfulfilled longing...

Washed ashore

Who lives on an island lives with the sea, the sea that gives and takes, on smaller islands even on a much larger scale. In taking the sea is often very cruel, but in giving likewise very generous. In the Western and Northern Islands, where trees are scarce, driftwood, especially when it comes from wrecked ships, is a highly welcomed gift, to be used as firewood or as building material. Anyhow, what arrives on the beaches doesn't always have to be wood...

Whisky galore !

Eriskay (from the Old Norse 'Eric's Isle') is a fairly insignificant Hebridean island, measuring only about $2\frac{1}{2}$ by $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles, situated in the sound between South Uist and Barra ⁵². Nonetheless it becomes famous worldwide, when in the night of February 5th 1941 the cargo ship *SS Politician*, participating in the Atlantic convoys and attempting to rendezvous one of those, runs aground on nearby Hartamul Rock, about 2 nautical miles east of the island. No-one is badly injured or killed in the accident. Her cargo includes £ 3 million worth of Jamaican 10-shilling notes, but most of all 22,000 cases (264,000 bottles !) of malt whisky, meant for the American market.



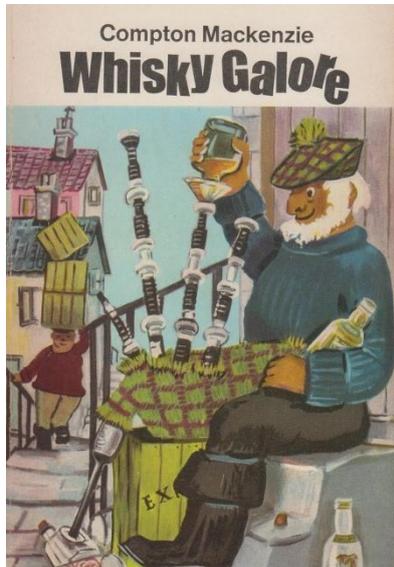
On and around the island now an hallucinating succession of events begins to unfold.

Thousands of bottles wash up on the beaches of Eriskay and are being "taken into custody" by

⁵¹ See also chapter 'Orkney and Shetland'.

⁵² Connected to South Uist by a causeway since 2001.

the islanders. Others continually visit the wreck in search of some 'liquid loot'. Customs undertake raids arresting people and seizing their boats. Many are fined and 19 are incarcerated at the Inverness prison found guilty of theft. The situation evolves in an incessant cat-and-mouse game between the islanders and the authorities.



Salvagers are used to rescue as much as they can: the whisky they raise is shipped back to its bonded warehouses, but even this cargo is looted during its journey.

The wreck is raised off the seabed, but parts of it are cut away and sank to the bottom of Eriskay Sound; the remainder of the hold is destroyed with gelignite to prevent further looting.

Sir Compton Mackenzie (1883-1972), having Gaelic roots, recounts this event in his hilarious novel 'Whisky Galore' ('Whisky in Abundance'), which is to become world famous and to be filmed twice, in 1949 and in 2016.

Whisky, yes, but many more times... people are unexpectedly landed on foreign islands.

Spainlanders

Fair Isle (from the Old Norse 'Fridarey', 'Peaceful Island') is often labelled as "the stepping stone between Orkney and Shetland", because it is situated roughly equidistant, say between respectively 24 and 27 miles, from Sumburgh Head in Shetland and North Ronaldsay in Orkney. From its 712 ft high 'Varda', weather permitting, it is possible to distinguish both archipelagos. This 'Guard' was once one of the many fire beacons in an Old Norse extensive defence network.

Fair Isle is a place that up to the present day continues to capture the imagination of seafarers all over the world because of its beauty, but even more it generates their deterrence because of its dangerous coasts.

The most notorious shipwreck is without any doubt that of *El Gran Grifón*⁵³, the proud flagship of the so-called "invincible" *Grande y Felicísima Armada o Gran Armada*, consisting of no fewer than 130 (!) ships. After the defeat inflicted on the Spaniards by *Sir Francis Drake* in the English Channel, the enemy fleet gets adrift around the British Isles. Finally on September 27th 1588, *El Gran Grifón* runs aground at Fair Isle, 650 miles farther to the North. The islanders, by necessity already permanently rationed, welcome the castaways with the hospitality for which they are renowned till



⁵³ And not 'Griton', as mentioned in the drawing...

today. All goes well, till the guests, also famished, start eating the the cattle and even the ponies of their hosts. Honeymoon over...

It is remarkable that up to today Fair Isle is inhabited by families with Spanish names. An actual example is significantly evocated in the BBC crime series 'Shetland', in which the DI (detective inspector) is given the name "Jimmy Perez", who by the way for that reason is good-naturedly picked on.

Facts about more shipwrecking?

Between 1702 and 1937 50 ships go down on the coasts of Fair Isle, the most notorious being the German barks *Lessing*, in 1868, and *Gazelle*, in 1869, with respectively 465 and 310 migrants to America on board. Till the last man, woman and child they are saved by the islanders! Not only for this reason, but just because of their location in the middle of an ocean the Fair Islanders are counted among the best seafaring folks in the world.

Anyhow, the bad reputation of the island's coasts only comes to an end when in 1892 Fair Isle is finally equipped with two lighthouses.

And what with the population itself of this 3 mi long and 1.5 mi wide island?

In 1861 the number of inhabitants has amounted to 380. This is clearly too high relative to the yields of their harvests. Moreover the situation is aggravated by the steady arrival of shipwrecked people, so *The Board of Supervision for Relief of the Poor* organizes the emigration of 130 men, women and children to New Brunswick in Canada.

The result 90 years later, in 1950 ?

Only 44 islanders being left, the authorities consider complete evacuation of the island. However, the tide turns: better housing, the installation of power and water networks, the modernising of the harbour...

make the number slightly rise to about 70. Today these braves live, as they have done for centuries, from crofting, fishing and... knitting, because Fair Isle sweaters are famous all over the world.



Fair Isle today

Fair Isle, in the care of the National Trust for Scotland, is a "place of exceeding natural beauty", a bird's paradise and remains of course, together with St Kilda and Foula, the destination of my unfulfilled dreams...

Floating off to husbands

A person can willingly choose for the high seas, or unwillingly endure the whims of them, which often leads to more tall tales.

Midsummer 1745. On the 4th of August two girls from the tiny isle of **Uyea** near Unst in Shetland head for the still smaller isle of Haaf Gruney in a rowing boat, to milk the cows that are grazing there. On their way back they end up in a storm. A strong wind makes them float off to the east

and lands them on the isle of Karmøy in... South West Norway.

Punch line of the story: the two girls never return home: they grow up in their new land and marry local men. Today their descendants still live in Norway.

Surviving on milk and hardtack



Elisabeth ("Betty") Mouat is a slightly paralyzed spinster native of **Scatness** in the very south of Mainland Shetland. On January 30th 1886, already 60 years old, she decides to visit her sister in Lerwick and to try to sell her knitwear and some goat milk on the local market. Accordingly she boards the cutter *Columbine* where, considering her limitations, she has to stay in the hold.

The weather is rough, understandingly not unusual in winter in the seas around Shetland, and the *Columbine* ends up in a storm. The mainsheet breaks, in trying to repair it the skipper goes overboard and the two boatswains lower a life raft to save him. In the meantime the *Columbine* has gone seriously adrift, in such a way that the life raft can no longer catch up with her. All the men reach the shore safe and sound, (deliberately ?) forgetting the presence of Betty in the hold.

Eight days later the *Columbine* runs aground on the isle of Lepsøy north of Ålesund in Norway. Not understanding what has happened Betty is lifted out of the hold by Norwegian fishermen and taken care of by local women. It appears that she has succeeded to stay alive on... her milk and on some hardtack (kind of crackers) she has taken with her. The distance between Lerwick and Ålesund, as the crow flies, is... 251 nautical miles...



The saving of Betty from the wreck
by a sketch made on the spot by a Norwegian artist

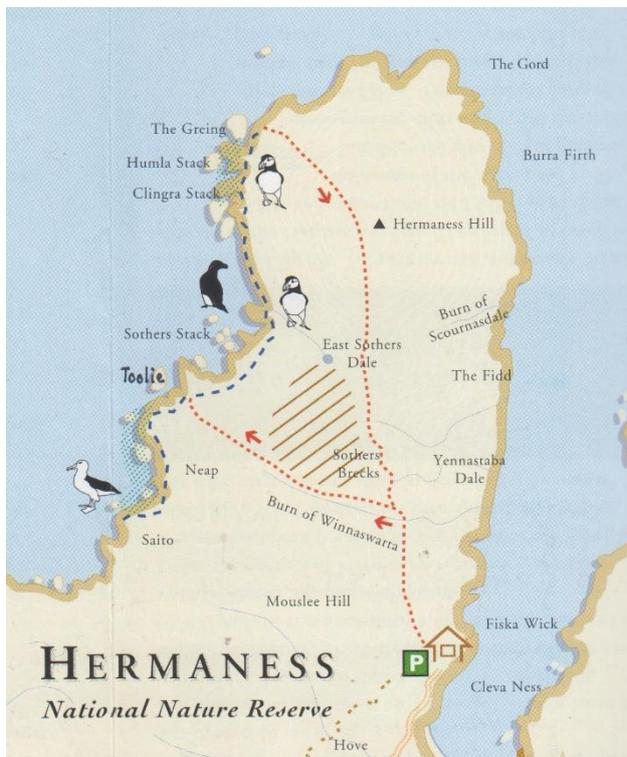
This remarkable occurrence makes the frontpages of newspapers all over the world. The City of Edinburgh welcomes

Betty as a real heroine, for the first time in her life she rides on a train, she is given a letter, including a sum of £ 20 - a lot of money in those days ! - by the Queen. Betty is asked to give a lecture on her adventure, an exposition shows the shawl she wore during her trip, some people beg for a lock of her hair...

But Betty remains unperturbable and just returns to her croft in Scatness. She dies February 6th 1918, 93 years old and is buried in St Olaf's churchyard in Lund, the same place where the two Bremen tradesmen have found their rest and where once the 'devil' wandered around.

Betty's home is now part of the countless forlorn crofts all over Shetland...

I finish my series of Remarkable Stories with a truly tragic one.



During the summer of 1994 we visit Orkney and Shetland with Bob and Nini for the second time in 3 years and likewise head for **Hermaness Hill** in Unst to enjoy the inexhaustible view of the peninsula and its outlying little islands with about 100,000 nesting birds.

August 3rd, half past 10 in the morning. Booted and spurred we leave the little carpark near The Ness at Fiska Wick, up to Hermaness Hill and the *Hermaness National Nature Reserve*. According to our own roughly made estimation the distance to the cliffs is about 2 miles.

Very soon we are shrouded in an opaque bank of fog. We can only walk by touch, fortunately guided by the posts from time to time popping up from the mist. And by doing so we reach fairly easily the top of the hill, 656 ft high, the place where a hut stands and where

the path starts to descend to the cliffs.

Everything fits as expected, apart from the hut being reduced to its foundations, a few poles and some wire. We are surprised and disappointed. The hut was a good resting point and kept a visitor's book, in which of course we had earlier left some impressions. So gone it is, but luckily we have kept a picture dating from our former visit three years ago.

Very soon we reach the edge of the hill and arrive at the cliffs, exactly at the moment when the sun breaks through and offers us the complete panorama of Muckle Flugga. It is a view familiar to us, but one you never get bored by: the imposing rocks, proudly occupied and at the same time white guano-covered all over by thousands of birds, such as gannets ("solans" in Scottish), puffins, guillemots, fulmars, kittiwakes, skuas ("bonxies"), shags, razorbills and who knows which species more...

With the experience of our first visit to Hermaness Hill, we are particularly cautious about the skuas ⁵⁵, because they nest in the fields not far from the path and execute fierce attacks, vigorously slapping their wings on everything - humans in the first place! - that comes in the neighbourhood of their nests or their chicks. A walk over Hermaness Hill in the breeding season is best made with an umbrella or a firm hat and that is indeed how we are equipped.

We stay several hours in these marvellous surroundings, walking all along the cliffs and making innumerable photographs. In particular the puffins, "the clowns of the sea", are easy to approach. We watch a man entering a burrow with a mini-camera and hear the tenant growl - yes, puffins do growl!

"Is he afraid?" I ask. "He", because we personalize these funny birds.

⁵⁴ Courtesy Margareth Mitchell.

⁵⁵ We called them "Stukas", reminiscent of the German war planes...

"No, rather concerned I'd say", is the answer.

Very British reply...

Anyhow, how enthralling all this may be, it is not the core of our story.

On our way back, still wondering what has happened to the hut and why it is not replaced by a new one, we meet a couple of locals and have a chat with them on the matter.

"Hermaness Signal Hut?" the man answers with a painful grimace. "Gone with the wind, I'm afraid, all over Muckle Flugga, on New Year's Day and taking along a couple of youngsters".

"What ????"

I shiver. The same could have happened to us that stormy night on Trotternish in Skye in 1972...⁵⁶

The complete story I find later confirmed by Wikipedia.



The hut on August 3rd 1991, shortly before its disappearance

In the night of December 31st 1991 a young Englishman and his Canadian girlfriend mount Hermaness Hill to stay overnight in the hut and to be the first to sign the Visitor's Book 1992. In the early hours of the new year one of the most severe storms ever recorded in the British Isles, with winds reaching hurricane force gusting up to 150 knots (170 mph), as measured at the Muckle Flugga Lighthouse, breaks loose over Hermaness Hill. The hut gets destroyed and is completely blown away, the debris being scattered all over the hillside. Five days later the body of the young man is found not far from the place where

the hut has been, the girl half a mile farther below a cliff of Burra Firth bay.



The hut has never been rebuilt. Today a series of stones shaped as a cross mark the site where it once stood. The path that once led to the bird colonies, officially "too much damaged by tourist erosion", has now been replaced by a more westerly route.

"Even the lighthouse on Muckle Flugga is not safe", our man continues. "One day one of the doors, situated at a height of 195 feet above sea level, was smashed to pieces by a storm. No one ventures any more to approach Muckle Flugga by boat. Now it is automated, but in former days the lighthouse keepers were brought back and forth by helicopter".

"Except Lady Franklin", I reply, but I don't know if that bad joke has fallen on fertile ground.

Anyway, it is very striking that the hut where only a few months before the storm we still enjoyed

⁵⁶ See chapter 'The Life and Times of the MacLeods of Skye', p. 39.

our simple lunch, wrote down our names in the Visitor's Book and had a lot of fun, has become the scene of an enormous human drama.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Several people have contributed to the creation of this publication.

Primarily I have to thank all my fellow travellers to Scotland who in the course of many years were so kind to endure my endless quests in bookshops, tourist offices and visitors' centres for information about the places we passed by, for material that eventually would form the basis of what is written down in this booklet.

As already mentioned in the introduction, in spite of the title this 'Stories from the Bagpipes' was originally written in Dutch. It was my dear friend and ex-colleague *Nicole Deryckere* who instigated me to translate it in English. I can only be thankful to her to have drawn my attention to my duty as an Anglicist.

My dear consort *Ingrid Goosen* was willing to assume the task of reading through the first drafts and to point at what in her opinion was not correct English in matters of vocabulary, syntax and grammar. It often led to interesting, intense as well as cheerful discussions by which our mutual knowledge of the English language only improved.

Last, but certainly not least, I want to pay tribute to my esteemed English neighbour in the village of Fourcès, *Julie Dove-Gallagher*, who rigorously perused the whole text and, when necessary, made my publication well worth reading.

To all these people: my sincere and warmest thanks !

The author



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APPENDIX

Travels in Scotland

- 1971, summer: Mainland & Skye, with Armand Petré.
- 1972, summer: Mainland & Hebrides, with Ingrid Goosen.
- 1974, summer: Mainland, Hebrides & Orkney, with Ingrid and Guy Van der Eecken.
- 1978, Easter: Mainland, with Ingrid and Frank de Smedt & Marianne Verschueren.
- 1990, Easter: Mainland & Hebrides, with Ingrid.
- 1991, summer: Mainland, Orkney & Shetland, with Ingrid, Bob Van den Bempt & Nini Cautreels.
- 1992, summer: Mainland & Hebrides, with Ingrid, Bob & Nini.
- 1994, summer: Mainland, Orkney & Shetland, with Ingrid, Bob & Nini (partly).
- 1996, summer: Mainland, with Ingrid.
- 1997, summer: Mainland & Hebrides, with Ingrid, Bob & Nini.
- 2000, summer: Mainland, Orkney & Shetland, with Ingrid, Bob & Nini (partly)



COLOPHON



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