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cultural geographies in practice

A rescue archaeology, Taransay, Scotland

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We're waiting for good weather; within sight of Taransay but still some 20 miles distant. The stalled start and radio tuned for the latest forecast seem an appropriate prelude for this trip. Kitchen conversations are tinged with an expeditionary anticipation. A fascination with 'Castaway 2000', the BBC's televised social experiment 'to create a new society for a new millennium', has brought us to the Outer Hebrides. The temporary setting for 12 months of Reality TV, Taransay's enduring visual appeal is obvious – the island is compact, rugged in terrain, uninhabited and fringed with a dramatic Atlantic coastline. Here, 36 carefully selected men, women and children 'took up the challenge to build and shape a community'. Now that Taransay is once again deserted, a brief window of opportunity exists to explore it in the immediate aftermath of the occupation. The island is soon to be returned to its original condition.

Continuing uncertainties over sea conditions for the short crossing from Harris do at least leave time for talking. It is the neighbouring landscapes of North Uist that spark our discussions. The soil strata, so dense with archaeological sites and deposits, have been subject to extensive survey and excavation. More than a century of archaeological recovery work, both amateur and academic, has resulted in a detailed local prehistory; the earthbound matter, the topography itself, telling of social units, settlement patterns, building structures and past lives. These interpretive readings of relics from a material culture suggest a compelling motif for our own activities. To rework traditional approaches – for devising a field methodology, for determining useful evidence and for ordering information – might help us undertake an archaeology of the present.

Nothing yet blankets the imprints and remnants from Taransay's most recent chapter of human habitation; so when we walk we find things. Our walking, at first excitable and hurried, gathers purpose as we try to make sense of the island. Four different 'finds' capture this new archaeology.

Monument

TV coverage might offer a tantalizing glimpse, but the photocopied maps give away few clues. From below, the high horizon remains a confusing jumble of rocky ribs. Fumbling, embarrassed in our own company by the binoculars, we finally pick it out against the skyline (Figure 1).

The small monument sits among the summit rocks of Beinn na h-Uidhe. On a natural plinth of gneiss and ice, this is the castaways' most deliberate and staged inscription onto the island's geography. Enjoying the late afternoon sun, we wander around their totem. For such a transient community it suggests intense feelings of belonging, perhaps even a surprising proprietorial confidence. The remnants of manual labour and a consecration ritual still lie strewn across the hillside: the fishing crate used to haul material uphill; a trowel to mix cement; coloured streamers caught among the heather sprigs; a drained whisky bottle jammed beneath a nearby boulder. Yet there is more here; more than a simple celebration of presence, more than a crude expression of territorial conquest.



FIGURE 1 Monument

This modern monolith creates a new point of orientation, drawing together axes of vision across the island's once inhabited landscape. Shading our eyes we pick out the standing stone guarding the isthmus leading to Aird Vanish, the dun fort on Loch an Dùin, and peer towards the rocky graveyard in the former township of Paible. A deep-seated scepticism about the castaways' awareness of history begins to fade. Their monument must already be counted among the many archaeological sites from Taransay's peopled past.

We are mindful that it tells of less contented island lives too. Designed and constructed as the millennial project drew to a close, the monument is testimony to long-standing concerns over the depiction of individuals and experiences on Reality TV. That relations between production company Lion Television and certain castaways had been at best tense was no secret to regular viewers. After all, heated disputes over access to the most private aspects of everyday lives are fundamental to this new media format. However, the monument commemorates a programme of localized resistance that our island explorations only truly reveal. Recalling Pat and Colin at the unveiling ceremony tentatively explaining their handiwork to camera, the collective gesture now seems all the more knowing.

The careful metalwork atop the cairn comprises two elliptical iron supports; they form a (pan)optic through which we might survey the island. A revolving metal disc – the eyeball – hangs from its centre. The dulled metal on one side of the disc is broken only by a small rectangular mirror, representing the (tele)vision to which the armchair viewer was restricted. In contrast, the still burnished surface on the disk's opposite face suggests the fuller, unmediated experience enjoyed by the community. One north Atlantic winter has taken an immediate toll, the iron already rust-stained, the central disc bent back by successive westerlies. We reflect on these artistic intents and the camera's complex role as both powerful ally and manipulative presence among the community. Reflexive to the last, the castaways have rewritten their own postmodern parable.

Feannagan

From this high vantage point, a more durable memorial to human endeavour extends across the island in every direction like a crumpled terrestrial carpet. These are the material remains of crofting agriculture, the feannagan, the long furrows of peat thrown into architectural relief in the low winter light. Built by hand and by spade, the ridge of the feannagan is both a living monument to the potato and the substrate for life itself. The English translation 'lazy-beds' – turning labour into lassitude – does a cruel injustice to the ingenuity and industry of the crofter. 'Nothing can be more moving to the sensitive observer of Hebridean life than these lazy-beds,' wrote the naturalist Frank Fraser Darling. 'Some are no bigger than a dining table, and possibly the same height from the rock, carefully built up with turves and the seaweed carried there in creels by the women and girls.' No organic or degradable material was left unused. It was all gathered and carried and folded back into the black peat, into the precious tubers, into their own bodies. Traversing the feannagan, we step lightly on a produced nature. This is no abstraction; it is beneath us, a beautiful carbon testament to an epoch of work.

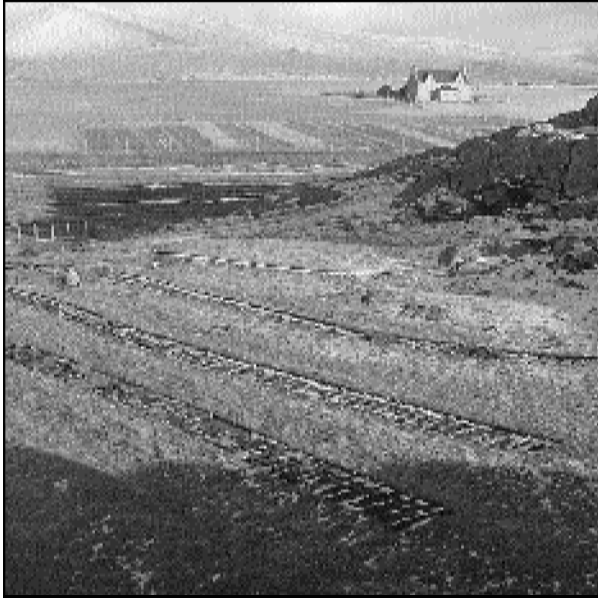


FIGURE 2 Feannagan

On a gentle north facing slope within sight of the Mackay house, where the feannagan lie wide and undulating, a series of parallel geometric shapes have been etched into their surface (Figure 2). Sunlight and snow pick out elongated rectangles of absent turf, their straight sides cut a few neat inches into the peat below. It is the mark of another more recent exercise in collective labour that has seen the feannagan stripped to provide roof insulation for the semi-circular accommodation pods. The castaways were left to turf their own pods; to make their own mark on the land; to be united as a community in the labour of exhuming this vestige of another, older community. Without full recourse to measurement or mapping, we diligently record the material interaction in our field notes.

It all makes perfect sense: it is the easiest source of turf, within stumbling distance of the pods and yet hidden by rocky outcrops. There is even an aesthetic quality to the neatness and care taken to remove the soil. But on passing over the fresh bare earth, there is a vague unease as if the feannagan, with their strangely sepulchral form, have undergone a casual desecration. We discuss it, and agree that the tension lies not in the authenticity of the ancient. It is perhaps that these different inscriptions span the entire age of modernity: from a premodern agricultural system which valued productive soil as a sign of material security to a postmodern experiment in leisure, labouring to cover itself.

Graves

A hundred yards west of the pods lies another monument to the castaway occupation, the grave of Ron's collie dog Charlie (Figure 3). So many of the arguments on the island were about Ron or the dogs. And yet the Harris vet's mercy killing of Charlie prompted a very public, even communal, performance of death rituals on Taransay. A simple wooden coffin was fashioned by Colin and Pat; the remains were brought back on the boat and solemnly greeted by the assembled castaways; school was closed especially for the occasion. The funeral party (with a video escort) proceeded to the resting final place: tributes were read; tears flowed; a wreath of white lilies was laid on a grave of rocks. And then there was a wake.

Some of the castaways harboured reservations about the occasion ('People feel as though they have to be displaying sorrow, like they did with Lady Di,' said Peter), but these were subordinate to the need to manage the troublesome Ron. To the surprise of the castaways who thought that the tempestuous psychotherapist was about to leave the project, Ron had buried Charlie on Taransay because, he said, 'This is my home'. But if this monumentalism was home-forming, Charlie's grave was ultimately not enough to keep Ron on Taransay. His departure was, in the end, acrimonious.



FIGURE 3 Grave

Although we had watched the interment footage, our discovery of the dog's grave (half-submerged in a puddle) still comes as a surprise. We could have anticipated it: among the other traditional anthropological categories (kinship, courtship, marriage), death is most obviously imprinted in the landscape. If our reaction to the stones is hesitant, it recalls the memory of an earlier encounter. Beside the cooked meats counter in the North Uist Co-op we had met Mrs Maggie Morrison, a celebrated octagenarian diarist for the *Stornoway gazette*. A native of Harris, she was excited, if a little incredulous, to hear that we were bound for Taransay. It was, she said, the resting place of her great-grandfather Iain Fidhlear – John MacLeod, the fiddler – whose featureless headstone we later discover in its own neat walled plot. Maggie had never been to Taransay but she knew about her ancestors, and Iain Fidhlear was a good man and a clever man. They are all there in the plot, the Fidhleirean, clearance victims who now lie bizarrely juxtaposed beneath the castaways' wind turbine. Charlie is just a stone's throw from Iain Fidhlear. We don't mention it to Maggie.

MSS

We creep into television's twilight world. The communal buildings are at once comfortingly familiar and then altogether strange. Now quiet, but for quarrelling sparrows, Paible still unfolds as a series of dramatic backdrops. Passing through each room it's difficult not to mimic fiery TV confrontations and community set pieces. The original cast have collected up their treasured belongings and departed the island, but the rooms are far from empty. So much seems to have been left behind. Aside from jumbles of clothing, unwanted cassettes and well-thumbed books, it's the handwritten scraps and folded paper fragments that suggest an everyday existence away from the camera's gaze. In memos, invoices, instructions, rotas, contracts, schedules, sketches, folders and jotters – the castaways' daily ebb and flow – we find a crumpled A4 archive. Here, designs on community take on appropriately mundane form. Bucolic aspirations for the good life are articulated through on-site plans, dietary recommendations, notes on good veterinary practice, seed-planting calendars and kitchen safety procedures.

Not all these leftovers are so easily consumed. Expectant but apprehensive, our fingers hover over a box of fan mail, opened and discarded: how might we use such personal effects; ought we to devise an ethical code for these alternative excavations? The decision deferred, we're content to compare our actions with an earlier search for firewood – beachcombers picking over Taransay's flotsam and jetsam. At the bothy, the castaways' favoured place of refuge and retreat, we pore over a more purposeful and public document. The visitors' book for this rough hut records two decades of occasional habitation. Its pages are busy with millennial stories. They recount ghostly nocturnal happenings, pay homage to the fishing trip blues and spill out drunken slurs from fireside sessions. Other entries, penned in a 'summer-house' haze, contentedly drift into utopian reveries; the temporary Hebridean home envisioned as a floating protectorate ('take in this beautiful island for what it is and not for what the TV made her. She has beauty everywhere'). If the hilltop monument veils the project's divisive politics in an abstraction, then here the commentary is altogether more candid. Among the soliloquies



FIGURE 4 Business card

we encounter community conflict, voluntary retreat and a programme of disruptive, wilful activity devised by Paible's militant tendency.

This paperchase ends on the duckboards, back among the village buildings. Discarded in the quagmire, we find a business card. It's saturated, the contact details are decomposing. Reality TV's short dalliance with Taransay is indeed coming to an end.

A final sift through the detritus reveals a torn cardboard box with '___AEOLOGY' remaining in thick black pen. It contains a measuring tape, some resealable plastic bags, a compass, lists of official monuments and a fieldwork notebook, the first page of which has a hasty sketch of an unidentified enclosure. The box is yet another interesting find, even if the circularity of it all is a bit disconcerting. We did not expect to share this fieldwork enterprise with the castaways, but it cannot now be annexed from them. Taransay offers 'fieldwork' as a common endeavour; as an open site of prehistorical and geographical enquiry, extending beyond the academy to encompass a diversity of narratives, practices, performances and experiences. If *field-work* conventionally constitutes a labour of knowledge, geographical or otherwise, here it cannot be reduced to a narrow scholasticism. Our acquisition of information is an aesthetic – as much as a cognitive – encounter, in which 'being' rivals 'doing' as the relevant verb. These excavations suggest that a phenomenology of fieldwork must attend to a variety of fugitive gestures, running against the empiricist grain, to include moments of leisure, play, irony and knowing. But this is not necessarily to undermine the ontological

foundations of geography's older field cultures. Rather, such reflexivity can complement venerable practices such as mapping, surveying, walking and recording. To this we might also add 'digging' which, even if we resist its literal application from archaeological method, is nevertheless suggestive of material cultures and contexts. Geography's earlier interest in objects and artefacts can itself be critically restored, not only informing our functional relationships with 'things' but rescuing new realms of meaning from the fragmentary and the ephemeral.