

# Paul Strand and the Atlanticist Cold War

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As far as the record shows, Strand never once mentioned those words, Marx, Marxism, Stalin, in public. Was he or wasn't he ... what? Actual facts regarding allegiances, commitments, activities, or memberships are quite rare and the picture unclear, more a matter of gossip, rumor, and fragments culled from scandalous FBI files. In any case, Strand's 'politics', in the sense of public statements, positions taken, or policies endorsed, are his own business as a citizen. ... In the narrow sense of affiliation and allegiance, Strand's politics bear an uncertain relation to his art, and seeking out connection between them is probably fruitless.

Alan Trachtenberg in *Paul Strand: essays on his life and work*, 1991

In recent times, only one book, *Paul Strand: essays on his life and work*, edited by Maren Stange, has attempted to place Strand's photography within a wider ideological context.<sup>1</sup> Even in this collection, only two essays, one by Alan Trachtenberg and the other by Mike Weaver, engage directly with the question of Strand's politics. Trachtenberg's and Weaver's approaches are entirely antithetical. Introducing the book, Trachtenberg claims that seeking a connection between Strand's politics and his art is 'probably fruitless'.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, Mike Weaver, as the first person to specifically address Strand's political affiliations and activities, makes the case that his photography should be situated amid a wider realist tradition in art, 'which must be seen within the context of his socialist vision if it is to be fully understood'.<sup>3</sup>

In this essay, I examine Strand's book on the Scottish Hebrides, published in 1962 as *Tir a'Mhurain* (figure 1), in order to develop a wider understanding of the relationship between Strand's photography, his Marxist aesthetic and his personal allegiances and networks within the hinterland of the Communist Party.<sup>4</sup> Strand's entry into the Hebridean project was, I argue, via very particular networks of association that are in no sense incidental to the character of the finished book. My essay seeks to re-engage the geopolitical content and import of Strand's photography. In the first instance, I review the literature on Strand's allegiances and summarise the existing account of Strand's photographic and political activities following his departure in 1949 from McCarthyist America. Strand's politics were by no means unusual and should, I argue, be understood within the wider frame of the cultural Left in the Cold War. I examine Strand's choice of photographic subjects against a background of interest by radical artists and intellectuals of the period in explicitly rural forms of sociality, even if this sits uneasily with the conventional Marxist focus on the urban proletariat. Outlining the specific context of the Scottish Folklore Revival and its influence on *Tir a'Mhurain*, I detail Strand's friendships and working relationships, paying particular attention to his collaboration with the writer Basil Davidson.

1 – *Paul Strand: essays on his life and work*, ed. Maren Stange, New York: Aperture 1991.

2 – *Ibid.*, 4.

3 – *Ibid.*, 207.

4 – The title *Tir a'Mhurain* means 'land of bent grass' and refers to the Marram grass that constitutes the Hebridean machair environment. Paul Strand and Basil Davidson, *Tir a'Mhurain / Outer Hebrides*, London: MacGibbon and Kee 1962.

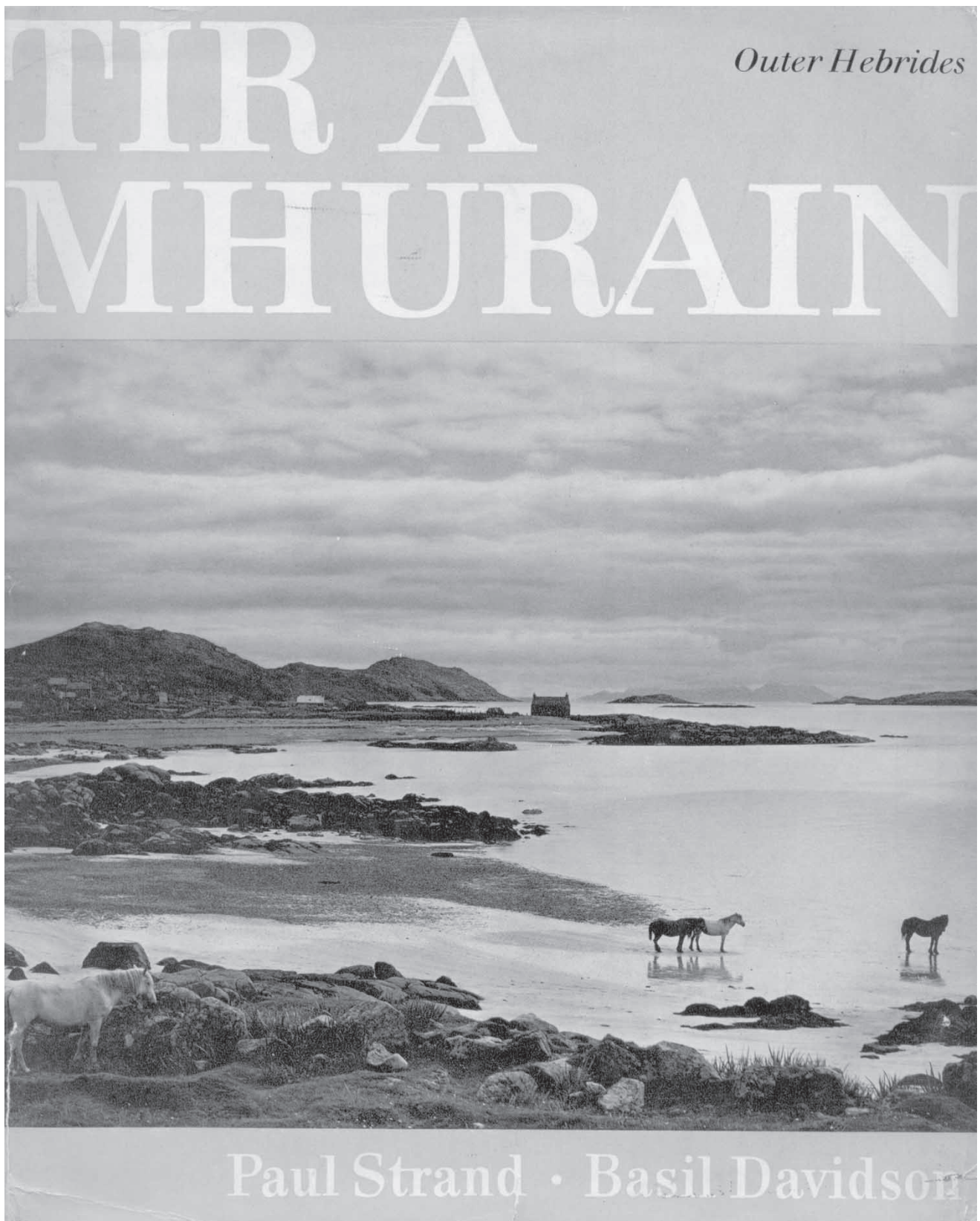


Figure 1. Cover, *Tir a'Mhurain / Outer Hebrides* by Paul Strand and Basil Davidson, published by MacGibbon and Kee Ltd, London, 1962.

5 – The Paul Strand Archive is housed at the Centre for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona, Tucson.

Based on correspondence from the Paul Strand Archive,<sup>5</sup> primary and secondary literature on Strand's associates, and personal interviews with his friends, I present a detailed picture of the social network that lay behind the production of *Tir a'Mhurain*. In addition to Davidson, prominent individuals within this matrix of socialist artists, activists and intellectuals include Alex McCrindle, Alan Lomax, Hamish Henderson, Hugh MacDiarmid and D. N. Pritt. The effect of this empirical study leaves little doubt as to the character of Strand's convictions, dispelling the strategic indeterminacy that has characterised some earlier accounts of his politics.

Having established the geopolitics of the Cold War as a relevant context within which Strand's photography can be understood, I take up the specific example of Strand's trip to the Hebrides. It is noteworthy that this visit took place at precisely the moment when the archipelago was on the cusp of becoming a new frontier in the Atlanticist Cold War. The decision by the British military to build a test site for Britain and America's first nuclear missile in South Uist provides an important, and as yet scarcely acknowledged, backdrop to the book. That a Cold War political exile should travel to a hotspot of clandestine NATO interest is remarkable. The 'rocket range' is an important Cold War subtext in *Tir a'Mhurain*, occluded in Strand's photographs but included in Davidson's text. Moreover, following legal arguments about allowing an East German printed work entry into America, the book itself becomes a Cold War artefact, subject to the dominant political forces that it seeks to critique.

Strand's visit to the Hebrides for three months in the spring and summer of 1954 has an important prior history. By the mid 1950s, Strand had completed three studies of place with *Time in New England* (1950), *La France de Profil* (1952) and *Un Paese* (1955), his portrait of an Italian village.<sup>6</sup> The geography of Strand's work is itself interesting. He once told an interviewer, 'I'm not the type of photographer who photographs a little here, a little there, whatever he happens to like at the moment':

It is much more planned than that. New England, Gaspé, Mexico, France, Italy, the Hebrides — all this work falls very naturally into a chronological sequence of projects. Each of these is a very definite area that must be investigated. I call it research.<sup>7</sup>

Mike Weaver was the first writer to acknowledge the presence of Strand's political instincts in the theoretical and geographical selection of his artistic subjects, drawing connections between each country Strand visited and the affirmation of his Marxist political beliefs.<sup>8</sup> Under this analysis, France and Italy had the largest Communist Parties in the Western world, where Strand could find like-minded collaborators like Claude Roy and Cesare Zavattini.<sup>9</sup> *Living Egypt* was a pointed choice over Israel at the height of the Suez War; Ghana was visited under the personal invitation from socialist President Kwame Nkrumah; and Romania, of course, was Eastern bloc Communist.<sup>10</sup> Strand had received his formative political education in revolutionary Mexico. Even the apparently more conservative *Time in New England* speaks of a revolutionary core to American selfhood. But the Outer Hebrides eluded Weaver's attention, even though, like *Living Egypt*, *Tir a'Mhurain* was printed in Leipzig, East Germany.

In exploring Strand's interest in the Scottish Hebrides, I will later pay particular attention to the role of the missile range. But less political, more aesthetic and cultural associations were also at work. First, it would be surprising if a return to the nation of David Octavius Hill, whom Strand regarded as the progenitor of the straight photographic tradition, had not held some allure. He had certainly made an early visit to mainland Scotland as part of his first trip to Europe in 1911.<sup>11</sup> There is also a connection with film-maker Robert Flaherty, whom Strand had met in 1925 and whose film *Man of Aran* (1934) had, according to Davidson, planted 'a seed of interest in the far-out Gaelic

6 – Paul Strand and Nancy Newhall, *Time in New England*, New York: Oxford University Press 1950; Paul Strand and Claude Roy, *La France de Profil*, Lausanne: La Guilde du Livre 1952; Paul Strand and Cesare Zavattini, *Un Paese*, Turin: Giulio Einaudi 1955.

7 – Jacob Deschin, 'An eye for the Truth', *Popular Photography* 70 (April 1972), 109.

8 – Mike Weaver, 'Paul Strand: Native Land', *The Archive*, Tucson, Arizona: Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona 27 (1990), 5–15.

9 – Strand and Roy, *La France de Profil*; Strand and Zavattini, *Un Paese*.

10 – Paul Strand and James Aldridge, *Living Egypt*, London: MacGibbon and Kee Ltd. 1969; Paul Strand and Basil Davidson, *Ghana: an African Portrait*, Millerton, New York: Aperture 1976.

11 – An image of an unknown river scene from 1911, believed to be from either France, Germany or Scotland, is printed in Paul Strand, *Sixty years of photographs*, ed. Calvin Tomkins, New York: Aperture Foundation 1976, 142.

fringe, the Hebrides being as much part of that as western Ireland'.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it was Ireland that was Strand's original Celtic destination, having discussed collaborating on a study of Irish villages with his friend Ernie O'Malley, the leading intellectual of the Irish Republican Army.<sup>13</sup> The Celtic periphery was a popular choice among American modernists, Eugene Smith having worked in Wales in 1950, while Dorothea Lange's visit to Ireland overlapped with Strand's Hebridean trip in 1954. Yet Davidson claimed that Strand's choice of the Scottish Hebrides was a matter of 'sheer chance'.<sup>14</sup>

In response to Davidson's question 'how did we come to go to there?', Strand replied that he had heard a BBC radio programme of folksong from South Uist produced by the folklorist Alan Lomax, who had earlier brought Woody Guthrie to international prominence as the Dust Bowl balladeer. As a contemporary of Strand in various New York artistic and political circles and as a fellow Cold War exile, Lomax had, on returning from Uist in 1953, 'talked glowingly of his experience there'.<sup>15</sup> Lomax had first visited Benbecula in 1951, returning two years later to do recording in South Uist as part of his commission by Columbia Records to make a series of LPs covering the folk music of the world.<sup>16</sup> His experience of South Uist suggested to Strand that it was a group of islands with scattered inhabitants who could be made to 'represent a culture as well as themselves'.<sup>17</sup>

### The authorship of *Tir a'Mhurain*

If Lomax was one important voice in favour of Strand's choosing the Hebrides as a subject, the novelist Sir Compton Mackenzie (1883–1972), with whom Strand considered collaborating, was another. The 1949 film of Mackenzie's 'genial farce' *Whisky Galore*, his satire on the sinking and sacking of the whisky-laden *SS Politician* by the islanders of Eriskay,<sup>18</sup> at the time represented the totality of British popular knowledge about the Hebrides. Strand's friend Honor Arundel, film critic of the British *Daily Worker*, had favourably reviewed *Whisky Galore* just weeks before Strand first met her at the International Film Festival at Mariánske Lázně, Czechoslovakia.<sup>19</sup> For Strand, the attraction of Mackenzie as collaborator was the writer's tremendous popularity, an attribute that would, he thought, have surmounted the primary obstacle of securing a publisher.<sup>20</sup> Strand may also have known of Mackenzie's difficulties with the British security services and, with this information, may have taken him for a socialist.<sup>21</sup>

The subsequent realisation that there was little political or artistic rapport between the two men was painful, and Mackenzie's eventual withdrawal from the project came as a relief to all concerned. Strand hoped that Basil Davidson, a writer he had met in the liberal atmosphere of London's Saville Club, might step in as a replacement. Writing several decades after the event, Davidson does not specifically recall Mackenzie's role, stating simply that Strand had 'tried to persuade a far more fashionable writer only to repent that choice'.<sup>22</sup> Proposing the collaboration to Davidson in a letter, Strand outlines the history of Mackenzie's involvement, complaining that 'he clearly showed that he doesn't see the photographs and gets no ideas for a text from them'.<sup>23</sup> 'Anyway', he continues, 'I am relieved, for it would have been a mess. I see clearly that people who are to work together need to have similar sensibilities and feelings about life or it won't work. On that score I feel sure we can make a fine book'.<sup>24</sup> 'M[ackenzie] and I are miles apart', Strand later wrote to Davidson, 'but you and I are not. And that to me is crucial'.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the recent 2002 Aperture edition, which removed Davidson's name from the cover, *Tir a'Mhurain* was the project of two authors, Paul Strand and Basil Davidson.<sup>26</sup> The full conception of the book came after Strand's visit in 1954 to the islands of South Uist, Benbecula and Eriskay. Even if Davidson's

12 – Basil Davidson, 'Working with Strand' in Stange, *Paul Strand*, 215.

13 – Richard English, *Ernie O'Malley: IRA intellectual*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1998, 141. The close friendship between O'Malley and Strand is also mentioned in Richard English, "'The Inborn Hate of Things English": Ernie O'Malley and the Irish Revolution, 1916–1923', *Past and Present* 151 (1996), 195.

14 – Davidson, 'Working with Strand', 215.

15 – Ibid.

16 – See E. David Gregory, 'Lomax in London: Alan Lomax, the BBC and the Folk-Song Revival in England, 1950–1958', *Folk Music Journal* 8:2 (2002), 136–169.

17 – Davidson, 'Working with Strand', 215.

18 – Compton Mackenzie, *Whisky Galore* London: Chatto and Windus 1955; Roger Hutchinson, *Polly: the true story behind Whisky Galore* Edinburgh: Mainstream 1998.

19 – Honor Arundel, 'Comedy with Spirit', *Daily Worker* no. 5532, 18 June 1949, 2.

20 – This was the view of Basil Davidson; interview with author, 17 September 2002.

21 – Recently declassified records at the Public Record Office indicate that Mackenzie received unwelcome attention from MI5 initially on account of his breach of the Official Secrets Act for writing his wartime memoir *Greek Memories*. The PRO file KV2/1272 details Mackenzie's familiarity with notable communists as well as British fascist leader Sir Oswald Mosley. See Richard Norton-Taylor, 'Whispers galore as author hounded', *The Guardian* 22 May 2003, 5.

22 – Davidson, 'Working with Strand', 214. Evidence of an intended collaboration between Strand and Mackenzie can be found in the correspondence at the Center for Creative Photography, Tucson, Arizona. Mackenzie is also mentioned as the writer of a book provisionally entitled 'Outer Isles' in an earlier feature of Strand's Hebridean work published in a special issue of *Picture Post*: Paul Strand, 'A Pattern of Islands — a story in pictures', *Picture Post Presents Festival Scotland 1955* (1955), 41–50.

23 – Letter from Paul Strand to Basil Davidson, 21 September 1955; courtesy of Basil Davidson.

24 – Ibid.

25 – Letter Paul Strand to Basil Davidson, 7 January 1956; courtesy of Basil Davidson.

26 – In a controversy about a French edition of *Tir a'Mhurain*, in which another author's text was proposed, Strand railed against this 'violation of the unity and integrity of the book. *No matter where the book is sold or in what language, it must have on the cover the names of Strand and Davidson*'. See Davidson, 'Working with Strand', 218.

text is somewhat separate from the book and fulfils a different role from the montage method of *La France de Profil*, it remains crucial in narrating the lives of the subjects. Various authors had been considered and rejected by Strand before Davidson, after some reluctance, finally agreed to the partnership. The collaboration proved to be a happy one, and Davidson ultimately felt relieved to have replaced Mackenzie. ‘I’ve taken the trouble to read his [Mackenzie’s] magna opera — *The Winds of Love*’, Davidson wrote to Strand in 1957. ‘And, you know, the man is terribly soft inside. It’s awful stuff. I’m really very glad you let me do this thing; whatever you may think of the result, it isn’t just verbiage, wall-paper, stuffing, or whimsy’.<sup>27</sup>

If Davidson was not necessarily an obvious choice to write about Scotland, there was much else to commend him. He was a prominent writer, journalist and novelist, having already published several books on Africa and one on China, with extensive experience from working on the staff of *The Economist*, *The Times*, *New Statesman and Nation* and the *Daily Herald*. His politics would also have endeared him to Strand. Although not a Communist Party member, Davidson was very much of the Left and suffered the usual restrictions of professional opportunity that was the fate of anyone identified as a fellow traveller. In this respect Davidson was unlucky enough to have raised the suspicions of both sides, at least in the early part of the Cold War. Having had what Eric Hobsbawm calls a “good” but unorthodox war, serving with Special Operations Executive in Yugoslavia and Hungary, Davidson had played a key role in persuading Churchill to support Tito and the partisans.<sup>28</sup>

If his close association with the partisans raised suspicions of Communist sympathies at home, it had the opposite effect in the Stalinist USSR. Davidson, they claimed, had been a British spy. The context for this allegation was the ejection of the Yugoslav Federation from the Cominform in 1948 as part of the escalating rift between Tito and Stalin. In September 1949, László Rajk, the Hungarian Minister of the Interior, was tried for allegedly instigating a Tito-backed conspiracy to overthrow the Communist government of Mátyás Rákosi. Testifying against Rajk was a former chargé d’affaires Lazar Brankov, who ‘confessed’ that they were both involved in a Titoist plot supported by ‘highly experienced [British] secret service men’, whose real aim was to carry out a plan by Churchill to turn Yugoslavia into a bourgeois capitalist state. Davidson was named as one of the alleged spies.<sup>29</sup> Even Eric Hobsbawm, who stuck with the Communist Party through the upheavals of 1956, did not believe its indictment of Davidson, not least because he knew that the writer’s fortunes had taken ‘a sharp turn for the worse with the Cold War’. Of Davidson’s career at the time, Hobsbawm claims simply that ‘nobody wanted him’.<sup>30</sup> At the height of the Cold War, he was followed everywhere by a security ‘tail’. For some time he was denied entry not only to the United States but also to the British colonies of Africa. He was forcibly ejected from apartheid South Africa. His telephone was tapped for years. Blacklisting worked surreptitiously; jobs that had been informally offered to Davidson were then inexplicably withdrawn. One cause of suspicion that hung over him was a trip to China in September 1952 as part of an unprecedented thirty-member British delegation that also included two other close friends of Strand, Molly Pritt (the wife of the Marxist lawyer, D. N. Pritt) and the Scottish actor Alex McCrindle. The reviews of Davidson’s published account of the trip, *Daybreak in China*, give some indication of the strength of feeling generated by his qualified support for the Chinese revolution.<sup>31</sup>

In one letter, Strand explains that the reason that ‘I ... think you are the “man for the job” is precisely because of your writings on Africa and China. That is to say the general approach’.<sup>32</sup> Davidson, however, was no small voice when it came to criticism of Stalinist state socialism, as is evident from the

27 – Letter from Basil Davidson to Paul Strand, 27 September 1957, Center for Creative Photography (CCP) archive, University of Arizona, box AG17/15/2.

28 – Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: a twentieth century life* London: Allen Lane 2002, 192–193; Basil Davidson, *Special Operations Europe: scenes from the Anti-Nazi War* London: Victor Gollancz Ltd. 1980.

29 – *Times* correspondent, ‘Mr Churchill’s “Balkan Plan”: Allegations at Rajk Trial’, *The Times* 19 September 1949, 3.

30 – Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 193.

31 – Basil Davidson, *Daybreak in China* London: Jonathan Cape 1953; Jean Escarra, ‘Review: Daybreak in China’, *Pacific Affairs* 27:1 (1954), 71–72; O. B. Van der Sprenkel, ‘Review: Daybreak in China’, *International Affairs* 30:3 (1954), 389.

32 – Letter from Paul Strand to Basil Davidson, 29 April 1957; courtesy of Basil Davidson.

account of his experience in the immediate aftermath of the Hungarian uprising contained in his pamphlet, *What Really Happened in Hungary?*<sup>33</sup> Of Rákosi and his ‘gang’ he writes that they presided over ‘bloody tyranny and threadbare poverty’ and accuses them of having ‘committed crimes, plunged themselves up to the armpits in blood [and] perverted the very meaning of Socialism’.<sup>34</sup>

It is clear, then, that there were important political differences between Strand and Davidson, even if these were not allowed to stand in the way of securing a reliable and appropriate writer for *Tir a'Mhurain*. Many years after Strand's death, Davidson reflected upon these tensions in correspondence with Mike Weaver prompted by the latter's essay in the book edited by Stange. Davidson emphasised:

In the many meetings and discussions that I had with Paul he never directly raised the question of politics, certainly not of Communist politics; but it was very clear more or less where he stood. He knew that I stood on different ground, but ground near enough to his own to allow good and trusting co-operation, and so we simply let it pass, as it were, and ‘spoke of other things’.<sup>35</sup>

Davidson also questioned the notion that ‘Strand was in any primary way a “political person” or “political thinker”, which, as I thought and think, wasn't ever the case’:

In the years when I worked with him ... he seemed very immune from the everyday world of political events — living in France and barely knowing the language, almost never reading it, and cut off from any kind (as it seemed to me) of political debate or argument. I myself never had any with him, and even in the wake of the Hungarian Rising of '56 (which I witnessed and reported for the old TUC *Daily Herald* in a manner extremely hostile to the Rákosi regime *et aliter*) there was still no discussion.

There is, then, an apparent contradiction at the heart of Strand's political identity. As we shall see, Strand had a profound emotional attachment to Communism; for Davidson it was ‘very clear more or less where he stood’. And yet, after 1949, Strand's commitment to this political ideal seldom extended to an everyday engagement with political events.

The circumstances of Strand's first meeting with Davidson, through the American film exile Joseph Losey, would, at least as far as Strand was concerned, have inspired trust from the outset.<sup>36</sup> As a member of the Communist Party USA and of the Communist Cultural Committee,<sup>37</sup> Losey was one of the 320 Hollywood workers blacklisted on the basis of testimonies to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Subpoenaed to appear before HUAC on July 1951, he fled to Italy and ultimately to England, where he continued to direct films<sup>38</sup>. That Strand and Davidson should have met through Losey is not remarkable. As Trachtenberg has pointed out, Strand was ‘hardly alone among what we might call Cold War modernists in art, Marxists in politics’.<sup>39</sup> To be a Left-aligned artist, not to mention an intellectual and an internationalist, was more than enough to draw unwelcome attention in a McCarthyite political culture. But it is important to guard against the notion that Strand was merely a hapless associate of Communism or some inadvertent fellow traveller. The opposite is the case. Strand moved in networks of political affiliation that he could depend on and in which he was deeply invested. It is a commitment however, that cannot be understood other than through the lived experience of the Cold War, a period which — as various ‘fellow travellers’ of the time have impressed upon me — was deeply threatening, personally and professionally, for anyone identified as a sympathiser. In this context, it is worth mentioning another of Basil Davidson's comments in response to Mike Weaver's ‘Dynamic Realist’ essay:

33 – Basil Davidson, *What Really Happened in Hungary?* London: Union of Democratic Control 1957.

34 – *Ibid.*, 12.

35 – Letter from Basil Davidson to Mike Weaver, 26 July 1989; courtesy of Mike Weaver.

36 – Evidence that Joe Losey was the means of their introduction is in a letter from Paul Strand to Basil Davidson, 30 September 1955; courtesy of Basil Davidson.

37 – Michael Cement, *Conversations with Losey*, London: Methuen 1985, 323; see also David Caute, *Joseph Losey: a revenge on life*, London: Faber 1994, 104.

38 – Caute, *Losey*, 106.

39 – Trachtenberg, ‘Introduction’, 4.

40 – Letter from Basil Davidson to Mike Weaver, 26 July 1989; courtesy of Mike Weaver.

So far as I know or guess, your political picture of him is good and right. But I think it is difficult to ‘get it across’ without reducing his moral stature, to generations living in very different times and for whom, for example, the harrowing pressures of the Cold War, anyway from 1947 or 1948, simply don’t come through.<sup>40</sup>

41 – Weaver, ‘Dynamic Realist’; Weaver presented some supplementary CIA and State Department material to CCP in 2004.

### ‘Allegiances, commitments, activities ...’

42 – The revelation of the so-called VENONA intercepts — 2900 translated decrypted messages sent by Soviet agents in the US back to Moscow — together with the corroboration of recently opened Soviet intelligence archives is widely seen to further indict Hiss. See Allen Weinstein and Alexander Vassiliev, *The Haunted Wood: Soviet Espionage in America — the Stalin Era*, New York: Random House 1999, 22–23; John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *VENONA: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1999, 167ff; Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes and Fridrikh Igorevich Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1995, 82. Much of this evidence, as Ellen Schrecker cautions, relies on the identity of a Soviet agent named ‘Ales’ matching the profile of Hiss; Klehr and Haynes have recently made a substantial case for the correspondence. See Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are The Crimes: McCarthyism in America*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1998, 175; John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *In Denial: historians, Communism and espionage*, San Francisco: Encounter Books 2003.

43 – Letter from Paul Strand to Alger Hiss, 18 June 1972, CCP Paul Strand Archive AG17/16:11.

44 – These were the Australian writer James Aldridge (1918–), the Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid (1892–1978) and the Scottish writer Naomi Mitchison (1897–1998). All received complimentary copies of *Tir a’ Mhurain* from Strand. Mitchison was regarded as a ‘silly sympathiser’ rather than a CP member. Timothy Garton Ash, ‘Love, death and treachery’ *The Guardian Review* 21 June 2003, 4–7; see also Timothy Garton Ash, ‘Orwell’s List’, *New York Review of Books* 50.14, 25 September 2003.

45 – George Orwell, quoted in Timothy Garton Ash, ‘Orwell’s List’.

46 – See D. N. Pritt, *Autobiography of D. N. Pritt*, vols i–iii, London: Lawrence and Wishart 1966.

To establish Strand’s position in the milieu of the American Left, I am, in the first instance, dependent on the research and initiative of Mike Weaver. It was Weaver who first accessed Strand’s security file under the provision of the Freedom of Information — Privacy Acts (FOIPA) section of the US Department of Justice (FBI), and presented it in 1990 to the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona, where it may be freely inspected.<sup>41</sup> Strand registered as a member of the American Labor Party on and off from 1937 through to 1947, at a time when an estimated twenty to twenty-five percent of members had Communist ties. The FOIPA file details Strand’s affiliation with more than twenty organisations later to be branded by the US Attorney General as ‘subversive’ and ‘un-American’, charges that Strand would later turn against his critics. In June 1949 he left America to present his film *Native Land* at the International Film Festival in Marianske Lazne, Czechoslovakia, where he defended the Hollywood Ten and condemned such ‘un-American’ activities as blacklisting. It was a sentiment that echoed Earl Browder’s famous slogan that ‘Communism is twentieth century Americanism’. The timing of Strand’s departure from the US is arguably notable in relation to the trial of his friend Alger Hiss (1904–1996), whose first libel trial ended on 7 July 1949 with a hung jury. For liberals and socialists, this is a moment that conventionally marks the high tide of oppressive McCarthyism. The trial was sparked by the testimony of ex-Communist Whittaker Chambers, who publicly identified Hiss as a Communist at a HUAC hearing in August 1948. Hiss emphatically denied this claim and defied Chambers to repeat the allegation outside the protection of a congressional hearing. When Chambers broadcast the charge on television, Hiss then sued for libel. In his defence, Chambers produced documents, not previously disclosed to HUAC, that purported to show not just that Hiss was a Communist (although this was implied), but that he was also a spy. After the first hung jury, Hiss was convicted of perjury by a grand jury (the statute of limitations for espionage having run out) and imprisoned for three and a half years. Although Hiss went to his grave in 1996 denying he was a Communist, most scholars now consider that recent evidence from Soviet archives confirms that he was a committed CP member active in espionage.<sup>42</sup> Strand and Hiss were close friends. When exiled in France, Strand made available his New York apartment to Alger and Priscilla Hiss.<sup>43</sup> Upon Strand’s death in 1976, Hiss delivered the address at his memorial service.

Strand’s professional contacts in Europe, like those in America, were to a large extent orientated around the Communist Party. The authors of text for his books *La France du Profil*, *Un Paese* and *Living Egypt* — Claude Roy, Cesare Zavattini and James Aldridge — were all Communists. It has also been revealed that three of Strand’s friends in Britain were on George Orwell’s notorious list, in which he submitted names of those he considered as either Communists or ‘cryptos’ to the British Foreign Office Information Research Department.<sup>44</sup> Also of concern to Orwell was another friend of Strand, the Marxist lawyer and Labour MP, Dennis Noel Pritt (1887–1972), whom he regarded as ‘a real crypto’ — the sort of person, said Orwell, who would ‘hand the [military] secret over without any sense of guilt’.<sup>45</sup> Pritt was notable for the resolve early in his career never to represent an employer against a worker, landlord against a tenant, or to act for any opponent of the working class.<sup>46</sup> As MP for Hammersmith North from 1935, he was expelled from the Labour Party in 1940

for defending the entry of Russian troupes into Finland. Although not overtly a CP member, Pritt was known for an unswerving loyalty that most members could not match. It was a reputation borne out of Pritt's emphatic endorsement of the fairness and legal legitimacy of Stalin's infamous Zinoviev Trial, which sought to portray Zinoviev and fifteen other oppositionists as being in secret alliance with fascism.<sup>47</sup> Stalin's ultimate target was Leon Trotsky who, two years before he was assassinated, insisted that 'attorneys of the Pritt type, will not dupe world public opinion'.<sup>48</sup> Shortly after returning from the USSR where he was awarded the Stalin International Peace Prize in 1955, Pritt received a copy of *Un Paese* from Paul Strand, to which the lawyer responded that 'it was a very fine and powerful piece of work — the truest kind of artistic propaganda'.<sup>49</sup> On returning from another trip to China, Pritt's wife Molly wrote to the Strands that 'you'd find it most invigorating, and feel as we did ... they will go from strength to strength and be a real bulwark for peace in the world'.<sup>50</sup> In 1945, Pritt had taken up a legal case of Roderick MacFarquhar (1908–89), another CP member, and subsequently an advisor to Strand and the *Tir a'Mhurain* project ten years later.<sup>51</sup> It is likely that Pritt introduced Strand to MacFarquhar, who at the time of Strand's visit had started an egg co-operative in South Uist.<sup>52</sup> Strand euphemistically describes MacFarquhar as 'a splendid man, a genuine progressive',<sup>53</sup> and 'the one really developed man on the island' with 'an excellent knowledge of the economic situation'.<sup>54</sup> MacFarquhar was important to *Tir a'Mhurain*, advising both Strand and Davidson on personal contacts, local politics and ultimately checking Davidson's text for any inaccuracies.<sup>55</sup>

While Strand's networks of personal association and activist solidarity are interesting, one cannot rely on these to stand in for a more personal knowledge of Strand's politics. Among his contemporaries who were active in the radical artistic circles of the 1940s, only Ben Maddow, a colleague from the film co-operatives Nykino and Frontier Films, has published a personal portrait of Strand's political life. For Maddow, Strand was a man of 'uncompromising integrity' — a phrase that reveals something of the high seriousness with which he approached art and life. 'As far as I could tell', wrote Maddow, '[Strand] believed simultaneously in the American, Russian and Chinese revolutions — even if they were contradictory — and never once wavered in his devotion to Stalin'.<sup>56</sup> On the question of Strand's relationship with the Communist Party, Maddow insists:

There is no question of his general allegiance, for he never wavered during the earthquakes that rocked the Party during the late 1930s. One might think that the horrid armed embrace of Stalin and Hitler in 1939 would have shattered any connection with a political party that approved of it, but that would be to underestimate the tangled emotional bonds between a famous man like Strand and the causes that he made his own. The infamous Moscow Trials ... and the postwar Russian invasions of East Germany, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia never provoked a single signature of protest from Strand. He would have thought any disapproval to be disloyal.<sup>57</sup>

As to the specific question of membership, Maddow states simply that 'no-one knows ... if Strand actually carried a red party card, if that indeed was its dramatic colour. It doesn't matter: there were so-called members-at-large, whose connections were unrecorded. But Strand might not have been even that variety of member'.<sup>58</sup> Whether or not Strand was a CP member, the FOIPA file indicates that Strand's movements around Europe were being monitored by security agencies in Paris and London.

## Paul Strand and the Scottish Folk Revival

The question of Strand's politics is not only important in respect to the ideological framework of what he called Dynamic Realism (as applied to film

47 – Pritt published a pamphlet entitled *The Moscow Trial Was Fair*. See D. N. Pritt, *The Zinoviev Trial* London: Victor Gollancz Ltd. 1936.

48 – Leon Trotsky, 'Twenty Years of Stalinist Degeneration', *The Bulletin of Russian Opposition* 66–67 (1938), 19–21.

49 – Letter from D. N. Pritt to Paul Strand, 2 November 1955. AG 17/18/1/24.

50 – Letter from Molly Pritt to Paul and Hazel Strand, 17 October 1955. AG 17/18/1/24.

51 – MacFarquhar had uncovered evidence that the British Military Government was appointing former SS officers within the post-war German administration. Correspondence between Strand and MacFarquhar, mostly over the latter's involvement in what he calls 'H-bomb activities' is in the Paul Strand Archive at CCP. See also James N. McCrorie, *The Highland Cause: the life and times of Roderick MacFarquhar* Regina, Saskatchewan: James Napier Publishing 2001, 93–94.

52 – Davidson mentions MacFarquhar, 'an enterprising Scotsman from the mainland', in the text of *Tir a Mhurain*. Strand and Davidson, *Tir a Mhurain*, 133.

53 – Letter from Paul Strand to Basil Davidson, 30 September 1955; courtesy of Basil Davidson.

54 – Letter from Paul Strand to Basil Davidson, 4 December 1955; courtesy of Basil Davidson.

55 – Letter from Roderick MacFarquhar to Paul Strand 28 March 1958; Paul Strand Archive, CCP.

56 – Ben Maddow, 'A View from Below: Paul Strand's monumental presence', *American Art* 5:3 (1991), 50.

57 – *Ibid.*, 57.

58 – *Ibid.*, 60.



59 – Weaver, 'Dynamic Realist'.

60 – Various general works exist, for instance: Hamish Henderson, *Alias MacAlias: writings on songs folk and literature* Edinburgh: Polygon 1992, 16–17; Hamish Henderson, 'The Edinburgh People's Festival, 1951–54', in *A Weapon in the Struggle: the cultural history of the Communist Party in Britain*, ed. Andy Croft, London: Pluto Press 1998, 163–170; Gregory, 'Lomax in London'; Ailie Munro, *The Democratic Muse: Folk Music Revival in Scotland*, Aberdeen: Scottish Cultural Press 1996; Ailie Munro, 'The Role of the School of Scottish Studies in the Folk Music Revival', *Folk Music Journal* 6:2 (1991), 132–168; Gerald Porter, 'The Word's Ill Divided: The Communist Party and progressive song', in Croft, *A Weapon in the Struggle*, 171–191; Donald Smith, *Storytelling Scotland: a nation in narrative*, Edinburgh: Polygon 2001; David King Dunaway, 'Music and politics in the United States' *Folk Music Journal* 5:3 (1987), 268–294. See also the special Hamish Henderson issue of the School of Scottish Studies journal, *Tocher* no. 43.

61 – Richard M. Dorson, *Folklore and Fakelore: essays towards a discipline of folk studies* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 1976, 19; see also Richard M. Dorson, 'Concepts of folklore and folklife studies', in *Folklore and Folklife: an introduction*, ed. Richard M. Dorson Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1972, 15ff.

62 – Gregory, 'Lomax in London', 143.

63 – *Ibid.*, 165.

and, by implication, photography).<sup>59</sup> Equally important is a particular cultural sensitivity to the forms of rural sociality and vernacular tradition that were prominent motifs within Communist artistic circles in the 1950s. Strand's visit to Scotland should be considered within this context. I have already mentioned the influence of David Octavius Hill, Robert Flaherty, Alan Lomax and, to a lesser extent, Compton Mackenzie in Strand's imagining of the Celtic periphery.

Lomax in particular represents a key figure in the American Left who had not just rediscovered the folk culture of rural America, but had turned to Europe — and notably to Scotland — to record the tradition-bearers of a rich oral culture. Here he encountered and inspired home-grown radicals like the Marxist collector Hamish Henderson who was at the centre of the Scottish Folk Revival, a parallel movement to that which, via Lomax, had brought Woody Guthrie and Leadbelly to prominence in America. The link between radical politics, specifically within the sphere of the Communist Party, and the Folk Revival is one that is as yet underdeveloped in historical scholarship.<sup>60</sup> It is notable however, that the American folklorist Richard Dorson recognised folklore as being an important territory on which competing Cold War ideologies (of both Left and Right) were fought. Faced with Soviet state support for oral history, Dorson even lobbied Senators for funding for American folklore on the basis that 'through ignorance [we are] playing directly into the hands of the Communists'.<sup>61</sup> Although the Scottish Folk Revival has, as Ailie Munro has described, earlier origins than the Cold War period, it was in 1951 that the movement gained momentum in Scotland. In that year, Lomax, with the assistance of Henderson, made his first recording tour of Scotland, demonstrating to the newly formed School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh, how portable recording equipment could be used in the field to systematically collect oral traditions.<sup>62</sup> At the same time, Lomax met Ewan MacColl, the English-born Communist folk singer who adopted the repertoire of Scottish travelling people and became a notable presence in both folklore and activist circles.

The most important event of the period was arguably the creation of the Edinburgh People's Festival as a popular response (or 'fringe') to the prestigious and establishment Edinburgh International Festival. The People's Festival was organised under the auspices of the Edinburgh Labour Festival Committee, a group that included representatives of trade unions, Labour Party organisations and other civic groups, but was also weighted with several members of the Cultural Committee of the Scottish District of the Communist Party. Among the emblematic differences distinguishing the People's Festival from its highbrow counterpart was the conscious presentation of the richness and diversity of Scotland's folk traditions, as they could be found in such seemingly marginal cultural groups as the indigenous travellers (pejoratively called 'Tinkers') and Gaelic-speaking Highlanders. For Hamish Henderson, who had spent the war years in Italy, where he had translated Antonio Gramsci's prison letters, the People's Festival was 'Gramsci in action'.<sup>63</sup>

Over its four-year life (1951–1954), the People's Festival was, to some extent, a victim of its own success. Concerned that its growing influence was a cover for Communist infiltration, the Scottish Trades Union Congress declared the festival committee a 'proscribed organisation', a move that prompted a Labour Party ban on their members associating with the festival. But even when the event ultimately foundered, the organisers could console themselves that the popular conception of Scottish culture had been transformed; the Scottish Folk Revival would yet flourish through other means.

The main institution of the revival was the School of Scottish Studies. Despite misgivings about his politics, Edinburgh University employed Hamish



Figure 2. *Paul Strand, Mrs Archie MacDonal, South Uist, Hebrides, 1954.* © 1962 Aperture Foundation Inc., Paul Strand Archive.

Henderson to secure the songs and stories of the Scottish travellers for the School's collection. The activities of the School in these early years had a distinct geographical orientation to the Highlands and Islands, on the one hand, and the sites of traveller culture in North East Scotland, on the other. Both areas of interest reflected the emotional ties of the two main collectors, Henderson and Calum I. Maclean. The Uists (those southern islands in the Outer Hebridean archipelago where Strand worked) had been at the forefront of the School's interest. Henderson had visited in 1951 with Lomax and again in 1953, and he had previously stayed there to write his award-winning poem *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica*.<sup>64</sup>

64 – Hamish Henderson, *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica* London: John Lehmann 1948.

The local doctor, Dr Alasdair Maclean, a brother of the folklorist Calum I. Maclean, was also interested in collecting songs and stories and had recorded Kate MacDonald ('Mrs Archie'), whose husband, Archie MacDonald, had told the doctor that his wife had 'a song' that might be worth recording (Figure 2). In fact Alasdair Maclean recorded over one hundred songs and encouraged his brother and Alan Lomax to do the same. Mrs Archie became one of the new stars of the Revival, travelling to London to record for Lomax and the BBC. Strand's relationship with Dr Alasdair Maclean, via the Folk Revival, was formative in the execution of *Tir a'Mhurain*. In an Institute of Contemporary Arts interview with the art and photography critic Bill Jay, Strand later expanded on the precise role of Maclean:

The question was how to contact these people. When we heard that they were very hostile, one way that we began to dig into the problem was to meet the local doctor, whom we had heard was a man of considerable culture, who, besides being a physician, was also interested in the folklore of the island. So one day we went to him and said 'Dr Maclean, this is our problem, how are we going to photograph the people? Will they be very hostile to us'. He said 'No. I don't think so.' 'Well you as doctor, you know everybody here. Would you mind sitting down and making a list of people from babyhood up to old age, who you think are photogenic, who we might go and see and say 'Dr. Maclean knows our reason for being here. We are making a book about this island and he thinks that it would be a good idea if you would allow yourself to be photographed'. ... Of course the whole thing depended on whether Dr. Maclean's idea of somebody being interested and photogenic and typical of their life was valid and a good solid judgement ... But it worked, it absolutely worked. He had a very fine eye and everybody we met was photogenic.<sup>65</sup>

65 – 'Paul Strand' [interview with Bill Jay recorded at the London ICA, 1972] *Creative Camera* 141 (March 1976), 84.

Strand's access to Hebridean culture was therefore via very specific networks of association and through particular 'gatekeeper' informants, closely connected with a national reappraisal of 'folk' culture. To anyone familiar with the practice of folklore in the Uists, what is striking about the choice of subjects in *Tir a'Mhurain* is that so many of the portraits are of bards, storytellers or other bearers of the oral tradition. Maclean's mediation goes some way to explaining this pattern. But there is also a multi-sensory aspect to Strand's work. Sara Stevenson has made the point that Strand, like David Octavius Hill, is deeply interested in picturing the oral.<sup>66</sup> As Dr Alasdair Maclean's greatest 'discovery' and the wife of Strand's personal guide, Mrs Archie was an obvious choice of subject.<sup>67</sup> But many lesser-known male tradition-bearers such as Neil MacDonald are also presented, each one holding their pipe, an object that functions as a material emblem of their orality, suggesting a time away from work, a time for reflection, for conversation and for narration (figure 3).

66 – Sara Stevenson, *The Personal Art of David Octavius Hill* London and New Haven: Yale University Press 2002, 116.

67 – That Archie MacDonald was Strand's guide is evident from a letter from Archie and Katie MacDonald, Garrachallie, Daliburgh to Paul Strand, 4 November 1957, CCP AG 17/26/3.

Strand's arrival in Scotland in 1954 therefore coincided with a Folk Revival that was, in no small part, a political as well as a cultural movement, and one nurtured within the orbit of the Communist Party. Not all the key figures of the movement were Party members, but many were closely involved. These included Pete Seeger, who provided some music for Strand's *Native Land*, his half-sister Peggy Seeger, her partner Ewan MacColl, Norman and Janey



Figure 3. Paul Strand, *Neil MacDonald, South Uist, Hebrides*, 1954. © 1962 Aperture Foundation Inc., Paul Strand Archive.

68 – Interview with Timothy Neat, 15 September 2003; Hamish Henderson, 'There's a fine poem in Gaelic', *Daily Worker* 5668 (24 November 1949), 2. After he was refused the opportunity to write for *L'Unita* Henderson believed that 'King Street' (the headquarters of the Communist Party of Great Britain) had briefed the Italian CP against him. He claimed, 'CPGB did not take me seriously'. See letter from Hamish Henderson to Phil Stein, 10 November 1993; courtesy of Timothy Neat.  
69 – Letter from Alex McCrindle to Paul Strand, 26 April 1957. CCP: AG17/17/15.  
70 – Letter from Paul Strand to R. G. Poynter-Davis (MacGibbon and Kee), 2 July 1962, CCP AG 17/2/9.

71 – Blacklisting denied McCrindle a wide audience until 1978 when he played General Jan Dodonna, leader of the rebel force in George Lucas's classic film *Star Wars*.

72 – Doris Lessing, *Walking in the Shade: volume two of my autobiography, 1949–1962* London: HarperCollins 1997, 108.

73 – Anon, 'Obituary: Alex McCrindle', *The Times* Saturday 28 April 1990, 12.

74 – In an interview with author, 9 September 2003.

Buchan, and, famously, Hugh MacDiarmid, who waited until after the Hungarian uprising to *rejoin* the Communist Party and whom Strand had considered as a potential collaborator. Hamish Henderson's relationship with the CP was always more ambivalent. Although he had taught on the programme of the Communist League, written for the *Daily Worker*, and advised the Chinese Communist Party on the methods of folklore collecting, Henderson drifted away from the Party through the fifties.<sup>68</sup> Strand's initial point of contact with this network was through the Scottish actor Alex McCrindle (1911–90), the most important person behind the *Tir a'Mhurain* project apart from Strand and Davidson and an individual embedded in the Folklore Revival. McCrindle acted as Strand's agent in Scotland, negotiating with Compton Mackenzie and visiting the School of Scottish Studies in order to help set up the project.<sup>69</sup> McCrindle and his wife Honor Arundel also accompanied the Strands for part of their visit to South Uist.<sup>70</sup>

Strand met McCrindle through *Daily Worker* film critic Honor Arundel, whom Strand had encountered in Marianske Lazne. At that time, McCrindle was at the height of his career, having played Jock in the popular radio programme *Dick Barton, Special Agent*, which ran for 700 episodes from 1946 to 1951 and at its peak attracted 15 million listeners. Despite being a household name at the time, McCrindle's Communist Party membership prevented him from getting further work as an actor, and he diverted his energies to starting the Scottish branch of Equity, the actors' union.<sup>71</sup> The home of McCrindle and Arundel in the fifties was always a hub of Party activity and organisation, as the writer Doris Lessing notes in her autobiography. Even in London, it seems that the cultural circles of the Communist Party were drawn to the Scottish Folk Revival:

In a garden on the canal known as Little Venice, now very smart, then dingy and run down, there were held ceilidhs, where Ewan MacColl sang [...]. The house belong to Honor Tracy (sic) [Arundel], an upper-class young woman whose education had destined her for a very different life, and her husband Alex McCrindle ... who was in a radio series of immense popularity. There were people from the worlds of radio, music, and nascent television, and of course, women with children. Most of them were communists, but none of them were communists ten years later, except for Alex. And Ewan MacColl, the communist troubadour and bard.

I found these occasions pretty dispiriting, all these people doing Scottish folk dances, often in a cold drizzle.<sup>72</sup>

Alex McCrindle was a Party loyalist, a 'Communist stalwart' as *The Times* obituarist described him, and held to an 'unrelenting Marxism which lost nothing of its purity and uncompromising severity'.<sup>73</sup> He remained faithful to the Party throughout the upheavals of the Hungarian Uprising and the Prague Spring and lived just long enough to see the bitter dissolution of Stalinist state socialism with the eventual fall of the Berlin Wall. And yet Alex McCrindle's daughter Jean remembers Paul Strand as being a much more fervent supporter of Stalin than even her father had been. Strand had, she said, an admiration for Stalin that was greater than that of anyone else she had met. Having been acculturated into a Communist household that was used to visiting Party workers, artists and intellectuals from all over the world, Jean McCrindle was still able to remark that she had rarely encountered anyone more committed to the Stalinist cause than Paul Strand.<sup>74</sup>

## Land of bent grass and guided missiles

One of the paradoxes of the Folk Revival was that its tradition was fashioned in the shadow of a military-industrial modernity. When the British Government

announced in August 1955 that a guided missile range was to be built in the Uists, the School of Scottish Studies redoubled its collecting efforts. This choice of the Hebrides as the test bed for the ballistic carrier of Britain and America's first nuclear missile, the US-made Corporal, significantly re-orientated the geopolitics of the Cold War. As the first country in the world to suffer a missile attack, when it was the target in 1944 of a Nazi V1 flying bomb and the V2 rocket, Britain was keen to invest both in the logistics of detection and in the development of its own nuclear missile capability. Winston Churchill's 1952 Defence White Paper and President Eisenhower's 'New Look' national security policy both emphasised the importance of nuclear weapons as the foundation of NATO security. By way of a stop-gap until its own generation of weapons could come into service, Britain purchased 113 Corporal tactical nuclear missiles from the US in 1954. The problem facing the military planners was that if this new suite of guided weapons was to come into service, then technical and operational training would be required when the range provision was plainly inadequate.<sup>75</sup>

If a new range had to be built within the British Isles, there were few options as to where it could be sited. Given that the range required a topography of observation, with a suitably located tracking station to monitor the trajectory of the missile, the Hebridean seascape — together with the recently abandoned St Kilda archipelago — seemed the ideal site. Despite vehement opposition from local people, conservationists, folklorists and such prominent public figures as Hugh MacDiarmid, Compton Mackenzie and the actor James Robertson Justice, the range was built more or less as planned in 1957 and 1958. The first test firing of the Corporal took place in the summer of 1959. As a 'tactical' missile, the Corporal was destined for use 'in theatre' in Eastern Europe. Significantly, its development indicated a willingness on the part of NATO chiefs to actually use some form of nuclear weapon short of the volley of intercontinental missiles that constituted the 'deterrent' of the time. The Hebridean testing of the Corporal was therefore of obvious interest to the Soviet Union. So concerned was the British Government about Soviet radio-electrical 'eavesdropping' on the range, that the remote islet of Rockall (which had no prior legal status) was annexed in case it was acquired by a foreign power and used to observe firing operations.<sup>76</sup> In fact the Soviet Union found other means of espionage, using spy vessels posing as fishing boats to study the frequencies of electronic warfare.<sup>77</sup> It is sufficient for our purposes here to note that the construction of the rocket range represented a move of considerable strategic significance within NATO.

Strand's visit to the Hebrides in 1954 took place between the military decision to proceed with a range in 1953 and the public announcement of the Uist site in August 1955. By the end of 1953, it was obvious to the military planners that Uist was by far the most likely location. When the Guided Weapons Working Party began its search, an early minute suggested that there were few possibilities for such a range and that it was 'certain that not more than one could be found'.<sup>78</sup> A Ministry of Defence conference in July 1954 authorised a 'preliminary site reconnaissance' of the Uists, an inspection that, according to the minutes, was made 'surreptitiously' in August/September 1954.<sup>79</sup> If Strand's visit did not overlap with that of military surveyors, they could only have missed each other by a matter of weeks. That a Cold War exile from America should have ended up at such a key location for NATO militarism at precisely this juncture is remarkable. But, unless further archival material comes to light, little else can be said about the coincidence.

Strand addresses the question of the rocket range with frankness, subtlety and skill. The relatively brief mention of the range in Davidson's text ('that grim and dubious project') was a matter for lengthy debate. For Strand, the

75 – A fuller account of the history of the rocket range is given in Fraser MacDonald, 'Geographies of Vision and Modernity: things seen in the Scottish Highlands', DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2003. All of this material is based on de-classified military files at the Public Record Office (PRO), London. Files of particular relevance are: Air Ministry boxes BT 217/577, BT 247/577, BT 247/98; Ministry of Aviation boxes AVIA 2/2648, AVIA 2/962, AIR 19/723, CAB 124/1601, T223/291.

76 – Fraser MacDonald, 'The last outpost of Empire: Rockall and the Cold War', *Journal of Historical Geography* (forthcoming).

77 – Staff writer, 'St Kilda Spy Shock: radar trackers pose as fishers' *Scottish Daily Express*, Monday 30 May 1960, 1.

78 – PRO AIR 19/723, Air Ministry file no. c. 46706/51.

79 – PRO DEFE 51/116, report on the Hebrides Range, 1953–1959.

range was an important political cause, not merely of local interest, but one that represented everything he struggled against: an aggressive capitalist modernity. ‘Rocket testing sounds innocuous enough’, he wrote to Davidson, ‘makes you think of the moon, interplanetary space and the geophysical year. But if by chance the word rocket were a euphemism of a sort for guided missiles — maybe with atomic warheads — that is a horse of a somewhat different colour ... If I have this all wrong then please tell me, because I don’t understand the position in the mild and humanitarian terms in which it is discussed’.<sup>80</sup> Initially, it seemed as if the controversy over the range might lend the book a contemporary edge. For Strand, it brought ‘the island into public view, at least makes it less obscure. Perhaps such a book as this can help the islanders ward off the threat, in some small way’.<sup>81</sup> Continuing uncertainty about how and where *Tir a’Mhurain* might be published meant that the political purpose of the book evolved throughout the nine years it took to reach publication. In 1957 Strand acknowledged to Davidson:

Our projected book is too late to help them, but does it not take on an added dimension and significance, politically and culturally? Doesn’t it become more desirable to have such a record of something which will certainly be destroyed? ... In short, it is not I who raise the issue now, but life itself, in the form of ruthless stupidity.<sup>82</sup>

Davidson was more circumspect:

Yes, the rocket range does give the book a new ‘angle’ — that is the Western Isle with the oldest surviving European culture, now invaded by the latest product of industrialism etc etc. But in all honesty I do not believe — and nor do my friends in Uist — that the range is likely to be anything like a death blow to that culture — much more serious of course is the continued refusal to teach children in Gaelic, at least in their primary school years [...] The rocket range disturbs and upsets the people — and is a typical piece of military beastliness. But it may only be a temporary thing; and it is most unlikely to become a launching base. Moreover, if it were to become a launching base, it would merely seal the fate of South Uist as the fate of London and all our people would then be sealed — more or less total annihilation. I should therefore be doubtful of the wisdom of making the rocket range a central theme of the text.<sup>83</sup>

The debate was over emphasis rather than substance. ‘I cannot get it out of my mind that guided missiles are the latest fashion in military preparations and warmongering’, Strand wrote to Davidson. ‘It is not a basic theme, but on the other [hand] something that cannot be relegated to a matter of no importance as I see it’.<sup>84</sup> Davidson’s reply states: ‘I think I would set the rocket range at a lower level of noxiousness (quite apart, of course, from the whole rocket business) than you would ... but goodness knows it is noxious enough’.<sup>85</sup>

Were it not for a fleeting reference to the range in the text to *Tir a’Mhurain*, it would be easy to dismiss the notion that Cold War political motifs are latent in the landscapes and portraits of this agrarian culture. After all, one assumes that Strand’s photographs predate his knowledge of the impending military development. But it is important to emphasise that a significant part of the creative process lay not merely in taking the photographs but in ordering them to create suggestive juxtapositions and new narrative meanings. Although just over a hundred photographs are used in the book, Strand took approximately six hundred Hebridean images.<sup>86</sup> The selection and organisation of prints — a process which took several years and over which Strand was famously fastidious — was thus responsive to the changing geopolitical climate. Despite the fact the photographs predate the military development, the rocket range, and the modernity it represents are nevertheless latent in the finished book.

The most iconic of all the photographs, simply entitled *Tir a’Mhurain*, is used on the front cover and as the final image (figure 1). Four horses stand

80 – Letter from Paul Strand to Basil Davidson, 29 April 1957; courtesy of Basil Davidson.

81 – Letter from Paul Strand to Basil Davidson, 21st September 1955; courtesy of Basil Davidson.

82 – Letter from Paul Strand to Basil Davidson, 1st April 1957; courtesy of Basil Davidson.

83 – Letter from Basil Davidson to Paul Strand, ‘Monday’ no date but presumed April 1957, CCP AG17/2/2.

84 – Letter from Paul Strand to Basil Davidson, 2 May 1957; courtesy of Basil Davidson.

85 – Letter from Basil Davidson to Paul Strand, 5 May 1957; CCP AG17/2/2.

86 – This figure is mentioned in a letter from Paul Strand to Jean Purcell Neiningger, 13 Dec 1954; AG 94:1/1.

at the water's edge. Until the army built permanent causeways, horses were the normal means of crossing the inter-tidal fords between the islands. About the same time, the tractor replaced the animal as the prime mover in crofting agriculture.<sup>87</sup> Archie and Katie MacDonald detailed these changes in a letter to the Strands in 1957:

You have of course heard of this famous Rocket Range. It will certainly alter the habit and way of the people. ... In a very short time, it may be difficult to find a horse in Uist. Since you were here they have practically disappeared. Very few of the old type of house is left now.<sup>88</sup>

When *Tir a'Mhurain* was finally published in 1962, its authors were aware that it would be received as an historical document, presenting a way a life that was rapidly changing. But Strand's photography reflects a folklorist concern with 'disappearing' cultural forms. His interest in houses (particularly thresholds of windows and doors) and in tools, mirrors the privileged ethnological status of vernacular material culture. This fixation could be read as romanticism. 'Modernism may have taught him to see the world with rigorous attention to the abstract form underlying every perception' wrote Alan Trachtenberg, but 'romanticism, his more powerful angel, taught him loyalty to the fullness of the world as it is'.<sup>89</sup>

Romantic socialist motifs occur throughout Strand's work, and *Tir a'Mhurain* is no exception. A more detailed visual exegesis is necessary to bring out these themes from the photographs. Indeed, the whole argument of this paper is, in one sense, endlessly deferred. The full analysis of Strand's politics cannot be sustained without a close reading of the photographs themselves, and yet that task is beyond the scope of this essay.<sup>90</sup>

### *Tir a'Mhurain* as Cold War artefact

I have argued that the conception, authorship and content of *Tir a'Mhurain*, like much of Strand's post-war work, must be placed in the context of the complex geopolitics of the Cold War. That Strand's work reflects the tense political climate in which it appeared is further evident in the production, publication and circulation of the finished book. Although it appeared too late to influence the outcome of the Hebridean rocket range, its publication, timed to coincide with the Edinburgh Festival of 1962, occurred on the eve of the Cold War's greatest emergency, the Cuban Missile Crisis. Strand's timing was inadvertently momentous. He had earlier experienced the bad fortune of having released his classic film *Native Land* — about racism and other malevolent forces in American society — on the very day of Pearl Harbour, when public interest in an internal threat was ousted by the patriotism of war. By contrast, *Tir a'Mhurain's* statement about tenacious working people caught in the geopolitical manoeuvres of Cold War militarism was timely.

At the height of the missile crisis, even Basil Davidson declared sympathy with Strand and the Soviet Union. Forwarding a letter of thanks from Dr Alasdair Maclean to Strand, Davidson scribbled on the top: 'I think Kruschev [sic] is an even greater man than I thought before. If we are still alive, it's largely thanks to him'. And, perhaps surprisingly, it was Davidson rather than Strand who suggested a Soviet edition of *Tir a'Mhurain*, eventually soliciting advice from Samuil Marshak (1887–1964), a friend of Alex McCrindle and the Russian authority on and translator of Robert Burns.<sup>91</sup> For Strand, however, the production of his art behind the Iron Curtain was as much a matter of ensuring quality as a gesture of political solidarity. His notoriously exacting standards required finding a printer that could produce his photogravures to his own precise instructions.

87 – Across Scotland tractors increased from 37,000 in 1950 to 60,000 in 1961. See John Bryden, 'Scottish Agriculture, 1950–1980', in *The Economic Development of Modern Scotland, 1950–1980*, ed. Richard Saville, Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers Ltd. 1985, 159.

88 – Letter from Archie and Katie Macdonald to Paul Strand, 4 November 1957; CCP AG 17/26/3.

89 – Trachtenberg, 'Introduction' in *Paul Strand*, 2.

90 – A detailed exegesis of the photographs is contained in my thesis, 'Geographies of Vision and Modernity', 281–362.

91 – Davidson's books, like those of another of Strand's collaborators, James Aldridge, had sold well behind the iron curtain. Letter from 'Meshca' [?] to Paul Strand, 19 November no year; Paul Strand Archive CCP, AG17/2:9. The correspondent writes that 'Davidson is getting part of his royalties from the S.U. in sterling! I guess one really must be on the spot to achieve results' [original emphasis].



That such a printer, Kunst Verlag, was found in Leipzig, East Germany, did not deter Strand. It did, however, create an obstacle in making the book available to the American market. A telegram from Strand's American publisher George Wittenborn on 24 September 1962 stated simply, 'Stop printing new book. Urgent customs trouble stop. Letter follows'.<sup>92</sup> Strand's New York-based legal agent, Stanley Faulkner explained that 'a serious matter has arisen', namely that the 'imprint in the book must bear the statement, "Printed in Germany, USSR occupied"'.<sup>93</sup> Typically, Strand's reply to Faulkner was uncompromising. If defeat was bitter, to be seen to be defeated was unacceptable:

It is a real kick in the stomach after all the work to bring this last work of mine to my own country — it looks though it is hard to admit, as though present circumstances will not permit the contract to be fulfilled. ... If you are satisfied that nothing more can be done, then the books will have to go into storage until there is a change historically. If we have to do this then I ask you to work out some sort of formulation with written form with Wittenborn to give the sense of a postponement. No useful service would be served by stating the real reasons for this postponement, on the contrary [...] You see how necessary it is to work out a plausible reason couched as a vague postponement. Manufacturing delays or that the American edition has had to be postponed because of unexpectedly large European sales — until the make of a 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. I don't care how it is done so long that we and Wittenborn do not appear as victims of this ruling.<sup>94</sup>

Wittenborn's pleas to Strand to compromise and allow the books to be stamped with 'USSR occupied' fell on deaf ears.<sup>95</sup> An alternative suggestion was an 'offset' edition, a cheaper process than photogravure, but producing a much inferior print quality, entirely different from the later offset printing favoured by Ansel Adams. 'A very regrettable situation indeed', replied Strand to Wittenborn, 'but one which cannot be solved as you suggest':

Offset editions made anywhere would be completely against my own concept of my work, the worst possible process for photography. ... We and *Tir a'Mhurain* are victims of a situation we knew nothing about and I fear can do little about at the moment. Perhaps a year from now things will be different.<sup>96</sup>

It was characteristic of Strand that he regarded historical circumstances as being more malleable than his commitment to the Communist Party. The American edition of *Tir a'Mhurain* eventually appeared six years later.

When *Tir a'Mhurain* was published, Strand believed it to be among the best of his life's work.<sup>97</sup> Alongside David Octavius Hill, Strand is widely recognised as being among the most important figures, not merely in the portraiture of Scotland, but in the wider development of photographic art. Strand's status in art history is beyond question. And yet, it is surprising that even more than a decade after the collapse of the Soviet empire, the geopolitical context of *Tir a'Mhurain* has not been given due attention. Even at the time, few critics remarked on the rocket range as a significant background to the project. Robert Koch, reviewing in *Aperture*, was an exception:

*Tir a'Mhurain* is a beautifully made book with large and crisply detailed reproductions. Ironically, its printing was done behind the Iron Curtain, the very existence of which has brought threatening rockets to this land of bent grass.<sup>98</sup>

Most reviewers have preferred to see the portraits of Hebridean landscape and people rather than acknowledge any geopolitical motifs in Strand's work. Aside from the scholarship of Mike Weaver and a few others, more or less the same reluctance has applied to the analysis of Strand's wider legacy. There is, therefore, scope for serious consideration of the triangulation between Strand's politics, his guiding aesthetic and the locale of his photographic practice. *Tir a'Mhurain* and his other books on New England, France, Italy, Egypt and Ghana suggest an obvious frame for such a study. Moreover, they have in

92 – Telegram from George Wittenborn to Paul Strand, 24 September 1962; CCP.

93 – Letter from Stanley Faulkner (Counselor at Law in New York) to Paul Strand, 24 September 1962; CCP Archive.

94 – Letter from Paul Strand to Stanley Faulkner, 26 September 1962; CCP AG 17/2/5.

95 – Letter from George Wittenborn to Paul Strand, 5 November 1962; CCP AG 17/2/5.

96 – Letter from Paul Strand to George Wittenborn, 8 November 1962; CCP AG 17/2/5.

97 – Letter from Hazel Strand to Dr Alasdair Maclean, no date; CCP AG 17/2/3.

98 – Robert Koch, 'Review: Paul Strand: *Tir a' Mhurain*', *Aperture* 11:2 (1964), 81.

common particular events, biographies and associations that reveal the importance of Strand's revolutionary instincts.

In this essay, I have tried to address Strand's politics, to explore the significance of the Cold War as a period of artistic and personal development, and to provide a model of how one book can open up the situated character of Strand's Modernism and Marxism. The task that remains is to explore the intertextuality of Strand politics, his affinity for folklore and the complex abstractions of his Modernism through the photographs themselves. Such an exegesis is a more ambitious undertaking than could be attempted here. Nevertheless, I consider that a close visual analysis of the images sustains the geopolitical and historical context that has been explored in this essay.