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*Cultural Geographies* 2001 8: 151

DOI: 10.1177/096746080100800202

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# St KILDA AND THE SUBLIME

*Fraser MacDonald*

This paper considers how the search for the sublime in nineteenth-century Scotland found its expression in the voyage to St Kilda, a remote island archipelago west of Scotland's Outer Hebrides. It looks at the historical construction of St Kilda as an *ultima Thule* for Victorian travellers, a site which offered an incongruous set of discourses on antiquity and modernity; improvement and romance; evangelicalism and impiety. Grounding the early interest in St Kilda in eighteenth-century aesthetic theory – specifically that of James MacPherson and Edmund Burke – the paper shows how this corporeal adventure into the Ossianic and oceanic sublime was disrupted by the islanders' religion and social organization. If the rhetorical strategies of the early tourists located St Kilda 'on the edge of the world', I draw attention to how the island was central to the ecclesiastical geography of Scotland. Given that for nineteenth-century Scotland the political life of the church eclipsed that of the state, the use of St Kilda as an emblem of Presbyterian polity was highly significant. In the context of a modern Scottish nation searching for historical perspectives on governance and community, the story of this 'island republic' has become important in the production of contemporary meaning. By challenging the moral-political authority of the travellers' accounts, I ascribe a greater degree of agency to the islanders and thereby question the dominant narrative of St Kildan history.

In our present era of mass mobility, it is hard to conceal the relationship between travel and privilege: those who can afford it will often choose to visit those who assuredly cannot. Such a totalizing summary of the contemporary tourist experience can also be applied to the aristocracy of nineteenth-century Britain, for whom a grand tour was an emblem of prestige and a badge of refinement.<sup>1</sup> Travel was replete with all the legitimacy of an educational project: European cities for a classical education and perhaps the Scottish Highlands<sup>2</sup> or the Lake District<sup>3</sup> for an aesthetic one. It was a select freedom, a function of the unprecedented industrial expansion of the British empire with its characteristic representations, practices and geographical knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Against such a background, this paper considers one specific but remarkable genre of travel: the sublime tour. It examines the distinctive vocabulary, scholarship and imagery of the sublime in relation to one of its key sites in north-west Scotland, the small island archipelago of St Kilda which lies 40 miles west of the Outer Hebrides

(Figure 1). This barren collection of islands which had supported continuous human occupation for millennia was finally evacuated in 1930 after an irreversible population decline. On 29 August the islanders boarded HMS *Harebell*, leaving their bibles open on their tables, a final gesture which marked the end of the long chronicle of island history.

Scrutinizing the texts of several travellers' accounts, I develop previous research in this field which grounds the nineteenth-century fondness for north west Scotland in eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, specifically that of Edmund Burke and James Macpherson.<sup>5</sup> If travel was the embodiment of aesthetic theory, it was also, as Mary Louise Pratt has demonstrated, one of the principal ideological apparatuses of empire.<sup>6</sup> In contesting the geographical knowledge contained in the St Kilda travellogues, this work contributes to a wider project of unpacking the discriminatory narratives of imperial travel.<sup>7</sup> It also adds to the recent critical scholarship on travel writing in two important respects. In a strictly textual sense, the paper looks at the construction of the author as subject through the process of writing. Secondly, the corporeality and sense of physical movement through sublime landscapes are highlighted in response to recent appeals for more embodied analyses of spaces of travel.<sup>8</sup>

Although most of the Scottish Highlands and islands have been pushed to the margins, both economically and semiotically, few places have been so resolutely distanced as St Kilda. In the 300 years since it was first represented in print in Martin Martin's *A late voyage to St Kilda*,<sup>9</sup> the islands have been given the dubious honour of being 'the remotest of all the Hebrides', 'on the edge of the world'<sup>10</sup> or even, according to one traveller, 'out of the world'.<sup>11</sup> The stigma and status of peripherality is understandable: St Kilda is geographically the most remote territory ever inhabited in the United Kingdom, and its intimidating outline has made it the ultimate prize for generations of aspiring adventurers. The distinctive vertical landscape and the poignant narrative elements of St Kilda's history have made it a compelling subject for representation in art, literature, photography and, most recently, environmental discourse. As a prominent symbol in the Greenpeace 'Operation Seachange' campaign against oil exploration in the Atlantic frontier, the islands and their former inhabitants are again the subject of public scrutiny 70 years after evacuation.

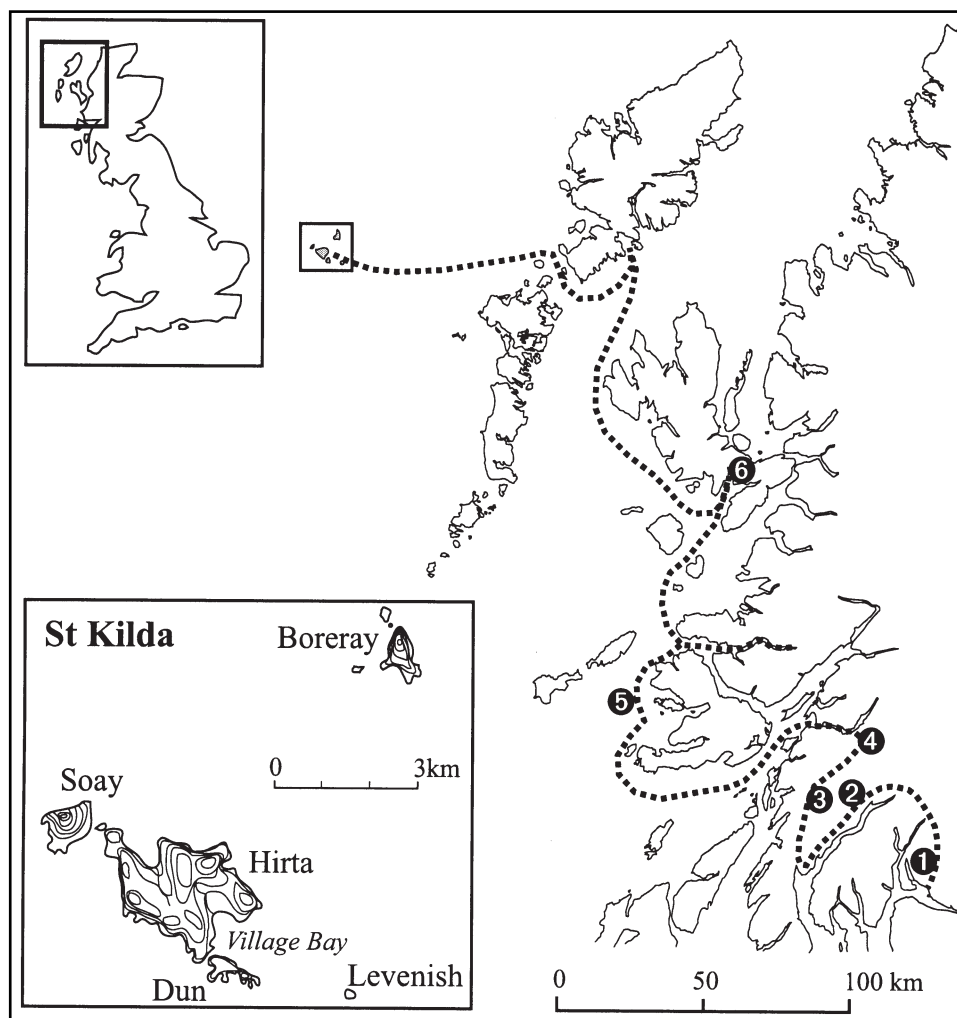
This interest in St Kilda, particularly in the so-called 'St Kilda Parliament' – recently 'reconvened' by Greenpeace<sup>12</sup> – has to a large extent been informed by, and drawn inspiration from, two popular histories by Tom Steel and Charles MacLean.<sup>13</sup> *The life and death of St Kilda* and *Journey to the edge of the world: Utopian St Kilda and its passing*, have been frequently reprinted to satisfy the insatiable popular appetite for the St Kilda story. Together they have acted as the primary portals of knowledge about the islands, more accessible than the weighty professional literatures that have begun to emerge from archaeology and other sciences.<sup>14</sup> Although different in style and scholarship, both broadly subscribe to the same interpretation: that this was an island utopia corrupted by the experience of modernity, in the form of education, religion and tourism. This erroneous narrative ascribes an Edenic character to the St Kildans but implicitly blames them for having material aspirations. In doing so, it is echoes contem-

porary discourses on Highland development that construct definite boundaries of what it is appropriate and legitimate for the rural periphery. I argue that this historiographical error comes from an over-reliance on the moral-political authority of nineteenth-century travellers, whose writings constitute almost the entire historical record of the island and its inhabitants.

Positioning these popular histories within the politics of a sublime aesthetic, this paper renders problematic this 'innocent' use of travellers' accounts in contemporary contexts. If the popular version of the island story offers powerful symbolic capital for a post-devolution Scotland, I suggest that a more critical understanding of St Kilda's negotiation with modernity can enhance its iconic potential. The sublime motif of tragedy in both Maclean and Steel offers a gloomy metaphor for a new Scottish Parliament, which has even in its design drawn inspiration from notions of St Kildan democracy.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the island community has become a popular referent for contemporary debates about the nature and function of Scottish government, a theme recently given prominence in an exhibition by the Scottish artist Ross Sinclair.<sup>16</sup> In an attempt to counter the tragic emphasis of Maclean and Steel, I position the St Kildans as active and willing agents of modernity. Such a revision asserts the integrity and import of island governance and challenges the now familiar historical construction of St Kilda as a primitive outpost in a world of developing sophistication. This critical retrospective lays a theoretical and historiographical foundation for future work on the contemporary significance of St Kilda as a cultural resource.

In examining the historical construction of St Kilda by travellers, it is instructive to start with place names which, like much of north and western Scotland, reveal both Norse and Gaelic influences. The name itself is a case of canonization by spelling error; 'Skildar' or 'Skilder' originally referred to another island on sixteenth-century maps but eventually came to be associated with Hirta (the main habitable island in the group) and, following Martin's published account of his visit, became firmly established as St Kilda.<sup>17</sup> This seemingly trivial fragment of knowledge is an early intimation of St Kildan history in the modern era; a history which, like the assignation of the name, is embedded in the power of external representation. Whatever the obvious commonalities that St Kilda shared with other parts of the *Gaidhealtachd*<sup>18</sup> – in faith, customs, language and dress – the island was always burdened with an emphasis on its singularity and isolation. In fact, as Andrew Fleming has recently stressed, St Kilda was a valuable part of the Macleod chiefdom, and must be seen in the context of regional interdependence rather than as a strictly isolated outpost.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, its ecclesiastical links to the rest of the Highlands proved to be one of the defining influences on the last two centuries of island life. Most commentators hold the axis of St Kildan history to be the arrival in 1822 of the Revd John Macdonald of Ferintosh (1779–1849), a well-known Highland missionary later to be canonized as 'the Apostle of the North'. Prior to this period, religious observance on the island was already 'Reformed' and, as Martin Martin had described it, 'neither inclined to Enthusiasm nor to Popery'.<sup>20</sup> But under Macdonald's pastoral care, a religious 'revival' similar to those that occurred throughout the nineteenth-century Highlands and Islands<sup>21</sup> changed the character of island life for ever.

There followed an era of theological orthodoxy which saw the islanders eventually adhere to the Free Church of Scotland, the evangelical party which seceded from the Established Kirk at the Disruption of 1843. By joining this new denomination the St Kildans aligned themselves theologically and politically with the rest of the *Gaidhealtachd*.. Though the evangelical faith of the islanders differed little from that in the west of Scotland generally, it was to become a particular problem for the increasing numbers of travellers who visited the island as part of a wider scenic tour of sublime landscapes.



**Figure 1** ~ St Kilda and other sublime sites (from the 1812 journey of Sir Thomas Dyke Acland): (1) Loch Lomond, (2) Inverary, (3) Loch Awe, (4) Loch Etive, (5) Staffa, (6) Isle of Skye. (NB: The dotted line does not necessarily represent the exact route between these sites.)

## Ossianic and oceanic sublime

In the middle of the eighteenth century two books profoundly changed the aesthetic understanding of the Scottish Highlands and islands and were instrumental in the integration and appropriation of the cultural resources of the *Gaidhealtachd*. The first was a seminal text by the conservative political theorist Edmund Burke (1729-97) entitled *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and the beautiful* and published in 1757.<sup>22</sup> Prefiguring the nineteenth-century romantic preference for wildness, Burke attempted an almost scientific scrutiny of taste, drawing specifically on the distinction between the categories of the sublime and the beautiful. His concept of the sublime, which embodies the 'passions' of terror, awe and sympathy, was both a legitimisation of and a response to the prevailing eighteenth-century ideology of land 'Improvement', interweaving moral, aesthetic and economic judgements. The second – and no less paradigmatic – book arrived three years later from James Macpherson (1736-1796), a hitherto unknown Scottish schoolmaster who in 1760 published his *Fragments of ancient poetry, collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and translated from the Gaelic or the Erse language*. Better known under the title *The poems of Ossian*, these epic poems in the Homeric tradition purport to be the ancient tales of Ossian, son of Fingal, collected and transcribed from the Gaelic bards by Macpherson himself. The popularity of the Ossianic poems was tempered by a famous controversy over their authenticity; but the question of whether Macpherson was a scrupulous folklorist or inspired forger (or both) is largely irrelevant to his enduring influence on the aesthetic appreciation of Highland Scotland.<sup>23</sup>

It is no coincidence that the appearance of these books was contemporary with the beginnings of tourism in Scotland,<sup>24</sup> or that this was a time when the popular response to the Scottish landscape was being transformed. Those aspects of Highland scenery which so offended the sensibility of Dr Johnson ('this wide extent of hopeless sterility'<sup>25</sup>) when he visited Scotland in 1753 were, by the end of the eighteenth century, the epitome of the fashionable sublime.<sup>26</sup> Not all of the Highland landscape, however, accorded with the gloominess of sublime nature: the region straddled an awkward Burian gap between the sublime and the beautiful, with certain areas, such as Loch Lomond, combining both pastoral and mountainous elements which delighted early tourists like William Gilpin. But although mountains were perhaps the most familiar element of sublimity, the Highlands did not always possess the interminable space required to fulfil a truly sublime view. Rather, they were often the framing device for the picturesque, providing 'a pictorially satisfying "termination" which saves the prospect from indefinite extension'.<sup>27</sup> The open sea, on the other hand, had no such limitation. St Kilda, that mountain in the sea, was truly awful; vast, solitary, dangerous. On seeing the island for the first time in 1822 Macdonald of Ferintosh writes:

At last I caught sight of the island, a sight I had longed to see, and my heart swelled with gladness as I looked.<sup>28</sup> But who could look on that island, standing erect out of the sea, with its rugged, craggy rocks, and its waste, unlovely mountains, its rough,

green shore, the rude, proud billows of the sea indenting all its sides as they dash against it with furious onsets, while it stands unyielding to the surf that is raging all around it, though its brow is bare and hoary with the waste and spray of the waves; who could see it thus, and unbiddden venture to approach it? Truly, if I had not a call from the Lord, I would not set foot on its shore.<sup>29</sup>

Burke's *Philosophical enquiry* and Macpherson's *Ossian*, although published in the middle of the eighteenth century, were especially influential in nineteenth-century romantic quests to find the 'lost' histories of wild Britain. In Scotland particularly there was a need to find a new literary hero who could represent both an unthreatening nationalism and a sense of historical continuity with a prior golden age of Scottish enlightenment.<sup>30</sup> But if Ossian provided a powerful symbolic resource for the British bourgeoisie, this same audience was, rather ironically, the driving force behind the retreat of Gaelic culture in the face of 'Improvement'. By the turn of the century only the Western Isles were considered to be sufficiently primitive to accord with the Ossianic myth: 'as they are inferior to their neighbours in every branch of modern improvement, so they excel them in these relics of former excellence'.<sup>31</sup> The concept of cultural authenticity employed by these early tourists and writers was, of course, deeply politicized, and symptomatic of the region's increasing integration into the economic realm of metropolitan Britain. In his excellent analysis of the twin ideologies of Improvement and romance, Peter Womack observes that

historically, the sympathy for the Highland barbarity and remoteness grew in proportion to the region's actual modernisation and accessibility. It wasn't only that more people could get there; it was centrally that as the logic of commercial utilisation permeated the land, it gave to the remaining enclaves of commercial uselessness the radiance of a disappearing authenticity.<sup>32</sup>

The canon of the sublime was therefore part of the aesthetic logic of economic Improvement. It was not, argues Womack, that 'the Ossianic version of the Highlands . . . resist[ed] the Improver's view of its moors and rocks as scenic negations; on the contrary it turned negation into style'.<sup>33</sup> Amidst this scenic arena the Highlander was constructed as a sublime subject, the Ossianic myth reinforcing 'the image of the Highlands as both the desolate refuge of a primitive people and an example, *par excellence*, of a sublime landscape'.<sup>34</sup> In this sense, eighteenth-century aesthetic theory became necessary prior knowledge for nineteenth-century travellers and as their accounts clearly show, these early visitors were highly tutored in the sight of Burke and Macpherson. Before going on to examine these portraits of St Kilda, it is therefore instructive to attend to the detail of Burke's *Philosophical enquiry* and the political context in which it appeared.

Although Burke is usually cited as author of *the* canonical text, other commentators on eighteenth-century aesthetic theory proved similarly influential both on the manner and subject of the tourist's vision. In addition to Longinus' first-century Greek treatise on the sublime (translated by William Smith in 1743), other works from leaders of the Scottish Enlightenment such as Adam Smith, David Hume and Hugh Blair were also important.<sup>35</sup> Continental philosophy, as represented in the aesthetic commentaries of Immanuel Kant, further advanced



the metaphysics of the sublime.<sup>36</sup> The basic impetus for the sublime was one of escape. For Burke, as for Hume, social order was maintained by a process of imitative behaviour, a reassuring cycle of comportment whereby knowledge and manners were learnt in a system of mutual conformity.<sup>37</sup> But within this social psychology of repetition lurked a danger of stagnation and paralysis, a condition which would leave little potential for self-elevation; thus some 'countervailing energy' was required 'which Burke discovers in the virile strenuousness of the sublime'.<sup>38</sup> At its most restrained the Burkeian sublime was a simple pleasure of the eye, but its wider meaning extended to a broader corporeal aesthetic:<sup>39</sup> a sensual repertoire variously including solitude, obscurity, sympathy, tragedy, terror, privation, vastness, difficulty and uncertainty. Of all these 'passions' it is terror – albeit of a qualified nature – that brings us closest to Burke's thought:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.<sup>40</sup>

When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we everyday experience.<sup>41</sup>

Terry Eagleton presents Burke's sublime as an ersatz aesthetic which, being 'confined to the cultivated few . . . with its "delightful horror", is the rich man's labour, invigorating an otherwise dangerously complacent ruling class'.<sup>42</sup> The leisured elite must find a thrill which can be easily legitimated on a pretext of personal and spiritual development. Most importantly, it must be safe: 'the sublime . . . [arises] from our confrontation of danger, although a danger we encounter figuratively, vicariously, in the pleasurable knowledge that we cannot be harmed. In this sense, the sublime is a suitably defused, aestheticized version of the values of the *ancien régime*.'<sup>43</sup> Out of terror comes another key component of the sublime: sympathy. 'It is a common observation' writes Burke, 'that objects which in the reality would shock, are in tragical, and such like representations, the source of a very high species of pleasure',<sup>44</sup> 'for terror is a passion which always produces delight when it does not press too close, and pity is a passion accompanied by much pleasure, because it arises from love and social affection'.<sup>45</sup> The delight of sympathy – and thus the appreciation of the sublime – then becomes a moral attribute,<sup>46</sup> a virtue which was later taken to giddy extremes by the Scottish novelist Susan Ferrier (1752–1854), whose characters were judged according to their sensitivity to Highland scenery.<sup>47</sup>

The weight of Burke's *Philosophical enquiry* consists of a detailed exposition of specific stimuli and their effect on the senses. He supplies a seemingly endless list of cause and effect:

greatness of dimension is a powerful cause of the sublime . . . a perpendicular has more force in forming the sublime, than an inclined plane; and the effects of a rugged and broken surface seem stronger than where it is smooth and polished . . . the rudeness of the work increases its grandeur, as it excludes the idea of art, and contrivance

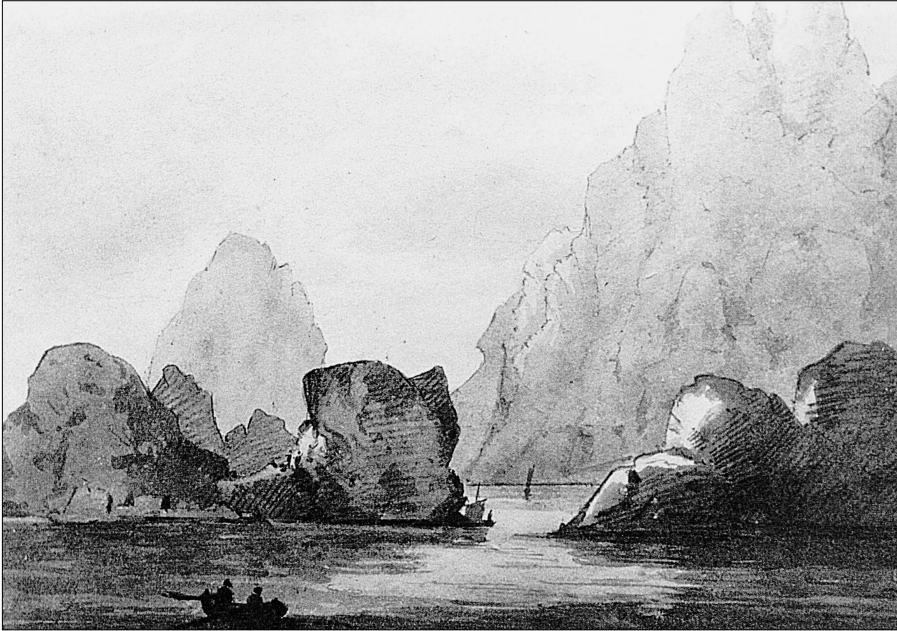


... a quick transition from light to darkness, or from darkness to light, has yet a greater effect; the cloudy sky is more grand than the blue ... excessive loudness alone is sufficient to overpower the soul, to suspend its action and to fill it with terror. The noise of vast cataracts, raging storms, thunder ... awakes a great and awful sensation in the mind.<sup>48</sup>

One of the logical outcomes of the sublime aesthetic in eighteenth-century landscape was the desire to travel and the search for adventure.<sup>49</sup> Whereas the pastoral and the picturesque could be imaginatively recreated in the home counties, the gentle beauty of England afforded little possibility of sublime experience. The Scottish Highlands, however, not only had a suitably mountainous landscape but possessed symbolic resources that were highly prized by the discerning traveller.<sup>50</sup> It is in this wider context that we must consider nineteenth-century travellers' accounts of St Kilda, a destination which until the 1830s remained geographically off limits to all but the most determined visitors.

One such was Sir Thomas Dyke Acland (1787–1871), who set off with his family on a tour of the classic sublime sites in June 1812.<sup>51</sup> First stopping off at 'Belle View', County Wicklow, that newly re-invented 'garden of Ireland',<sup>52</sup> the Aclands went on to take in those sights which were fast becoming key nodes in the locational geography of Scottish tourism:<sup>53</sup> the Falls of Clyde, Loch Lomond, Invereray, Loch Awe, Loch Etive, Staffa (site of the Ossianically titled Fingal's Cave<sup>54</sup>) and Skye, eventually arriving at St Kilda on 17 July<sup>55</sup> (see Figure 1). Here Acland was to produce the earliest known pictures of St Kilda (Figure 2), 12 watercolour paintings in a rough textured sketchbook (12 × 9 in.) representing those properties which made the island truly sublime: verticality, jagged surfaces, scale and contrast. Acland was reputedly appalled at the primitive living conditions of the islanders, making several sketches of their huts and promising to return in a charitable capacity. His election as MP for North Devon delayed this famous second coming until 1834, when on his new yacht, *The Lady of St Kilda* (named after his wife rather than any of the islanders), he embarked on a sketching tour of the British coastline.<sup>56</sup> Finding the living conditions of the islanders unchanged from his previous visit, Acland left a 'prize' of £20 for the first islander to build a proper house, a move which ultimately resulted in the contentious division of the commons into strips of individual tenure. A new village was eventually built, and Acland's money was allocated to a shared expenditure on windows, furniture and crockery, domestic improvements which quickly extended to the reorganization of agriculture through drainage and fencing. As one of the earliest visitors to St Kilda, Acland can be easily located within the dual representational strategies of improvement and romance: that which he came to find – an authentically primitive island community – is also that which must be transformed by the material expression of sympathy.

The arrival of Macdonald of Ferintosh in 1822 must also be understood in the context of an aesthetic education. It would be naïve to suggest that Macdonald, for all his missionary zeal, was unresponsive to a sublime sensibility; indeed, as Bebbington contends, there are substantial grounds to link evangelical Protestantism with romantic inclination.<sup>57</sup> In Kennedy's classic biography



**Figure 2** ~ *Sgarbstac with Stac Lee behind and Boreray to the right*, by Sir Thomas Acland (1812). Reproduced by courtesy of the National Trust

we learn that prior to his first visit to St Kilda and at the request of Sir John Sinclair, the newly licensed Macdonald embarked on an Ossianic tour of the North West Highlands ‘to ascertain to what extent traditions of the Fingalians existed in the Highlands, and whether Ossian’s poems were still remembered’.<sup>58</sup> On his tour in the summer of 1805, having come across no ‘individual, so far as I recollect, who did not hear of the race of Fingal’, Macdonald ‘settled the question’ of whether the poems were ‘the production of an ancient poet called Ossian, or of a modern poet called Macpherson’.<sup>59</sup> Having thus authenticated Macpherson’s poetry, the Apostle ‘did not forget that he was dedicated to a higher service’, and duly answered the request of the Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge to preach in St Kilda. Macdonald was thought particularly suitable for the task which, Campbell writes, ‘from your habits of itinerating, I should incline to think would not fail to be agreeable to you’.<sup>60</sup> The call was irresistible. Although Macdonald was only present for 11 days in the late summer of 1822, the island and the Apostle had a profound affect on each other; with ‘his thoughts ... ever returning to St Kilda’, Macdonald made a second visit in the summer of 1824, a third in 1827 and a final visit in 1830. In the interim he worked hard to bring the spiritual and temporal condition of the St Kildans to a wider Scottish audience, raising sufficient funds for the church and manse and finding, in the Revd Neil MacKenzie, a minister suitable to fill them. Macdonald’s journal entries for his final visit of 1830 detail his highly personal vision of the St Kildan sublime. He records on

Thursday 8th July that he preached from Isaiah 32: 2 ('And a man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest'):

The state of the day suggested the subject to the speaker, and the same circumstance seemed to give it greater force with the hearers. A view of a St Kilda storm was certainly presented to us this day. The sea all in a commotion – its billows rising mountains high, and dashing with fury against the lofty rocks all around, which oblige them in their turn to retire and sink into their mother ocean – the columns of spray which out of this conflict, and overtop the highest mountains – and all these present a sight awfully grand and sublime.<sup>61</sup>

Although Macdonald's account of St Kilda was typical in its emphasis on those characteristics of terror, 'commotion', scale and contrast, his earlier description (see pp. 154–55 above) is unique in that he uses the islanders' isolation amid a hostile ocean as a metaphor for the spiritual vulnerability of their Christian lives.<sup>62</sup> His was a pastoral sympathy. Most visitors, however, found the islanders' religion to be one of the least appealing features of local tradition, and for other early travellers St Kilda's inaccessibility held alternative meanings. Making the arduous journey to the island became part of a wider bodily aesthetic: if it did not assault the senses then it would not inspire the same feeling of awe and thus qualify as truly sublime. On the other hand, there were genuine dangers in navigating the Atlantic swell on a voyage which could take days and with a landing which provided little protection or shelter. For Burke the real fear of death would eclipse the pleasure of the sublime, but its exaggeration in the subsequent travelogue would not only effect a greater impression on the reader but would reflect well on the bravery and moral character of the traveller. Affirming Terry Eagleton's theory, this sort of expedition was presented as a great and necessary labour, embodying Burke's sentiment that 'when any work seems to have required immense force and labour to effect it, the idea is grand'.<sup>63</sup> The narratives of the early travellers are thus the epitome of oceanic, if not Ossianic, sublime. Exploring St Kilda from the seas at its base provided Lord Henry Brougham in 1799 with precisely the excitement that he anticipated. Writing as the conquering hero of fear, the future Lord Chancellor Brougham mocks another more timid passenger as they enter a cave, in a revealing dialogue:

'Is not this light delightfully horrible?' 'Hear! hear! How we touch the sides!' 'Only see, Doctor, what a noble scene – the flashing of the water, the foaming of the sea, the majesty of the rocks!' 'Oh dear! I am sure our boat can't weather it.' 'Then, Doctor, the craziness of the vessel, the shallowness of the water, the horrible gulfs near us. By the by, don't Mr Burke reckon terror the basis of the sublime?'<sup>64</sup>

But the travellers' hardships were trivial in comparison with those of the islanders. Living conditions on St Kilda, in common with the other Hebrides, were poor; infant mortality was shockingly high; nutrition was precarious. Moreover, these privations became a valued component of the cultural encounter, allowing the visitors to experience vicariously a 'primitive' society and thereby obtain the sublime pleasure of sympathy.

## Travellers' tales

It is hard to overestimate the significance of travelogues in the historical construction of St Kilda, the history of representation of the island being one of exclusively external reports. But if we acknowledge that these accounts are important, we must also recognize the conceit of their authors. 'The history of St Kilda', writes Charles Maclean, 'exists by virtue of those visitors, who by going to the island helped to give it a history in the first place and by writing about it afterwards recorded what would otherwise have been lost'.<sup>65</sup> If the St Kildans lacked history, then a history was assigned to them. In this way the role of the traveller has become central in establishing a dominant 'way of seeing' the island and its inhabitants. While this hegemonic view situates St Kilda 'on the edge' of human experience, precariously distant from 'normal' economic and social relations, it is important nonetheless to recognize that the island was not always so peripheral to geographical knowledge. As Charles Withers has recently shown, St Kilda was central to the chorographical and philosophical enquiries of seventeenth-century natural philosophers such as Martin Martin<sup>66</sup>. In the twentieth-century, too, St Kilda has featured prominently in 'official' markers of memory and Scottish nationhood.<sup>67</sup> But in the era of the sublime, both scholarly and popular discourses on St Kilda were united by the production of a semi-otic distance between the respective worlds of 'hosts' and 'guests'.

Recent popular histories of St Kilda<sup>68</sup> are acutely schizophrenic in their treatment of these travellers' accounts. They blame the visitors for the 'slow downfall . . . of an ideal society'<sup>69</sup> on the one hand, while being entirely dependent on them for their portrait of island life on the other, reproducing the prevailing nineteenth-century view that St Kildans were seduced by modernity. To make sense of St Kilda from the historical record, recent writers have attempted to unravel the 'facts' from the colourful prejudices of the travellers without reference to historiography. It is clear, however, that these early tourists were working within a sign-system which held that their knowledge of the island was not representation but *reality*; their project was myth-making in the Barthian sense, where the representation effaces its own status as a sign 'in order to foster the illusion that we are perceiving reality without its intervention'.<sup>70</sup> A more critical approach to the historical record is therefore overdue. Rather than relying on these tales as ethnographic accounts, we must recognize that they say a good deal more about the moral, economic and aesthetic judgements of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie than about the everyday life of the St Kildans. Specifically, they reveal the subtle pleasures that lay behind the typical sentimental responses of the visitors: sympathy, moral scrutiny and paternalistic rebuke. In those instances where they attempted to identify with the hardship of the islanders it was a sympathy in the manner of the sublime, a sort of playful approximation of privation in order that its moral value might be asserted. One writer, John MacDiarmid, recounts how the Duke of Athole (a known sublime-seeker) visiting St Kilda in the 1850s 'supped of the brew made from the fulmar's meat, and slept all night on the floor of the hut, and vowed in the morning that he never had better repose'.<sup>71</sup> (This same nobleman was reputed

to be so taken with the countenance and virtue of two young people on the island that he offered to transplant them, with surviving parent, to his own estate.<sup>72</sup>) But such enthusiasm was seldom unqualified by more contemptuous pronouncements on the islanders' immorality, stupidity, laziness, dirtiness, hypocrisy and avarice. Their 'savagery', as Brougham described it,<sup>73</sup> could only be explained with reference to that most powerful of ideologies: nature. It was, after all, their humanity that was in question.

### *The St Kilda zoo*

Travellers of an aesthetic sensibility were, predictably enough, also attracted by the wildlife interest of the island. The wilderness ideal which had reached its zenith in Macpherson's *Ossian* was easily identified in the aerial freedom of St Kilda's non-human subjects. For 'the true devotees of beautiful Nature' and the 'mere holiday tourist',<sup>74</sup> the bird life represented both the magnitude of St Kilda's sublimity<sup>75</sup> (400 000 breeding pairs of 15 species<sup>76</sup>) and its distinctiveness, the St Kilda wren being a well-known evolutionary adaptation to remoteness and micro-ecology. The island could further boast of the 'melancholy attraction as the site of the last recorded British occurrence of the great auk'.<sup>77</sup> Whilst it cannot be surprising that travellers found both the people and the wildlife worthy of comment, the manner of their description reveals a great deal about the social relation between 'hosts' and 'guests'. From the *a priori* distinction between 'nature' and 'humanity' in popular discourse, we can infer that nature is a cognitive category through which we conceptualize what is 'other' to ourselves<sup>78</sup>; in the travellers' narratives this is expressed by characterizing the islanders as living in a 'state of nature'. Although this could attribute characteristics of 'primitive virtue', for the most part it invoked – with varying degrees of subtlety – the animality of the St Kildan people. The islanders' complaints of being made to feel as though they belonged to the zoo rather than to society are further substantiated by the tourists themselves. The most liberal of these, the naturalist and photographer Norman Heathcote, remarks:

I do not wonder that they [the St Kildans] dislike foreigners, so many of the tourists treat them as if they were wild animals at the zoo. They throw sweets to them, openly mock them, and I have seen them standing at the church door during service, laughing and talking, and staring in as if at an entertainment got up for their amusement.<sup>79</sup>

Heathcote's comment is perhaps a veiled attack on the *Glasgow Herald* journalist Robert Connell, who, on the pretext of famine relief, sought to identify 'the numerous proofs of semi-savagery from which the St Kildans have yet to be reclaimed'.<sup>80</sup> Connell describes a woman whom he had coerced to 'break the sabbath' to find some milk for his breakfast, as having 'ankles like a rhinoceros, and who walked like that interesting but inelegant animal'.<sup>81</sup> Having thus pressurized the islander to go against the 'ridiculous Sabbatarianism', he then uses this transgression as evidence of her moral degeneracy.<sup>82</sup> Oblivious to any contradiction, Connell then complains of the 'great moral injury that tourists and sentimentalists and yachtsman, with pocketfuls of money, are working upon a

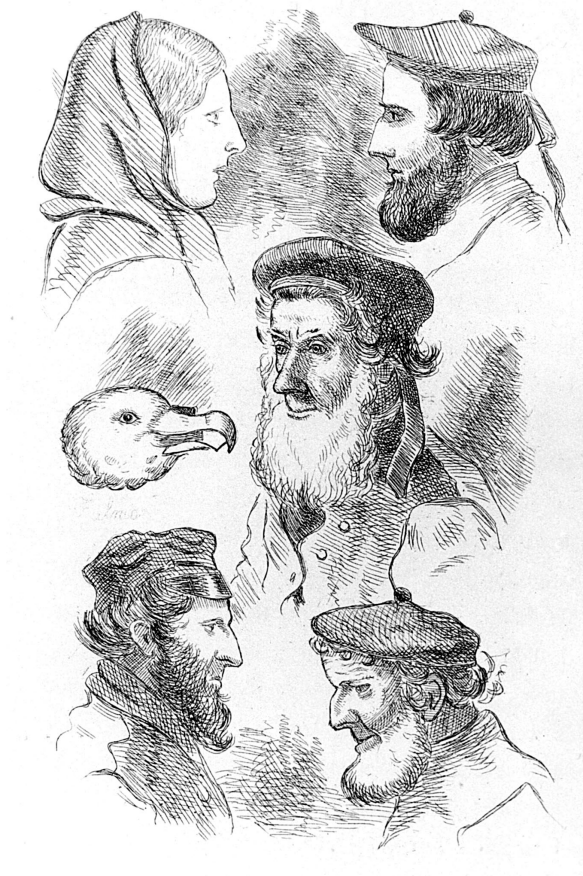


kindly and a simple people'.<sup>83</sup> His prose is typical of its genre, swinging wildly between sympathy and contempt, admiration and patronage, Improvement and romance. Caught in this duality of representation, the islanders are on one page 'simple' and 'kindly' while in other parts of the same book they are characterized as dirty, lazy, greedy and cruel. Other commentators use similar, if more restrained, rhetoric. The novelist Anthony Trollope, visiting in 1878,<sup>84</sup> describes the community and concludes, 'such is St Kilda; – a most picturesque point in the ocean at which to land and at which to marvel at the beautiful freaks of nature'.<sup>85</sup> The famous Kearnton brothers, who pioneered wildlife photography, feature 'St Kilda and its inhabitants' as the first chapter of *With nature and a camera*, the frontispiece showing an islander and his home-made 'mail-boat'.<sup>86</sup> The illustrations in John Sands' *Out of the world; or, life on St Kilda* are more blatant still, one representing a group of eccentrically drawn islanders together with a fulmar under the collective caption 'Natives of St Kilda' (Figure 3).<sup>87</sup> Even within the proto-scientific conventions of the *British Medical Journal*, in an article on the 'inhabitants and the diseases peculiar to them', another traveller distinguishes the islanders from the birds by the term 'wingless bipeds'.<sup>88</sup> But whereas most writers only occasionally lapse into such language – an inadvertent revelation – Robert Connell repeatedly, and one presumes deliberately, employs this device. For Connell, as for many of the nineteenth-century visitors, it was the islanders' Calvinism that presented the greatest obstacle to reconciling the reality of community life with the more romantic images of Celtic tradition.<sup>89</sup> Of the St Kildans' Gaelic worship he writes:

I do not wish to be uncharitable but I state solemnly that I never before heard such a medley of discordant, incongruous sounds. I can compare it to nothing but the bay-ing of a pack of hyenas. There was no tune – or rather every man had a tune for himself, and where two happened to be in the one key it was an accident.<sup>90</sup>

### *The problem of piety*

Despite being rooted in this wider representational strategy of animality, Connell's view of the St Kildan church remains the dominant version of island life, this quotation being reproduced unproblematically in Tom Steel's popular history, *The life and death of St Kilda*.<sup>91</sup> On this question of the St Kildans' adherence to an evangelical Presbyterian faith, it is interesting to see an amiable alliance between nineteenth-century travellers and twentieth-century writers. That there are no contemporary accounts which do *not* refer to the islanders' faith gives some indication of how the moral and aesthetic imagination of travellers was challenged by the religious fervour they encountered. Rather predictably, it is Robert Connell, in his attempt to expose the St Kildans as pious frauds, who is most emphatically scornful of island worship. Confirming his misgivings that the islanders are of low moral character, he observes that the church bell, having been recovered from a wrecked ship, 'serves only to awaken your suspicions that you have dropped into a nest of pirates'.<sup>92</sup> 'The purity and high moral tone of the people's lives have been extolled by every visitor' writes Connell, but 'there can be no doubt that the picture is overdone'.<sup>93</sup> As evidence



**Figure 3** ~ *Natives of St Kilda*, from John Sands' *Out of the world; or, life on St Kilda* (1876)

for this claim he endeavours to uncover rates of illegitimacy, which he reluctantly concedes are 'not abnormally high'.<sup>94</sup> Much more revealing however is his caution that 'if you go to church, make up your mind at once to hear many unpleasant things addressed to you personally from the pulpit'.<sup>95</sup> The frankness and application of the preaching was a problem. John Sands, an MP and journalist who spent many months on the island, was equally surprised to be spoken to so directly from the pulpit: 'the attack seemed personal; but I endured it, although I could not help thinking that it was ungenerous of him [the minister] to take advantage of a poor sheep who had entered confidingly into his fold'.<sup>96</sup>

The travelling elite from the heart of the British empire could not have anticipated moral rebuke from people who were shoeless, unwashed and without English. This interaction of bodies on sublime territory yielded a confusion of sentiments for the carefully groomed tourist; the physically impoverished condition of the islanders ensured a certain measure of sympathy, and therefore some pleasure. But to be reproached by such a pungent assembly was to threaten



the very basis for travel. Somehow the export of civilization to the periphery had been turned around, so that it was Sands and Connell who found themselves to be the beneficiaries of the islanders' sympathy and moral tutelage. For the St Kildans, the travellers, though 'giants in the world of commerce, were dwarfs in the world of the spirit',<sup>97</sup> and required the pastoral care and admonition appropriate to an irreligious people. Having been attracted by the sublime sentiments of sympathy – and, by extension, moral superiority – the visitors were on the defensive; the evangelical imperative had subverted the power dynamic between hosts and guests. Contrary to the logic of empire, it was the travellers who became the subject of the St Kildans' prayers as one visitor, Lachlan Maclean, records in 1838:

Bless those into whose hearts Thou hast put it to come and visit us –  
Not to mock us, but with hearts running over with love.<sup>98</sup>

In capturing the spiritual high ground, the islanders disrupted a key component of the tourist experience. The tactical response of many travellers was to characterize the St Kildans as being fanatical and extremist, a line which twentieth-century writers have happily reproduced.<sup>99</sup> Although the practice of worship in St Kilda was not substantially different from the evangelicalism of other Gaelic congregations<sup>100</sup> or from that of the nineteenth-century Free Church,<sup>101</sup> the popular interest in St Kilda greatly exceeded that in the rest of Gaelic Scotland. What was most striking to the visitors (few of whom had other experiences of Gaelic worship) was the strict sabbatarianism of the islanders. According to Connell, 'this extraordinary fanaticism' had 'crippled' the fishing industry, or more specifically, his own wish to be taken out in the boat by the islanders.<sup>102</sup> In this he attempts to recapture lost territory by expressing the moral indignation of economic Improvement (by implying that the islanders were work-shy) to counter the very unromantic experience of their critical sermon. Other travellers also found the Sabbath to be an inconvenience; if a sailing party inadvertently landed on a Sunday, the islanders would simply refuse to cooperate.<sup>103</sup> Even a famine relief expedition was expected to wait until Monday to unload its precious cargo, one journalist recalling that 'no entreaty, expostulation, or persuasive language on our part, though uttered in the hardest Gaelic, would make them alter their decision'.<sup>104</sup>

There was, then, a basic problem with St Kildan Christianity: it was modern. Enthusiasm for the ordinances of religion was, to be sure, no new thing. The islanders had certainly been Reformed since before Martin's time,<sup>105</sup> but the adoption of evangelicalism, and the subsequent adherence to the Free Church of Scotland in 1846, bound the islanders into a ecclesiastical network beyond their own shores. Travellers who came in search of a Hebridean Arcadia of primitive virtue and rustic simplicity<sup>106</sup> found instead a community with an austere form of worship which exceeded, in enthusiasm and in discipline, the prevailing religious temperament of metropolitan Britain. Not only had the islanders already been 'improved' in terms of their religious instruction, but having been thus integrated into a politically active Presbyterianism by the middle of the nineteenth-century they no longer held the endearing attribute of authenticity.

By the 1870s the popular opinion was that St Kilda had been spoilt. John Sands, discovering that even primitives are not what they used to be, is deeply nostalgic for the Arcadian idyll:

In the olden time the St Kildians tempered their religious exercises and their dangerous and laborious employments with a little recreation . . . they ran races on their small but fiery ponies . . . they were fond of music too in the good old days, although the Jews harp was the only instrument they possessed, and to its feeble twang they danced and were gay. Now dancing is unknown.<sup>107</sup>

In a similar vein, Connell writes of the 'good old days of cake and ale, before the Disruption, when whistling was not yet a sin, and when fiddling and piping, and even dancing, were not unknown in St Kilda'.<sup>108</sup> If Connell and Sands were crudely nostalgic in an era of progress and Improvement, then twentieth-century commentators have elevated this conservatism to a level unknown since Martin Martin. For Tom Steel the islanders were 'a simple, credulous people'<sup>109</sup> who were 'made slaves' by 'the stern faith of the Free Church'.<sup>110</sup> Macdonald of Ferintosh was the principal culprit: 'it was due to him that the foundations of a highly organised, strictly managed, puritan and often harsh religion were laid'.<sup>111</sup> Charles Maclean, making a bid to outflank even Tom Steel, holds that Macdonald 'earnestly set about the destruction of the island culture with all the zealous good-will of a holy bigot'.<sup>112</sup> As the hapless victims of a modernity epitomized by the Free Church, 'what little culture the St Kildan's possessed . . . had long since died'.<sup>113</sup> Without history and culture, the islanders could hardly be expected to have agency of their own. Rather, both nineteenth-century travellers and twentieth-century historians provide an alternative explanation that is firmly embedded in the sublime.

Most comment on the superstitious nature of the islanders<sup>114</sup> citing their belief in premonition or 'second sight' which was widespread in the Hebrides until well into the twentieth-century.<sup>115</sup> Although it is unlikely that second sight was any more prominent in St Kilda than in the other Hebridean islands, the association was powerful, assisted perhaps by the popular writings of Walter Scott.<sup>116</sup> As with other parts of the Highlands, the barren landscape and prolonged isolation were considered explanation enough for these otherworldly tales. This coupling of emotional hyperactivity with a sterile landscape had, according to Peter Womack, been a longstanding feature of writing on the sublime.<sup>117</sup> Womack gives the example of James Beattie, who ascribes second sight to 'persons of lively imagination, immured in deep solitude, and surrounded with stupendous scenery'.<sup>118</sup> The sublime characteristics of the landscape are thus projected onto the mental activity of the inhabitants: as if 'almost pathologically, the fancy is roused to feverish activity by the inhuman emptiness of the mountains'.<sup>119</sup> For the terminally nostalgic Steel and Maclean, this was the perfect explanation for the islanders' adherence to evangelical Christianity. 'The combination of superstition and fatalism made the St Kildans extremely susceptible to religious influence', writes Maclean, their faith being 'a kind of hysterical fervour in their hearts'.<sup>120</sup> Similarly, Steel holds that 'physical isolation forced the people towards the easy acceptance of a faith, whatever denomination it represented'.<sup>121</sup>

What Macdonald preached to them appealed to their superstitious nature. They believed implicitly in what he told them and a religion, the roots of which lay deep in the fear of the unknown, began its long domination over the people of St Kilda.<sup>122</sup>

In analysing these travellers' accounts, it would be easy to corral them into the familiar reading of 'primitivist' geographical imaginations of travel, in this case, inflected through the lens of the sublime. But there are also other stories that cut across this prevailing narrative and position St Kilda as central rather than as peripheral to Scottish culture and society. If Macdonald of Ferintosh was attracted by St Kilda's sublimity, his earnest ambition was to bring it into the ecclesiastical bosom of Scotland. This project was continued by the post-Disruption Free Church, who looked on St Kilda as a model of successful evangelism. A missionary leaflet produced by the 1880s Free Church shows a photograph of island children with the text: 'Where do you think these nice children live? Not in Asia, Africa or America . . . but they are nearly as much cut off as if they lived in Japan'.<sup>123</sup> Such a sensational caption to a very conventional school photograph emphasizes that while St Kilda may be geographically remote, its inhabitants are still 'the subjects of Queen Victoria, and their home is in Scotland'.<sup>124</sup> Another striking example of how St Kilda was central to the pietistic geography of Scotland can be seen in the naming of a plaintive psalm tune, which was, and is, one of the most popular in the Scottish psalmody. Written by William Robert Broomfield and introduced into public worship in 1854, the tune 'St Kilda' rapidly became a classic.<sup>125</sup> While it could be argued that this solemn composition in a minor key reinforced the sublime motif of 'tragedy'<sup>126</sup> in relation to St Kilda, it certainly brought the island to the attentions of the worshipping public 'Sabbath after Sabbath over the greater part of Scotland'.<sup>127</sup> These ecclesiastical discourses which sought to collapse the semi-otic distance between core and periphery were, however, unusually antithetical to the dominant narrative.

For the most part the popular accounts posit the islanders as the dupes of modernity, too simple to withstand the seductive advance of religion, education and trade. If this suggests a romantic conception, then we can be sure that its twin ideology of Improvement is never far away; the characteristics that made the islanders attractive to a sublime sensibility – their otherworldly attitude and exotic, idiomatic tales – ultimately proved to be their fatal flaw. Far from being the negation of romance, Improvement is its necessary consequence. As Anthony Trollope concluded about St Kilda, 'though the life of a Robinson Crusoe, or a few Robinson Crusoes, may be very picturesque, humanity will always want to restore a Robinson Crusoe back to the community of the world'.<sup>128</sup> English language was one recommended strategy, wage labour another. Like the free workers of Jamaica that Marx describes in *Grundrisse* who, being 'content to produce what was strictly necessary for their own consumption', were portrayed by the plantation owners as idle and indulgent,<sup>129</sup> so the St Kildans were similarly held in contempt both for their adherence to use value and their endemic socialism.<sup>130</sup> That the organization of island society was communal presented a moral problem for those travellers who, in the manner of the sublime, had fetishized the 'naturalness' of the individual within an external and threatening nature.<sup>131</sup>

True to form, Connell writes that 'this nibbling at socialism is responsible for a good deal of the moral chaos which has so completely engulfed the islanders'.<sup>132</sup> Improvement is thus the recurrent subtext of the travellers' tales. In contrast to the charming superstitions of the islanders, theirs is the voice of reason and of progress. The resultant prescriptions for St Kilda were not romantic but dull and authoritative. And by the latter half of the nineteenth century the final, seemingly inevitable, prospect of evacuation and integration was inflected in almost every discussion of island life.

## Conclusion

It is easy to assign the islander to this misty, rather beautiful world, and leave him there if one first of all succeeds in making that world unreal, and its inhabitants unreal, off the edge of things, a noble savage with his stories and unmaterialistic concerns.<sup>133</sup>

In summarizing the politics of sublime travel and its associated process of marginalization, the Gaelic writer Iain Crichton Smith is not, in this quotation, referring to nineteenth-century St Kilda. Rather, in his essay entitled *Real people in a real place*, Smith draws our attention to identical processes and relations in the context of tourist writing on the Outer Hebrides in the 1980s. The story of St Kilda therefore has another contemporary resonance; the modern *Gaidhealtachd* remains stuck within this same dualistic representation, a semiotic problem which has material and experiential consequences. Like the Hebrides today, St Kilda is described by most travellers in ostensibly favourable language. It is an other worldly island, a place to visit but not to live. A receptacle of old values and superstition, it has residual, uncorrupted features where community and tradition can thrive. The city, on the other hand, while lacking the quaintness and authenticity of the island, has authority and objectivity and centrality. It is, in short, the spatial and temporal realm of *real life*. This dualistic schema is, according to Womack, a necessary linguistic strategy for the political ratification of disadvantage.

The Gaeltacht becomes, in every sense, an ideal country, until even those who seek to uphold its interests against the core find that they are doing so in the glowing and reverent language which ratifies its oppression.<sup>134</sup>

The effusive and laudatory language which was a characteristic of nineteenth-century travelogues (and which recurs with monotonous regularity in more recent accounts) must be seen as part of this wider project of 'making that world unreal'. In doing so it validates the reality of life in the city while creating a utopian world from which the traveller can escape the hub of industrial Britain. Making St Kilda unreal was necessary because not only were the islanders active agents in their own history but they represented an unacceptable combination of apparent dirtiness, idleness, socialism and evangelicalism. All of these confused or contradicted the accepted norms of social behaviour and were considered to be 'out of place'.<sup>135</sup> We can see, then, that both in the accounts of nineteenth-century travellers and in more recent popular histories the St Kildans

have been semiotically written out of their own story, so that nothing as irritatingly dystopic as formal religion can spoil the effect of their sublime subjectivity. Their geographical remoteness scarcely registers in comparison to their marginality in language. What, after all, is the 40 miles from St Kilda to the Hebrides compared to the distance between the metropolitan core and 'the edge of the world'? Smith uses an arrestingly similar phrase: 'off the edge of things', a marginality from which it is almost impossible to return.

To scrutinize the accounts of the travellers in this way – that is, to place them in their ideological and aesthetic context – is to divest them of the original moral-political authority of the sublime tour, a power which has subsequently been validated by twentieth-century popular historians. Laid bare in this sense, the historical record of St Kilda tells a different story, one where islanders have voice to participate in a reciprocal encounter with the world beyond their shores. In this dialogue, the islanders assert their spiritual and political autonomy, question the latent values of the Victorian bourgeoisie and challenge the mimetic representations of the travellers. Their secure allegiance to evangelicalism ultimately bound them into a wider ecclesiastical network; it was an integration that not only spoke of their modernity but expressed solidarity with the dissent of the Free Church. Such a wilfully political gesture simultaneously made the St Kildans central to the expansionist project of Presbyterianism and further disrupted the paternalistic moralism of the travellers. The story of St Kilda is one to which many groups lay claim, with artistic, environmental and political intent. Critical enquiry into the accepted canon of Scottish historiography is therefore an essential task as long as we use such narratives to fashion innovative cultural forms and new structures of democracy. At a time when a revisionist orthodoxy beckons in Scottish history, the outpost of St Kilda signals a new approach to the historical record, prompting questions about the authority of sources, the linearity of time and the politics of memory.

### Acknowledgements

Several people have, in different ways, assisted the development of this work. I am grateful to Paul Basu, Phil Crang, Keith Hart, Beryl Hartley, Hayden Lorimer, Donald Meek, Ian R. MacDonald and for the comments of two anonymous referees. I am particularly indebted to Peigi Townsend of Griomasaigh, North Uist, who first encouraged me to consider the representation of the St Kildans. This research was kindly supported by the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland.

### Notes

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- <sup>2</sup> M. Andrews, *The search for the picturesque: landscape aesthetics in tourism in Britain 1760–1800* (Aldershot, Scolar Press, 1989).
- <sup>3</sup> N. Nicholson, *The lakera: the adventures of the first tourists* (London, Robert Hale, 1955).
- <sup>4</sup> J. Ryan, *Picturing empire: photography and the visualization of the British empire* (London, Reaktion Books, 1997), p. 20.

- <sup>5</sup> P. Womack, *Improvement and romance: constructing the myth of the Highlands* (London, Methuen, 1989).
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- <sup>8</sup> J. Duncan and D. Gregory, 'Introduction', in J. Duncan and D. Gregory, eds, *Writes of passage: reading travel writing* (London, Routledge, 1999), p. 5. Further treatment of a Highland landscape aesthetic and the body can be found in H. Lorimer, 'Guns, game and the grandee: the cultural politics of deerstalking in the Scottish Highlands', *Ecumene* 7 (2000), pp. 431–59.
- <sup>9</sup> M. Martin, *A late voyage to St Kilda, the remotest of all the Hebrides* (London, Brown & Goodwin, 1698).
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- <sup>11</sup> J. Sands, *Out of the world, or, life on St Kilda* (Edinburgh, MacLachlan & Stewart, 1878).
- <sup>12</sup> 'Debate resumes: St Kilda's Parliament reconvenes for ecology fight', *Guardian* (5 Aug. 1999), p. 6.
- <sup>13</sup> C. Maclean, *Island on the edge of the world: utopian St Kilda and its passing* (London, Stacey, 1972); T. Steel, *The life and death of St Kilda* (London, Fontana, 1975).
- <sup>14</sup> For a more detailed bibliography see M. Harman, *An isle called Hirte: history and culture of the St Kildans to 1930* (Isle of Skye, Maclean Press, 1997).
- <sup>15</sup> H. Lorimer, 'Sites of authenticity: Scotland's new parliament and official representations of the nation', in D. Harvey, R. Jones, N. McInroy and C. Milligan, eds, *Celtic geographies: landscape, culture and identity* (London, Routledge, forthcoming).
- <sup>16</sup> Sinclair has included a copy of Maclean's book in an installation piece called 'Library'. See R. Sinclair, *Real life and how to live it: a user's guide* (Edinburgh, Fruitmarket Gallery, 2000).
- <sup>17</sup> A. B. Taylor, 'The name "St Kilda"', *Scottish studies* 13 (1969); A. Coates, *The place-names of St Kilda* (Lampeter, Edwin Mellen Press, 1990).
- <sup>18</sup> A term which refers to Gaelic Scotland. See C.W.J. Withers, *Gaelic Scotland: the transformation of a culture region* (London, Routledge, 1988).
- <sup>19</sup> A. Fleming, 'Human ecology and the early history of St Kilda, Scotland', *Journal of historical geography* 25 (1999), pp. 183–200.
- <sup>20</sup> M. Martin, 'A voyage to St Kilda', in *A description of the Western Islands of Scotland circa 1695 and a voyage to St Kilda with a description of the Western Isles of Scotland* (Edinburgh, Birlinn, 1999), p. 76.
- <sup>21</sup> S. Bruce, 'Social change and collective behaviour: the revival in eighteenth-century Ross-shire', *British Journal of Sociology* 34 (1983), pp. 554–72.
- <sup>22</sup> E. Burke, *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and the beautiful, the Second Edition with an introductory discourse concerning taste* [1759] (Meston, Scolar Press, 1970).
- <sup>23</sup> The weight of scholarship has very firmly come down on the side of their forgery, something which many commentators see as irrelevant to their influence or literary merit. See F. Stafford, *The sublime savage: James Macpherson and the poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1988).
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- <sup>25</sup> Johnson, quoted in Andrews, *The search for the picturesque*, p. 197.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.



- <sup>27</sup> Womack, *Improvement and romance*, p. 64.
- <sup>28</sup> The motif of swelling is also common in Burke, where he writes that a certain situation 'produces a sort of swelling or triumph, that is extremely grateful to the human mind'; quoted in R. Paulson, *Representations of revolution* (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1983), p. 69.
- <sup>29</sup> Macdonald, quoted in J. Kennedy, *The Apostle of the North: the life and labours of the Rev. Dr. Macdonald* (London, T. Nelson & Sons, 1866), p. 114.
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- <sup>31</sup> John Stoddart (1801), quoted in Andrews, *The search for the picturesque*, p. 204.
- <sup>32</sup> Womack, *Improvement and romance*, p. 80.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- <sup>34</sup> C. Withers, 'The historical creation of the Scottish Highlands', in I. Donnachie and C. Watley, eds, *The manufacture of Scottish history* (Edinburgh, Polygon, 1992), p. 151.
- <sup>35</sup> For a fuller collection of texts on the sublime see A. Asfield and P. de Bolla, eds, *The sublime: a reader in eighteenth-century aesthetic theory* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996).
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- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- <sup>39</sup> T. Eagleton, *Crazy John and the bishop and other essays on Irish culture* (Cork, Cork University Press, 1998), p. 44.
- <sup>40</sup> Burke, *Philosophical enquiry*, p. 58.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- <sup>42</sup> Eagleton, *The ideology of the aesthetic*, p. 56.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- <sup>44</sup> Burke, *Philosophical enquiry*, p. 71.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73–74.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74. Burke writes that 'if this passion was simply painful, we would shun with the greatest care all persons and places that could excite such a passion; as some who are so far gone in indolence as not to endure any strong impression actually do'.
- <sup>47</sup> J. Holloway and L. Errington, *The discovery of Scotland* (Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland, 1978), p. 107.
- <sup>48</sup> Burke, *Philosophical enquiry*, pp. 127, 128, 139, 145, 149, 151.
- <sup>49</sup> T. C. Smout, 'Tours in the Scottish Highlands from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries', *Northern Scotland* 5 (1983), pp. 99–122.
- <sup>50</sup> P. Baines, 'Ossianic geographies: Fingalian figures on the Scottish tour, 1760–1830', *Scotlands* 4 (1997), pp. 44–61; R. Clyde, *From rebel to hero: the image of the Highlander, 1745–1830* (East Linton, Tuckwell Press, 1995), p. 99.
- <sup>51</sup> All information on Acland and his tour comes from David A. Quine's detailed research published in D. Quine, *St Kilda portraits* (1989, available from the Revd David A. Quine, Briar Crag, Gale Rigg, Ambleside, Cumbria LA22 0AZ, 1988), p. 3.
- <sup>52</sup> E. Slater, 'Contested terrain: differing interpretations of Co. Wicklow's landscape', *Irish journal of sociology* 3, (1993), pp. 23–55.
- <sup>53</sup> See C. Withers, 'Picturing highland landscapes: George Washington Wilson and the photography of the Scottish Highlands' *Landscape research* 19 (1994), pp. 68–79.



- <sup>54</sup> Fingal's cave was not, as Derek Cooper suggests, renamed by Sir Joseph Banks subsequent to Macpherson's poetry; D. Cooper, *Road to the Isles* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979) p. 26. Rather, according to Banks's own account the cave was already named after 'Fiuhn MacCoul'; it was 'fortunate that we should meet with the remembrance of that chief whose existence . . . is almost doubted in England'; J. Banks, 'Curious Account of the Island of Staffa (one of the Hebrides) communicated to Mr. Pennant by Joseph Banks, Esq', *Annual Register* **20** (1774), pp. 89–93.
- <sup>55</sup> St Kilda became the climax of many Ossianic tours. The first explicitly 'tourist' trip, organized by the Glasgow Steam Packet Company on the *Vulcan*, arrived at St Kilda on 28 July 1838 after visiting the Giant's Causeway, Staffa, Iona, Loch Scavaig, Loch Coruig and Loch Maddy. See J. Macleod, *Memorials of the Revd Norman Macleod* (Edinburgh, David Douglas, 1898), p. 158; L. Maclean, *Sketches of the island Saint Kilda* (Glasgow, MacPherson, 1838).
- <sup>56</sup> David Quine has shown that the St Kilda district of Melbourne, Australia was named after Acland's yacht, which, under a subsequent ownership, finally came to rest on a beach nearby. See Quine, *St Kilda portraits*, pp. 9–10.
- <sup>57</sup> D. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in modern Britain: a history from the 1730s to the 1930s* (London, Routledge, 1993), p. 80.
- <sup>58</sup> Kennedy, *The Apostle of the North*, p. 43.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.
- <sup>62</sup> D. Meek, *The quest for Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh, Handsel Press, 2000), p. 219.
- <sup>63</sup> Burke, *Philosophical enquiry*, p. 139.
- <sup>64</sup> H. Brougham, *The life and times of Henry Lord Brougham* **1** (Edinburgh, William Blackwood, 1871), p. 102.
- <sup>65</sup> Maclean, *Island on the edge of the world*, p. 11.
- <sup>66</sup> C. Withers, 'Reporting, mapping, trusting: making geographical knowledge in the late seventeenth century', *Isis* **90** (1999), pp. 497–521.
- <sup>67</sup> H. Lorimer, 'Ways of seeing the Scottish Highlands: marginality, authenticity and the curious case of the Hebridean blackhouse', *Journal of historical geography* **25** (1999), pp. 517–33; H. Lorimer, 'Sites of authenticity: Scotland's new parliament and official representations of the nation', in Harvey *et al.*, *Celtic geographies*.
- <sup>68</sup> Steel, *Life and death of St Kilda*; Maclean, *Island on the edge of the world*; Cooper, *Road to the Isles*.
- <sup>69</sup> Maclean, *Island on the edge of the world*, p. 11.
- <sup>70</sup> T. Eagleton, *Literary theory: an introduction* (Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press, 1983), p. 166.
- <sup>71</sup> J. MacDiarmid, 'On St Kilda and its inhabitants', *Transactions of the Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland* **10**, 4th ser. (1878), p. 239.
- <sup>72</sup> J. Morgan, 'The falcon among the fulmars; or, six hours at St Kilda' *MacMillan's magazine* **4** (1861), p. 107.
- <sup>73</sup> Brougham, *Life and times*, p. 100.
- <sup>74</sup> W. C. Dendy, *The wild Hebrides* (London, Longman, 1859), p. 3.
- <sup>75</sup> Macleod, *Memorials of the Revd Norman Macleod*, p. 166; This is also true for more recent commentators; see C. Baxter and J. Crumley, *St Kilda: a portrait of Britain's remotest island landscape* (Lanington, Colin Baxter Photography, 1988), p. 7.
- <sup>76</sup> J. M. Boyd and I. L. Boyd, *The Hebrides* (London, Collins, 1990), p. 300.
- <sup>77</sup> J. Huxley, 'Birds and men on St Kilda', *Geographical magazine* **10** (1939), p. 69.
- <sup>78</sup> K. Soper, *What is nature?* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1995), p. 15.

- <sup>79</sup> N. Heathcote, *St Kilda* (London, Longmans, Green, 1900), p. 69.
- <sup>80</sup> R. Connell, *St Kilda and the St Kildians* (London, Hamilton, Adams, 1887), p. 146.
- <sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80; notwithstanding the politics of Connell's comparison, it is clear that the islanders did have distinctively enlarged ankles and prehensile toes which were, over successive generations, an adaptation to life spent on a near-vertical plane. These features were a goldmine for the 'freak'-collecting photographers of the late nineteenth-century and no doubt further established the animality of the islanders in the minds of a curious public.
- <sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- <sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.
- <sup>84</sup> Trollope visited St Kilda on his way to see another canonical sublime site, the geysers of Iceland. V. Glendinning, *Trollope* (London, Hutchinson, 1992), p. 459.
- <sup>85</sup> A. Trollope, *Anthony Trollope: an illustrated autobiography including 'how the "Mastiffs" went to Iceland'* (Gloucester, Alan Sutton, 1987), p. 269.
- <sup>86</sup> R. Kearton, and C. Kearton, *With nature and a camera: being the adventures and observations of a field naturalist and an animal photographer* (London, Cassell, 1898).
- <sup>87</sup> J. Sands, *Out of the world; or, life on St Kilda* (London, MacLachlan & Stewart, 1876), p. 42.
- <sup>88</sup> C. R. MacDonald, 'St Kilda: its inhabitants and the diseases peculiar to them', *British Medical Journal* (24 July 1886), p. 161.
- <sup>89</sup> See also M. Chapman, *The Gaelic vision in Scottish culture* (London, Croom Helm, 1987), p. 25; S. Macdonald, *Reimagining culture: histories, identities and the Gaelic renaissance* (Oxford, Berg, 1997), p. 166.
- <sup>90</sup> Connell, *St Kilda and the St Kildians*, p. 86 (emphasis added).
- <sup>91</sup> Steel, *The life and death of St Kilda*, p. 100.
- <sup>92</sup> Connell, *St Kilda and the St Kildians*, p. 84.
- <sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.
- <sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- <sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- <sup>96</sup> Sands, *Out of the world*, p. 26.
- <sup>97</sup> I here invoke the parallel experience of urban Gaelic highlanders (and their employers) as described by Donald Macleod in the foreword to I. R. MacDonald, *Glasgow's Gaelic churches* (Edinburgh, Knox Press, 1995), p. v. Macleod continues: 'any employer visiting these Gaelic services (and some did) would have been viewed with the compassion appropriate to the backward', a social relation which would also hold for the St Kildans.
- <sup>98</sup> L. Maclean, *Sketches of the island Saint Kilda*, p. 49.
- <sup>99</sup> See Steel, *The life and death of St Kilda*, p. 92f.
- <sup>100</sup> For a description of this, albeit for an earlier period, see J. MacInnes, *The evangelical movement in the highlands of Scotland, 1688–1800* (Aberdeen, Aberdeen University Press, 1951).
- <sup>101</sup> D. Meek, *The Scottish Highlands: the churches and Gaelic culture* (Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1996), pp. 30–34.
- <sup>102</sup> Connell, *St Kilda and the St Kildians*, p. 62.
- <sup>103</sup> This also applied to a late arrival on a Saturday evening. See G. Seton, *St Kilda, past and present* (Edinburgh, William Blackwood & Sons, 1878), p. 272.
- <sup>104</sup> MacDiarmid, 'On St Kilda and its inhabitants', p. 234.
- <sup>105</sup> Martin, *A late voyage to St Kilda, the remotest of all the Hebrides*, p. 82.
- <sup>106</sup> W. J. Miller, *St Kilda, the arcadia of the Hebrides and Psalms of life* (London, Elliot Stock, 1898); anon., *Songs, Choruses &c. in the new melo drame called Love's Perils, or, The Hermit*

- of *St Kilda, performed at the Royal Circus, 1809* (London, Lowndes & Hobbs, 1809), p. 14.
- <sup>107</sup> Sands, *Out of the world, or life in St Kilda*, 2nd edn (1878), p. 31.
- <sup>108</sup> Connell, *St Kilda and the St Kildians*, p. 55.
- <sup>109</sup> Steel, *The life and death of St Kilda*, p. 97.
- <sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.
- <sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- <sup>112</sup> Maclean, *Island on the edge of the world*, p. 113.
- <sup>113</sup> Steel, *The life and death of St Kilda*, p. 98.
- <sup>114</sup> e.g. Connell, *St Kilda and the St Kildians*, p. 144.
- <sup>115</sup> J. MacInnes, 'Looking at legends of the supernatural', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* **59** (1994), pp. 1–20; J.V.S. Megaw, 'Folklore and tradition on North Uist', *Folklore* **68** (1957), pp. 483–88.
- <sup>116</sup> Scott makes reference to St Kilda in a discussion of second sight in the Highlands. See J. MacDonald, 'Sir Walter Scott and St Kilda', *St Kilda Mail* **19** (1995), p. 32.
- <sup>117</sup> Womack, *Improvement and romance*, p. 76.
- <sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- <sup>120</sup> Maclean, *Island on the edge of the world*, pp. 57, 116.
- <sup>121</sup> Steel, *The life and death of St Kilda*, p. 102.
- <sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- <sup>123</sup> 'The Ladies' Schools in the Highlands and Islands', *Sabbath School missionary leaflet*, **28** (Edinburgh, Free Church of Scotland, Nov. 1885), p. 1.
- <sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>125</sup> W. Milne Gibson, *The old Scottish precentor: historical, biographical, anecdotal and reminiscent* (Aberdeen, Aberdeen Daily Journal Office, 1907), p. 126; W. Carnie, *Additional Aberdeen reminiscences: social, civic and personal pencillings of the Granite City* (Aberdeen, Aberdeen University Press, 1906), p. 218.
- <sup>126</sup> 'St Kilda' is often sung to Psalm 51, a psalm of contrition.
- <sup>127</sup> Carnie, *Additional Aberdeen reminiscences*, p. 220.
- <sup>128</sup> Trollope, *Anthony Trollope: an illustrated autobiography*, p. 266.
- <sup>129</sup> K. Marx, *Grundrisse* (London, Paladin, 1973), p. 101.
- <sup>130</sup> Connell, *St Kilda and the St Kildians*, p. 58.
- <sup>131</sup> The cult of the individual is prominent within the sublime, evident in the solitary Lakeland shepherd of Wordsworth or Caspar David Friederich's *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer*. See D. Cosgrove, *Social formation and symbolic landscape* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), p. 232.
- <sup>132</sup> Connell, *St Kilda and the St Kildians*, p. 61.
- <sup>133</sup> I. C. Smith, *Towards the human* (Edinburgh, Macdonald, 1986), p. 14.
- <sup>134</sup> Womack, *Improvement and romance*, p. 169.
- <sup>135</sup> M. Douglas, *Purity and danger: an analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo* (London, Routledge, 1991), p. 36.