

Folklore collector Otta Swire's chapter on the Isle of Eriskay

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(Otta, with family roots in Skye, was a descendant of Flora Macdonald of "Over the Sea to Skye". Her son, Dr Jim Swire, championed the cause of justice after his daughter, a medical student Flora MacDonald Margaret Swire, was killed in the Lockerbie Pan Am bombing of 1988.)

The Outer Hebrides and their Legends



Otta F. Swire

THE OUTER HEBRIDES
and
THEIR LEGENDS

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ERISKAY

And the lark said in her song,
Often, often, often,
Goes the Christ in stranger's guise:
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Goes the Christ in stranger's guise.

KENNETH MACLEOD

THE small island of Eriskay lies in the Sound of Barra between South Uist and Barra itself. Martin Martin in writing of it comments on the purity of the Gaelic spoken there and gives as reason 'the small number who speak English' and also 'because some of them are scholars'. One wonders who lived in that remote island to teach the children and produce the scholars, for nearly 300 years ago it must have been indeed remote.

But the island was rich in pasture and seems to have been inhabited from a very early date if the 'earth houses' are anything

to go by, for these underground dwellings (more often called Picts' houses or Erd houses) belonged to a very ancient people. In Martin Martin's day several could be visited in Eriskay.

The Island of Eriskay is perhaps now best known for its songs – the Eriskay Love Lilt, the Eriskay Cradle Song and others. The story is told how once, long ago, there was a young girl in Eriskay who would always be singing. She had a lovely voice, true and sweet as a mavis, but she knew no songs for there were none to know in the island, so she just imitated the cries of sea-birds, the songs of the little nesting birds in spring, and the rippling croon or angry growling of the sea. But one day as she was herding her father's cattle she heard a sound coming out of the knoll of the Little People. She knelt down to hear better. Yes, it was a song, a real song with words. The girl listened in joy and wonder till she knew the song by heart. She went home singing it – and so the Eriskay Love Lilt was born. Next day she listened again, and again the day after. Each day she learned a new song, went home singing it and taught the islanders to sing the fairies' songs. But the Little People soon guessed what had happened and were angry. Next time she came to the knoll to listen she heard another new song and was so busy trying to memorise it that she never noticed a door in the side of the Dun opening or the Little People trooping out. Soon she was surrounded, a helpless prisoner. The girl was never seen again but Eriskay kept her songs.

After her disappearance 'Father John' used to say Mass every Sunday on the Creag Shiant, an enchanted rock near Baile, to keep the Little People in subjection. He was not the first priest who went to Eriskay's aid, however, for once upon a time the island was so completely in the hands of supernatural beings, not so much the Little People as the strange unnamed spirits which haunt many a glen and mountain side, that no one could live there without their consent. These spirits had very little objection to women but would allow no man on their island, so for long Eriskay was a land occupied entirely by women until one night of storm a ship-wrecked man was washed ashore alive. The women who found him were much worried as to what to do, for there was no hope of getting him off the island on such a

night. At last they dressed him in women's clothes and hid him in their midst as they sat spinning. The sailor could spin well, and did. But it was no good. The spirits knew. Down the slopes of Ben Screin rolled one of them, in the appearance of a ball of heather rope; it quickly sought out the man and strangled him. This really annoyed the women. In due course they had a boatload of eggs, woollen stuff and cheese ready and they crossed with it to Uist in hope of exchanging these things for others of which they had need, as their custom was, but as soon as they had safely landed, leaving their goods in the boat, they hurried to the priest's house and there besought his help. Next morning the priest arrived on Eriskay with a procession of the faithful and a stoup of holy water. He walked over the whole island, blessing every glen and every hillock and Ben Screin itself for the use of men, and sprinkling all with holy water. After that the women were able to bring their husbands and sons to the island, there to live in peace and safety; but if a man had to wait alone to ferry doctor or priest back to Uist, he waited at sea.

It was not only a maiden who sang in Eriskay; it was the birds also. For the Island is noted for the number and the beauty of song of its larks. Some think the girl herself is one of them, her voice still rising in the music she loved. Larks were also connected in the Isles with Ossian, whose grave was sometimes referred to as the *Carn-na-h-Uiseag* or Larks' Cairn. His poems had lived on in bird form, said some. His spirit had joined the larks, said others. How highly larks were thought of in the Isles is shown by their Gaelic name of 'Mary's Bird'. To her they were sacred, and to kill one brought swift punishment. To find a lark's nest was lucky, but ill betide anyone who stole or destroyed her eggs for the larks would curse him with as many curses as there are spots on a lark's tongue and every single curse would come to pass.

Very different is the fate of the yellowhammer's nest if found, for this bird is known to contain one, two or three drops of the Devil's blood and so it is ill to meet it and its nest should be destroyed. The poor thing goes round singing in Gaelic, 'Touch my nest and the Devil will take you', but it is no use. Nevertheless, if any sufferer from jaundice stares long enough at a yellow-

hammer he will be cured of the jaundice, which will go to (or return to) the bird.

Limpets, too, were connected with the Virgin in Eriskay, where one variety was called 'Mary's little cup' as she was believed to have used one when weaning the Christ Child, it being a cup suited in size to His tiny hands.

The island was once a great resort of eels, perhaps because they were seldom fished for there, the reason for this being the fact that, as was well known in Eriskay, it was very dangerous to eat an eel's head as they suffer at times from a contagious form of madness. Indeed, it is safer not to eat them at all. Once in time of shortage a man caught a trout and an eel and nothing else. So he gave his wife the trout and he himself ate the eel. Then he realised it had been a mad one. Quickly he warned his wife of her peril and bade her go at once to her brother's house for safety as he would soon become dangerous. She arose and went. When she had explained her coming her brother hurried to see what ailed his brother-in-law and found that he had killed his horse and was eating it raw. Realising that he had the incurable madness and would soon kill and eat humans, he shot him and then fled for safety to Boisdale in South Uist where he and his descendants were long known as 'of the horse'. To us it seems strange that for a murderer to reach South Uist, so near Eriskay, was to reach safety, but perhaps if space travel progresses we may learn to think of it as equally strange that people once sought refuge in South America instead of on Jupiter. Had the woman only known enough to make her husband sick when he felt the first symptoms he would have recovered and all trouble been saved.

In spite of this danger a few eels were killed in Eriskay for their skins as a girdle of eel-skin will prevent cramp when swimming: indeed an eel skin laid on any limb will cure cramp in it. Once it was believed that there were no male eels and they were referred to as 'the female race'. Perhaps that was why they flourished in Eriskay. It is said that eels have so powerful a digestion that they can digest even iron or steel, such as hooks. Not canny in fact.

As in other islands, cocks held an important place in Eriskay

lore. They could banish ghosts, avert the evil eye and foretell fate, but a cock hatched in March had much stronger powers than those of later hatchings, especially if the March cock was red. Just as a dog is a watchdog for things of earth, so is a cock for things not of earth. It was called 'Christ's Watcher', 'Watcher of the Night', 'Travellers' Guard' and other such names, for was it not 'Peter's Remembrancer'? Once it has crowed for the dawn the black hags of night must fly and all men may travel in safety. In Eriskay it is told how, when Herod's soldiers were searching for the Baby Jesus to kill Him, they came to the house where He was. The woman of the house was cooking a cockerel for Mary and Joseph for their journey when the soldiers entered. The cock, which was boiling in the pot, arose and 'hooking its claws into the chain over the fire, crew at the prompting of the King of Virtues'. Herod's men fled in terror and searched no more.

Hens, on the other hand, were ill thought of because it was said that once when Christ fled from his enemies a farmer hid Him under a heap of oats, but while he went for more oats the hens scratched away the grain which covered Our Lord. The ducks, seeing what had happened, hastily spread themselves over the heap, treading it back into place that Christ might not be seen. So hens are accursed, miserable in thunder or rain; without oil to preen their feathers they are obliged to humble themselves in the dust and with only one joy - the joy of earth. Ducks, on the other hand, are 'happy as a duck in a thunderstorm', love rain, have oil for their feathers and have more joys than any other creature - the joy of air, the joy of water and the joy of under-water. This has given rise to two Gaelic sayings:

'Your heart is quivering like a hen in thunder', and
'You are as pleased as a duck who expects thunder',

but of course if anyone eats *any* bird's heart his own will quake for ever. It seems that hens still do the wrong thing and have not yet learnt when and where not to scratch, for it is told that when Government schools were started all over Britain orders were given to make a road in Eriskay for the convenience of children going to school. A school inspector arrived a few years

later and, seeing no trace of a road, enquired and was assured that the road had been built as ordered, but 'the hens had scratched it'.

As there are no foxes in Eriskay their part in stories and fables was taken by the cat, who became a somewhat sly and undesirable character there. Once some butter was washed ashore and two elderly cats found it. They agreed that, while ample for one, it would be a poor meal for two and that therefore it should go to the elder. 'I am certainly the older,' said one cat, 'for I was Adam's cat in the Garden of Eden.' 'Ah,' replied her friend, 'that is old, certainly, but I am even older for I was on earth before the hempen feet* went under the sun.' Cat number one agreed that that was old indeed and cat number two began to eat. But there was more than they had thought and he ate and he ate and he ate, and he swelled and he swelled and he swelled till he could hardly move. At this awkward moment a wolf sprang upon him and caught him. 'It is not good to be telling lies', said the cat as the wolf ate him. A child's Gaelic poem about cats runs:

Creeping by night,
 Creeping by night,
 Creeping by night,
 Quoth the grey cat.
 Creeping by night,
 With neither star nor gleam,
 Nor brightness nor light,
 Quoth the grey cat.

Eriskay, like most of the Hebrides, has innumerable small lakes and hills, its highest hill, Ben Screin, being about 600 feet. The slopes of these hills and the grassland at their feet are a glory of wild flowers in summer, and, like its larger neighbours, Eriskay is full of its own traditions and legends. Indeed, it was perhaps fuller than most of the Islands of what might be called Christian legends, or perhaps it is only that they have been remembered longer. For instance, in early June the hillsides are

* The hempen feet, i.e. the sun's rays.

blue with wild violets. There are said to have been few violets on earth when Christ preached the Sermon on the Mount but when He said, 'Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth', a tiny violet plant growing at His feet heard the promise and began to spread, until the ground around and about Him was purple-blue with its tiny blossoms; so, too, the slopes of Eriskay to remind men of Our Lord's teaching. The robin, with its red breast, is also a reminder, this time of the parable of Dives and Lazarus, because when Dives pleaded that Lazarus might be sent with a drop of cold water to cool his tongue and the plea was refused, the robin had pity and, filling its beak with fresh cold water at a spring, flew bravely down into Hell and, its mission of mercy accomplished, flew out again but with its breast badly singed. Ever since, he has had red breast feathers.

It would seem that the people of Eriskay once felt that Christ and His mother were likely to be met with any day on hill or on shore. Perhaps this was a heritage from the old Scandinavian religion, for the Norse gods Odin and Thor constantly visited earth and talked with men wearing, as the Madonna wears in so many old paintings, mantles of a blue no earthly dyer could produce - that blue lovelier even than the colour of ground ultramarine. In one of these stories Christ and His mother came to a house in the guise of poor and tired wayfarers. 'I have nothing to give you,' said the proud young wife, 'my meal chest is empty.' So the tired ones passed on. The wife then went to her brimming chest to take from it meal for bannocks for her husband's supper but when she opened it she screamed with horror, for out of it poured rats, rats large and small, black and brown, the first and most vicious ever seen. Terrified, the woman guessed what had happened and to Whom she had lied. She rushed from her house in pursuit of the Wayfarers, whom she found welcomed in a neighbour's cottage. Falling on her knees she confessed her sin and begged Christ's forgiveness, swearing she would never again refuse to share what she had if only He would pardon her and take away the 'live creatures' from her house. This last, Christ told her, He could not do as she herself, not He, had brought them there, but in token of His pardon He would give her a gift which would help her if she was kind to it

CAT
STORY

and could persuade it to stay with her. He opened His hand and there, curled up in it, was a little cat.

Another woman in Eriskay was once visited by a poor mother with a baby in her arms. She asked rest, shelter and food for herself and her child. 'Shelter and rest is yours,' said the woman, 'but I have no food to give you. Look, this is all I have for my three children; your little boy shall share it but you and I must do without,' and she placed a tiny bannock on the table, divided into four small pieces, and a small bowl of milk. The Baby in His mother's arms stretched out His hand and touched the food, laughing as a happy baby laughs. He and the children ate and ate but neither the bannock nor the milk grew less. 'Let us eat also,' said the mother, 'and call your husband. There is plenty for all.' Never again was there want in that house.

It was believed in Eriskay that many strange things occurred at midnight on Christmas Eve and that at that hour all Christians should stay in house or church and say a prayer for Protection. One thing that happens is that all rivers run warm that night lest the Virgin need their water, no matter how cold the weather may be; steam can be seen rising from them, only there are none to see it. Once a woman in Eriskay would not believe this so she went out to see for herself and prove her neighbours wrong. She never came in again. Eriskay has settled the question, too, of why 'sheep' and 'goats'? Once Christ came to a burn that was in flood. By it stood a goat. Christ asked the goat to carry Him across but the goat refused. At this moment a sheep came by and, seeing Our Lord in difficulties, at once offered to carry Him over the stream, bidding Him to hold firmly to its fleece. Ever since, the goat has been accursed and the sheep blessed; also the sheep's coat has been thicker and warmer than that of any other animal.

Once the Virgin Mary was weaving stuff to make a plaid for her Son, when she ran short of wool to finish and neighbours gave her some. A few months later as she was walking by a cottage the housewife came out, looking very worried. Mary asked her what was wrong and the woman told her that she had no wool to finish the web in the loom. 'I have no wool to give you,' answered Mary sadly, 'but perhaps hair will do,' and she

cut a lock from the left side of her head. The woman thanked her and went off with the hair but by the time she reached her loom, in her hand was the finest wool. Ever since, the women of the Isles have had hair thicker on the right side than on the left. This story reminds of an old metrical version of the Bible which tells how

Jacob made for his son Josie
A tartan coat to keep him cosy.

Martin Martin commented on the old dress being still worn by many of the older people, especially women, in the Island when he visited it about 1695, and one wishes that he had described it. How old the 'ketch' or coif, a headdress of linen is, I do not know. It was the headdress of the married woman, which she donned on her wedding day and wore for life, and although it is probably extinct now I can remember as a child, before the First World War, seeing at least one old 'granny' who wore it. It was a square of linen folded into three points, to represent the Trinity it is said. The following verses are from Alexander Carmichael's translation of an old song to the bride which began with good wishes for health and wealth and 'a thousand hails to thee beneath thy ketch' and went on to give her much good advice on how to behave as a married woman should, advice most of which is still sound today.

This spousal crown thou now hast donned
Full oft has gotten grace to woman,
Be thou virtuous, but gracious,
Be thou pure in word and hand.

Be thou hospitable, yet be wise,
Be thou courageous, but be calm,
Be thou frank, but be reserved,
Be thou exact, yet generous.

Be not miserly in giving,
Do not flatter, yet be not cold,
Speak not ill of man, tho' ill he be,
If spoken of, show not resentment.

Be thou careful of thy name,
 Be thou dignified yet kind.
 The Hand of God be on thine helm,
 In inception, in act, in thought.

Be not querulous beneath thy cross,
 Walk thou warily when thy cup is full,
 Never to evil give thou countenance
 And, with thy ketch, to thee a hundred
 thousand hails.

One summer day in July 1745, a 16-gun French frigate came sailing in to the little Island. There it landed a young man, Prince Charles Edward, and a few of his friends. He had come, without troops or arms, ships or backing, to win a Kingdom for his father, and he very nearly succeeded. But during the long lazy summer days he had to bide patiently (or otherwise) in Eriskay while his friends raised the Clans. It is said he spent part of that time sowing a pocketful of seeds he had collected in Normandy and from them grew the beautiful blue 'morning glory' convolvulus, unknown elsewhere in the Hebrides but still a wild flower in Eriskay. He sowed it on the shore of a tiny sandy bay facing out to the north-west. It was here he had landed and it was ever after known as Prince's Bay. Many years later one of the Stewarts of Ensay built a low wall round the shore to mark his landing place and shelter the flower he had sown. At that time the little cottage - a black house - in which the Prince spent his first night on British soil was still occupied and proudly pointed out, but at the beginning of this century or very end of the last, both house and wall were demolished by order, it is said, of the proprietor, Lady Gordon Cathcart, who is believed to have remarked that they kept old tales alive 'and old stories waste time'. She also feared they might attract tourists. In that last she may have been wiser than we are. Time will show. But the family to whom belonged 'Angus, son of Murdoch', who carried the Prince ashore from his boat have not forgotten. Nor has the Prince's answer to 'Boisdale' been forgotten. When Macdonald of Boisdale in Uist, brother of

Clanranald and one of the Stewarts' staunchest adherents, heard of his arrival he hurried to Eriskay and tried to dissuade him from an attempt to recover the Kingdom at that time without proper foreign aid, finally advising him to go home.

'Sir,' replied the Prince, standing erect on the barren grey rocks of Eriskay and looking out over the grey sea, 'I am come home.'