

DIARY OF A VISIT TO SCOTLAND
MAY 2015



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WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY

GILLIAN ARMSTRONG © 2021

PART ONE: THE OUTER HEBRIDES

Tuesday, 5th May

Set off from Ranelagh, Dublin, at 9.50 a.m., but had to return for Gillian's hat and gloves! Didn't think formal dress was needed. Nevertheless, got to the first service station on the M1 motorway to Belfast as scheduled, for our favourite snack: coffee with almond and raspberry slices! Left at about 11.00 o'clock and made good time to meet sister Dorothy (I must make it clear, *my* sister Dorothy – she is neither nun or nurse) at the service station by the Moira roundabout. Moira, eight miles from Lisburn (my home town), is one of those places with two addresses. Geographically it is in County Down, but its postal district is in County Armagh. If you write Co. Down on the envelope, it takes days for the letter to arrive.

Would have met up with Dorothy earlier, but took wrong turn and headed off on the motorway to Dungannon. Thought it would be at least Portadown before we could get off, but fortunately there was an early exit and we made a rapid return, only a teeny-weeny bit late. Dorothy was already there waiting for us with just a hint of long suffering patience. Lunch passable. My dish of chicken had a sauce with hardly any garlic and a lot of rosemary. 'Oh Rosemar(ie)y, I love you', but not that much.



Easy drive to Larne for the boat, which left early and, passing the great rock Ailsa Craig, reached Troon early, allowing us time to catch the 7.30 p.m. ferry from Gourock to Dunoon. Then on to Inveraray, arriving about 9.00 pm. Our B&B is in a former 'Wee Free' Presbyterian Church, very tastefully done up, and next door to a small kilt-making factory. (I don't mean the kilts are small, just the factory.) All the bedrooms are named after Scottish islands. Our room is called Colonsay. Had a restless night, as seem to be developing a cold with tickly throat.

Wednesday, 6th May

Superb breakfast, fruit, porridge, enormous fry, toast, coffee, all of which knocked the cold out cold. Gillian had scrambled eggs and smoked salmon. There was so much salmon that she was able to 'doggy-bag' some for sandwiches. Opened up my *Irish Times*, which I hadn't read from the day before, and was surprised and gratified to find my letter published about some contemporary composers not being able to hear what they wrote. Couldn't help showing it proudly to our host and hostess who were polite, but perhaps not over-impressed.

Dropped into the factory to enquire about the price of a kilt and was staggered at the cost. Apart from the basic garment, there are all the accoutrements: sporran, socks, dagger (dirk) to put inside your sock, shoes, waistcoat. Underpants not worn, so no charge. Said I would give it my earnest consideration. As it was quite a nice morning, strolled around Inveraray – a pretty town. Looked inside the large Presbyterian Church in the Main Street where, in past times, Gaelic and English speaking congregations had separate entrances and services, and were physically segregated by a solid internal wall which is still there, though there is a connecting door. Helpful attendant told me that services now take place only in the English side, with the Gaelic section largely used for storage. Wandered on to the bridge to get a good view of the Duke of Argyle's noble pile, built very much in the style of a French castle/château. Didn't like it much; thought it looked so heavy and ungainly.



Then a beautiful drive to Oban. Arrived in good time for the boat to Barra in the Outer Hebrides, a journey of nearly five hours – the longest ferry crossing to a Scottish island. Eventually got away at 2.00 p.m., twenty minutes late. Spectacular journey through the Sound of Mull. Two hours before we reached open water. Very rough, but the boat stable, so no *mal de mer*. Stayed all the time in the observation lounge and dozed off and on, especially when the only scenery to see was the sea.

Landed at Castlebay in Barra at 6.45 p.m. The old defensive Kisimul Castle is built on a rock in the middle of the bay. Lovely sheltered harbour. Found our B&B quickly, and were warmly greeted by John and Mary Davis. John with his open, smiling, weather-beaten face, looks like my mental picture of Long John Silver, but happily

has both legs. There is a permanent aroma (not unpleasant) of tomato soup. Excellent en-suite bedroom. On John's advice went to the bistro on the Quay, only to find it closed 'due to burst pipe'. Ended up in the Croughard Hotel for a nice dinner. Then drove right round the island for about forty minutes. Daylight much longer here than at home. Feeling very tired, so hit the pillow and conked out.

Thursday, 7th May

Woke up to a glorious morning. Thought it would be a healthy idea to have something other than a full Scottish breakfast, and had a plate of delicious kippers instead. Into Castlebay to get stamps for postcards, buy a guidebook, a hunk of bread, and a chunk of cheese. Then drive to the island of Vatersay. Sparkling seas, cloudless sky, brilliant sunshine, though a cold wind. The beaches at Vatersay are so pale that they conjure up a quote from Shakespeare (suitably amended): 'Come on to these white sands, and then hold hands'. Walked along the biggest beach near the causeway, avoiding a dead seal and seagull, before going back to the car for 'elevenses'.



Then drove round the rest of Vatersay. Explored a falling-down deserted house with its own private beach, and a position and view you could die for. Picnicked there on the bread and cheese and fantasized about owning such a magical property.

Returned to Castlebay and visited the large and imposing Church of Our Lady Star of the Sea, built of granite on an elevated site overlooking the harbour. Then turned northwards to check the location of the ferry terminal for Eriskay. By this time it was really warm and the tide was full out at Barra airport, where planes land and take off on the sand, and the timetable varies with the tides. Watched a small twin propeller plane come in with half a dozen passengers, who collected their luggage from what must be the world's smallest baggage-reclaim area.





Carried on to the end of the peninsula to visit St Finbarr's Church, founded by the Irish saint, and the nearby graveyard where Compton McKenzie is buried. McKenzie wrote the book *Whisky Galore*, which was made into a classic Ealing Studios comedy film of the same name in 1948, shot entirely in Barra. The story, factually based, is about the ship which, during World War II, went aground on the rocks off the neighbouring island of Eriskay. Its cargo included a quarter of a million bottles of Scotch whisky.

Needless to say, the shenanigans of the islanders to collect as much as possible of the precious liquid and frustrate the efforts of Customs and Excise to recover the contraband, lead to many farcical situations which are exploited to the full in the film. The inhabitants are depicted as strict Presbyterians who must observe the whole long twenty-four hours of the Sabbath (Sunday), and can only watch the stricken vessel and pray that the Excise officers don't arrive from the mainland. On the stroke of midnight (Monday morning), all the menfolk pile into every boat that can float, and row out to raid the ship, which is on the point of breaking up! I am sure that in real life the people of Barra, who are almost entirely Catholic, wouldn't have suffered such Sabbath Day scruples.

Back in Castlebay discover that the burst pipe has been repaired and Bistro Kisimul is open. It is run by a husband (Indian) and wife (Italian) team and, acknowledging the culinary diversity, Gillian had a chicken curry, and I chose a *spaghetti carbonara*. Both dishes were the best we had ever tasted. So, on a remote Scottish island we enjoyed cuisine of the highest order at cost of little more than McDonalds. Replete with food, fresh air and sunshine, took a leaf from Samuel Pepys's diary, 'and so to bed'.

Friday, 8th May

The third glorious day in a row. Early breakfast and away to Aird Mhor to catch the ferry to Eriskay, the island where the ship (SS Politician) with all the whisky actually

went down. Journey scheduled to take an hour, but in calm sea crossed in thirty-five minutes. Beautiful scenery. Visited St Michael's Church, where a fine statue of the Saint stands at the entrance. Inside, the wooden altar incorporates the bow of a lifeboat.



Stopped at the pub named, in a singular coincidence, AM Politician, which was closed even for coffee. But, by way of compensation, the owner took us inside and showed us a whisky bottle (empty), which he said came from the wrecked ship. No reason to disbelieve him. Eriskay is where Bonnie Prince Charlie first landed in Scotland in July 1745 at the start of his ill-fated attempt to regain the English throne. A famous lovely folk song from the area is called *The Eriskay Love Lilt*.

A large causeway joins Eriskay to South Uist; extremely rocky, mountainous and barren land. The islands of South Uist, Benbecula, North Uist, and Berneray are also linked by road. Had excellent though expensive coffee and cakes at café in Lochboisdale. Heard two cuckoos – or maybe the same cuckoo twice.

Progressed up South Uist. Halted at Flora Macdonald's birthplace. Read all about how, after the battle of Culloden, she helped 'Bonnie' Prince Charlie escape the English forces, by disguising him as her maid and spiriting him across country and by boat to Skye. It was a gruelling and dangerous journey over difficult terrain. In gratitude, Charlie gave her the secret recipe for Drambuie liquor whisky, distilled to this day. Chuckled at the incident when the Prince, tramping over a muddy swamp, lifted his skirts too high, which gravely compromised his assumed gender. Flora had to ask him to be more careful! I have no photographic record of this *faux pas*, for which I apologize

Visited the heritage museum at Kildonan. Very interesting display of crofting in South Uist. Turned off to Loch Aineort where, having negotiated a pothole the size of a small lake, we had wonderful views of Skye and the Cuillin mountains. The climax of the day was a walk on the startling white beach at Aird a Mhachair. Baking hot and not a breath of wind from the sea. Barra and Eriskay clearly visible in the distance. Excellent salmon salad at the Stepping Stone restaurant in Balavanish on Benbecula, the island that lies between South and North Uist, before driving into North Uist for B&B at Baleshare. Lingering residue of tobacco smoke throughout the house didn't create a favourable impression. Left window open all night.

Saturday, 9th May

Poor start to the day. Imagine a Scottish 'breckie' without porridge being available! 'Had run out of supplies' was the excuse. Rest of the meal distinctly basic and no frills. Glad to get away, especially as it was another stunning day. Retraced our steps to the little port of Ceallan. Well not so little, as huge storage tanks for lobsters, scallops, etc. indicated a big fishing business. Turned northwards to North Uist (what other way?), bought salmon pâté and fudge at a wayside smoke house, but fudged the special offer on haggis. Overwhelming desire to have a little something was satisfied at the craft centre in Cladach Chireboist looking across to Kirkibost Island, great coffee and raisin shortbread. Gillian bought three jars of homemade jam.

Breathtaking views over the sea – not to Skye – but far south to Barra. Noticed a signpost pointing northwards to a viewing point to St Kilda and Boreray that was too good to miss. Telescope useless, but it was such a clear day, didn't need it.



St Kilda is the most remote of all Scottish islands. Far out in the Atlantic, a round trip to sail and visit takes about twelve hours. The inhabitants left for the mainland in 1934 in a planned evacuation. Before embarking for the last time, a fire was left burning in the hearth of every cottage. There still is the human presence of ornithologists and tourists as it is a famous bird sanctuary and World Heritage Site. Also heard rumour of the presence of an intelligence listening station. But of course can't talk about that as it's top secret.

Decided that a proper lunch would vary the daily diet, so took short cut across the mountains to Lockmaddy. Extensive turf cuttings all along the way. Good fisherman's pie at local hotel followed by a spot of shut-eye in the car by the quayside. Slept through the arrival of a huge ferry from Skye.

Even after that restorative snooze didn't have much appetite for further exploring, so drove on to our next B&B on the island of Bernarey. Appropriately named 'Sealview' there were numerous grey seals basking on the rocks close to the house. Watched them over a leisurely evening picnic of the salmon pâté and fudge. Then a short drive round the island before retiring.



Sunday, 10th May

What a change in the weather! Bucketing rain, fog, howling wind, and a 'Grand National' of white sea horses. Arrived at the ferry for Harris. Ourselves and another couple from Somerset, whom we had met the previous Wednesday on the boat to Barra, were the sole passengers on this imposing craft. We sat in state in the observation deck (not that we could see anything) as the captain took a zig-zag course round rocks and small islands. The crossing must be highly treacherous to judge by the number of marker buoys.

Still torrential rain when we landed at Leverburgh. It was Sunday and we had forgotten that Harris is one of the islands that completely shuts down on that day. It reminded me of Lisburn, my childhood town in the '40s and '50s. Big problems. Our friends from Somerset had no petrol and we had no food. Our captain, sympathetic, but of a Job's comforter disposition, informed us that the nearest petrol station was in Stornaway some sixty miles away, and cast doubts on whether the nearest hotel in Rodal could serve meals on the Sabbath to non-residents! I thought we might be classified as *bona-fide* travellers but refrained from seeking the opinion of our legal adviser on that tricky point. The 'Somersets' had a camper van and decided to pull on to the side of the road and stick it out to morning. We set out to find the hotel. On the way passed St Clements, the oldest medieval church in Scotland, but couldn't find the entrance.

Ended up at the harbour hotel and threw ourselves on the goodwill of the proprietor. He showed mercy by booking us a table for lunch and allowing us to use the residents' lounge. Gave us precise instructions as to how to enter the church. We asked if there was a service. He looked rather mystified. 'Oh no, this is Sunday.' Now we were puzzled. Thought this was the one day when there would be divine worship. So he explained that it was a deconsecrated building and used for all sorts of activities, weddings, etc., but Sunday was a day of rest. Entirely logical I suppose. 'Six days shalt thou labour.' Got back to the church. Struggled up the path, buffeted by wind and rain, and took shelter inside. Completely bare except for tombs of three Knights (not Crusaders as their legs weren't crossed), a beautiful stone altar, and

five elaborately carved gravestones. Very interesting but bitterly cold, so didn't stay very long. No sterling change but dropped an Irish euro coin in the donation box.



Weather so awful we decided the only thing to do was to partake of the hotel lunch and spend the afternoon curled up in the lounge. Excellent fare of chowder and fisherman's pie. Gillian tasted macaroni cheese *à l'écossaise* for the first time and was immediately hooked. The walls of the dining room were covered with very impressive paintings by a Scottish artist whose name now escapes me.

Both of us dozed off in the lounge and, on waking, saw a break in the weather. Took an immediate decision to make a dash to our B&B on Scalpay island which is connected by causeway. Of course respite doesn't last. Arrived at 'Hirta House' in a ferocious gale. Made very welcome by Margaret and Kenny Morrison. Given a lovely room with the bed in the shape of a Jacuzzi. Needed a breath of fresh air so drove to the farthest headland. Discovered the lighthouse there was the oldest in Scotland, having been operating since 1789.

Scalpay is quite densely populated. Noticed two 'wee free' churches quite close to one another, each having evening service at the same time. Observed that the larger church described itself as 'continuing' and deduced there must have been a difference of opinion. The gathering storm was really starting to close in, so we were

glad to get back safely to our B&B. Felt very cosy tucked in against the wild elements. Lulled to slumber by the constant beating of rain on roof and windows.

Monday, 11th May

Weather as bad as ever in the morning. On going to the dining room, found Margaret, who is a nurse, had disappeared. An emergency, Kenny said. This left Kenny to make the breakfast, something he cheerfully told us, he had never done before. Felt that this was the real emergency. He did very well however, even if the menu got a little out of kilter – toast and coffee came before fruit juice and cereal – but there was nothing wrong with the bacon and eggs. Rain still pelting down so we lingered on in conversation in hope of weather improving. Kenny confirmed my suspicion that there had been a split in the 'Free Church' in Scalpay over one man. I presume the minister. Kenny is a fisherman and quite certain that global warming/climate change is already happening. Storms are more severe. The month of May, usually mainly dry and sunny, is subject to many squalls, and snow is now unknown.

Eventually, a patch of blue sky opened up and we returned to Harris and got petrol at Tarbert. By the time we filled up, the clouds had lifted, and we set off on a spectacular coastal road to Huisinis on South Lewis. Narrow, twisting and precarious. Fortunately, we met very little traffic to contest the slender passing places. Half-way along encountered a huge baronial castle at a place called Abhainn Suidhe, which Gillian translated as 'Fairy Stream'. However the owners were firmly down to earth as the notice on the entrance proclaimed in large red letters PLEASE NOTE THIS IS A PRIVATE RESIDENCE. However, there was a nice castle shop inviting customers in, where we bought rolls, smoked salmon, and chocolate. By the time we reached the end of the road, which literally ran into the creamy white beach, it was blowing so hard that it was difficult to get out of the car, never mind go for a walk. After admiring the churning sea for a few minutes, retraced our path along the snake-like road. Found a recess to eat the 'combustibles' from the castle emporium.



With the weather getting worse all the time, we pressed on to Callanish to find our next B&B. Just beginning to get a little bit anxious as Gregor MacLeod had never answered my telephone calls requesting directions. Decided to go the Heritage

Centre beside the famous standing stones and enquire. Wee lassie at reception desk told us everybody knew Gregor as he was the chef in the café and ran his B&B as a little side-line. Gregor emerged from the kitchen covered in flour to greet us, shaking hands with plastic gloves. He pointed out his cottage which was close by, so we let ourselves in as nobody locks their door in these parts. Have to say his home is very well appointed. Gregor had given us directions to the nearest hotel about five miles away, where we had a good lasagne. On returning to the B&B, our host produced some scrumptious drop scones and home-made raspberry jam. Gillian and Gregor, who is a native Gaelic speaker, had a scholarly discussion about vocabulary and the differences in pronunciation between Irish and Scots Gaelic, which seem to be many. Then an early night.

Tuesday, 12th May

The weather a little better but still a very stiff wind. Gregor showed off his culinary skills by serving *cordon bleu* porridge and scrambled eggs – not together, I hasten to add. Decided to immerse myself in the history of the standing stones and stroll up to the Heritage Centre to watch videos and read pamphlets. It certainly was fascinating. If I understood correctly, the circle is not aligned to either the summer or winter solstice. However, every nineteen years the moon appears especially low at Callanish and appears to dance along the southern hills. The stones would appear to align with these phases! It must have taken aeons of time to make those astronomical observations, the significance and purpose of which is still unknown.



Imbued with the spirit of times past, proceeded to the Broch at Dun Carloway – one of many ancient fortified hollow-walled tower structures, indigenous to Scotland.



Then on to the black houses at Arnol. These are habitations where humans and animals lived together in the one dwelling. The fire was in the middle of the earthen floor and the smoke dispersed through a hole in the roof. This aperture was controlled by an ingenious flap pulled by a rope, which allowed the smoke still to escape, even when the wind direction changed.



There is something intriguing about going to the extremity of an island so carried on to the Butt of Lewis. In passing, waved at the Trusal standing stone – the tallest in Europe. At the Butt ignored a 'Building Closed' notice to have a quick look round St Moulag's Church and got thoroughly soaked by a sudden shower. The saint punished us well for our presumption. Dried out at the same hotel as last night (Doune Braes) over a nice cod pie, and then to Gregor's abode. Later that evening went back to admire the standing stones.

Wednesday, 13th May

Sat down to breakfast at Gregor's, served by our host, with two new guests, Chrissie and her niece Karen, both fluent Gaelic speakers. The whole meal was filmed by BBC Alba, the Scottish Gaelic TV Channel. Gillian was more than able to join in the conversation, while I remained the strong silent listener.

Went to visit more standing stones in the area. Got hopelessly lost and were re-directed to the right road by a helpful local man. Very grateful to stand corrected. Looked at an iron-age house at Bostadh on Great Bernera Island. Saw NATO radar stations at Aird Uig and the Flannan Isles in the distance. This is where the three lighthouse keepers vanished without trace in December 1900, and their disappearance is still an unsolved enigma. Well, if it's unsolved it has to be an enigma, like Elgar's *Enigma Variations*. At An Galan Uigeach turned on the radio for the news, and heard all about the leak to the *Sun* newspaper of Prince Charles's highly intimate epistles to Camilla Parker-Boles. Didn't actually say what was in the letters, which was frustrating. Drove down to Liurbost on the way to Stornaway for our B&B. Good meal at the Royal Hotel.