The lonely islands of St. Kilda—colourful, dramatic, seldom visited—were a natural choice of subject for the Films of Scotland committee when they decided to venture for the first time into a 16mm production for colour television. The nature of both the subject and the place called for specialised treatment, using light, portable equipment carried by two people at the most, rather than the cumbersome gear of a normal 35mm Film Unit. Moreover, the National Trust for Scotland, who now own the islands, had recently published Tom Steel's book "The Life and Death of St. Kilda." Inspired by the story, David Bruce wrote an imaginative and exciting film treatment which, backed by the enthusiasm of their Director, Forsyth Hardy, in turn inspired the Committee to accept the idea and to commission the film

THE CHALLENGE OF ST KILDA

BY CHRISTOPHER K. MYLNE

WHEN I WAS ASKED to undertake the production, we started planning immediately, as there was every probability in the spring of 1966 that that would be the last year the Army would still be there, providing communications and emergency services. I knew the value of such things from my earlier stay there in 1957, making a film for the National Trust, when the Army were first moving in to set up their radar tracking station for the South Uist Rocket Range, and the Trust was concerned to preserve the ruins of the deserted village and the famous "cleits" or stone storage huts from possible damage by the construction work.

The story of St. Kilda as a film subject was, like the islands themselves, a challenge. For hundreds of years the islands were a constant challenge to those who lived there, against the relentless enemies of wind and weather. After the evacuation in 1930 they presented a new challenge to naturalists who quickly realised their potential as a place where populations of wild creatures could be studied in their natural environment with the minimum of interference from man. In 1957 they challenged even the resources of the Services when they assumed a new strategic importance; and they challenged the National Trust for Scotland when the Marquis of Bute bequeathed the island group to the nation with the opportunity to preserve it as an open-air museum of a way of life.

The landing craft arrived in Village Bay; the bulldozers came and went; the village was saved and later largely restored by volunteer working parties, organised by the Trust to preserve at least the walls and gables from further decay; the naturalists also achieved their objects when the Nature Conservancy leased the islands from the Trust as a National Nature Reserve. Man had failed to meet the challenge of life on St. Kilda in face of the attractions of 20th century life in an easier environment, but was making headway in the new problem of exploiting such a magnificent national asset and even of showing it to a larger public than ever before. The Trust was justifying its courage in taking on the most inaccessible, spectacular, forbidding and fascinating group of islands in Britain by organising annually cruises to show more and

Fulmar in flight, using feet and tail to manoeuvre in the upcurrents

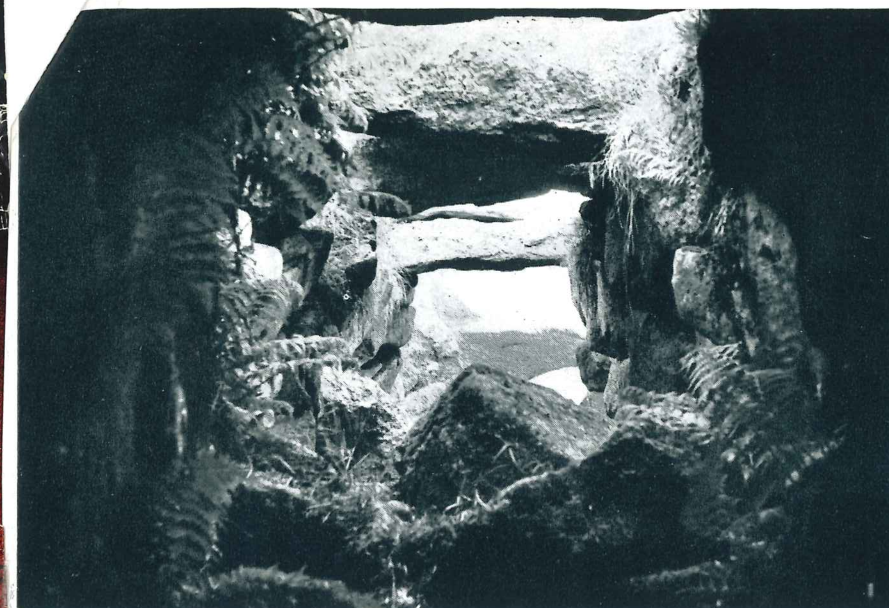
more people the finest natural history spectacle in Scotland, perhaps in Europe.

All this was part of the story and a lot more besides. There was the whole history from the time when the "earth house" was built and lived in, through the mediaeval times when Martin Martin wrote his superb chronicle of his "Voyage to St. Kilda" in 1697, up to the black houses of 1830, and then the village street with its crescent of "but-and-ben" houses built in 1860. There was the old dependence on fowling and cliff-climbing; the boat expeditions to Boreray and the stacks four miles to the north; the harvesting of fulmars and gannets, puffins and guillemots' eggs; the rent paid in feathers; the lamps burning fulmar oil; the spinning and the weaving of St. Kilda tweed; the people of the "little commonwealth" living in a world apart.

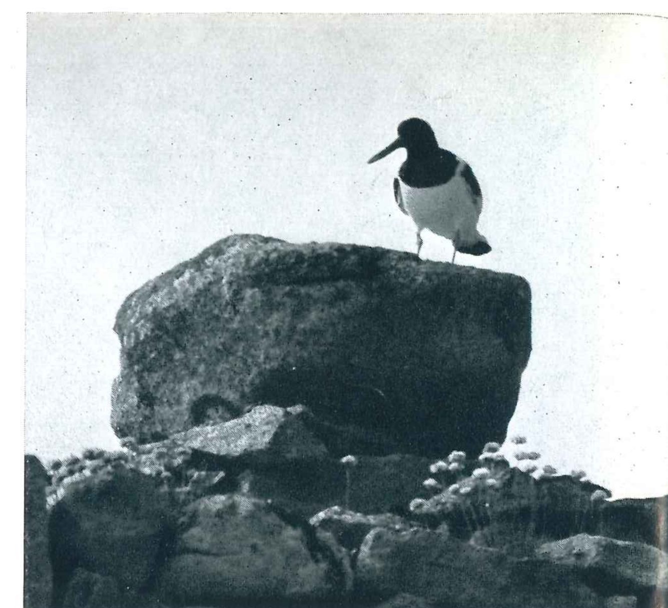
And then there was the sad history of an oppressive Church, the school, the coming of tourism, the introduction of money, the moral and spiritual decline to the final plea to be evacuated in 1930. There was the teeming natural life in a savage but beautiful environment where the sea is the great provider, the land mostly a temporary home for the millions—yes, literally millions—of oceanic birds which breed there. There were the few highly specialised creatures that live there all the year round, the island subspecies of wren and field-mouse found nowhere else in the world and the goat-like Soay sheep, forerunners of our later domestic breeds which eventually displaced them on all the mainland of Britain and finally on the islands, too, except the most inaccessible of all, Soay to the west of Hirta. All this—on a time scale from Viking times, perhaps even earlier, to the present day and in a physical setting whose scale is difficult to appreciate even when one is there—all this was part of the story of St. Kilda.

Early in 1966 plans were laid for a four weeks' stay on the island with the co-operation of the Nature Conservancy. A script was written and agreed, but the more we thought about the subject and the more I remembered of my several previous visits there, the more impossible it seemed to translate the place into film terms. St. Kilda is essentially four-dimensional. Its green slopes and black precipices are utterly divorced from 20th century life. It is a timeless fortress, a place where nature is supreme and where the force of the wind must be felt, the smell of the great fulmar colonies wafting on the up-current at the cliff-top savoured before the experience becomes meaningful. One must tread its steep and dangerous paths under one's feet and look down on the marbled sea a thousand feet below to appreciate even its three staggering dimensions and understand its scale. Our aim was to reduce this terrifying place, with its sea-cliffs rising vertically a quarter of a mile from the tideline, into intelligible terms on a strip of celluloid with an image a mere 10mm. wide. We were, of course, bound to fail.

On May 24 it seemed as though our plans would fail for other and more immediate reasons. For several weeks our thoughts had been directed more and more to the very practicable problem of getting myself and my field assistant, Keith Moffat, to St. Kilda. Places had been booked on an Army boat for him to prepare the way for my arrival on the National Trust *Meteor* cruise a few days later. Then the seamen's strike scotched his plans to get there first, and in the end we were lucky to squeeze him into a cancelled berth in *Meteor* at the last minute. We left Leith on May 21 to go west to St. Kilda by the devious route of an itinerary north via Shetland, and at once the Scottish weather started to make itself felt. *Meteor* was storm-stayed in Lerwick for a couple of days, and each day, as even the most carefully laid cruise plans were altered to suit the winds, our own chances of landing on the most storm-swept islands of the lot seemed to grow more and more remote. As we lay in Ronas Voe in the teeth of a Force 8 gale, St. Kilda seemed a very long way off and we were comforted only by the knowledge that all the 150 passengers were as anxious to get ashore there as we were.



'The Earth House,' called by the St. Kildans 'the fairy house,' is a long underground dwelling, roofed across the narrow passageway with huge lintel stones



Oystercatcher on the gable of the Factor's Store where it was nesting.

A northerly swell thunders through a tunnel in one of the headlands. Seals use the surf in the tunnels as a short cut from bay to bay

St. Kilda has been the highlight of many a Trust cruise. Rising like a series of mountain-tops out of the Atlantic 45 miles west of the Outer Hebrides and with no other land in sight, it never fails to make an impact. Sunshine enhances its stark vertical outlines and the flashing white of gannets overhead. Wind emphasises its grim isolation and rings it with the forbidding white surge of the Atlantic swell. Low cloud exaggerates its height as the cliffs rear up into the mist to unknown heights. Only fog brings disappointment, or a south-east wind that makes a landing in Village Bay out of the question.

As we headed south the wind started to moderate. Alternative plans had been laid for the rest of the cruise in the sheltered waters of Stornoway and the Inner Hebrides but hopes were raised of better weather just in time to make the decision to go west of the Butt of Lewis. Miraculously the wind dropped away for the first time in the week, the sun shone and we passed the Flannan Isles in clear weather with increasing confidence and with a Pomarine Skua hanging in the breeze at the stern to add to the excitement.

In the end the weather couldn't have been better as we sailed round first Boreray and the great rock stacks, Stac Lee and Stac an Armin, and then the main island of Hirta. *Meteor* is a notoriously top-heavy ship in a swell and while I swayed awkwardly trying to keep my horizons straight for the duration of my film shots, the still photographers had a field-day. One cannot ask for everything, however, and with a plume of cloud capping the Mullach Bi on the south-west shore of Hirta, the coastline looked as colourful as it was dramatic, with its head in the clouds and the white swell crashing at its feet.

On our first approach to Village Bay we had met the fishing boat *Glen Carradale* carrying a party of a dozen Edinburgh schoolboys from George Watson's College, departing after a fortnight on the island. Now on our second sail past the stacks, we arrived at the moment that the *Glen Carradale* was taking the boys for a last look at the islands before heading for the Sound of Harris. This lucky chance gave me the first clue to solving our major film problem, the problem of scale. The scale of the massive south face of Boreray hanging over the tiny craft took on a new meaning that no amount of commentary on the statistics

The National Trust for Scotland organise working parties of volunteers, who have restored many houses in the village street

would ever give. A key shot was in the can, and we saw that our first aim in shooting scenics must now be to put man into the picture. Our first project when we got ashore must clearly be to film Conachair, the highest sea-cliff in the U.K., and Keith's role as the figure standing at the top dwarfed by the 1330 ft. drop beneath him was already clear. But first we had to get ashore.

We reached Village Bay late in the day and, worse still, at very low tide. The Army launched a box pontoon off the pier and got all 150 of us ashore as well as our 18 items of baggage, mostly wrapped in polythene bags inside their boxes. Captain Wilkes, the O.C., and his Battery Sergeant-Major had joined us for the sail round the islands and before we