

## **The Making of *St Kilda: The Lonely Islands***

When I started out as a freelance film-maker, I was fortunate to have two part-time jobs to help me tide over the transition period, both of which were very flexible in the responsibilities and the hours I was expected to put in. I was grateful for these two appointments as part of the package, which I felt was largely in compensation for the fact that the promise of film-making opportunities had not proved possible while I worked for the Trust full-time.

I was to be Adviser on Natural History for NTS, scarcely an onerous advisory role, and also Public Relations Officer for the newly formed Scottish Wildlife Trust. This was the brain-child of Sir Charles Connell, an Edinburgh lawyer, who launched the only Scottish example of the Conservation Trust movement then springing up in a number of English counties, based on the pioneering model of the Norfolk Naturalists. When I was appointed, the SWT had a few small rooms in Sir Charles' offices and Bernard Gilchrist had been appointed as its first Secretary. It was all to play for. And fortunately for me, I was given leave to be absent on St Kilda for six weeks in the summer of 1966 to make my first film under the banner of 'A Films of Scotland Production'. But first I had to persuade the Director, Forsyth Hardy, that I was up to his very high standards.

For obvious reasons – the weather and the breeding season for the birds – it was essential to plan enough time out in mid-summer to make a full-scale documentary on St Kilda a realistic possibility. I approached Films of Scotland, officially a committee of the Department of Trade and Industry, which had a high reputation for producing films of Scottish projects that were imaginative and artistic. Forsyth Hardy, making use of some formidable Scottish talent, had made a success of it in the film world. I put up the idea and within a few weeks was writing a script and working out my first film budget. I knew his reputation for cutting costs, so I cut them for him and proposed a total budget, including all laboratory costs up to the first show-print, of £1,500. It could only be done by restricting man-power to two and banking on free travel in with the National Trust, and out with the Army. I achieved both, and my budget was accepted. It was ridiculously low in commercial film terms, but Forsyth knew an opportunity when he met it in the form of a mad enthusiast who really wanted the job.

I let the word go round in the Scottish Ornithologists' Club that there was an opening for a student to get to the Scottish Mecca for bird-watchers for some useful pocket money plus absolutely all costs covered. A friend of a friend put me in touch with Keith Moffat, a brilliant First Class Honours molecular biologist with a month to spare before going to the USA to do his PhD at the cutting edge of science. It was an ideal arrangement, and one morning in May we were disembarking from *Meteor* in Village Bay, and going ashore to set up our HQ in the Factor's House where we shared kitchen and toilet facilities with two Nature Conservancy wardens. For sleeping accommodation, we had the permission of the Quartermaster Sergeant to use the bedding store, a Nissen Hut with 53 mattresses and a generous supply of pillows and blankets to help us to sleep comfortably. It was a rational and economical arrangement, unusually sensible in bureaucratic terms for the army. A few St Kilda fieldmice, with whom we shared these facilities, was a small price to pay for such spacious and dry accommodation, albeit a bit noisy in an Atlantic rainstorm. Luckily for the mice, there were no cats on our tin roof.

I had a long list of subjects, covering both the human and natural history of the island, with obvious priorities. I came armed with a number of prepared plans, such as enlargements of

some of the archive black-and-white photographs of village scenes which I hoped to bring to new life in colour with the help of members of that summer's Trust Working Parties. I even had a First Edition of Martin Martin's 1698 publication "A Late Voyage to St Kilda" from which to reconstruct some of the oldest recorded features of village life.

For the wildlife, I had the most portable of all semi-professional cameras, the H16 Bolex, with a battery of telephoto lenses, and hides which would have only limited application in such precipitous locations. We carried everything in rucksacks on our backs and went on foot except when we could hitch a lift in an army Land Rover. For political reasons we dropped lots of hints and left it to them to offer when it was convenient, and their time schedule often did not fit with our needs. Days with a lift to the top were a bonus as the central ridge of Hirta has to be traversed to reach any of the highlights of the North side of the island: Glen Bay, the village of the 'horned' dwellings, the Amazon's House, the Tunnel, and the Cambir where one looks across Soay Sound, bristling with rock stacks, to the ramparts of Soay, the furthest west point of Britain. Time was precious and often we were still trudging home when the army had all finished their evening meal.

Gradually, the top priority subjects were covered, with the weather staying unbelievably anticyclonic. Many days saw us basking in wall-to wall sunshine, wonderful for the slow film which we needed for quality, but scarcely a true representation of typical St Kilda weather. We had some magic moments like the day we climbed out of the mist on the Mullach Mhor to look, across a blanket of white fog, at the tops of Soay and distant Boreray, peeping out under a blue sky. Below us a posse of dark Soay sheep plunged out of sight into the fog, running headlong down steep grassy slopes, poised a thousand feet above a sheer drop to the sea.

We spent a whole morning in the Tunnel, where an Atlantic swell came rushing in with a noise like thunder, echoing from the vaulted roof over our heads, and crashing on the rocks as though to demonstrate how this huge hole had been carved out of solid rock over aeons of time. And by sheer good luck, as the camera purred to record the scene, two grey seals appeared in the middle of the surge for just long enough to be seen plunging deliberately right through the turmoil of boiling waters.

Always in such scenes the problem was how to convey the scale of the place. It was awesome to see and hear it for real. Rock scenery writ large is humbling to experience, but reduced to a film frame the size of half a postage stamp, would it ever look so terrifying on the screen? We did try one dodge which in the end was successful. With Keith's help I filmed a scene at the top of Conachair, which aimed to put across the remarkable fact that a stone launched into the air 1,300 feet above sea-level takes twelve long seconds to reach the sea. I took all the shots needed to tell the story, later edited down to a rapid sequence of a dozen breath-taking shots: he looks at his watch, and just before the second hand reaches twelve, he picks up a stone, and on the dot of twelve throws it hard outwards; the second-hand ticks on, his face looks down; below, fulmars hang in the wind; the watch ticks on; he peers over intently; the marbled sea below shows birds as tiny white dots; the second hand reaches twelve seconds; the stone splashes in close to the foot of the cliff. It's a lot of work.

It took us half the morning to find a place where Keith could throw a stone, which the camera could see landing just at the base of a vertical cliff from close enough to make an impressive splash. It still had to look like a 150 mph impact from a great height. And all that effort because the feeling that the highest sea-cliff in UK gives to the pit of your stomach as you

actually look over is quite impossible to induce in the audience sitting in a comfortable seat in the cinema. So you must tell them just what is involved. You have to make them stop and think by inducing the 'Wow!' factor in their brains to add to creative photography on the screen.

By far the most effective sequence, to put across one of Martin Martin's best stories about seventeenth century St Kilda, was the one we took of Keith performing the famous balancing feat, which Martin describes as the ordeal "every bachelor wooer" had to perform to prove to his wife-to-be his ability to go bird-fowling on the cliffs. It's daunting even to read about it, and especially if performed on the Lover's Stone, a dramatic, upward pointing tooth of rock that juts out at the very top of the huge talus slope below the Carn Mor, on the south-west rampart of the ridge above the valley of Glen Bay. I went up myself to test the risk. The stone slopes steeply up but has a flat top with an edge poised above a drop of about 300 feet. Admittedly, it is only above a grassy slope, but it would not do anyone any good to fall off. A broken neck would be as likely as anything else.

As I walked carefully up the sloping stone and stood briefly on the top platform only a couple of feet across, I had a sense of being more exposed to the air and to immediate danger than I have ever been in any other situation in my life. Nothing in this world would have induced me to bend down or do any sort of balancing trick at the edge, let alone the truly difficult manoeuvre expected of the "bachelor wooer", who had to stand only on one heel, put one foot in front of the other over the edge, heel to toe, and then, bending down, put his two fists end to end against his forward toe (if he could even reach that far) and hold that long enough for his lady-love to observe and approve his achievement.

Keith was the hero of the hour. No, of course I didn't ask him to perform this stunt on the real stone. But he had assiduously practised the balancing feat in the bedding store until he had mastered it. So first, to add credence to the sequence, I filmed him walking out, as I had shown him was possible without undue risk, until he neared the rear of the top platform. We then cut to close-ups of his anguished face and his booted feet, and then a close shot of him achieving the balancing trick on a very similar but safe rock, which it took us the best part of the morning to find – and the job was in the can. Well, not quite. A young lady from the work party dressed up the next day in a suitable shawl and gazed anxiously skywards for long enough to cover the tense action of her wooer, and then sighed with relief at his success.

It was tricky to edit, and make it convincing. But I have watched that sequence with many audiences and it does work, and there are usually genuine sighs of relief as he steps back from the edge. The only thing we got seriously wrong was that he did it in boots, whereas the St Kilda fowler always went with bare feet 'for a better grip'. And yes, Martin Martin does mention the 'Mistress Stone' down by Ruaival as the site for the test, but that is not nearly so dangerous, dramatic or terrifying! So we chose 'The Lover's Stone' instead. Call it 'Director's Licence. Of such deceptions are the best films made.

The only natural spectacle we did not have time to cover was the largest gannet colony in the northern hemisphere, on Boreray and the Stacks. We often watched them through binoculars soaring in their thousands along the edge of the cliffs in the updraught, and occasionally venturing closer to Hirta when a fishing party found a shoal near the surface and hundreds of birds would fly out and plunge from, perhaps, a hundred feet up, like a shower of pure white arrows, head first into the surf. I have watched the same performance from the stern of a cruise ship so close you could see them disappear, in a stream of green bubbles, into the

depths, emerging seconds later with the prey already swallowed, before splashing off over the surface, taking to wing and climbing upwards for the next dive. It must be one of the greatest natural spectacles in Britain, even more remarkable for taking place in the unnaturally smooth water at the stern of a large ship, where presumably we create artificial conditions which make the fish more easily seen and captured. But film taken under these conditions could not have been presented as if it had been taken from Hirta, and there was no way I could get out to Boreray. So I had to break the least important rule of authenticity, the actual location, and shoot my sequence of the gannet colony elsewhere.

By careful planning and hard work, helped by wonderful weather, we had completed in one month all the sequences of the Films of Scotland script where Keith's assistance was essential. Filming which includes specialized wildlife coverage calls for a load of heavy gear, and I had devised one method of cutting down on weight, and time. We never made sandwiches but each day took the same energy pack of food to keep us going: a chunk of cheddar cut from a complete round cheese, which kept remarkably fresh in its original cheesecloth rind; a packet of Healthylife wholemeal biscuits, kept at base in a tin; raisins and dates and chocolate, all of which travelled well and kept in good condition. In spite of its sameness, we always enjoyed our lunch, but then we often ate it in some of the most spectacular locations in Scotland. Along the cliffs, and especially looking down from above, there were the constant aerobatics of stiff-winged fulmars at the cliff edge or the cackling of breeding pairs on their nesting ledges, and against the background of 'the wine-dark' sea, a constant criss-cross pattern of fulmars coming and going at all levels, some close and elegant, some tiny white silhouettes a thousand feet down. Puffins were everywhere there was turf for their burrows, though often hard to get really close to. Their gaudy beaks added a touch of colour, their antics of bill-clapping or threat displays or boisterous fights on the green slopes, a touch of humour to our lunch breaks. Puffins are never boring to watch.

On sheer cliffs nearer the sea, onomatopoeic kittiwakes cried in chorus; guttural guillemots croaked and fought on crowded ledges; smart razorbills in their dinner-jacket plumage scuttled to their nest-sites among the rocks. And as often as not there would be a St Kilda wren singing to hold its territory against rival wrens, a show of arrogance among all these sea-birds ten times its size which never ceased to amaze us.

The best wren we encountered was on Dun, the long lush island which shelters Village Bay from the south-west, when we joined the work-party that had asked the Army to take them over in their dory on one of their leisure days. None other than the O.C. of the St Kilda Detachment was at the helm as we left the pier and made our way through uncountable numbers of puffins, floating in serried ranks we had never noticed before, half a mile out from the shore. After we had landed, scrambling ashore on the rocks at a tiny inlet, we watched the puffin fly-past, an endless procession of flight after flight of whirring wings as they carried their beakfuls of sand-eels back to their young waiting underground. Counting them in the air or on the water was impossible. Everywhere they were legion.

Dun must be one of Scotland's most prolific bird islands. It is also very steep and difficult to penetrate. To start with, its vegetation is knee-deep because it has no sheep to graze its steep slopes, which are thick with grasses and sorrel, decorated with sea campion, thrift, and scurvy-grass, and undermined with thousands of puffin burrows. At the south end, it is a tumble of huge boulders, an almost impenetrable fortress of rock, and yet here is one of St Kilda's strangest mysteries, a man-made wall of stones blocking off the space beyond like the wall of a castle. Could it have been a refuge for the villagers from Viking raiders?

At the other end are the remains of extensive lazy-beds where they once grew crops to eke out the meagre yield from the rigs below the village street. In that area, as we waited for the boat to pick us up, a wren, which probably only saw human visitors on two or three days in a year, strutted and pirouetted on a boulder in defiance of our intrusion into its territory and gave me the best ever chance to film its defiant display because it was so bold and unafraid. It was a magic moment, a truly humbling experience. Moreover, it was filmed without any trickery except a knowledge of just how close one can get to a bold wee performer determined to show these human intruders who was boss.

The other St Kilda speciality, the St Kilda Fieldmouse, was a different problem altogether. To start with, they are very timid and we seldom saw any except perhaps at dusk when one might have just a fleeting glimpse of a small, brown shape disappearing like lightning into a cleit or part of a ruined house. They seldom appeared in sunlight. So I borrowed some live traps from the Warden, baited them with oatmeal or cheese, and soon had several mice ready for the camera. I had also borrowed several sheets of window glass and a spade from the helpful Quartermaster, a staunch ally in such places for innovative cameramen. I then chose an area of grass dotted with stones and mossy hollows to which I added several recognizable features – stones, a shell, a sheep’s skull, a tuft of Soay wool – for the mouse to run amongst.

Round this miniature stage-set I cut vertical grooves with the spade deep enough to support a pane of glass set at a slight angle sloping inward, making a barrier just a fraction higher than I reckoned they could jump. I was right, but only just, as I watched several times when they tried – in vain – to escape. After much practising through the camera viewfinder in covering the area enclosed (about six square metres) without ever showing any glass, or reflection or shadow created by glass, I slowly introduced a mouse to its stage and gave it ample time to settle down and explore.

As most animals will when faced with a strange and perplexing situation of which they have no previous experience, the mouse engaged in ‘displacement activity’, usually preening or performing a natural function in a ritualistic fashion. As there is nothing more appealing to watch than a tiny mouse performing its elaborate toilette, grooming its fur, cleaning its whiskers, scratching its ear with a hind foot, I was able to catch some definitive and absorbing shots of one of Scotland’s rarest mammals in big close-up as though it was free in its natural environment. The whole area was well lit, and with care the glass walls of the prison were quite invisible.

It took a whole morning to achieve, and details of every shot recorded, so I could be sure I had as many as possible recording the mouse’s movement either to the left or to right, past identifiable landmarks. Careful editing would later create the impression of an animal progressing over the ground in a perfectly natural way, but over a greater distance than my miniature set actually allowed. And at the end, with the aid of a little persuasion and a few handclaps, the mouse was allowed to ‘escape’ into a devised bolt-hole like a flash of brown followed by a long tail – a suitable conclusion to one of the most difficult sequences in my whole coverage of the wildlife of St Kilda.

When the time came for Keith to leave, I decided to stay on for another fortnight to concentrate on further wildlife filming. I had film to spare, and when would I ever get the opportunity again? It was time well spent. The weather continued warm and sunny and my days were very full with so many memorable images in my viewfinder. I spotted a migrant

butterfly from the Mediterranean, a Painted Lady, on a clump of thrift, so fragile for such a location. I filmed an oystercatcher's nest on the floor of the ruined Factor's Feather Store down by the pier, with eggs and then young chicks both protected by impeccable camouflage, but still requiring the fierce defensive tactics of their parents against a pair of marauding ravens, scouring the village ruins for food. And I found a wren's nest in the roof of a cleit beside the Kirk, which I illuminated, for lack of electric lighting, by reflecting sunshine via a large mirror borrowed from the stores, up into the roof inside. The wren paid little attention, creeping through the stonework with beakfuls of insects for her young, as the patch of sunlight crept slowly past her nest, while I waited anxiously for my chance of a shot before the mirror had to be moved yet again. There was a limited time when the angles were right and it took several precious mornings of sunshine, and long spells in a cramped hide, patiently waiting for the small patch of sunshine to coincide with the arrival of the birds at the nest, to achieve those few seconds of action which tell the story.

Perhaps best of all was my night on the Carn Mor, an all-night excursion complete with tape-recorder and lights, to film those underground night birds, the Manx Shearwater and the musky little Leach's Storm Petrel, which gives away its position under a boulder with purring notes like a mechanical clockwork toy. Each Petrel's song is recognised individually by its mate returning from the sea with a crop full of food. This is one of Britain's rarest birds, only recognised as distinct from the common Storm Petrel, because of its deeply forked tail, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Martin Martin describes what he calls the 'Assilag' and portrays it with a quaint illustration of what is clearly a Storm Petrel with a straight tip to its tail, standing on tiptoe on a large rock on its tiny webbed feet as no petrel ever did, or could.

Storm Petrels are never seen on land by day, but at night the slopes are alive with them on just a few of Scotland's remotest islands. My first opinion was that it would be virtually impossible to count them, but new methods, using tape recordings of their calls to elicit replies from underground, have produced figures far higher than I ever would have guessed, in thousands of pairs. They have only been recorded on Foula in very small numbers, and only as a breeding species since 1974, but there could be many inaccessible breeding places on the cliffs so maybe we haven't yet looked hard enough to assess the population there.

On my visit to St Kilda in 1957, when Ken Williamson was on the island, we went to the Carn Mor with a tape recorder and found a burrow with the unmistakable Leach's Storm Petrel 'song', which I recorded with glee. Then Ken reached down and pulled out an adult bird from its nest. It turned out to have a ring on its leg which he had placed there years before. The discovery was pure chance, as he had no idea where in the colony he had found the bird before. His expression of surprise and delight at this meeting with an old friend was so spontaneous that it is one of my abiding memories of St Kilda, and won the tape recording I made of it a place on a BBC Radio programme on wildlife soon after I returned home. That rhythmic mechanical churring song is certainly a most evocative sound, frequently punctuated by the exuberant flight-call, which the birds use to locate their own burrow as they return home from the ocean.

After an exhausting night on the Carn Mor, we were rewarded with yet another inspiring experience as we reached the summit to find a pink and orange dawn breaking. As the sun came up behind Boreray and the Stacks away out to the north-east, it made a perfect closing sequence for a weary cameraman.

After six weeks of completely unexpected fine weather, I had almost given up hope of getting something more typical of the most gale-swept location in the UK. I only had a couple of hundred feet of film left, so I booked my place on the LCT, which was lying on the beach in Village Bay awaiting its return to the mainland. It was my last day after six weeks of perfect sailing weather, and suddenly a midsummer depression with gales was forecast, in July. Just my luck! As a bad sailor, I was apprehensive. LCTs were notoriously unseaworthy, never designed for North Atlantic weather. But as a cameraman, I was suddenly aware that I might at last have an opportunity to capture on film weather characteristic of St Kilda, instead of this endless Mediterranean sun.

The sky darkened, as I was packing up all my camera gear and I could see the cloud shadows racing over Oiseval. I hastily unpacked the camera and loaded one of my last two rolls of film. I noticed there were several Spanish trawlers moving into Village Bay to join others already sheltering. There was clearly trouble brewing. Walking down towards the pier, I had reached the main street ruins near the old Manse, where an army squad had been dismantling some of the 1957 Nissen huts, and there were piles of huge curved sheets of corrugated iron waiting to be loaded onto the LCT for disposal ashore. The wind was rising and I crept into a ruined doorway for shelter. It was hard to hold the camera steady. I took a light reading, set the exposure on my lens and prepared to shoot. The wind screamed in the electric cables by the Sergeant's Mess. As I started the camera a gust of wind – what we would have called a 'flan' on Foula – came down from the heights of Ruaival and whipped across the Bay, lifting whirlwinds of flying spray from the surface as it coursed through between the sheltering boats. There was a roaring sound through the village, and suddenly I was aware that the pile of corrugated iron was almost gone. As I focused the camera on the foreground, I realised I was too late. The last sheets were being driven along the shore past the Factor's Store and as I looked up, I could see several huge sheets literally flying up over Oiseval like so many pieces of burnt paper and away over the cliffs into the sea. I kept the camera running and watched further *flans* sweep across the Bay and out towards the end of Dun. The worst was over, going as suddenly as it had arrived; but at least I had recorded something of the fury of the Atlantic for which St Kilda was so notorious. Even a midsummer gale can be terrifying.

I have two footnotes to my story of the making of *St Kilda, The Lonely Islands*, which was eventually shown in the Royal Festival Hall in London and broadcast both on BBC1 and BBC2 in 1967.

When shooting was nearly complete, the work-party in the village at the time decided, as most of them do, to dispatch a traditional 'St Kilda mailboat' with letters or cards from all the members, to test out the usual method of communication practised in times of hardship or shortage in the old days. So I sent a report to Forsyth Hardy of my progress with the filming and some notes on subjects covered and what was still to be done. The boat was launched with due ceremony off the rocks west of Ruaival. It was eventually recovered and posted by the finders, so that Films of Scotland received their first ever film-progress report from a camera crew delivered by wind and tide, which reached them before I did.

The second tale of the conclusion of my project was one of near disaster. There was no post from St Kilda except army mail which would have required special dispensation for me to use, so I had accumulated nearly ten thousand feet of exposed Ektachrome carefully stored in the coolest part of the Factor's house until my departure. I had decided to take it with me, so that only I was responsible for seeing the whole project's results to the laboratories for processing. It meant all my eggs in one basket, but it seemed the safest bet. So I left with my

whole six weeks of work in one box, which I carried in my own hands aboard the LCT on the day of departure.

Space was limited and there were three of us in one rather crowded cabin. I noted with relief that there was no heating in the cabins so it was cool enough, for the worst enemy of unprocessed colour film is heat. The crossing wasn't too bad but I took my usual sea-sickness pills and, as so often, slept soundly as a result, with my precious box of film under the bunk beside the cold radiator.

When I woke, I was sweating. I put my hand out and found the radiator almost red-hot. It had switched on during the night and now my whole box of film was being cooked. I whipped it out into a draughty corridor and prayed it hadn't been like that for too long. There was nothing I could do except help it to cool down gradually, but the outside of the box was uncomfortably hot to touch at that stage. It could have been a disaster, but in the end I got it to the labs and warned them of what had happened, and few days later my worries were over. The film had all been processed and everything, miraculously, was fine. I don't think Forsyth Hardy ever knew how close his film project on St Kilda had been to total failure. I thought it better to keep that part of the story to myself.

All the rest was a memory of the most fulfilling filming experience of my life, filled with natural images of almost unbelievable beauty and the continuous music of the birds calling, the seals singing, the wrens trilling, the often-distant sea a thousand feet below our feet, sighing and surging against the base of thousands of acres of vertical rock. And in the village we heard in our imaginations the Gaelic lilt of old men with beards and the shouts of precious children, survivors of the eight-day sickness, running in bare feet to school along the village street.