

The making of “The Isle of Rhum”

After the success of my venture on St Kilda, I was involved in making short films for Educational Films of Scotland and in BBC Schools Programmes from Glasgow, both on radio and television. The only island topics were a winter visit to Shetland to cover the Up Helly Aa festival in Lerwick, a rumbustious Viking fire festival for the locals, rather than for tourists, to make a bonfire of a Viking galley and drive away the winter blues.

In 1968, I seized an opportunity to record on film the chance visit of a Black-browed Albatross, a vagrant from the Southern hemisphere, to the Bass Rock in the Firth of Forth. There was a precedent for this rare event where a similar lost albatross settled into a colony of gannets in the Faroes and stayed there for over 30 years. I was lucky in that this bird was so engrossed in displaying to a nesting gannet – its nearest equivalent in Scotland, as our largest seabird – that it allowed me to approach near enough to get close-ups of its fanned tail and open beak as it bowed in ceremonial greeting to its new-found friend. Its wingspan was awesome and its flight graceful as well as powerful. Years later, I followed it to Shetland where it had settled with the gannets of Hermaness in Unst, and finally built itself a nest. On its way north it had spent a couple of years in Orkney where there were no gannets to find. Once it discovered a new home in Unst, it featured in a schools TV programme on BBC, but was impossible to film in close-up as it was at the base of a 300 foot cliff. The bird had wisely chosen a National Nature Reserve and so there was no question of the disturbance that would be caused by getting down there with a camera. So I did not need a hide, but I had to be roped behind a precarious tripod and weighty 600mm lens for all the shooting from a projecting rock at the very edge of the cliff almost directly above. While I was there the bird seldom left its large cup-shaped nest, but if my eye was not at the viewfinder when it decided to fly, I had missed it, as in seconds it was away out over the water. It cost me two tiring, vertiginous days of eyestrain to get just two short shots of its magnificent wingspread and its incredibly swift and effortless mode of flight. Wonderful, in spite of the strain, not least from the twitchers seeking to tick Albert (Ross!) off on their lists. At least he – probably she – was quite impervious to both their and my attentions.

My second major venture with Films of Scotland was to make a film on the Isle of Rum, the most mountainous of the Inner Hebrides and one of the wettest places in Scotland. It too was a National Nature Reserve with a resident warden, Peter Wormell, who was especially expert on insects. With his help and co-operation, I tried to convey the story of how the Nature Conservancy, as it was then called, was trying to restore Rum’s former woodlands by a massive scheme of ploughing and planting. Here too was a history of a past population of crofters, 750 of whom had left for Canada in 1828 at the time of the Clearances. Rum saw one of the more humane and successful forced evacuations of an unwanted population.

There was even a ruined village which had been inhabited by Skye crofters when they in turn were evicted and sought refuge in Rum on the shores of Loch Scresort. The landlords had total rights over land use and tenure, and even over human beings. I think the worst story I heard about Rum, probably apochryphal, was of the punishment meted out to one enemy of the laird, who was pegged down naked on open moorland and left to the mercy of the midges. I can’t imagine a more horrible torture to inflict or a more terrible fate to suffer on a sunless summer’s day. What we suffered as film-makers working in the open was quite bad enough.

In the end, the story of Rum was dominated by the Bullough family, who had bought the island from Maclean of Coll for the inflated price of £150,000 in 1886, which included the original Kinloch House. John Bullough of Accrington in Lancashire had amassed a huge fortune from the patents he had bought in America for the new ‘spindle and ring’ system, which soon had revolutionized the whole cotton-spinning industry. Then the ring-spinning frame followed, the equivalent of 75,000 spindles all working at once, powered by steam. He made his money from selling, by the end of the century, 250 tons of machinery a week, all over the world. So, by timing

his inventions to coincide with the boom in cotton world-wide, he was able to amass enough wealth to realise his ambition for the island with which he had become obsessed and now owned, including its mansion house at Kinloch.

The feature of Kinloch House which had attracted him most was its newly planted woods. So when he built Kinloch Castle as the rich man's dream of a sporting estate, it followed that the most interesting aspect of the Bulloughs' regime was their far-sighted policy of planting extensive woodlands round the castle. This was one of the earliest examples of forest regeneration and it brought with it a variety of woodland birds and insects to what had been bare moorland. Once established, red deer had access to these mature woods where they could do little damage. Out on the surrounding hillsides, new plantations were all fenced in the current experiment to extend the woodland areas. The most interesting were those where no seedling trees were planted but nature was left to fill the gap within the fence by windblow and then self-seeding. Small birds like pipits and stonechats were often seen perched on the fences and one enclosure on the road to Harris was full of flourishing birch trees.

Outside the deer fences, few trees could survive the browsing, nibbling teeth except in rocky clefts too hard for the deer to reach, as on the rocky dykes running down to the curving sands at Kilmory Bay on the north shore, looking across to the Cuillins of Skye, usually under a cap of cloud. This was one of my favourite places, where at times mature stags with their huge antlers in velvet would allow a closer approach, or a party of hinds with their spotted calves. Eider ducks were often offshore and gaudy oystercatchers with their scarlet bills fed on mussels at low tide.

I enjoyed one success with one of these of the sort that only the bird photographer can really appreciate. I stalked a small party of feeding birds prepared to allow my closer approach, as they took advantage of the exposed shellfish. With a 400mm lens and an 8x magnification, I focussed on the nearest bird till it almost filled the frame. Its striking black and white plumage pattern was ideal for really sharp focus. On a sturdy tripod I was all set for an excellent close-up of the action but just in case, I levelled the tripod accurately so that I could, if needed, follow the bird in flight. This is always difficult with such a high magnification, where every camera movement is also exaggerated eight times, which makes a smooth shot so hard to achieve. I ran the camera and the whirr of the motor was too much and it took to the wing. But I was prepared and followed the take-off and flight, keeping the bird –with some difficulty – bang in the centre of the picture and, with my left hand steadily adjusting the focus as it receded, focussed so that every feather looked sharp. It flew to the next group of rocks and, still in focus and still beautifully framed, braked with its wings widespread and landed as I slowed the lens to a halt. It was the perfect follow-shot, in perfect light and I breathed a sigh of intense satisfaction. For once it had all worked as it was meant to.

Why do I remember this small incident so clearly? A year and a half later, the BBC used the bulk of my film of Rum, in which I had naturally included this technically perfect shot, in a BBC 2 series called "Look Stranger". The Head of the BBC Natural History Unit in Bristol, Bruce Campbell, who was responsible for the whole programme, wrote me a short note the day after the transmission, which is the sort of thing wildlife photographers cherish in their wildest dreams and makes the whole hard slog of the fieldwork worth all the effort in the end:

"Dear Chris, Heartiest congratulations on your Look Stranger. I've written at once to David Attenborough to tell him what I thought of it, but will spare your further blushes except to say that I thought the long panning shot of the oystercatcher was perhaps the technically most remarkable shot of the whole film (when you think of the difficulty most people have in keeping a bird in frame at all). I take it you'll be asked (have been asked) to do more ...".

A few simple preparations for what I guessed might happen had truly paid off, with exactly the sort of result a freelance needs just once in a while.

Revenont a nos moutons Sheep had not been a success on Rum and at the turn of the 18th

century they had all gone. The crofters had kept small sheep, famous for their soft wool, and small black cattle, essential for their survival as much as their 1,000 acres of potatoes, all dug by hand in scattered lazybeds. After the clearance, Maclean introduced 8,000 cheviots but the island was soon overgrazed, and the red deer also suffered from the poor soil. So the Bulloughs replaced sheep with deer, so that only on Rum were they the key species and stalking the way of life. In one year, the family and visitors between them shot over 100 stags when the peak population of deer had been 1,600. They must have lived on venison.

When the Bulloughs' reign came to an end, Rum offered a unique opportunity for research. Now the Nature Conservancy was trying to find the best method of deer control to apply to the widespread Scottish problem of over-stocking and overpopulation. Long-term research was in full swing, and Rum was now considered to be Scotland's largest outdoor laboratory. The declared result of years of study was that one sixth of the herd must be culled annually.

Apart from the deer, the most unusual feature of Rum's dramatic peaks was the immense colony of Manx Shearwaters which nested high up on the slopes in their thousands. By day, there was little to see except patches of greener turf honeycombed with burrows. Luckily for me, Peter had a sample area with marked burrows where he could pull out sitting adults to show to visitors and tourists. Otherwise, the only evidence we had of their presence were the huge rafts of birds which gathered offshore in the evening, waiting for darkness to fly up to their breeding place on the tops. It must have been noisy, and eerie, up there at midnight. We went up one day to get close-ups of his marked shearwaters and try our luck for any shots of red deer on the hills we could get.

At lower levels, we hitched lifts in the Nature Conservancy Land Rovers when we could, but the roads were so potholed that these were real bone-shakers. It was apparently deemed cheaper to run Land Rovers to death rather than try to repair the roads when torrential rain and bouncing wheels would soon re-create any potholes that had been filled in. So a lift home was a mixed blessing. Blisters on our weary feet were replaced by bruises elsewhere, but on the whole we appreciated the helpful Conservancy staff who often got us home quicker at the end of a long day.

I say 'we' because I had recruited a young student as my assistant, and on many days I certainly couldn't have done the job and carried all the gear without him. He had come the year before on a bird-watching course I ran for junior members of the RSPB, during which he had won a competition I ran, the prize for which was the chance to join me for a week on a filming expedition in Scotland. I fear I made him work fairly hard for his prize, as Rum is a big island and we walked miles carrying heavy packs, when it wasn't pouring with rain, which it did as only Rum can demonstrate with 130 inches a year on average. On those days we worked in the Castle, where we stayed in the servants' quarters with limited but adequate facilities for cooking and sleeping.

Outside were the overgrown gardens and crumbling greenhouses, where at one time alligators and turtles were kept to amuse the visitors and for occasional treats like turtle soup. To manage all this, the Bulloughs had employed 40 outdoor staff, and 14 trained gardeners, apart from umpteen house staff to look after one family and their guests. At least we weren't summoned by the huge array of bells by which the Bulloughs called their servants to their duties in whichever room their services were required. Another astonishing feature of communication was the first internal telephone exchange in Scotland. There was also electricity, low voltage, direct current, powered by a huge generator driven by a water-powered turbine using water piped from the hills. The crystal chandelier in the ballroom was supposed to be the largest in the country. What else would one expect in a millionaire's castle designed to be superlative in every detail?

Kinloch Castle was the most bizarre film subject on a Hebridean island I had ever tackled, but rewarding in its own way. John Bullough, who master-minded most of it in the early Edwardian era, demanded the best whatever the expense. It was finished in 1901 and cost £250,000, an almost grotesque extravagance at that date, and equivalent to several millions today. His son George inherited it at 21. The building material, dark red sandstone, had been imported from Arran in the

Clyde. The design formed a hollow square the dimensions of which were exactly the size of his luxury yacht, the 'Rhouma'. Lavish wall-hangings and pictures, with portraits of the family as sportsmen, decorated all the rooms, and the house was full of treasures: huge Chinese porcelain jars, stylish furniture, lion and tiger skin rugs, four-poster beds, and in George's study a whole library of books, many of them copies of his father's political speeches and rather primitive poetry. A huge carved wooden Golden Eagle was his lectern, and in the Great Hall stood a Bechstein concert-grand piano, which I seized the opportunity to play one evening – a Producer's perk I never enjoyed anywhere else. It sounded wonderful in the spacious Hall and was surprisingly in perfect tune.

Other classic features, so typical of the period but only for the extremely rich, were the bathroom with a shower controlled by a battery of taps producing every variety of jet and spray; and the Orchestrian. This was a magnificent mechanical organ whose thick perforated rolls of classical and popular music controlled a whole orchestra of pipes, plus full percussion with triangle, cymbals and drums. My camera script went to town on close-ups of all the instruments in action. I planned to edit a complex sound sequence of 'The Honeysuckle and the Bee', an attractive music-hall ditty, so that all the movements of the instruments on the screen were synchronized with the music.

In one sense all this was fascinating, but at the same time Kinloch Castle seemed empty and sad, a faded dream, a picture of unwarranted privilege and inherited luxury. By contrast there were two genuinely sad features of the island to be filmed for the record. One was the lichen-covered tombstone in the little burial ground at Kilmory, where the laundry for the Castle was situated close to some grass-grown ruins of cottages. This headstone recorded the tragic deaths from diphtheria of a whole family of infant children, all the dates amounting to just one week. The other was the grandiose Mausoleum built for the Bullough family near the windswept north shore at Harris. This extravagant pillared structure, so out of place on an island which once supported families of impoverished crofters, was surrounded by a looped iron chain hanging between small stone pillars. Some of this had rusted away but I closed the film on a close-up of two paper thin links on either side of the rusted iron ring that still supported the chain, swinging gently in the breeze as they too neared the end of their days, worn through by time and the ravages of Atlantic weather. This was for me a wonderful example of how as a director-cameraman who was also the scriptwriter and editor, I could find subjects on site which exactly matched the mood I was trying to create, without the necessity for expensive research in advance. As a one-man Film Unit on a very low budget, this often depended on luck as much as skill. It all came down to developing an eye for the image that was symbolic or significant as well as seeking to convey the astonishing raw beauty and subtle colours of the west coast scenery.

"The Isle of Rhum" film was edited and produced over the winter of 1969/70, delayed by the rush of work caused by European Conservation Year 1970 and my aim to complete the new film for the Scottish Wildlife Trust ("A Place for Wildlife") in time to mark the occasion.

But the main cause of delay was a recommendation by my doctor that I should deal with my duodenal ulcer problem with surgery. A vacancy came up in July, so in spite of it being in my 'camera' season, I decided to take the risk and go for it. In those days, before today's wonder drugs, this meant a gastro-enterostomy, or losing about half of one's stomach to try to reduce the acidity. It was a big decision and a major operation, but thanks to the skill of a wonderful surgeon and superb after-care provided by the National Health Service, it was all a great success.

There was one great disappointment as a result of my convalescence, which had interrupted the editing of the film so that I had to delegate some of the sound-track work to another film company. Sadly, they rejected my plans for the synchronisation of the sequence on the Orchestrian in Kinloch Castle as too expensive. 'The Honeysuckle and the Bee' was played over a clever shot of the famous chandelier revolving overhead, as though viewed by a twirling dancer, effective and easy to set to music. Time defeated me and it has remained an unfulfilled dream of what could have been a classic movie sequence.

The film itself was, however, a success and had its premier at the Usher Hall in Edinburgh on 9th January 1971, followed by a network TV showing on BBC2 in the series entitled “Look Stranger”, which aimed to show parts of our natural heritage of special interest and significance. This was exactly the kind of recognition Forsyth Hardy was looking for to put Films of Scotland productions on the map, but what I enjoyed even more was the wonderful letter of appreciation I received from Morton Boyd of the Nature Conservancy, who wrote “I daresay that I should be as good a critic as most of a film on Rhum, and I came away from the Usher Hall and also from my viewing of the BBC2 programme tonight with no fault to find in either!” I just hoped that my young camera assistant basked in the reflected glory of such appreciation and felt his hard- working holiday had been worth all the effort. He certainly played a noble part in our success.