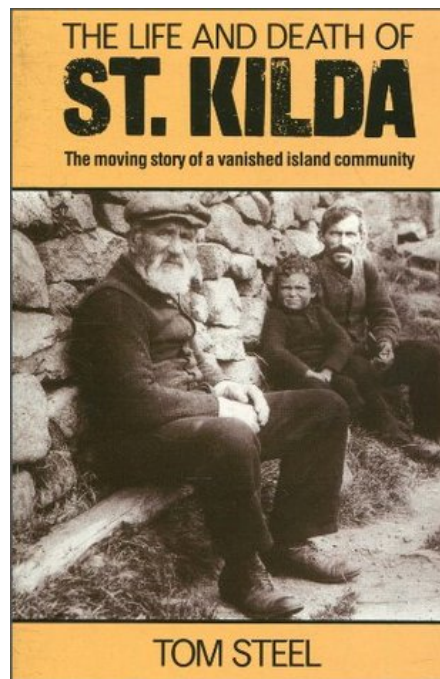




The Life and Death of St Kilda

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On 29 August 1930 the remaining 36 inhabitants of this bleak but spectacular island off Scotland's western coast took ship for the mainland. A community that had survived alone for centuries finally succumbed to the ravages that resulted from mainland contact. What their lives had been like century after century, why they left, and what happened to them afterwards is the subject of Tom Steel's fascinating book. It is the story of a way of life unlike any other, told here in words and pictures, and of how the impact of twentieth-century civilization led to its death.

The Life and Death of St Kilda Details

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Tweedledum says

I am so glad I persevered with this book. At one point I got bogged down in all the minutiae of the history and detail of the day to day life, but gradually the story took hold of me and I could not let go.

Whew St Kilda has had quite a history and undergone an extra-ordinary transformation in the second half of the C20 after the sad and even pathetic way in which the 36 last St Kildans were removed to the mainland at their own request in the midst of the depression.

Now a bird sanctuary, world heritage site, owned by the NT but rubbing shoulders with a military base the ancient history of St Kilda is emerging.

Tom Steel's detailed and at times harrowing history shows us a people out of time, manipulated by clergy in the C19 to blend an already isolated life with Puritan doctrine....no singing or dancing..... Where even the occasional Postal Service was grudgingly granted by the PO amid frequent complaints of it being too costly and where ultimately diseases unknown to the islanders...tetanus, TB, the common cold and Flu decimated the population. In 1930 the government reluctantly and grudgingly spent a mere £1000 evacuating and resettling the St Kildans on the Scottish mainland. Less than 3 decades later a military base was established on the island ,which had suddenly become strategically valuable , and for which it seemed money was no object. The wheel turns.... Ironically it is the establishment of this base that has enabled the resurrection and rediscovery of St Kilda.

<http://www.kilda.org.uk/>

Amanda says

Today is my birthday - and the 87th anniversary of the evacuation of the last remaining indigenous people from this remote island, 60 miles west of the Outer Hebrides.

I hadn't heard of this place and it's story until I recently visited the Outer Hebrides, but it is astonishing - on so many levels. That people lived on this inhospitable island for so long (over 2,000 years), that they maintained their lifestyle and culture more or less intact for so long and the sad toll that modern society had on them.

A fascinating story.

Melisabeth Fell says

Amazing insight to what seems now to be another world

Rob says

Interesting book on a fascinating subject. The story seemed to lack energy though, I wasn't drawn into the story like I was expecting to be. Of course it was written as a more academic type account of the history and events.

St. Kilda is a remote island off the coast of Scotland which was inhabited until 1930 by a small group of islanders. They subsisted on the land and the sea birds that nest there. Their way of life is damaged by the visits of mainlanders and this could have been the cause of their downfall. Also interesting is the view that the author proposes that their intense religious worshipping also helped to weaken them.

Worth a read for sure, but I'm also led to believe there are other books on the subject which could be better reads.

andrea says

Well this is different island living. The sheer numbers of birds killed and eggs taken was outrageous! Have book if you want it.

leo says

this is a book with a lot of interesting content and as good an explanation as any of why people stayed on st kilda as long as they did and why they left, but it really could have done with a better editor.

Kit says

If you have been to Scotland, have lived on an island, and, especially if you are interested in the effects of industrialization on indigenous people anywhere in the world, you will enjoy this book. This is fascinating history of the people who lived in a very remote part of the United Kingdom, certainly one that I wasn't aware of until I travelled to the Outer Hebrides. The narrative bogs down a bit near the end, but mainly it's a fascinating read that will hold your attention.

Leila says

Lots of fascinating historical facts. I enjoyed it.

Ape says

This book was an interesting little history about the way of life on the island, and how it all came to an end when the population simply wasn't big enough to support itself. I suppose this is because the outside world

was too much of a temptation to the younger islanders, so it was inevitable. At least that the outside world would have this effect, especially as they were relying on it as well to support them, send over goods etc. I suppose the only way they could have gone on was through immigration, and being more open to outsiders. It sounded like a tough life, where community was the word, not the individual. I can't say I could have lived that life. Religion also got oppressive and killed off any singing or dancing, which was taking away some of the fun of the island.

It would be an interesting place to visit one day.

Helen says

Fascinating and thorough history of St. Kilda and its inhabitants, before and up to the evacuation in 1930, and then the lives of the St. Kildans afterwards and the subsequent history of the island. A remote and truly isolated place in every sense (many island dwellers are seafarers, but apart from a little local fishing these were not): they were cut off for large parts of the year with no fresh supplies and no mail or other connection to the mainland. The island sounds very bleak, if spectacular - cold, windy, little fuel and few crops. The society also sounds fascinating: in theory it was a feudal set-up, the landowner being Macleod of Macleod on the Isle of Skye, but the tenants lived what elsewhere might seem a Utopian existence, sharing everything fairly. Crime was unknown, and the men gathered each morning as what they called their parliament, to discuss what needed to be done that day and where everyone would be. It sounds like a particularly hard life for the women, who did the heavy carrying (while the men did the sewing). The men's most daring and important work was scaling the cliffs to catch seabirds at certain times a year. The diet sounds gruesome (puffin porridge, &c.). The language was Gaelic (it would have been interesting to know a little more about this, such as how far there might have been said to be a St. Kilda dialect). Tragic in the end as the community became unsustainable and the special way of life was lost, and lots of interesting insight into the island's more recent history.

Carolyn says

I've never heard of St. Kilda before. And I also have to admit that I had to google where this island is situated exactly. Well, there is a map in the book but I'm not so familiar with the Scottish coastal line ;)

The book is about a people living on a rocky and stormy island far out in the Atlantic with no or very little contact to the outside world. They hunted sea birds, collected their eggs and grew some vegetables - and that was what they ate. Besides they had some sheep, mainly for their wool which they needed to knit or made tweed of. They had a hard but at the same time nice life: They shared everything, they had no money, no crime reported for over 400 years. But they also had to be prepared for the rough winter storms, they were mainly on their own - let it be at times with not much to eat or at times of disease. They have worked with tools or in ways that seemed ineffective and 'ancient' for those living on the mainland. They have never seen a tree or a horse or a single little bee because there were no such things on the island. But then the contact to the mainland grew stronger. This had positive and negative effects on the people: They were supported with food and other goods needed for survival but they were also treated like zoo animals. They were curiosities and they came to believe that mainland must be like paradise...so, many young people left the island to seek their fortune leaving behind too less people to do all the work needed to survive another winter. So the decision was made to evacuate St. Kilda. But how could these people be thrown into a community on the mainland very different from everything they knew? How did they get along with it? And was it the right decision to destroy rather than support something that valuable as the St. Kilda community was not in a

monetary but cultural understanding? And what happened to the abandoned island and the animals living on it thereafter? Tom Steel tells about all this very detailed and with many quotations depicting the view of the St. Kildans. Plus, there are many photos for creating a vivid report of the daily life on the island.

Everything put together it was a very interesting topic: a community that differs very much in their opinions, in their skills, knowledge, eating habits and behaviour from the people on the mainland. But at the same time I didn't like so much what the author made out of this topic. He repeated some facts over and over again and some parts were stretched out to the last while others were told quite shortly. The author arranged the chapters thematically not chronically which seems understandable to me, but I also think that it's very important then to be careful not to tell the same thing five times in the book - and the author unfortunately hasn't been too careful about that. That's why I rate "The Life and Death of St. Kilda" only two stars, though I was moved by and interested in the fate of the islanders very much.

Ian says

An interesting journey for what you could call a unique race of people who had survived on a remote Scottish Island 50 miles West of the Outer Hebrides in the Atlantic Ocean for what is thought to be nearly 1000 years. Devoid of all contact from the outside world the islanders developed their own language (a version of Gaelic) and formed a parliament. Not with bills, proclamations and policies but based on a little meeting or huddle each morning to discuss the tasks for the day. They survived from the fruits of the island of a meagre crop of oats and the salted flesh of sea birds and their eggs. Surprisingly the St. Kildan's didn't like fish or looked down on it distastefully despite being surrounded by plentiful stocks. The story tells of the highs and lows of this isolated lifestyle, the fluctuation of the population which at times was as high as 200 and after an infectious disease dropped to as low as 30 inhabitants.

'...one particular storm left all the islanders deaf for over a week by the sheer volume of the Atlantic's pounding waves and unceasing howling of the wind'

With an increasing awareness and publicity of the existence of St. Kilda and it's inhabitants in the mid 1800's comes a tragic tale with the inhabitants eventually succumbing to the mainland's rules and regulations of society. The islanders become a tourist hotspot in the early 1900's and through exposure to things like currency and commodities such as whisky and tobacco the Islanders gradually become dependent on the tourists. Eventually the Scottish Government intervene, first trying to support the islanders by funding the construction of new cottages with a window in each cottage and replacing the earthen floors with wooden boards but later arranging the evacuation of the islanders. Two camps of supporters form with the 'leave the islanders alone and offer support when asked for' and the 'this is appalling we need to evacuate the islanders and allow them to experience a higher standard of living'. Eventually neither group win as the islanders themselves volunteer to be evacuated, partly because of the low number of male inhabitants but also the lure of a better life. I can't help but wonder if it was just a case of the grass seeming better on the other side of the fence.

A tale of hardship and survival leading to the tearing apart of a 1000-year-old community. The book clearly shows how, despite the hardships and simple lifestyle, there was contentment and I guess the moral question is should one intervene on a social group and risk destroying people's lives?

A really good read that kind of puts life into perspective.

Scott says

I had never heard of St. Kilda before reading this book, but it is a truly fascinating story of a small island community in the Atlantic that for hundreds of years organized and conducted daily life in a largely non-hierarchical way. There were no elected officials, no money, virtually no technology. Decisions were made during morning assemblies by the men of the community - yes, there was still sexism. Goods were distributed based not on ability, but on need. There was no crime, and as such no jails or police.

This way of life was largely undone by the intrusion of the 'modern world' and its values - dogmatic religion, money, and materialism. In 1930, the last inhabitants of the island were evacuated to Scotland.

With such a history, it's a shame the book wasn't more well written. It was based off a thesis and clearly shows that - with much repetition, unnecessary detail, each chapter dedicated to various aspects of St. Kildan life, and large chronological gaps. It also has a clear pro-St. Kildan viewpoint, which is easily understandable. Regardless of the faults, Steel put much energy into this work and it is a worthwhile read.

Matt says

I'm about half way through this book and I'll admit I'm not the speediest of readers but this is hard going. Throughout the chapters it deals with the different aspects of life in the island. Each chapter ends with the populace leaving the island. Religion, health or exposure to the bigger world all are looked at so far. But the Wee Frees imposed such a dour god fearing life sucking, break your fiddles over your knee, pessimism that you can't blame the poor people. My folks come from the Outer Hebrides so I know a bit about this. Life was hard enough up there but this was unquestionably a further burden they could do without. Sadly didn't realise it due to their isolation. I'll keep going though...

Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says

Imagine you were born there. You're supposed to be a British subject but you don't know English, don't pay taxes, you don't know what money is and are not touched by any governmental regulation. You speak Gaelic, but cannot write. You do not know what is happening anywhere else in the world. There's no TV or radio or books or magazines anywhere around. Much later did your place have a postal service but even then it took months for mails to travel in and out of the islands, from origin to destination.

It is not known how these group of rock islands in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, about 100 miles off the Scottish mainland, got their name. There's no "St. Kilda" in the list of Catholic saints. In fact the locals like you prefer to call the place "Hirta" yet the origin of this name is also vague. You do not know it, but subsequent archeological studies indicate that remote as these islands are, your ancestors had inhabited the same for about two thousand years before you were born.

The weather is fickle and unforgiving. It'll be all sunshine in the morning then, just for a few more hours, it'll be as stormy as hell, with wind so strong that some of your sheep will be swept away to the sea and drown. You do not know what trees are, you haven't seen one, not even in pictures. No trees grow in your islands of

towering rocks which have been the world to you all your life.

You have sheep, dogs and a few cows. You are surrounded by the ocean but your main staple food is not fish. The waters are often too violent for fishing. The few boats that your community has are too precious to be put at risk for fishing. The wood you'll need to repair them, or build new ones, can only come from shipwrecks or imported from the mainland. In any case, you find fish too bland for your taste. You crave for oil. You get that oil from the food source which come to the islands seasonally and which you harvest like Thais harvest rice--birds. You and your community of around 180 men, women and children are perhaps the only bird-eating community the world has ever had.

On 29 August 1930, however, your community ceased to exist. By that time only 36 of you remained. The British government had persuaded all of you to leave, your sheep and cows sold to partly pay for the cost of the evacuation. All your work/pet dogs were put to sleep. It was the consensus that you only have two choices: leave and survive or remain and perish from hunger, sickness and for lack of enough able-bodied men to continue working on the land, harvest the birds, mend your boats and do other chores only men can do. Many of you had left willingly, some had wanted to remain.

What a story.

(this book needs better organization and editing. Several times the author would repeat himself. But the story of this unique community, a well-documented and photographed one, is something no one can possibly find boring)

Chase Parnell says

Kind of a slow read but it finished strong. Definitely have the Scottish Isles bug.

Karen says

Fascinating book, fascinating people. Informative and haunting.

Cheryl says

Interesting story about these island people of Scotland. However, it's not written by a "writer" and lacked a great deal of editing. If you skim, and ignore the "writing in circles", you can still learn a lot about their life, evacuation, and subsequent new life on the mainland.

•Karen• says

Written on the inside cover: Skye, 1977.

Peter says

An excellent read about the end of a community whose survival had become untenable. The fate of the St. Kildans was both sad but inevitable. This is an excellent account of how difficult life had become on the islands and the need for the community to be evacuated.
