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ANNUAL CONFERENCE ISLAY
27th March – 1st April 1978

ADAM McNAUGHTON

People join the Scottish Society for Northern Studies for a variety of reasons: members include archaeologists, historians, linguists and general nordophiles. If one permutates this with the multiplicity of reasons for spending an Easter vacation at a conference on Islay, one begins to realise the problem facing our organisers: 36 individuals with different backgrounds, different interests, different expectations. It is to the credit of John Baldwin and Ian Fraser that they produced a programme that satisfied all those expectations, though it may not have had the coherence of previous conferences.

This lack of continuity was largely due to the paucity of Northern remains on Islay. We heard references to a doubtful longhouse site, to the burial site of Ballinaby, and to scattered small finds. No theories were laid before us to explain this but since the place-name evidence suggests more extensive settlement,

we may perhaps assume that many of the Norse sites have remained in continuous occupation as prime farming sites to this day.

Lacking the theme, then, of "The Norse Presence on Islay", the conference became more diverse in temporal and cultural content, and from the point of view of the non-specialist, first-time visitor to the Island, this was a positive gain.

The conference opened with a well-illustrated archaeological survey of Islay delivered by Ian Fisher in which the wealth of early Christian sites and the comparative rarity of Norse remains became immediately apparent. On the following morning, Mr. Gordon Booth gave a resident's view of the island's riches, including those mentioned by Mr. Fisher, but ranging over later industrial remains and the local flora and fauna, with particular reference to the bird-life of the Island.

In the first formal paper of the week, John Bannerman drew on Irish, Scots and Scandinavian sources to demonstrate convincingly the identity of the terms, "Ri Innse Gall" and "Dominus Insularum". And the full range of the conference was appreciated when we heard that fount of Islay tales, Mrs. Elizabeth Earl, expatiate upon the local fairy lore, including stories of magical cures and toothache stones, one of which we were to see for ourselves later in the week.

On Wednesday, after a full day excursion, Ian Fraser delivered a paper on "The Scandinavian Element in Islay Place-names". He dealt with both topographical and settlement names, paying particular attention to the latter since it is from variation there that we will learn about the Norse occupation in the Western Isles. The topographical names in Islay differ from the other islands, of course, as the physical features differ.

On the Thursday Ted Cowan gave a graphic account of the 16th Century feuding and scheming which resulted in the control of Islay passing from the Macdonalds of Dunyveg to the Campbells. He placed much of the blame on the Macdonalds themselves — a proposition which, perhaps surprisingly, provoked no reaction from the local people in the audience.

Two more enthusiasts complete the list of speakers: from Jura came the Reverend Peter Youngson, patently delighted at the picture of island life in the 17th Century which he got from Presbytery records; from among the conference members came Dr. Ove Arbo Hoeg, who gave a delightful talk on "Practical Uses of the Withy", well illustrated with some fine examples of withy bindings for rowlocks and hobbles.

Complementing the lectures, as usual, we had a full and varied series of excursions, when the weather, which at other times had threatened to disrupt the conference by delaying one speaker and laying another low remained comparatively fair. We visited several of the chapel sites to which Ian Fisher had introduced us, including the splendidly situated chapel at Kilchiaran, where we were reminded that for centuries it had been easier to travel to church by sea than by land. The carved stones and crosses of Islay are justly renowned, and each excursion added to our knowledge of these, with Kildalton, fittingly, left to the last.

Fortifications were also among our objectives, from the mysterious artificial hill of Dun Ghuaidhre to the homes and castles which the Macdonalds had defended against Macleans and Campbells. Perhaps the most enduring memory of the conference will be of listening to Ian Fisher tell, at length, of the last stand of Macdonald of Dunyveg, while the conference members huddled under the walls of that fortress, trying to escape the salt, tree-blasting wind.

More recent buildings included the mill at Redhouse, now sadly no longer in production but hopefully to be preserved in situ; the round Kirk at Bowmore and that town's distillery. A visit to the recently opened and very promising museum at Port Charlotte completed the picture of Islay folk-life.

I have said that the lecture-programme had less cohesion than in previous years, but simply being in the place spoken about gives point to the lectures. It also changes one's attitude to what is said. We were told at least twice how widely cultivated Islay was. We were told even more often how benevolent the clearances were on Islay, resettlement rather than eviction, whether the people

emigrated or moved to island's planned towns. In Edinburgh it would have been easy to accept these statements. However, each time we travelled the Bowmore road across the flat, desolate moorland and saw the many hares hopping "pa letten fod over lyngen", I thought of Jutland before the 19th Century cultivation of the heath. And when you stand on a deserted croft, it is easier to see with the eyes of John Livingstone:

Though the rays of the sun may ration Heaven's warmth to
meadows' bloom,
Though the sheilings have their cattle, with folds full of
lowing calves,
Islay has lost her people; the sheep have emptied homes.

In his report on last year's conference, Ian Keiller drew attention to a division between the academics and the general members of conference, which he noted particularly at the final ceilidh. No such division was evident this year. Our numbers swollen by the presence of some Islay friends, we sang and danced (to the piano of Dr. Margaret Storrie) late into the night. And academic elbows and vocal shords were exercised as much as others. Perhaps we benefited from a practice run on an earlier evening when we enjoyed the hospitality of Dr. Storrie at her home in Port Ellen.

The conference however, had already been declared successful at the informal general discussion, though members, asked for suggestions for next year, perhaps with memories of Port Ellen Bay, tended to favour a mainland site. Katanes? Jorvik? Gardarik? Here we come!

A PROBLEMATIC 17th CENTURY DUELLING PRACTICE IN SCOTLAND

Ian A. Morrison

At the Islay conference of the Society, the Reverend Peter Youngson of Jura introduced the work that he is doing on the Presbyterian Records of Kintyre, and drew attention to a