

# IN THE LEE OF ROCKALL

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"We are, you see, in the lee of Rockall." This splendid explanation for the mildness of winters in the Outer Hebrides was recounted to me by Alec Small of the Scottish Mountaineering Club. I claim that it is also applicable to the origin of the name 'St Kilda'.

In the first description of the island group by a visitor, '*A Voyage to St Kilda*' (1697), Martin Martin says:— "This isle is by the inhabitants called Hirt, and likewise by all the Western Islanders; — — — Sir John Narbrough, and all seamen call it St Kilda;" Why should a small and remote island have two different names?

'Hirta' is much the older name. The late Dr. A.B. Taylor ('The Name "St Kilda"', in '*Scottish Studies*', Vol 13 (1969) Pt 2) found a reference to '*Hirtir*' in an Icelandic saga dated 1202. He suggested that the word meant 'Stags' (from the Old Norse '*hjörtr*'), referring to the appearance of the group as seen from a heaving Viking ship. Not having charts, the Vikings gave descriptive names to prominent seamarks, for example the hill Hallival ('Table Fell') and Askival ('Rough Fell') on the Island of Rhum. The description of St Kilda as 'Stags' is indeed apt, as anyone who has visited it will agree. Taylor's suggestion seems the most likely, but two other possibilities should be mentioned.

In the April 1989 issue of the '*St Kilda Mail*' (Journal of the National Trust for Scotland's St Kilda Club) Dr Jeffrey Stone, of Aberdeen University, drew attention to a description of St Kilda in the introduction to the '*History of Scotland*' written in Latin by Hector Boece (1526), first Principal of Aberdeen University. This was one of the first books printed in Scotland. John Bellenden published a version in Scots in 1536, and there is an inferior English one (last reprinted in 1807) by the Elizabethan hack, Raphael Hollinshead, from which Shakespeare hewed '*Macbeth*', first performed before King James VI and I in the Globe Theatre in 1606. Boece's original Latin has never been reprinted, but the Aberdeen University Librarian very kindly allowed me to see their best copy of the original.

In his account of St Kilda Boece states that "The name of this island is derived from the sheep we call *Hierth* in the old language. For the island carries sheep which are bigger in size than the largest of he-goats, with horns equal in thickness to those of oxen, but somewhat greater in length. Furthermore, their tails hang right down to the ground." Boece goes on "Adjacent to it lies another, uninhabitable, island

[Soay]. On it are animals hardly distinguishable from sheep, but otherwise wild and uncatchable except by encircling them with nets; they bear fleeces intermediate between those of sheep and goats." [My translations].

In *'Island on the Edge of the World'* (Canongate Publishing, Edinburgh, 1972) Charles Maclean says "Being at an intermediate stage of domestication the Soay sheep has acquired a fleece which obscures but does not completely replace its original coat of hair." Boece's informant clearly knew what he was talking about.

In the first comprehensive history of Scotland, c. 1385, John of Fordun had also given a geographical introduction to his narrative. He lists 'Hirth' among the Western Isles of Scotland, and goes on to say "Near it is an island —, where wild sheep are said to exist, which can only be caught by hunters." (F.J.H. Skene's translation). (Fordun's *'Scotichronicon'* was published in the series 'Historians of Scotland' (Vol. 1, Latin, 1871, and Vol. 4, English, 1872).

Another Latin History of Scotland, conceived as a revision, correction and continuation of Boece was published in 1578 by John Leslie, Bishop of Rosse, at Rome, where he lived in exile after the Reformation. It was translated into Scots by Father James Dalrymple of the Scots Cloister, Regensburg, in 1597, and this version was edited for the Scottish Texts Society by Father E.G. Cody, OSB, of Fort Augustus, and published in 1888. The description of St Kilda follows Boece closely, mentioning both the quality of the St Kilda sheep, and the wild sheep on the adjacent island of Soay. In a footnote Fr Cody comments "That the island should be called from the sheep is not at all unlikely. The greater number of islands near have Norse names, and generally express some peculiarity of the spot. Hirtha would mean Hirth island, and Hirth or Hirt means a *horned* animal, a very apt name for St Kilda sheep. They are considered by experts to be a Norwegian breed," The Faroes are named for their sheep, why not St Kilda.?

There is yet another possibility, from the contrast between the 'herded' sheep of St Kilda, and the wild sheep of Soay. The parallel here is with the Herdwick breed of the Lake District, also an area of Viking settlement. That name derives from the Old Norse *'Hjörd'*, a 'flock' or 'herd', and the *'wic'* means the district, of the lands of the Abbey of Barrow in Furness, in which the sheep owned by the Abbey were managed by tenants under a system of tenure similar to that known in Scotland as 'bound' sheep stocks. St Kilda might then be the island of herded sheep.

The distinction between wild and tame sheep is also known from the Faroes. Duke Hakon's Sheep Letter, dated 1298, regulating sheep husbandry in the Northern Isles, deals, among other matters, with the taming (*kyrring*) of sheep, and sets penalties for letting wild (*styggr*) sheep get among tame (*kyrr*) ones. I am indebted to Mr William Thomson, of Kirkwall, for drawing this to my attention. According to Kenneth Williamson (*'A Mosaic of Islands'*, 1963), wild (ie feral) sheep of a brown type like

the St Kildan Soays survived in the Faroes until fairly recent times. The first mention of them goes back of course to Dicuil.

Taylor derived the name 'St Kilda' from a hypothetical Norse name "*Schilder*", meaning 'shield', which he suggested had originally been borne by another island closer to the Long Island, and transferred in error to Hirta by an early Dutch cartographer, since St Kilda itself could hardly be described as shield-shaped. On a visit to the Outer Hebrides Taylor looked for a suitably shaped island, but found none that did not already have another perfectly good Norse-derived name. He did not attempt to explain why "all seamen" should have adopted an erroneous name, nor did he consider the circumstances in which seamen could have acquired a name of their own for the group.

There is no obvious reason why Martin should have cited Sir John Narbrough. From his entry in the Dictionary of National Biography it appears that he was born in Norfolk in 1640, joined the Royal Navy, and in 1674 was Admiral commanding-in-chief of a squadron sent against the corsairs of Tripoli, who had been raiding up to the south coast of England. He was later given command of a small squadron sent to the West Indies, and died there of a fever in 1688. Taylor searched his published writings, but found no reference to St Kilda. Narbrough does not appear to have served in the north-eastern Atlantic. He may have heard about the island from West Country seamen familiar with the fishing grounds of the north-east Atlantic, whom he met either on his expedition against the corsairs, or when he was fitting out his squadron for the West Indies.

The Board of Trustees and Commissioners for Improving Fisheries and Manufactures was a sort of 18th century Scottish Development Agency. It was appointed under an Act of 1727 by George I to supervise the spending of the interest on the "Equivalent", which was the compensation awarded to Scotland under the Treaty of Union, 1707, for assuming a share of England's National Debt. Among other measures, the Trustees offered "praemiums" to encourage the catching and curing of herrings for export. Their object is doing so was to foster an export trade in cured herring, not only for the European market, in competition with the Dutch, who at the time were fishing for herring in Scottish waters in great numbers, but also with a view to supplying a cheap and nutritious food for the slaves on the sugar plantations in the West Indies. Any potential new fishery was of interest to them. Their papers are held by the Scottish Record Office, Edinburgh, and the following extracts are quoted by kind permission of the Keeper.

The Trustees' annual report at Christmas 1742 contains the following: "It is in this hope That your Trustees have thought fit, not to discourage a Proposition [by a certain John Stevenson, a tobacco importer, of Glasgow] that came to their hands too late to be examined and encouraged in this year. The proposition was to fish for Cod on a very large Bank that is said to lye some leagues to the Westward of St Kilda,

and to stretch from thence southward to Killibegs on the Coast of Ireland. The undertaker says That its plentifully stockt with excellent Cod. He asserts that most Vessels that come to the Clyde that way from the West Indies Fish upon it with success, and your Trustees have been informed That to the westward of the Scots Islands a Bank was famous for Cod and frequented by different Nations before the Newfoundland Fishing was pursued. As this Overture was made so late all your Trustees could do was to give the necessary Orders for Enquiring into the Truth of the Facts alledged, to the end that if they are sufficiently confirmed they may be able against next Christmas to lay before your Majesty a Proposition encouraging the Experiment."

The outer edge of the Continental Shelf would just about fit the description "some leagues to the westward of St Kilda -- to Killibegs on the Coast of Ireland", but if 'Bank' is to be taken literally, the only possibility is Rockall Bank. This forms a broad oval, at the 200 fathom mark about 280 miles from north to south, and much of it is less than 100 fathoms deep. Its southern end lies about 350 miles west of Killibegs. It is about 180 miles west of St Kilda, which would be the nearest landfall for anyone working the outer Shelf or Rockall Bank.

The next year, 1743, the Trustees reported as follows: "-- your Trustees have since upon Enquiry been informed. That many of the Ships that come from America to the Clyde have taken notice of that Bank, and found it well stored with Cod, and as the Undertaker -- is willing to fit out a vessell of 50 Tons -- they humbly pray That your Majesty may be graciously pleased to authorize them to give him a praemium after the rate of 30sh the Tun on that Tonage of his Vessell which will amount to £75 per annum for this and the two succeeding years upon his fitting up the Vessell as he proposes, and fishing on the said Bank for four months in each of these Years." Unfortunately the venture fell through in 1744 because of the outbreak of war between Britain and France and the Trustees duly reported to His Majesty that they had "thereby saved £75"!

The Trustees reported further unsuccessful attempts to develop this fishery in the 1760s. These are also mentioned in *'Report on the Hebrides'*, 1764 & 1771, by the Rev Dr John Walker, Professor of Natural History in the University of Edinburgh (republished in 1980 by John Donald, Edinburgh). Walker went on to say: "From the Accounts given by Sir William Monson in his Naval Tracts, it has been supposed that there are Cod Banks of great Extent lying to the westward of the Long Island, from the Extremity of the Lewes, to Tilly Head in Ireland, which is a Distance of above 100 Leagues, and especially about St Kilda and the little solitary Island called Rocca, which lies about 50 Leagues to the westward of Barra." (my Italics).

Unfortunately the italicised reference to Rockall and St Kilda must have been added by Walker, Monson's actual words being "to the island of Rona, betwixt fifteen and sixteen leagues from Lewis, and whence there runs a bank of 100 miles in length and

as far as Teelin Head in Ireland, which bank affords the best quantity of cod and ling in any part of the seas, and this one hundred and odd years not used.

All the same it was not an unreasonable addition for Walker to make, and “one hundred and odd years” from the reign of Charles I takes us to the beginning of the 16th century, very close to the date of Cabot’s discovery of Newfoundland in 1497.

According to the Dictionary of National Biography Sir William Monson was born in Lincolnshire in 1569 and died in 1643. He served as a volunteer against the Spanish Armada, became a career naval officer, and in due course rose to the rank of Admiral. His last active command was ‘Admiral of the Narrow Seas’, in which capacity he was instructed to root out pirates from the north and west coasts of Britain and Ireland. From havens in those parts, the pirates, among other nefarious activities, had been pillaging fishing vessels, including those returning from Newfoundland. In 1614 Monson led two King’s ships round the north of Scotland, to Orkney and Shetland, over to Lewis, and across to Broad Haven in Ireland. There in an adventure worthy of the ‘*Boys’ Own Paper*’, he and his crews passed themselves off as pirates in order to make friends with the locals, who were hand in glove with the pirates, then throwing off their disguises, frightened them into betraying a shipload of genuine pirates, whom Monson promptly caught and hanged! So he had ample opportunity to acquire knowledge of the area in which we are interested.

In 1615 Monson was removed from his command under suspicion of having been implicated in a murder. Though eventually cleared he was not restored to the active list, and spent the rest of his life writing ‘Tracts’, in which he describes the actions in which he had taken part, and expounds his views on naval and commercial maritime policy. He had a particular bee in his bonnet about the menace of the Dutch, who were the dominant mercantile and fishing nation at that time. His Tracts are a major source of information about the Navy of his day, and a definitive edition of them was published in 1902 by the Navy Records Society. They include a Tract addressed to Charles I about 1624 on the development of the fisheries off the north and west coasts of Scotland, and the above quotation comes from this. A version of Monson’s Tracts was included in a “Collection of Voyages”, published in 1704 by Awnsham and John Churchill, with a second edition in 1732. One or other of these editions must surely be the source of Walker’s and Stevenson’s information on the earlier fishery.

Taylor searched Scottish sources in vain for pre-Martin reference to St Kilda by that name. Monro, in 1549, knows it only as ‘Hirta’. Alexander Lindsay, chief navigator to James V on his circumnavigation of Scotland in 1540, took the royal flotilla through the Minches, and his ‘*Rutter*’ (medieval equivalent of a modern Admiralty “Pilot”), the best edition of which was published posthumously from Taylor’s notes by the National Maritime Museum in 1980, makes no mention of the group by either name. From the Scottish point of view the west coast of the Long Island was the back of beyond.

Scotland had had an active inshore fishery from the 12th century, but unlike England no long tradition of deep sea fishing. There were commercial herring fisheries in the Firth of Forth from at least the 12th century, and in Loch Fyne and the Moray Firth from the 15th (see '*Scottish Society in the Fifteenth Century*', ed. Jennifer M. Brown, 1977, p. 75). It must be remembered, however, that until the 13th century, the Western Isles were a Norse possession, and did not begin to be integrated with the rest of the country until the 17th and 18th centuries.

English vessels had fished and traded in fish as far as Iceland from at least the 14th century. There are references, not always favourable, to their activities in the Annals of Iceland early in the 15th century. An Act of the English Parliament of 1548 (2 & 3 Edw VI, c.6) relates to "such merchaunts and fysshermen as have used and practysed the adventures and journes into Iselande Newfoundelande Irelande and other places comodious for fysshinge, and the getting of fysshe in and upon the Seas or otherwise by waye of marchauntes in those parts." The existence of the Rockall Bank may have been kept secret to avoid competition.

At first most of the vessels concerned in the Iceland fishery came from English East Coast ports. To reach Iceland, they went north via Shetland and the Faroes. At a later stage West Country boats took part, and by the second quarter of the 15th century Bristol became the chief port trading with Iceland. In '*An Atlas of Irish History*', 2nd edition (1981), Ruth Dudley Edwards gives Galway as a port of call for Bristol ships trading to Iceland in the 15th century. There was a big herring fishery in Tudor times on the southern and western Irish coasts. Edwards shows Killibegs and the Aran Islands as main centres on the west coast. Killibegs is an excellent sheltered haven on the north side of Donegal Bay. The fact that it has poor land communications would not have mattered to the Bristol men, and would if anything have been an advantage to fishermen of continental nations, which might be at war with England. Teelin is just to the west of it, under Slieve League, while Broad Haven, scene of Monson's adventure, lies on the south side of Donegal Bay. From there, the Bristolians were well on the way to Iceland – or Rockall!

Iceland is an easy landfall, with mountains up to over 2,000 metres (nearly 7,000 feet) high, including Hekla and other active volcanoes. Even without smoke plumes, they would be above the horizon over 100 miles away, perhaps farther taking refraction into account. I am told that in suitable meteorological condition, commonest in spring and autumn, stationary cloud "bonnets" form high above the Icelandic volcanoes, and these clouds would be visible from even greater distances. The magnetic compass was available from the 13th or 14th centuries, so, from the north-west of Ireland, the ships could have sailed direct, the course being roughly north-northwest, and the distance approximately 700 miles. This would take them not far from Rockall, which appears on the charts from the 16th century. Square-rigged sailing ships were very dependent on favourable winds. They probably wandered widely, and would soon have discovered Rockall and its Bank. (In

'*Captain Courageous*', 1897, about the Newfoundland cod fishery in the 19th century, Rudyard Kipling has a telling phrase about "the exceedingly casual way some craft loafed about the broad Atlantic". It would have been much the same in earlier times).

For various reasons, including antagonism from the Hanse, English ships effectively ceased from going to Iceland by the third quarter of the 15th century, and the Bristol merchants began to look for alternative grounds. The main need was for suitable islands on which shore stations could be established for drying the fish, to avoid the unpleasant labour of cleaning the fish on shipboard, and to save expensive salt. From Bristol two expeditions were fitted out, in 1480 and 1481, to look for the island of Hy Brasil, believed to lie off the south-west corner of Ireland. The stores put aboard included forty bushels of salt. It is not recorded what success they had then, but by 1497 Cabot, in a vessel from Bristol, had found Newfoundland, and the Newfoundland cod fishery was begun. (See, eg '*England and the Discovery of America*' (1974) by D.B. Quinn, and Patrick MacGrath's article 'Bristol and America, 1480-1631' in '*The Westward Enterprise*' (1978), edd. K.R. Adrews, N.P. Canny, and P.E. Hair).

Fishing between the north west of Ireland and the Outer Hebrides is attested in the 16th century. In her introduction to '*Documents Illustrating the Overseas Trade of Bristol in the 16th Century*' (Bristol Record Society, 1979), the editor, Dr Jean Vanes, states that Bristol had no regular trade with Scotland, regarding the Scots as enemies, for Scottish pirates "lurked — — — off the Scottish islands to seize English ships fishing off the Hebrides, the Orkneys or Northern Ireland". In document No. 111 she reproduces a petition to the Lord High Admiral by a widow of a Bristol merchant, who had joined the others in the chartering and fitting out of a vessel, the *Katherine*, of Bristol, "afysshying to the oute Iles of Scotland", for recovery of her late husband's share in the venture.

Icelandic exports took the form of 'stockfish', ie sun and wind dried cod, which was a major item of international trade, and many of the English vessels who went to Iceland simply traded for locally caught fish. Any fish caught on the Continental Shelf or the Rockall Bank would, however, have had to be cured 'wet', ie split, salted, and packed into barrels on board. The Bristol port books do record landings of both types, but their origin is given simply as "from Ireland".

After Cabot's discovery of Newfoundland the Spaniards and Portuguese were the first to exploit the Newfoundland fisheries. The French followed soon after. The Basques had been whaling in the Bay of Biscay since the 10th century, extending their enterprise into the north Atlantic as stocks became depleted, and they had stations in Newfoundland and Labrador through the 16th century. Apart from Monson's pirates, the coasts of England and Ireland became more hazardous to the continentals because of war about the time of the Reformation. A consequence of

losing many of their ships, requisitioned for the Spanish Armada in 1588, was the end of Basque transatlantic whaling at that time. A BBC TV '*Chronicle*' programme, on 26 July, 1989, drew information about Basque activity in Labrador from records held in a monastery in the North Spanish town of San Juan. I did not find any 15th or 16th century reference to Rockall or 'St Kilda' in the archives I examined in Bristol. The Spanish archives may, however, deal with cod-fishing as well as whaling, and might be worth looking at, by someone who knew Spanish.

The English were slow to take advantage of the bonanza offered by Newfoundland, but when they did they eventually drove the others off, and this led the French to discover the Grand Bank itself.

Anthony Parkhurst, who visited Newfoundland in 1585, gave the elder Hakluyt an account, both of the numbers of vessels of the various nations fishing off Newfoundland at that time, and of the curing techniques they employed. A hundred Spaniards and Basques, as well as about fifty Portuguese, were engaged in 'wet' curing cod, which they dried on return home. The French too made 'wet' fish, but sold it in that state. By the end of the 16th century, when the English gained control of Newfoundland, they mostly fished inshore and cured the fish on land. (See '*The British Fishery at Newfoundland – 1634-1764*' by R.G. Lounsbury, 1934).

From the Middle Ages fishing was big business, not only for protein, but also because the Church forbade Christians to eat butcher meat on Fridays. As well as the English, Portuguese, Spaniards, Basque, and French fishermen, fishing more adventurously off their shores, developed fishing craft capable of working in the open Atlantic and ultimately of crossing it, techniques for catching cod in deep water, and the 'wet cure' process which they went on to use in Newfoundland waters. They were able to fish beyond the western and northern coasts of Ireland, where some of them claimed to have found the island of Hy Brasil. They could well have found and fished the Rockall bank. No doubt some of the continental fishermen went back there following the English take-over of Newfoundland. I suggest therefore that it is from English and continental fishermen that the chartmakers, from the middle of the 16th century, learned about Rockall and 'St Kilda', by that name.

Martin mentions "a Dutch sea map" by Peter Goas, published in 1663, showing both St Kilda and Rockall, and 'containing the soundings of some places near St Kilda'. This phrase did not strike me as odd when I first read it – although it should have done, considering that St Kilda was visited about once a year by small boat from Harris – but when I looked at the Chart by Johannes van Keulen, published in 1712, it appeared to my astonishment that the west coast of the Long Island was much less accurately depicted than St Kilda. Taylor included in his paper reproductions of two early charts, one by Waghenhaer, dated 1592, and another by Blaeu, dated 1608, both of which give reasonably accurate outlines of St Kilda, together with some soundings, and also share the peculiarity of much less accurate depictions of the Long



Island. (The first accurate survey of the Outer Hebrides was carried out by Murdoch Mackenzie in 1750).

It is clear that to the early Dutch cartographers that, and not St Kilda, was the back of beyond! The simplest explanation of this is that the Dutchman's informants came from the west. The west coast of the Long Island would not have been an attractive place to masters of sailing ships. There are few havens, and the only light was the monks' – pre-Reformation – beacon on Shillay of the Monachs, which in dirty weather would probably not have been visible until one was already too close to a lee shore. The best fishing anyway would have been well out, near the edge of the continental shelf, where nutrient-rich water wells up from the ocean depths.

Rockall first appears on a Portuguese chart of c.1550 in the National Library of France. "just to the north of Ireland, a fair sized island, against which there is a name apparently similar to 'Rochol', but the ink was unfortunately smeared before it was dry." (Miller Christy, one of the earliest historians of Rockall, quoted by James Fisher, *'Rockall'*, 1956, p. 15). The Portuguese were secretive to the point of paranoia about their navigational discoveries, so as to retain the utmost commercial advantage. Is it a coincidence that the existence of Rockall was made known by them, just at the time its importance had diminished through the discovery of Newfoundland and its much richer fisheries, to which the Portuguese had just turned their attention?

In the Map Room of the National Library of Scotland I was shown two magnificent books, which would have delighted Taylor, had he lived to see them:– *'Early Sea Charts'* by Robert Putnam, New York (1983), and *'Kortasaga Islands, frá Öndverdu til Loka 16 aldar'*, by Harald Sigursson, Reykjavik (1971). Both are in large format and contain many reproductions in colour of old charts. I noted ten 16th and 17th century charts of the north-eastern Atlantic. Five of them (1544, 1554, 1555, 1569, and 1571) had 'Hirta', or variants thereof, and none of these marked Rockall. Two, surprisingly, had Rockall alone – 'Rockol' (1583) and 'Rocol' (1650) though the latter also depicted St Kilda without naming it. Three (1591, 1666, and 1677) had both Rockall and St Kilda, variously spelled. There seem to be two series, a 'Hirta' one, derived from Scottish sources, and a 'Rockall/St Kilda' one derived, as I have argued above, from fishery sources. Since they were the major chart-users, their nomenclature prevailed.

In *'A Voyage to St Kilda'* (1698), Martin makes three references to visiting vessels. I suggest that they could all have referred to fishermen working on the Continental Shelf or the Rockall Bank.

First was "a cock-boat some two years ago from a ship for water, being favoured by a perfect calm." The crew spotted lots of sea-bird eggs on the rocks, and collected some without leave of the islanders. One of them, the better to carry his spoil, took

off his breeches to stow them in. The offended St Kildans dropped stones on them from the clifftop, whereupon the visitors decamped, leaving both eggs and breeches, which the islanders immediately confiscated. The visitors could well have been fishermen, run short of drinking water, come to draw from the famous Tobar-Childa well, and happy at a change from hard tack. The episode does show some "needle" between islanders and visitors, in spite of the St Kildans' reputation for generous hospitality.

This hospitality was well displayed in the next episode, that of a company of "French and Spaniards who lost their ship at Rokol in the year 1686", and came to St Kilda in their pinnace. The unwittingly offended the islanders by working on their boat on the Sabbath. By reference to a chart and by signs they explained that their ship had been wrecked on Rockall, which they called by that name; whereupon the St Kildans told them that their name for it was "Rokabarra".

At this stage I had another stroke of luck. I was in Aberdeen University Library, looking up fisheries references, when my eye was caught by '*The Hebridean Connection*' (1984) edited by Prof Donald A. Fergusson, of Nova Scotia. This is a collection of traditional lore handed down orally in Uist, and only written down in this century. Quoted in it is an old song, purporting to be the instructions given by King Olaf of Norway (a contemporary of William the Conqueror) to sea-constables appointed by him and stationed on Haiskeir Island, then said to have been rather larger than it is now, in the following terms, quoted with Prof Fergusson's permission:—

"You shall watch over *Coire Brug*, going over to Orkney; you shall watch over *Coire Leathann* (the Wide Deep), going from Orkney to Faroe; you shall watch over *Coire an Aog* (the Deep of Discomfort or Death) between Faroe and the Hebrides; you shall sail round *Boreray* (St Kilda); you shall make the circuit of *Rocabarraidh*, source of sea-ware."

A common feature of all the Scandinavian lands was the *leidung*, or ship muster, whereby the king raised his naval forces. On land there were annual wapentakes to test the equipment and state of training of the levies, and it seems reasonable to suppose that the muster ships were also exercised. King Olaf's "instructions" may therefore be a far-off, and no doubt exaggerated, recollection of these.

If this is authentic, then Rockall must have been known to the Vikings. The existence of two names for the rock makes this in any case quite possible, for it would be reasonable to regard 'Rocabarra', like so many other Hebridean names, as derived from Norse. Rockall itself would then be the fishermen's name, either from Irish, assuming a sea-wandering monk had found it in the first place, or perhaps so-named by Iberian fishermen. Consideration of possible derivations for these names is, however, outside the scope of this paper.

*'From the Farthest Hebrides'* (1978), a collection of Hebridean songs, also by Fergusson, contains a lament for a fishing boat, the *Canarag* of Heisgeir (the Monachs), lost with all hands at the Rockall fishing in the 1760s. So while the Glasgow merchants were trying to develop a new fishery there, the locals were apparently going there as a matter of course. In those days too, it appears that St Kilda and Heisgeir were in regular touch, and swopped bulls annually, as a measure against inbreeding in their cattle stocks.

Martin's third reference is to a visit by "Lowlanders --- who were not Christians"! Since the St Kildans spoke only Gaelic, they would have said "Sasunnaich", and I suggest that Martin should have translated this as "Englishmen", who were likely to have had a more relaxed attitude to Sabbath observance than Scottish Lowlanders, even supposing any such were in those waters at that time. The visitors were clearly used to calling at Irish ports, since one of them could speak "bad Irish" (a term which covers both Scots and Irish Gaelic). They stole some cows from the islanders, offering in exchange "a few Irish copper pieces" (A similar incident is recorded in the Annals of Iceland in 1413), and, final insult, attempted to seduce the highly respectable island women, offering them "a piece of broad money, than which there could be nothing less charming in a place where the inhabitants cannot distinguish a guinea from a sixpence". Obviously the ship's company were used to visiting a port at which "sailors' comforts" were obtainable at a price! That would no doubt have been true of pirates' nests on the west coast of Ireland, and Monson's account implies as much.

Finally, in his *'Description of the Western Islands of Scotland'* (1703), Martin also mentions "English hooks, which are found sticking to the fish bones" in the nests of the solans, "for the natives have no such hooks among them."

The late Professor W.J. Watson (*'A History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland'*, (1926), suggested that 'St Kilda' was a garbled version of the name of the principal well on the island, 'Tobar-Childa', which is the Gaelic followed by the Norse for 'well', a common construction following a change of language. This well was never-failing, and famous for the quality of its water.

Visiting fishermen, who came to St Kilda in need of fresh water, under stress of shipwreck, or for a run ashore, are most likely to have called it by a version of the name used by the islanders, and very likely to have garbled it, particularly if it was in a language virtually unknown to them. If the well which was their main reason for knowing about the island was called something that sounded very similar to them, the two would almost certainly have been confused. They are most unlikely to have preserved an otherwise unknown name meaning 'Shield Island'. Nowadays we hardly realise how much those early sailors were dependent upon the supplies of fresh water they brought with them, and how important it would be for fishermen stooging along the continental shelf or along Rockall Bank for weeks on end, looking

for fish to fill their barrels, to know the nearest point at which they could obtain reliable supplies of good water to replenish their water butts, if their supplies ran out or went bad.

Even an interpreter who spoke “bad Irish” was likely to know that Gaelic did not use any equivalent to ‘Saint’ in place-names. If he thought, as Martin said, that ‘Tobar-Kilda’ was really St Kilder’s Well, he would naturally have supplied the missing ‘St’. It was common to write this as ‘S.’ and a draughtsman could easily have combined this with ‘Kilder’ to form Taylor’s ‘Schilder’.

In ‘*The Life and Death of St Kilda*’ (1975), Tom Steel suggested that the origin of the name might be found in the way the islanders pronounced ‘Hirta’, Martin and other early visitors having reported that the Kildans had a ‘lisp’, causing them among other things to pronounce ‘r’ as ‘l’. Martin says, “Both sexes have a lisp, but more especially the women, neither of the two pronouncing the letters d, g, or r.” In these circumstances the name of the island would have sounded, not as approximately ‘Hirsht’, as in the Long Island, but something like ‘Hilta’. This would have readily been confused with the islanders’ pronunciation of ‘Childa’, the second half of the name of the well, which would have been something like ‘Hil’a’.

In effect I am combining Watson’s hypothesis of the origin of the name ‘St Kilda’ with Steel’s suggestion of the St Kilda lisp, and providing a reason, in the international fishery which touched on St Kilda, for the island and its characteristics to become widely known.

I suspect that Watson’s rhyme from his Easter Ross boyhood, “*Tobar Childa challda, allt Chamsroin a lobhair*”, and his St Kildan version “*Tobar ghildeir chaldair, allt chamar nan ladhar*”, do not refer to one and same well, but are independently derived from a common source, quite possibly a Scandinavian nursery rhyme. I do not know what the second halves mean. Watson does not condescend upon a translation, and their obscurity suggests the crossing of a language boundary. Easter Ross abounds in Scandinavian place-names, ‘Dingwall’ showing that the area was once under Norse control, just as was Hirta along with most of the Hebrides, so the rhyme may go back to those times. (I have contacted investigators of folklore, but so far they have not come up with any parallels).

From the end of the 18th century successful fisheries were again developed on the St Kilda and Rockall Bank grounds. In the 1880s halibut were said to be so common in the waters round St Kilda as to impede the cod fishing! This was a problem the Shetlanders also were to encounter in their home waters during the 19th century. (They even used the larger halibut as pads over which to haul up their sixerns, see ‘*Fishing – the Coastal Tradition*’ by Michael W. Marshall, 1987, p.13). In 1895 an expedition to Rockall, sponsored by the Royal Irish Academy, sailed, appropriately from Killibegs, in the SS “*Granuaile*”, chartered for the purpose from the Congested

Districts Board, and failing to find the rock in heavy weather, spoke a "ketch-rigged fishing smack 'head reaching' under close reefed canvas". They found she hailed from Shetland, and her skipper told them exactly where to find Rockall (Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy, Vol. XXXI, 1897).

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