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EXPLORING THE INNER HEBRIDES

• ISLAY AND JURA • COLONSAY AND ORONSAY • SLATE ISLANDS OF NETHER LORN

• MUCK, EIGG AND RHUM • IONA, STAFFA AND TRESHNISH

• COLL AND TIREE • THE SHIANTS AND HANDA

Written and Illustrated by Dr Mary E. Gillham MBE

This book records the impressions of a southern-based naturalist exploring northwards along the island-dotted Minch. It is aimed at the general reader and will be an essential companion for anyone who is intending to take a trip to the Inner Hebrides. Highly illustrated, and with an expert text compiled from information gathered over many years by the author, the account moves along the Minch between mainland Scotland and the chain of the Outer Hebrides. From Islay in the South to Handa in the North, we visit these fascinating islands to view the plants, birds and other wildlife against a background of the complicated geology. Most of the visits were in summer, at the height of the sea-bird nesting season, but the first section refers to the beginning of winter and the arrival of migrant birds from the Arctic. The author's photographs, including over 100 colour photographs, and her exquisite drawings profusely illustrate this excellent guide.

After leaving school at sixteen in 1937 to work in a London office, **Mary Gillham** escaped into the countryside by joining the Women's Land Army for the duration of the war. As a post-war student in the University of Wales, she graduated with a 'first' in botany and a doctorate in plant ecology before taking up her first lectureship in the University of Exeter. Her love of islands took her to the Antipodes, the Antarctic, Indian Ocean and South Africa, researching the effect of colonial sea-birds, salty winds and mammals (or giant tortoises) grazing on the vegetation, interspersed with university lectureships in New Zealand, Australia and Nigeria. Most of her academic career was based in the Adult Education Department of the University of Cardiff until her retirement in 1988, lecturing and leading field excursions at home and abroad – as far as the Seychelles and West Indies and including, of course, the full range of Scottish Islands. She was awarded an MBE in 2007 for her work in Nature Conservation.

Also by Dr Mary Gillham

This Island Life: Discovering Britain's Offshore Gems

A Naturalist on Lundy



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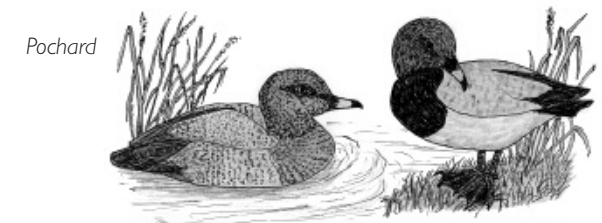
- I. Islay And Jura**
- II. Colonsay And Oronsay**
- III. Slate Islands Of Nether Lorn**
- IV. Muck, Eigg And Rhum**
- V. Iona, Staffa And Treshnish**
- VI. Coll And Tiree**
- VII. The Shiant's And Handa**



The Author and the Sgurr of Eigg in 1987



Highland Bull near Ballyhaugh



Pochard



Mew or Common Gulls

beaches there in summer, but the birds scattered across its slopes today were great black-backed gulls.

Beyond the northern half of the northern island the open sea was channelled into a veritable archipelago. While houses stood their names from shore to horizon, waves not waiting to reach the shadows before toppling forwards in a frenzy of spume.

The tide was running in from the north and we watched fascinated as the untaken current streamed through the gap between Nether Cornish and the mainland. Conditions can change quite rapidly in the gully's land. Yesterday the sea had been relatively still, by Irishman standards, and a number of little boats had put to sea, but today a one hundred thirty yachts were today.

Not that there were many yachts here now, although a selection of small boats was moored on the placid waters of the main harbour and more dozens up on the grassed slope between here and the lake zig-zagging up to the higher ancient basalt level where most of the cottages were sited.

The majority had recently been refurbished in holiday accommodation and at this time of year it was almost a ghost town, with probably no more than ten people in residence. Nevertheless, all the houses were nearly empty for guests and the flower beds were in good order. Renovations during the past two years had been extensive and subject to strict building regulations, maintaining their character but adding extras such as the water purification system and new sewage works.

Modernisation had detracted nothing from the charm of the little haven, where the old concrete jetty slept beside the pocket handkerchief sized beach. Quarantined waters meandered among the boats and spoked softly between intruding arms of rock. No one could have been more at odds with that of the location, coiled over themselves outside with that stately blue girl of water.

A little piece of Atlantic sea had surely chosen the harbour for their afternoon siesta, blown in all. In fact they were not 'basking' with sunbathers in sleep, but regarding our little party with interest. Seals have a way of staring at you with unblinking concentration until you begin to feel uncomfortable. There was, however, some interaction, with the dark, black-backed seal watching one of the water house windows. Gary Allan was more concerned with the seal than the so-called common seal which we encountered later off the cliffs.

We gathered on the edge of their play pool, sorting out the beach, and not other waterlilies by their leaves and dead trunk heads rose to where the stones from the moorland could be seen marching down into the harbour.

On the low point of the tidal river but against a wall of red fence grass

presented the perfect example of a 'barred beach'. Wind-combed changes of the middle-level grass swept up to a level at an angle of around forty five degrees for six to eight inches, to a tapered crest, to drop steeply on the lowest level or more towards the overhanging cliffs.

It was easy to draw a parallel with these formations, where the gentle slope occurs on the windward side, tipping over to a steep downward face which can provide important shelter for invertebrates in both instances. The tangled burls and hollows of the yielding grass blades mirrored those of the violence beyond the islands.

As we headed our vehicle a big flock of redwings came rattling down from the slope behind, to settle on grass and fence. These, we were told, were birds of the island race, moved to from the north coast, each slightly larger than their more southerly counterparts – as in the way of birds in cold climates.

One perched within a low knot of the mistle, peering in through the window, its plumage reflected by the wind to show the red flank feathers. We saw many more of their kind throughout the week, but few of the feldites which often accompany them.

Before we left they were joined by another immigrant flock – all headed into the wind to prevent cold air sweeping in under their glossy, speckled winter feathers. The odd goldfinch and chaffinch perched in the garden.

Our next stop, quite nearby, was to view something altogether less traditional. This was a unique, wave-powered electricity generator appeared in 1980 by Greenpeace. It was a valiant attempt to harness some of the violence prevalent offshore.

We reached it through a wide metal lane gate and along a wide installed bollard track. There was little to see apart from the concrete roof of a bloody red and white roller built inside a gulch in the cliff below park level. There was, however, much to hear.

Each wave arrived with a thump and a whoosh, great hydraulic roar like a giant's breath – of the sort sometimes emanating from natural cliff blow holes. Sea water did not gain entry to the turbine but pushed volumes of air through under pressure to provide the power – a giant's breath indeed. We were glad no more rain fell there when it was all happening. Whether the amount of power generated would make the effort of construction worth while, was open to question, but the fact that no replicas had been produced since was not encouraging.

This was one of two new devices installed on Islay exploring a programme to harness wave energy – the UK's first full scale wave power machines. Wavepower's 'Lampart' is the shoreline device installed here, the other the 'Sea Trader' thought up by Orona Power. Both on the sea surface.

They were put in place after a Greenpeace survey of the coast using side scan sonar where Lampart was installed and three D mapping of the seabed where Sea



In Islay



Kinloch Castle



Portnahaven Harbour at the Southern tip of the Rhinns



Erosion of 'organ pipe' jointing in Basalt

Example of a double page spread.