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8: Historicity, narration and myths in Karin Altenberg's *Island of Wings*¹

PHILIPPE LAPLACE

I shall for the present close my journal, and that in the words of Dr MacCulloch, with some little deviation, *viz*: if St Kilda is not the Eutopia so long sought, where will it be found? Where is the land which has neither arms, money, care, physic, politics, nor taxes? That land is St Kilda. [...] Well may the pampered native of happy *Hirt* [St Kilda] refuse to change his situation – his slumbers are late – his labours are light – his occupation his amusement. Government he has not – law he feels not – physic he wants not – politics he heeds not – money he sees not – of war he hears not. His state is his city – his city his social circle – he has the liberty of his thoughts, his actions, and his kingdom and all the world are his equals. His climate is mild, and his island green, and the stranger who might corrupt him shuns his shores. If happiness is not a dweller in St Kilda, where shall it be sought?²

One of the most conspicuous features when researching Scottish literature – whether one talks about literary classics, modern or even sometimes contemporary productions – is the collusion of history and myths. Mythopoeia is indeed a classic occurrence throughout the literature of Scotland. After all, as many scholars have convincingly argued before, history and myths are natural constituents of sentiments of nationhood. It is therefore not surprising to see them used by writers who wish to express feelings of identity or of belonging. The Highlands and the islands of Scotland have more particularly lent themselves to such ideological and rhetorical use.

This chapter considers history and myths in *Island of Wings*, Karin Altenberg's first novel which takes place on the remote isle of St Kilda. As it is demonstrated in the epigraph to this chapter, St Kilda and the St Kildans have repeatedly been subjected to myth-making; this chapter will also consider Altenberg's deliberate respect for authentic sources, that is to say

the extent of her novel's historicity, and the paradoxical angle she has adopted towards developing her own fiction.

Because of its distance from the mainland, rough sea crossings and total isolation, the isle of St Kilda – or to be more accurate Hirta, as St Kilda is the name given to the archipelago – was a favourite subject for travel writers throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One of the first narrations, and probably the one which is responsible for a mythicised vision and a fascination for this island, is Martin Martin's 1698 *A Late Voyage to St Kilda*. Martin presents an island where contemporary worries and concerns are unknown to a population whose main occupation and means of existence is fowling. Contacts with the outside world are by all means scarce and limited to the yearly visit of the taxman, to occasional shipwrecks and to the rare visitors who venture the rough crossing from South Uist. According to Martin, trips to the island and the visit to its hundred or so inhabitants were sadly undervalued adventures which offered the exoticism which many were keen to find abroad.³ Martin, in a way, succeeded in promoting journeys to the Scottish isles: Samuel Johnson, for instance, acknowledges that it is one of Martin's later books which triggered his decision to visit the Western Islands of Scotland.⁴

In *A Late Voyage to St Kilda*, Martin describes a peaceful community where bartering is the only means of acquiring anything, where crime and violence are virtually unheard of, and where islanders frugally live off what nature provides. Rousseau's theories of the noble savage, Herder's considerations on primitive authenticity, quests for the sublime, the flurry of travels and travel writings to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and the beginning of the age of tourism in the second half of the nineteenth century were later to amplify this vision of a peaceful idyllic world existing outside time. The decision by the few remaining St Kildan families to finally abandon the island in 1930 paradoxically reinforced these myths. All these legends gave way to what the archaeologist Andrew Fleming derogatorily calls the 'Hardrock consensus', from the name given to the 1957 military operation on St Kilda. It symbolises what Fleming sees as the extension of myths about idyllic life on the island, that is to say the outsiders' first impression that St Kilda was the last repository of ancient traditions and that the islanders lived in a Golden Age which came to an abrupt end because of tourism and the lure of emigration. The 'Hardrock consensus' propounds

that rather than a mere decision based on the difficulties of life on St Kilda, the regular shortage of food and the desire to improve their conditions, only basic external forces, that is the irruption of Victorian and Edwardian values, led its inhabitants eventually to prefer self-exile.⁵ For instance, in a 2011 revised edition of an earlier book devoted to St Kilda one reads: 'Like many Celts, they were dreamers rather than men of action. [...] As contact with the mainland increased [...] the St Kildans were incapable of adapting to a more complex set of rules of behaviour and became introverted.'⁶

Observers with better knowledge of Highland culture had on the contrary praised the St Kildans' adaptability. For instance in the notes left by Rev. Neil Mackenzie, who is, by the way, the protagonist of Altenberg's novel, the St Kildans are described as crafty and calculating. For instance:

Encouraged by the amazing credulity of the ordinary tourist, the natives have got to be very successful in imposing upon them. The tourist comes with a certain idea in his mind as to what the native is like, and would be disappointed if they did not find him like that; this the natives have been shrewd enough to discover and turn to their own profit.⁷

Rev. Mackenzie then describes how the St Kildans would, in Gaelic, comment on the tourists' naivety and on their own acting skills. As far as the benign atmosphere of St Kilda is concerned, Rev. Mackenzie also downplays the apparent peaceful serenity of the island. He gives two instances of acts of revenge – punishments condoned by the villagers – committed in the 1830s by groups of St Kildans on fellow islanders guilty of having betrayed their community.⁸

St Kilda – now owned by the National Trust of Scotland, a military base and a UNESCO World Heritage Site – has continued to exert a certain fascination. The island has inspired many works and research, a craze that the already cited Andrew Fleming names as 'Hirtophilia'.⁹ The St Kildans' simple way of life and society have also been at the heart of a somewhat incongruous fascination. The poet Douglas Dunn, for example, used one of the key features of St Kilda's social organisation – what was known as the 'Parliament' – and the famous 1886 photograph as a metaphor for the lost dream of sovereignty following the 1979 abortive referendum on devolution.¹⁰

Karin Altenberg's *Island of Wings* is the very latest element in this popular fancy for St Kilda, but its goal is utterly different and it does away with most of the varnish St Kilda and its inhabitants had been embellished with. Published in April 2011, it describes St Kilda and life on the island during the middle of the nineteenth century. Writing a novel about St Kilda is a daunting challenge as one has to wrestle with mythicised representations, emotional accounts and distorted historical facts. Karin Altenberg complicates her task by writing a biographical fiction about one of the most significant outsiders having lived on the island; somebody responsible – and probably guilty according to the 'Hardrock' consensus – for having had a profound influence on the islanders' way of life, an achievement that the same Andrew Fleming describes in a very positive way as 'phenomenal'.¹¹ However, Altenberg's protagonist has become a tragic hero, his professional success creating collateral damage at the expense of his wife and family.

Altenberg's novel depicts the thirteen years spent on St Kilda by the envoy of the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SPCK), the Church of Scotland minister Reverend Neil Mackenzie and his wife, from their arrival in July 1830 to their departure in May 1843, shortly after Rev. Mackenzie's refusal to walk out from the General Assembly to join the dissenting Free Church ministers led by Chalmers. (I will use the names 'Neil Mackenzie' and 'Elizabeth Mackenzie' when talking about Altenberg's characters and 'Rev. Mackenzie' and 'Mrs Mackenzie' when talking about the non-fictional couple who lived on St Kilda.) Although Altenberg heavily relies on the few documentary sources and historical data available, a fact she acknowledges in a postface to the novel,¹² such as Rev. Mackenzie's notes, travellers' accounts or scientific studies, she also stresses that Neil and Elizabeth Mackenzie's personal lives, turmoils and sentiments as they are presented in the novel are utterly fictional. The fact that she felt the need to provide the reader with a paratext shows the thin line between history and fiction in the novel and, more generally, when talking about St Kilda. It is indeed worth mentioning that Rev. Mackenzie, in the notes he left which were later published by one of his sons, rarely refers to his wife or to his children. The main focus of his attention was the island itself. It included, of course, the islanders' spiritual redemption, but also their physical well-being and improvement, the former being the reason why he had been dispatched to the island by the SPCK and the latter having been his greatest

achievement. His passion for the island and its inhabitants comes at the detriment of his family. This is also a key feature of the novel, to the extent that Altenberg, when they are about to leave to return to the mainland once his duties for the SPCK are accomplished, makes his wife say: 'Your mission was always most important, was it not? More important than me and the children. [...] I think at times that perhaps you were never really brave enough to love us' (297). This serves as the main chorus to the novel: the story of St Kilda is told from two viewpoints in *Island of Wings*: Neil Mackenzie's nearly scientific observations of the island and its inhabitants, and Elizabeth Mackenzie's personal sentiments towards the island, her relationships with the inhabitants and her feelings towards her husband and his involvement in his evangelical mission. Authenticity is a clear concern for Altenberg, and she has managed the seemingly impossible task of scrupulously respecting historical documents concerning the island while managing to write a fictional biography of the Mackenzie family.

Island of Wings therefore allows us to glimpse into narratological issues: Altenberg gives us access to Neil Mackenzie's subjectivity. Despite having lived and transformed life on St Kilda, Neil Mackenzie is a fictional character whose thoughts and secrets are imagined by the author. Biographical fiction, or biopics in cinematographical parlance, is a genre which has nearly always been ignored by literary critics and, apart from the first hagiographers, by academia as a whole. Michel Foucault once considered the editing of the archives of the Hôpital Général and the Bastille into a fictional form in order to tell these people's stories, what he calls 'an anthology of existences'. However, Foucault never pursued this idea much further and concluded very harshly on the genre:

I began by saying that these texts might be read as so many 'short stories'. That was saying too much, no doubt; none of them will ever measure up to the least tale by Chekhov, Maupassant or James. Neither 'quasi-' nor 'subliterature', they are not even the first sketch of a genre; they are the action, in disorder, noise, and pain, of power on lives, and the discourse that comes of it.¹³

Altenberg has crafted her novel by putting together a mosaic of accounts. By referring to archives and documented data not only regarding Mackenzie's

achievements but also about life on St Kilda, she keeps confusing the reader and, in a way, clouding the issue: is this a fictional work based on Rev. Mackenzie's life or a very detailed – quasi-historical – document about life on the island and Rev. Mackenzie's achievements? And this is very much what could be held against Altenberg's book: the presence – or the absence – of fictional elements is difficult to assess. As Lukács had noted, 'it is inevitable that biography should appear as the specific form of the modern historical novel.'¹⁴ However, by adding purely fictional elements, Altenberg makes it more difficult for anyone who does not know what has already been published about St Kilda and Rev. Mackenzie to distinguish between history and fiction. The only clue is her hint in the postface that 'the account is accurate in most historical details' (310), from which we can infer that all personal elements are purely fictional.

Altenberg faithfully follows the main points of Reverend Mackenzie's years on St Kilda as he and visitors recorded them. The second chapter, entitled 'May 1831–A Visit', for instance, records George Clayton Atkinson's expedition to St Kilda which he related in an article published in 1838.¹⁵ Altenberg carefully mixes Atkinson's scientific observations and descriptions of the few weeks he spent on the island with fictional episodes. She quotes from the article and makes it appear as an extract from Atkinson's notebook (87), a narrative device she acknowledges in her postface; but she also deliberately paraphrases or uses passages of Atkinson's article at various instances without using italics or quotation marks, therefore weaving together authentic details in order to create a rich tapestry to illustrate one of the island's crucial developments, as in the following example where textual similarities are highlighted in **bold**:

Atkinson:

We were **much struck with the good looks of the inhabitants as they turned out**, men, women, and children, to receive us. They are of **rather short** stature, but **present neat compact specimens of the human form**, set off by lively **intelligent countenances**, adorned almost always with beautifully **white teeth**. [...] The women wear a gown of the same blue woollen material of which the men's coats are made, drawn in at the waist, but as they **are not generally, I think, so good-looking as the men, this negligence is not becoming**.¹⁶

Altenberg:

'I was **struck**,' said Mr George Atkinson, '**by the good looks of the inhabitants as they turned out** to meet us on the landing rocks.'

'Yes,' agreed the minister enthusiastically, 'although they are **rather short** they **present neat and compact specimens of the human form**.'

'I have never seen **teeth as white** as theirs; did you not notice their teeth?' asked Mrs Mackenzie of no one in particular as if the thought had just occurred to her.

'Oh yes, I did indeed,' said the other Mr Atkinson [G. C. Atkinson's brother]. 'However, I was mainly impressed by the **air of intelligence** which they conveyed. [...] Although I think, [...] that the women **are not generally so good-looking as the men. The negligence in their dress is not becoming**'¹⁷

This is quite recurrent throughout the novel. I have managed to find large extracts from Mackenzie's notes which have become part of the plot or are developed as a subplot: concerning the island, the islanders' accommodation, local traditions such as weddings or various incidents such as the stealing of a rug in Mackenzie's manse, or Mackenzie giving a hand in the building of new accommodation and surprising the islanders by his strength and ingenuity.¹⁸ She also sometimes puts someone else's words into another character's mouth; for example, part of the epigraph to this article is ascribed to Atkinson instead of Lachlan Maclean (61–62). Altenberg also gives us an insight into Neil Mackenzie's notebook, and the passages, this time highlighted in italics in the novel, faithfully correspond to the notes left by Rev. Mackenzie.¹⁹ Authenticity, and the desire to be as close as possible to the true history and life of the St Kildans, is at the core of the novel, to such an extent that official documents and reports are disseminated throughout the novel.²⁰

However, *Island of Wings* is definitely not a hagiography: Neil Mackenzie does appear, in spite of – or maybe because of – his Church of Scotland mantle, as a very weak and frail man in front of the awesome St Kildan traditions, myths and rites. A fight for power and domination lies at the heart of the novel: Neil Mackenzie was sent by the SPCK to establish God's power on this forsaken land and to turn **paganism** into Christianity. On leaving the island he reflects on his own **achievements**:

There was a time when they were like puppets in my hands, impressionable and naive – I wanted to protect them from their misdemeanours and show them the purifying properties of the heart's sorrow. I moved their world when they did not think it possible; I waged war upon the ghosts of their minds and chased away the witches of their imagination; I have ridden the storm and relaxed in the eye of the wind. This was my art. I was strong once, and then weakness overcame me. (304)

Neil Mackenzie, like a Prospero exercising his art, clearly sees his role as that of the patriarch, wielding control and domination over the subjugated islanders. However, as demonstrated by the islanders' refusal to knock over the idols which have assumed the form of immemorial traditions, the spirit of St Kilda lives on in spite of his struggles and he will eventually come to the conclusion that nothing can erase the St Kildans' collective unconscious and their attachment to the land. Neil Mackenzie, whose analytical approach relegates sentimental concerns to the sideline, concludes: 'I have watched them as closely as a scientist looks at insects under a glass. I have been able to touch them, to heal them, to encourage them, to instruct them – but I still do not understand them' (296). His logical reasoning and analysis however drove him to radically improve their lives by convincing them to destroy their antiquated and unhygienic accommodation and to build modern houses.

All visitors to St Kilda, prior to Rev. Mackenzie, had indeed lamented the poor quality of accommodation. Living in dirty hovels, hygiene was not a consideration for St Kildans who were affected by what they called the '8-day sickness', namely the frequent death of newborn babies within eight days of their birth.²¹ Their accommodation is described at length by Rev. Mackenzie in his notes and Altenberg extensively uses his descriptions in the novel. The trigger of the minister's resolution to change this situation is the visit of Sir Thomas Acland and his wife in 1834, an episode also faithfully described in the novel. Appalled at the islanders' living conditions, Acland donates money to encourage people to build new homes. The St Kildans, at first reluctant, finally accept Rev. Mackenzie's plans in 1838. Within four years a new village springs out with brand new houses and furniture donated by subscriptions on the mainland. At that time many

observers remarked that the St Kildans' accommodation was the most pleasant and comfortable that could be found in the Hebrides. This is clearly due to Mackenzie's stubborn achievement. However, he was not able to uproot old traditions and pagan rites: a subsequent shortage of food is attributed to the new village structure by the islanders (266–75).

Despite being a book written about one of the most influential men who ever lived on St Kilda, the novel's point of view is clearly from his wife's stance. Elizabeth is the one who takes us through Neil's private conflicts and personal turmoil. Altenberg makes use of a whole range of symbolic images in *Island of Wings* and birds indeed play a key part in the novel. Birds after all were crucial to St Kildans' culture and fowling was the main source of food. They also often play a symbolic part in Neil and Elizabeth's lives and fate. In 1830, when approaching St Kilda by boat, Elizabeth, pregnant with her first child, notices the shape of a cross drawn by an albatross hovering over the ship (7). This is of course highly significant of what the newly-wed Elizabeth Mackenzie is going to endure on St Kilda. Her dreams of marrying a minister of the Church of Scotland, of living the life of a missionary's wife, will be shattered by the rough existence on the island and the total lack of communication between her and the natives, this being further exacerbated by the breakdown in communication with her husband. Their thirteen years on the island resemble more an ordeal than a voluntary exile or an evangelistic mission. Altenberg repeats the same Christian image of the cross when the couple leaves St Kilda: Elizabeth hurts herself with splinters when stroking her hand over the wooden crates where they have deposited their belongings (305). Her suffering is probably not over yet despite their leaving the island. After all, the man she married confesses on several occasions to having been changed by life on St Kilda: 'This island changes us – it eats into you and won't leave you alone' (235). Neil Mackenzie is oblivious to his own family in order to succeed in his evangelising tasks and to turn the St Kildans into obedient subjects of the Presbyterian Church. 'Is this the man for whom I left everything?' asks Elizabeth Mackenzie as she ponders her husband's rigid and uncompromising attitudes only two years after their arrival on the island (59). Love between them slowly but surely fades away.

The turning point between Elizabeth and Neil in the novel is the discovery of a foreign sailor marooned on St Kilda after a shipwreck. This is purely

fictional as no shipwreck is recorded between 1830 and 1843. The survivor is found seriously injured, and Elizabeth takes care of him despite her husband's reluctance. Of Spanish or Portuguese origins, nobody manages to understand him or to talk to him. The islanders, used to sheltering castaways and shipwrecked sailors, do not pay much attention to him. However, relationships and sentiments between Elizabeth and Neil – which had started to break up – definitely fall apart because of his presence. She decides to call this man Nathaniel, in memory of the first child she lost on the island, and this foreshadows their impossible relationship. She decides to shelter him in the manse, to feed him properly and to look after him. With a mixture of pure jealousy and Presbyterian suspicion, Neil Mackenzie resents this intrusion and eventually forbids his wife from taking care of him. This mysterious man indeed reawakens sentiments of love, physical desire and a passion in the young woman. Neil's reaction to the sailor, apart from basic male jealousy, is full of prejudice. Writing to the laird, the minister says: 'I cannot say whether he wants salvation or whether his mouth, which speaks so coarsely in a foreign tongue, is still greedy for wrong. As far as I can tell, his character will take no goodness' (197). It is only when this man leaves the island, in the care of the tacksman, that he reveals his real name to Elizabeth: he is called Solano, a name conjuring up the image of the sunshine he briefly brought to her life. This man marks the watershed point in the novel. Not only does he awaken physical desire in Elizabeth's life but he also opens up the concealed wound Neil Mackenzie meant to forget. At the heart of his decision to become a minister of the Church and then later to go to St Kilda was the drowning of one of his friends.²³ This element, an obsessive psalmody in the novel, is also a true biographical feature, as Rev. Mackenzie's son tells us.²³

Rev. Mackenzie's family, from Glen Sannox in Sutherland, had been forced to move to the coast during the Highland Clearances and Rev. Mackenzie probably saw many companions emigrate to North America. Gaelic being his mother tongue, he was therefore very well equipped to preach in St Kilda. Altenberg also uses the memory of the Clearances in order to stress the fact that Neil Mackenzie was prone to seeking to transform life on St Kilda. Improvement, in a different sense than what was meant by landlords and factors who used the term to justify the Clearances, was a necessary development in order to provide the inhabitants with means of

existence and to avoid further clearances, as Neil Mackenzie tells Atkinson. However, the death of his companion in a fishing incident still haunts him and, in the novel, not only does he feel responsible but he is presented as having been responsible. He did not save his drowning companion. Neil Mackenzie managed to keep his balance thanks to the Presbyterian concept of predestination. Once in St Kilda – and this time this is a purely fictional element – Neil Mackenzie watches a young boy drown and merely stands aside. This of course reawakens and reinforces his previous guilt and suffering and throws him into the angst of a personal and a deep religious crisis:

But in his darkest moments, when his faith and his confidence were failing him, a thought might occur to him: what if I was not chosen? What if I survived merely because I was stronger, because I saved my life and left Will to die? What if there is no afterlife, no heaven for the young dead? What if I have deceived myself? (238)

When confronted with such a memory, Neil Mackenzie's defence is to brush aside all feelings of guilt and to remind his wife that she lost her first child. The lack of communication is characteristic of life in St Kilda. There are clearly two sides, and, as he is a native Gaelic speaker, this is not only linguistic, related to Gaelic. His wife, who does not speak a word of Gaelic, sides with the St Kildan women, sharing their grief and their fate on this inhospitable island (125–26). Referring to Gaelic, the language spoken by the inhabitants, George Atkinson wrote (and this is an extract from his article not quoted in the novel): 'Mrs Mackenzie, a Glasgow lady, does not speak it, and therefore, was, I am inclined to think, very glad to see us, as it must have been six months since she exchanged a sentiment with any one but her husband.'²⁴ This lack of communication is after all Elizabeth's predicament on the island.

The novel ends with the same image as at the beginning: the couple on a boat, but this time – thirteen years after their arrival – they are now leaving St Kilda. There is a clear sense of failure: Neil Mackenzie feels he has let down the islanders and the SPCK in his evangelising task and, apart from a considerable improvement as far as the islanders' conditions of life are concerned, his mission has been tragically unsuccessful.²⁵ He lacked the nerve to join the 1843 Disruption and he is clearly aware that his marriage

has reached a point of no return. Neil Mackenzie's last action is much more than a mere token gesture: offering his bible as a sacrifice to the sea sums up his sense of failure at redeeming the islanders and at coming to terms with the guilt feelings afflicting him and the religious crisis he has experienced on the island.²⁶

As the island subsided into the vanishing skies behind him he took out of his coat his Gaelic bible and opened it to the title page where his name had once been inscribed. For a moment he looked at the browning ink that spelled out his past before he closed the book and, leaning over the bulwarks, dropped it into the silencing sea. (308)

The strong and tragic image chosen by Altenberg also forecasts the fate of St Kilda and of its society. Altenberg's use of the bible is a clever adaptation and a reversal of history: those who witnessed the 1930 abandonment of the island say that the St Kildans left a bible on the table of their houses, and one of them had it open on the Book of Exodus.²⁷

What actually followed the Mackenzies' departure was a long period of cultural oblivion for the St Kildans. Charles Maclean referred to a 'vacuum' left after Rev. Neil Mackenzie's return to the mainland.²⁸ Rev. Mackenzie, a Highlander himself, despite his opposition to the island's traditions and culture, had been careful not to prohibit them. He even collected poems and songs from St Kilda which were later edited in the *Celtic Review*.²⁹ The Kirk elders who replaced him imposed a very strict ideological censorship until a Free Church minister was eventually sent in 1865. Many visitors described the natives as having discarded and then forgotten their own music, poetry, traditions and dancing. St Kildans started emigrating and this, with the outbreak of disease and long periods of food shortage that severely threatened life itself on the island in the 1920s, eventually led to the abandonment of the island by its last thirty-six inhabitants in 1930. At the end of the nineteenth century, when tourist expeditions to St Kilda were valued by the Scottish gentry, the *Glasgow Herald* special correspondent to St Kilda had already remarked:

Writers like Martin and Macaulay saw only the most delightful romance in this simple primitive people leading a life of all but

complete isolation on their lonely rock [...] The romance is gone; it could not by any possibility survive the stern fact of repeated periods of destitution imperilling the very existence of the community. It is these recurring seasons of scarcity that have forced the problem of the future of St Kilda upon the attention of the public, and have led many sensible people to think that the only way of solving it satisfactorily is to abandon the island.³⁰

Sentimental stories had indeed flourished about the island and its inhabitants and had led to many romantic tales blurring the grim and difficult life of the St Kildans. Karin Altenberg's novel does justice to Rev. Mackenzie's achievement and, through her patient compilation of first-hand reports and official data, restores the islanders' history. She is, after all, an archaeologist who works on the field of cultural heritage. Her fictional biography, presenting Neil Mackenzie's mission and achievements and his wife's shattered dreams and subsequent distress, is also an invaluable historical document on a key moment in the tragic history of Hirta.

Notes

- 1 K. Altenberg, *Island of Wings* (London: Quercus, 2011). All references to this edition will appear in the text between brackets.
- 2 Lachlan Maclean, *Sketches on the Island of St Kilda* (Glasgow: McPhun, 1838). Quoted in Francis Thompson, *St Kilda and Other Hebridean Outliers*, new edition (London: David & Charles, 1988), pp. 111–12. The original reference, by MacCulloch, reads: 'The pampered native of St Kilda may with reason refuse to change his situation; finding his amusement where his chief occupation lies, in the pursuit of sea fowl, that constitute at the same time his game, his luxury, and a considerable part of his wealth. Free from the reputed evils of law, physic, politics, and taxes; living under a patriarchal government, among a social circle of his relations; in a mild climate, without knowledge of a higher state of things; if he thinks not his island an Utopia, the pursuit of happiness is indeed a dream.' John MacCulloch, *A Description of the Western Islands, including the Isle of Man*, vol. II (London: Archibald Constable, 1819), pp. 29–30.
- 3 Martin Martin reported having seen above one hundred and eighty people, which is one of the largest figures recorded for St Kilda: Martin Martin, *A Late Voyage to St Kilda, the remotest of all the Hebrides, or Western Isles of Scotland* (London: D. Brown & T. Goodwin, 1698), p. 51. See also: Mary Harman, *An Isle Called Hirta: A History and Culture of St Kilda to 1930* (Watnish: Maclean Press, 1997), pp. 124–42. In his preface, Martin wrote: 'It is a piece of weakness and folly merely to value things because of their distance from the place where we are born: thus men have travelled far enough in the search of foreign plants and animals, and yet continue strangers to those produced in their own climate.'

- 4 As recorded by Boswell in the very first paragraph of his *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson*.
- 5 See: A. Fleming, *St Kilda and the Wider World: Tales of an Iconic Island* (Macclesfield: Windgather Press, 2005), pp. 1–13.
- 6 T. Steel, *The Life and Death of St Kilda: The Moving Story of a Vanished Island Community* (London: Harper Press, 2011), pp. 51–53. Quoted by Fleming, p. 6.
- 7 J. B. Mackenzie, *Episode in the Life of the Rev. Neil Mackenzie at St Kilda from 1829 to 1843*, edited by his son the Rev. J. B. Mackenzie Minister at Kenmore (1911), p. 28. Rev. Neil Mackenzie's first visit to St Kilda was in 1829, accompanied by John MacDonald (known as 'the Apostle of the North'). Rev. Neil Mackenzie came back with his wife in July 1830.
- 8 J. B. Mackenzie, p. 30.
- 9 A. Fleming, p. 5.
- 10 D. Dunn, 'St Kilda's Parliament: 1879–1979. The photographer revisits his picture', in *St Kilda's Parliament* (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), pp. 13–15.
- 11 A. Fleming, p. 131.
- 12 'It builds largely on documentary sources [...] and published research [...] Students of these texts will realise that I have taken a number of liberties regarding the individual characters and their personalities, but the account is accurate in most historical details.' (Altenberg, p. 310).
- 13 M. Foucault, 'Lives of Infamous Men', in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–84*, edited by James D. Faubion, translated by Robert Hurley and others, vol. III (New York: The New Press, 2001), pp. 157–75 (p. 174).
- 14 G. Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, translated from the German by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962), p. 301.
- 15 G. C. Atkinson, 'Notice of the island of St Kilda, on the North-West coast of Scotland', *Transactions of the Natural History Society, of Northumberland, Durham, and Newcastle upon Tyne*, II (1838), pp. 215–25.
- 16 G. C. Atkinson, p. 217.
- 17 K. Altenberg, pp. 56–57.
- 18 Altenberg, (the rug incident) p. 13; (Mackenzie's ingenuity) p. 16; (description of houses) pp. 18–22.
- 19 Altenberg, pp. 28–30.
- 20 Altenberg also introduces Lachlan Maclean as a visitor to the island (247). He comments: 'A land where everything is held in common, where crime and war are unknown and where there is an abundance of food to feed my people and no one would have to work too hard.' Maclean was beaming. [...] "Did you ever imagine paradise such as this?" Maclean cried in exultation.' (258).
- 21 Medical science later explained that the precise cause of the '8-day sickness' was due to a local tradition of cleaning the umbilical cord with a mixture of oil from birds, some babies developing a form of tetanus. Moreover, problems of house hygiene should certainly not be dismissed: 'Two weeks later Mrs Mackenzie gave birth to twin girls. It all happened as it should. The old crone from the village was called to cut the umbilical cord from the tiny bodies and smear the stumps with bird grease. [...] The old woman wrapped the girls in linen towels, but rather poorly as there was only enough linen for one baby. Lizzie was concerned that the girls were not washed before being wrapped but was too exhausted to do anything about it just then.' (Altenberg, p. 97).

- 22 J. B. Mackenzie, p. 3.
- 23 'The drowning of a companion by the capsizing of a new fishing wherry which they were trying, and his own narrow escape from the same fate, caused him to make up his mind to become a preacher of the Gospel and to go somewhere as a missionary.' (J. B. Mackenzie, p. 3).
- 24 G. C. Atkinson, p. 219.
- 25 In his notes, Rev. Mackenzie commented: 'It appears to me that my work here is now finished, and that I would be more useful somewhere else. I have therefore made up my mind, as there is an opportunity, to leave the island for a time, and it may be for ever. The labours and anxieties of the past two years have told heavily, both on my bodily health and mental vigour, and I need a time of rest and mental refreshment.' (J. B. Mackenzie, p. 38).
- 26 'But in his darkest moments, when his faith and his confidence were failing him, a thought might occur to him: what if I was not chosen? What if I survived merely because I was stronger, because I saved my life and left Will to die? What if there is no afterlife, no heaven for the young dead? What if I have deceived myself?' (Altenberg, p. 238).
- 27 Tom Steel, p. 21.
- 28 Charles Maclean, *St Kilda: Island on the Edge of the World*. Afterwords by Margaret Buchanan (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1998), p. 126.
- 29 Neil Mackenzie, 'Bardachd Irteach', *Celtic Review*, 2 (1906), pp. 328–42. 'Antiquities and Old Customs of St Kilda, compiled from notes by the Rev. Neil Mackenzie', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 38 (1904), pp. 397–402.
- 30 Robert Connell, *St Kilda and the St Kildians* (London & Glasgow: Hamilton, Adams & Co. and Thomas D. Morison, 1887), p. 158.