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**Death of an island: alienation and death on St Kilda in
Karin Altenberg's *Island of Wings*¹**

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This island is our punishment, this island and one another's company, to the death. (J.M. Coetzee, *Foe*, p. 37)

St Kilda is the furthest western archipelago in Scotland; its location and the particular way of life of its inhabitants have captured the imagination of many travel-writers, and of some novelists or poets and also some playwrights (like Sue Glover, *The Straw Chair*). Of these literary representations, I have selected *Island of Wings*, a novel published in 2011 and written by Karin Altenberg. It is set on the island of Hirta, also commonly called St Kilda after the name of the archipelago. *Island of Wings* can be best described as a biofiction, that is to say, as Altenberg confesses in a paratext to the novel: “*This is a fictionalised portrait of the historic lives of the Rev. Neil Mackenzie and his wife. It builds largely on documentary sources [...] and published research. [...] I have taken a number of liberties regarding the individual characters and their personalities, but the account is accurate in most historical details.*” (p. 310). Altenberg explores a key colonial moment in the history of St Kilda. Reverend Neil Mackenzie, the protagonist of the novel, was indeed a pastor for the Church of Scotland. He and his wife, Elizabeth, spent thirteen years on St Kilda from July 1830 to May 1843, not only evangelizing the locals but also reforming most of their traditional customs.² This paper will focus on the representation of St Kilda as a place of alienation before examining the recurrence of death. Postcolonial considerations and the symbolic imagery used by Altenberg will guide us through this reading, but because of the biofictional nature of the novel we will never lose sight of the true history and lives of the Mackenzies.

¹ Karin Altenberg, *Island of Wings*, (London: Quercus, 2011).

² See also: 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.

An island, because of its remoteness, is first and foremost a place of isolation, banishment and confinement. This feature has always been characteristic of Hirta. Because of its distance from the mainland, the island had for instance been previously used in the eighteenth century in order to exile Lord Erskine's wife, Lady Grange, whose plight Boswell had described as "*frightfully romantic*".³ One of the first commentators about St Kilda, Alexander Buchan who had spent 25 years as a minister there, had even expressed in 1727 his concerns about the predicament of the inhabitants of the island, forced to live in what he regarded as worse than a jailhouse:

*They are in a manner prisoners, yea worse, all things being considered; prisoners in other places have the advantage of visits from friends and converse with them, which these poor people have not for the greatest part of the year, except when the steward and his followers come along them to demand his rents;*⁴

This theme is of course appropriate to *Island of Wings*: the Mackenzies are going to live in utter isolation on Hirta, even though the Reverend is keen to stress that he considers this as his mission.

But the Mackenzies are strangers to this island. Altenberg sets the symbolic stage right from the start: the crossing is rough and young pregnant Lizzie Mackenzie can only hope her foetus copes better in the amniotic fluid that she does on the raging seas. All the natural elements combine in turning this crossing into a nasty experience thus highlighting the sense of infringement. Seasickness is the obvious physical symptom for this cataclysmic change, and the furious seas stress the tremendous upheaval the Mackenzies are about to cause. But animals also conjure up visions of warning for the missionary couple. The shape of a bird extending its wings is perceived as an ominous cross by Lizzie, a symbol of perils, tensions and uncertainty for their future life on the island and also for their marriage: she anticipates that the passion she still confesses for Neil may wane and that it is on the island that she will discover the true nature of her recently-married husband. She glimpses that this island will be full of dangers and discomfort: this is where they will realize who they really are. This corresponds to what Northrop Frye calls '*points of epiphany*' when describing the symbolism of islands in literature: it is in such highly charged locations (islands,

³ James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson followed by a Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, 1773.

⁴ Alexander Buchan, *A Description of St Kilda, the Most remote Western Isle of Scotland*, (Edinburgh, 1741), p. 24. (Buchan had been minister there from 1704 to 1729)

mountain tops etc) that one can eventually discover the real self.⁵ When leaving St Kilda after having rubbed shoulders with the natives for thirteen years, both Neil and Lizzie will be different persons, different from who they were when they first arrived: "*This island changes us — it eats into you and won't leave you alone*". (p. 235).

Island of Wings is a genuine colonial story: Neil Mackenzie is the ordained minister sent to evangelize the natives. The anxiety he and his wife feel before setting foot on the island corresponds to a natural feeling of the unknown, but also to the unnerving realization that it is a world and people they have to subdue. He gathers that his task, as set by the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, is far from easy: "*The minister looked at his new congregation and, if he did not find them quite like the noble savages he had expected, he still understood that there was a lot of work needed to raise them in the scale of thinking beings.*" (p. 22). Here Altenberg provocatively collates two images dating from the end of the eighteenth century and which were for a long time associated with the inhabitants of St Kilda: Rousseau's Noble Savage⁶ and one of Samuel Johnson's insulting statements about the Highlanders.⁷ And this echoes many visitors' points of view about the islanders: praising their innocence and cursing their laziness and ignorance in the same breath.

Neil Mackenzie's contempt for the natives is obvious from the start, even though one of the reasons why he was appointed was that he could speak and preach in Gaelic. The natives soon become the metaphoric 'Others'. As mentioned before, *Island of Wings* belongs to the biofiction genre and the real Reverend Mackenzie had himself voiced similar concerns in his diary about the islanders' lack of knowledge and understanding of religion:

When I went to the island in 1830 I was accompanied by my friend Dr M'Donald who during his short stay on the island preached several eloquent and powerful sermons, to which they apparently paid great attention; but I soon found that they were only charmed by his eloquence and energy, and had not knowledge enough to follow or understand his arguments. I found that it was the same with my own sermons — that they were too ignorant of the leading truths of Christianity and the practical effects which, under the influence of the Spirit of God, they were calculated to produce, to profit as I would like by my discourses. Consequently I at

⁵ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays*, (1957; London : Penguin Books, 1990), p. 203.

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⁷ A later travel-writer had also used the very same image and expression when recalling his 1841 visit to St Kilda and his meeting with Rev. Neil Mackenzie. "The good Minister [Rev. Neil Mackenzie] is teacher and writing-master, (literally prime minister) as well as priest, and seems to leave nothing untried to ameliorate the condition of his flock, whether by enlightening their spiritual darkness, improving their worldly fortunes, or, as Dr. Johnson would have said, raising them in the scale of thinking beings." James Wilson, *A Voyage Round the Coasts of Scotland and the Isles*, vol. 2, (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1862), p. 12. Samuel Johnson, "Inch Kenneth".

*once began Wednesday evening meetings, where I explained to them the Short Catechism, clause by clause, and almost word by word.*⁸

The Noble savage trope Mackenzie is keen to discover had actually been put forward as early as 1698 by Martin Martin, the second travel-writer ever to set foot on St Kilda, and it plagued the representation of the islanders for centuries.⁹ Most documents about the St Kildans allude to this trope, thus underpinning further interpretations and defining the visitors' expectations.

These sentiments of intellectual, moral and spiritual superiority displayed by Mackenzie echo the ones that all the visitors from mainland Scotland express throughout the novel, thus reproducing colonial discourse. The natives' are seen as 'primitives' and their only attributes are their skills and physical superiority; these are of course prerogatives that visitors look down as an inborn privilege dictated by their island rough environment, but which they in fact covertly admire. Mackenzie and visitors do not belong to this world and the natives' ability to live in such a rugged environment magnifies their own feelings of impotence and inferiority:

He [George Atkinson, a visitor] was thinking of the skills of the cragsmen. He had become conscious of his own insignificance and littleness as he had watched the two young men suspended and crawling among the cliffs. At times it had been difficult to make them out amongst the chaos of rock and sea, as if they were truly part of the elements. He knew that he could never be one of them. (p. 86)

Feelings of alienation are of course also transmitted through language. Lizzie Mackenzie does not speak a word of Gaelic and although her husband is a native speaker, he sometimes finds it hard getting used to the linguistic idiosyncrasies of the islanders, a way of speaking which he derogatorily dismisses as "*medieval*". Cultural, social and also linguistic distances are clearly marked by Altenberg. Reverend Mackenzie, in a true colonial manner, imposes his discourse, that is to say the current hermeneutic and beliefs of a Presbyterian minister. He begins with what corresponds to the essence of life on St Kilda: their own topography and mythology: "*He had charted all the place names and translated them into English in an effort to rob them of their threatening magic. He had tried to stamp out the St Kildans' vernacular way of explaining the world and replace it with a Gospel.*" (p. 91).

⁸ 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, pp. 31-32.

⁹ Martin Martin, *A Late Voyage to St Kilda, the Remotest of all the Hebrides*, (London: Brown & Goodwin, 1698).

The aim of this textual appropriation is to control the territory and to erase any mystical elements linked to their natural environment. Remapping the islands free of any occult or supernatural dimensions would mean that Mackenzie's spiritual and religious ascendancy would have to be acknowledged wholeheartedly by the St Kildans. However, Mackenzie realizes that he has failed; in spite of his textual take-over and however hard he has tried to instil respect and theological values into the souls of the St Kildans, he has not managed to understand their cultural and spiritual background, their own identity. "*He feared that there was a layer of existence on the island that he could not get to: a dimension that was deliberately hidden from him.*" (p. 91). Despite a rational and systematic approach towards them — he confesses for instance to being a devoted reader of Adam Smith¹⁰ — he knows that the islanders still elude his command and his grasp. When leaving the island, thirteen years after their arrival, a downcast Mackenzie can only acknowledge his failure: "*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.*" (p. 296). His theological creed and his individualistic approach could not but clash with the islanders' communal vision of life.

In spite of her ignorance of Gaelic, however, it is Lizzie MacKenzie who better understands the St Kildans. Even if at first she decides to shut herself off the natives and their customs, she realizes that she shares more elements with them than she thought. Her biggest personal quality over her husband is her open-mindedness: she does not harbour as intransigent conceptions as his Calvinist dogma. She is clearly touched by the female St Kildans' reactions and condolences after the death of her twin daughters, unlike her husband who rejects these as an act of idolatry that should not be tolerated. "*Lizzie, still struggling to believe in the God who had taken her girls away, wished that she too could free her mind and create a mythology of her own like the St Kildan women had done.*" (p. 101).

Altenberg portrays her in a far more favourable light than her dour and uncompromising husband. The real Lizzie Mackenzie has been nearly completely forgotten in history books. She's only mentioned a couple of times in her husband's diary and is only

¹⁰ For instance : "*Neil MacKenzie had read *The Wealth of Nations* and knew well that in order to build a new society for Scotland it was vital to remove the obstacles that hinder the natural progress of economic changes and social order. This is what he had been taught at university, and he believed that it was the only way to a modern society based on moral and scientific achievement.*" (p. 13)

sketchily remembered by travel-writers in the 1840s as “a *fresh-complexioned pleasant-looking person*”.¹¹ But what Altenberg manages to do in her biofiction is to show that the minister’s wife, far from being only “*pleasant-looking*”, displays the humane values her husband is deprived of and is the one who opposes the SPCK’s evangelical and colonial projects.

This deficiency of understanding and this rejection of any cognitive effort, typical features of the spirit of the colonizers, also operate at a more personal level for the Mackenzies. Lizzie’s dreams about married life with Neil, as well as life as a couple on the island, have eventually vanished. The natives and St Kilda have acted as a mirror to her couple. Neil, however, has refused to acknowledge the gaze of the natives, concentrating instead on his colonizing and evangelical mission.

Like a tribute they have to pay the island for their visit, the Mackenzies lose their first baby shortly after disembarking. Unable to understand a young boy’s warnings in Gaelic, Lizzie pursues her walk towards a nest of wild sea birds whose angry and violent reaction at being disturbed causes her to run away, to trip, and to miscarry. Language, as we’ve seen before clearly isolates Lizzie from the rest of the community. But she nonetheless later shows in the novel that understanding people, the natives, is not only through linguistic means but through more personal and unspeakable ties. As a woman, she more than once says that she feels the conditions of the other women, even though very few can communicate with her in English. Subjected to the elements, they share a common destiny on this island. There is a clear discrepancy and a major bone of contention between Lizzie and her husband: “*They know this island — we do not.*” says Lizzie, to which her husband replies: “*I command this island!*” (p. 167) Because of his colonial and his Presbyterian outlook, both conditioned by an adherence to logocentric cannons, Neil Mackenzie refuses to take the environment into account, contrary to the islanders who display their anti-anthropocentric view of the world.

The couple also lose their second babies, twins who die nearly a week after their birth, victim of what the locals mystically refer to as the ‘8-day illness’, a disease they do not try to explain or understand, but simply attribute to fate. This illness was in fact due to very poor

¹¹ James Wilson, *A Voyage round the Coasts of Scotland and the Isles*, vol. 2, (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1862), p. 11.

hygiene and to ritualistic practices after delivery. Because of this, every birth on the island is submitted to a ruthless lottery: any newborn is not sure to survive until the 8-day threshold has been reached.¹²

Altenberg shows through the death of babies that the mainlanders' and the islanders' philosophy and outlook are different. For the Mackenzies, nurtured on Post-Enlightenment individualistic concepts, the death of a child is lived as a highly personal trauma. For the St Kildans, it is perceived as a communal tragedy endangering the future of life on the island and their own survival as a species.

Lizzie Mackenzie's life, punctuated with regular pregnancies, is however utterly changed by the arrival of a foreign castaway she decides to take care of at home and who eventually becomes her lover for a very short time.

There isn't, however, any counter-narrative in the novel. Neil Mackenzie quickly sends the foreign castaway into custody in Dunvegan. Neither are the native St Kildans given any narratological voices to express their dismay. The narrator can only hint at their look of alarm when witnessing the centripetal forces crushing their traditions and customs. Only Lizzie's sympathetic accounts and her kind-hearted attitudes towards the female natives make up for her husband's intransigent admonitions and harsh behaviour.

Indeed, Reverend Mackenzie, fulfilling his evangelical mission, prescribes new definitions to interpret their world. These dogmas allow him to control the population, dictating what is right and what is not, therefore contradicting centuries of traditions and customs. "*There was a time when they were like puppets in my hands, impressionable and naïve [...]*". (p. 304) However the islanders will always escape Neil Mackenzie's comprehension: their rituals and customs cannot be understood, in spite of his theological and spiritual guidance: The natives can be judged according to the visitors' mainland standards and Protestant ethics, but they retain their intrinsic freedom. They will never be

¹² The journalist Robert Connell, who visited the island twice in the 1880s, had a careful look at the census and the figures left by Mackenzie: "During the first period of sixteen years, viz, from 1830 to 1846, the total number of deaths on the island was, as above mentioned, 68. Of these no fewer than 32 certainly resulted from this one fearful malady, and the total infantile mortality was 37 [...]. The second period, for which the returns are in possession of the Registrar-General, embraces thirty and a-half years, namely from the beginning of 1856 to the end of June last. In those years the number of deaths actually exceeded the number of births. The births numbered 81 — 5 of them illegitimate — and the deaths 84. [...] Of the total — 84 — no fewer than 52 represent infants who died between the fourth and the twenty-seventh day after birth. Practically the whole of these died from lockjaw." Robert Connell, *St Kilda and the St Kildans*, (London & Glasgow, Hamilton, Adams & Co — Thomas D. Morison, 1887), pp. 103-04.

subjugated. “*The spell is broken and all I want now is to be released from this place.*” (p. 304) Mackenzie confesses.

To CONCLUDE:

Island of Wings highlights a critical moment, a turning point, for the islanders and the island but also for the Mackenzies. Neil Mackenzie, as a colonial idealist who is convinced that his mission will give him the prestige and renown he deserves, faces disillusion.

The conclusion to Altenberg’s novel, and the end of Reverend Mackenzie’s life on St Kilda is his decision not to back the Free Church in 1843 and to resort instead to the comfort of a manse on the mainland. This may appear as a defeat for Neil, but it also left the islanders in a limbo until 1865 when a proper Free Kirk minister was despatched to the island. Robert Connell, a journalist from *The Glasgow Herald* who travelled to St Kilda in 1885 and 1886 bore witness to Mackenzie’s legacy and what happened after he left:

At every point in the island one comes upon evidences of the practical usefulness of a former minister, the Rev. Neil Mackenzie, under whose beneficent guidance the St Kildans appear to have put forth some energy to improve their condition. That, however, was in the good old days of cakes and ale, before the Disruption, when whistling was not yet a sin, and when fiddling and piping, and even dancing, were not unknown in St Kilda.¹³

From a personal point of view, the Mackenzies have greatly suffered on the island. The couple is now torn apart and they both acknowledge when they leave that the rift has widened to an irreconcilable extent.

But Mackenzie’s professional role in St Kilda has also been ambiguous and this is clearly shown by Altenberg: he was obviously keen to fulfil his mission, but as a civiliser he also wanted to improve the islanders’ living conditions. His contribution was to teach them better hygiene and raise their standards of living, in spite of their resolute attachment to traditions: “*I moved their world when they did not think it possible;*” says he when leaving the island (p. 304).¹⁴

However, it is Mackenzie’s good intentions that brought about the collapse of the islanders’ independence and identity. By launching a philanthropic call to help the islanders build new comfortable houses, he drew the British public’s attention to the unusual and exotic life led

¹³ Robert CONNELL, *St Kilda and the St Kildans*, (London & Glasgow, Hamilton, Adams & Co — Thomas D. Morison, 1887), pp. 52-53.

¹⁴ However the St Kildans had to wait until the 1890s and the forceful intervention of the Free Kirk minister Fiddes, who had also trained in midwifery and who insisted on the use of antiseptics and the presence of a nurse on the island, to see the end of the 8-day illness. See: David A. Quine, *St Kilda Snapshots based on Lachlan MacDonald’s Collection*, (South Lochs: The Islands Book Trust, 2011), p. 12.

by the St Kildans. The Industrial Revolution was in full swing and that soon allowed passenger ships to undertake regular crossings from Glasgow, turning the West coast of Scotland and more specifically St Kilda, into a tourist attraction for the wealthiest.¹⁵ There was a clear clash of class consciousness, contempt, and patronising views, a compassionate commentator even using the word “zoo” to describe the outrageous behaviour of some of the visitors towards the St Kildans.¹⁶ Mackenzie’s intervention, the Industrial Revolution, and the detrimental attention they received were the final nails in their coffin. The young St Kildans emigrated and the population dwindled and then finally on August 29th 1930 the 36 last inhabitants of St Kilda decided to relocate on the mainland; but that was a *Zeitgeist* neither the Mackenzies nor the St Kildans could oppose.

Altenberg’s biofiction, because of its female point of view and its colonial perspective, adds a valuable contribution to a vast field of books about St Kilda and raises debates and questions such as the colonizers and colonized people’s attachment to nature and the environment, the role and the involvement of women and finally the significance of the religious discourse in colonial projects.

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¹⁵ See : Donald E. Meek, *Steamships to St Kilda. John McCallum, Martin Orme, and the Life and Death of an Island Community*, (South Lochs: Islands Book Trust, 2010).

¹⁶ “[...] so many of the tourists treat them as if they were wild animals at the zoo. They throw sweets to them, openly mock at them, and I have seen them standing at the church door during service, laughing and talking, and staring in as if at an entertainment got up for their amusement.” Norman Heathcote, *St Kilda*, (London: Longman, Green and Co, 1900), pp. 69-70.