The Tangle o the Isles

By The Unreliable Narrator

> *The earth belongs unto the Lord*
> *and all that it contains*
> *except for the West Highland piers*
> *for they belong to MacBraynes*
> *—Anon.*

Islands are finite spaces enclosed by boundaries of indeterminate extent. This is a result of the Coastline Paradox, and specifically the Richardson Effect, to wit: the sum of the segments is inversely proportional to the common length of the segments. In other words, the shorter the ruler you use to measure a coastline with, the longer the coastline you're measuring becomes; as ruler length l approaches zero, the measured outline of any island approaches infinity — or, the more you look, the more you see.

This maxim applies to the Hebrides — that fractal scatter of rock and machair — more than most. Northern Europe's largest archipelago is also its most physically diverse. Just eighty miles, as the solan flies, separates the flat, sun-struck island of Tiree from the cloud-scraping alien ramparts of the Quiraing on Skye, and a shade over fifty lies between Staffa's basalt cliffs and Barra's caster-sugar beaches.

Canna, Inner Hebrides [Wikimedia Commons]

The Hebrides enter the written record in the first century BCE, with Diodorus

Siculus's account of the Hyperboreans, who dwell 'in the regions beyond the land of the Celts' — his description of a temple there is widely assumed to be a reference to the stone circle at Callanish, on Lewis. Diodorus, though, is recounting legends told by older authors, such as Hecateus of Abdera, whose works have now vanished, so tales of these islands in the uttermost north were in circulation in the classical world centuries before Diodorus wrote them down.

It might seem strange, to some, that ancient Greeks had heard of distant Callanish, while no rumour of Stonehenge seems to have reached their ears. But mainlanders everywhere think of islands, and islanders, as separated by the sea: in reality, the sea connects them. It is Stonehenge that lies marooned, isolated thirty miles inland, cut off from the commerce of the world. The Hebrides have been snagging and absorbing peoples since the ice retreated last; and after Diodorus put pen to papyrus, the Gaels blew in from Ireland, and the Vikings heeled past Cape Wrath to claim whatever they could swing a keel around. With genes like these, it's no wonder that these islanders are not insular.

On the map, the islands lie strewn across the north-west corner, like a broken afterthought — but the map is not the territory, and Hebridean people have never felt themselves peripheral. Even when they were scattered — to Glasgow; to Canada; to all the ends of the Earth — the islands travelled with them, in words and song, for better or worse.

And islands call to people, too. For mainland writers, they have a particular appeal: notwithstanding the prospect of a quiet retreat — and of cheap lodging — their definite outlines, demarcating one island from another, are full of fictive potentials for chapters and verse, worlds in miniature for characters to rattle in. George Orwell nestled down in Jura, to conjure up a dystopian London, and Virginia Woolf is not alone among the literati in finding that Skye is chust sublime.

In this issue of *The Bottle Imp*, we go a-reiving through the western isles, cutting across the blue-black sea, to see what treasures we can come away with. Setting the stroke, we have Kevin MacNeil, taking the measure of contemporary Hebridean poetry in **Portable Rootedness and Other Contradictions**, and seated alongside is Priscilla Scott, keeping the rhythm with **A Sense of Place in the Poetry of Màiri Mhòr nan Òran**. Next in line is Kenneth Steven, marking time with **Coll and the Poetry of Islands**, shoulder to shoulder with Madeleine

Bunting, drawing out the dreams and realities of **Island Mythologies**. Then we have John Hodgart, aiming at the furthest fringe, St Kilda, in **Wrestling with Demons and Deities: Sue Glover's *The Straw Chair***, and Moray Watson, digging down to grasp **The Idea of Islands in Gaelic Fiction**. Pulling like a hero, Ronald Black shows us **Sorley MacLean, Derick Thomson, and the Women Most Dangerous to Men**, and Maggie Scott sends the spray flying with the **Scots Word of the Season: Skoosh**. And with her eye turned north, Alison Grant watches out for **Viking Influence on the Gaelic Place-Names of the Hebrides**. We've Atlantic salt on our lips, a haul of **book reviews**, and a fair wind!

Heel y'ho, boys, let her go, boys …

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