

*Text and pictures about
a rather special place in Scotland
St Kilda
features & fractions & fate*

Bernd Rohrmann



Bernd Rohrmann (Melbourne/Australia)

St Kilda Islands in Scotland - Features & Fate

May 2015

In April 2015 I visited Hirta in St Kilda. Therefore I have created this essay, in which its main features and its fate are described, enriched by several maps and my pictures.

Location

The Scottish St Kilda islands are an isolated archipelago 64 kilometres west-northwest of North Uist in the North Atlantic Ocean, which belongs to the Outer Hebrides of Scotland.



The largest island is Hirta, whose sea cliffs are the highest in the United Kingdom; the other islands are Dùn, Soay and Boreray.

Name

The origin of the name *St Kilda* is still debated. Its Gaelic name, referring to the island Hirta, is "Hiort", its Norse name possibly "Skildir". The meaning, in Gaelic terms, may be "westland". The Old Norse name for the spring on Hirta, "Childa", is also seen as influence. The "St" in St Kilda does not refer to any person of holiness. One interpretation says that it is a distortion of the Norse naming.

The earliest written records of island life date from the Late Middle Ages, referring to Hirta.



Aerial view 1

Landscape

The archipelago represents the remnants of a long-extinct ring volcano rising from a seabed plateau approximately 40 metres below sea level.

The landscape is dominated by very rocky areas. The highest point in the archipelago is on Hirta, the Conachair ('the beacon') at 430 metres. In the southeast is Oiseval ('east fell'), which reaches 290 metres, and Mullach Mòr ('big hill summit') 361 metres lies west of Conachair. Ruival ('red fell') 137 metres dominated the western cliffs.

Boreray reaches 384 metres and Soay 378 metres.

The extraordinary stac (i.e., a high single rock in the sea) An Armin reaches 196 metres, and Stac Lee 172 metres - making them the highest sea stacks in Britain.



On the east coast of Hirta is a bay, Loch Hiort, used by ships, and settlements were established there.

Weather

The weather at the St Kilda archipelago is mostly rough. Southwesterly winds prevail. In winter, fierce storms occur. Gale force winds occur, and gusts may reach 180 kilometres per hour. Waves 12m high have been observed.

Temperatures are generally cool, averaging 6 C in January and 12 C in July.



Stac An Armin



Cliff face of Stac Levenish

In case of stormy weather, ships can not enter the Loch Hiort bay, and thus dingys can not be used to land at the beach.

The tidal range is 2.9 metres, and ocean swells of 5 metres frequently occur - in that case landings are pretty much impossible.

Snow is rare, it occurs only for 1 or 2 weeks per year.

Early history of settlement

St Kilda may have been permanently inhabited for two millennia, from the Bronze Age to the 20th century. In research after 1900, some evidence of earlier Neolithic settlement was found, mainly on Hirta but also on Boreray.

There are indications that Vikings briefly settled on St Kilda around the year 900, however, they did not maintain this.

The population probably never exceeded 180; from about 1850 onwards it fell below 100 residents.

Medieval times

At first the St Kildans lived in "black houses", then "earth houses". These became dome-shaped structures above the ground, constructed of flat boulders with a cap of turf on the top - originally houses to live in, later used as storage buildings.

More than 1000 of these "cleits" were build, mostly on Hirta, yet on Boreray as well.



Earth houses ~ "cleits"

The St Kilda islands were owned by Scottish lords, for a long time the Macleods of Dunvegan in the Skye island. All residents lived in a small settlement in Village Bay, "The village". Some seasonal dwellings for summer times were in Gleann Bay (north-west of the Village; see map above).

The landlord granted land to the islanders through a factor who collected the rents on his annual visit to St Kilda. He was represented by a "ground officer", a St Kildan, who dealt with the islanders on a day-to-day basis.

Until the late 19-th century, rents were mainly paid in kind. The factor sold the produce, and also supplied the islanders with to be imported goods, to be taken from the mainland of Scotland.

Modern times

In 1860 the island owners (the McLeods) decided to build 16 modern houses, which changed the village significantly. These were rectangular-shaped cottages built from stone.



The village street as it looks nowadays

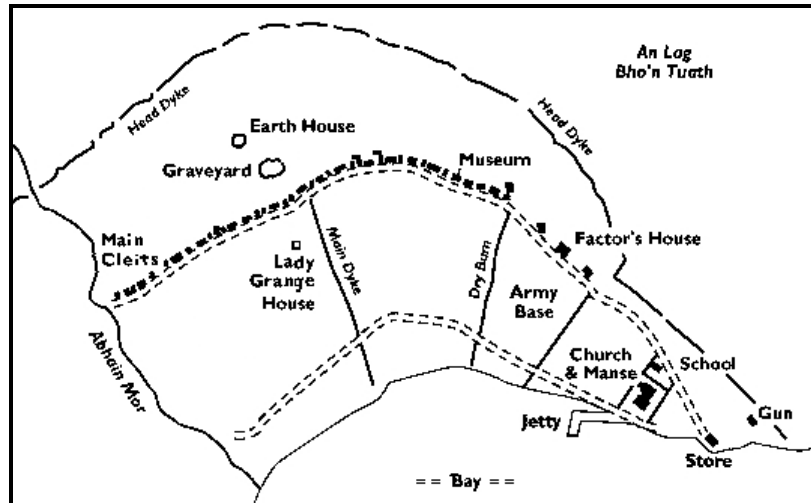


Two restored houses from 1860



The Store house .

The "village street" - still evident today - runs from the Store building along the new houses to a set of regularly used cleits.



Sketch of old village map



Aerial view 2 - - this includes the historic village and the modern military buildings

The cemetery of the village, in circular shape, is still there; most gravestones are little rocks.



Cemetery in Hirta

Food

For the St Kildans getting food was all the time a grave problem. The islands soil was not good enough, just barley and some potatoes could be grown. The only animals which could somewhat domesticated were the sheep, which happened to a moderate degree.

Fishing was restricted because of the heavy seas and unpredictable weather, thus was never a significant part of getting food.

The real source were birds. Fowling seabirds: The islanders took gannets, fulmars and puffins for food, feathers and oil, some of which they consumed themselves, the rest going to pay the rent. The birds, many many thousands, were taken during the breeding season which lasted from about March to September. They were caught by hand, or with a fowling rod or a snare. Bird eggs were also collected. These fowling activities involved considerable skills in climbing.

Only much later cows had been brought to Hirta, and became part of the food customs, including butter and cheese.

Over the centuries, shortage of food during winter induced several times serious famine periods.

Social community life

Given the small number of residents - always below 200, and often below 100 - basically everyone knew everyone, as all residents lived in the same little village. and social cliques hardly ever developed. Each house hosted very many people, generally covering three generations, and there were no private areas - it was a one-room setting.

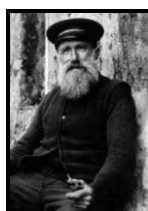
Because of the often harsh weather, most activities had to happen inside; in summer also outside, on the street.



People in the village street, mostly men, in 1886

An unusual aspect of St Kildan life was the daily 'parliament'. This was a meeting held in the village street every morning, after church visit and prayers and attended by all the adult - only males though.

During this event they would decide upon the day's activities. No one led the meeting, and all men had the right to speak. Reports say that "discussion frequently spread discord, but never in recorded history were feuds so bitter as to bring about a permanent division in the community".



Old resident, 1929

Manufacturing special clothes was a main activity. It was based on producing yarn out of wool from sheep (collected every year), using a spin wheel. This became later attractive to visiting tourists.



Woman with spinning wheel, observed by tourists

Both men and women had to work very hard. Altogether it appears that women were more intensely burdened than men.



Woman in front of their house, some knitting, plus two kids

Just once St Kilda was also used as a detention place, almost a prison - to use islands as prison was very common in England (even Australia was used for that!) but not a Scottish mode. Nevertheless, after very heavy family conflicts, Lord Grange (Edinburgh) kidnapped his wife and placed her in captivity - from 1834 to 1840 in remote St Kilda, where she had to live under extremely harsh conditions in a cleit outside the village street (see map above).



Lady Grange - painting 1710

Marriages were obviously a local issue. Incest was hard to avoid. However, there seems to be no proper research regarding potential inbreeding effects in St Kilda.

Crime hardly existed, and institutions such as police were simply not needed, let alone a prison. Altogether the community life in Hirta was definitively different to any other village in Scotland -- and many early visitors pointed out that the predominant theme of life on St Kilda was isolation. Yet many residents had only crude ideas about people on other islands, because they had never been away.

Religion

The islanders' isolation and dependence on the bounty of the natural world obviously meant that their philosophy was linked to Druidism.

Starting around 1700, Scottish missionaries arrived in St Kilda and began to establish Christianity - yet the idea of organised religion did not take hold soon.

However, from 1822 onwards reverends instituted by the Scottish church achieved changes through intense preaching and establishing regular church services. A new church and manse were erected at the east end of the village in 1830, substituting earlier provisional facilities.



Church in Hirta; in 1884 a schoolroom was built as an annexe



The interior of the church at Oiseabhal in St Kilda

Later in the 19th century unfortunate conditions took place. Firstly, the combat between different religious positions in Scotland were carried over to St Kilda, overdemanding the people there. Secondly, with the arrival of Rev. John Mackay in 1865 rather extreme structures were installed. He placed an absurd emphasis on religious observance, for example: . Three two-to-three-hour services on Sunday, attendance compulsory.



Church minister around 1870

St Kildans were very pious and obediently followed the commands. The impact were bad: Time spent in religious gatherings interfered seriously with the practical routines of the island. Old ladies and children who made noise in church were lectured at length and warned of dire punishments in the afterworld.

During a period of food shortages on the island, a relief vessel arrived on a Saturday, but the minister said that the islanders had to spend the day preparing for church on the Sabbath, and it was Monday before supplies were landed.

Children were forbidden to play games and required to carry a Bible wherever they went. Mackay remained minister on St Kilda for 24 years.

All in all, religion became a quite unfortunate factor in peoples' life, and certainly contributed considerably to the increasing trouble they had to cope with the hard conditions of getting along in St Kilda.

Education

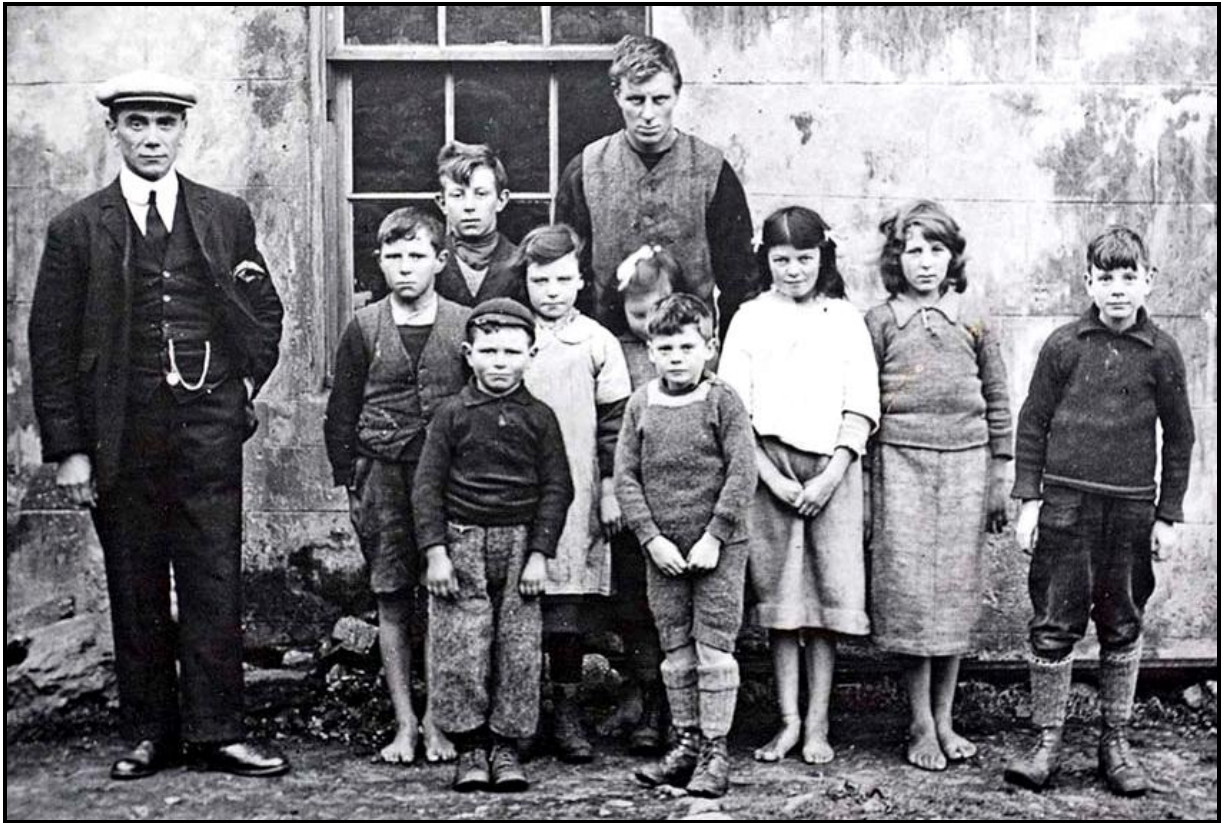
For a long time there was no school in Hirta - basically education did not exist, beyond crucial skills necessary to live on St Kilda. Nevertheless, all people were proud of their children.



Kids and their parents

Official schooling began around 1820; for decades it was tightly linked to religious programs, and many teachers were church ministers or their relatives. Eventually, in 1906, a little school was built, a room attached to the church.

Essential teaching subjects, besides religious matters, were reading, writing, basic mathematics and both the Gaelic and the English language. Of course English was essential, as it was the official language for any interaction in Scotland.



School: Teacher and pupils

This school room, with benches for about 20 pupils and a workplace for the teacher has been restored and can be visited.



Historic teaching room in the school

Communication with the Scottish mainland

A reliable connection only became possible when steamships came to St Kilda. In the 19th century regular lines were established, first for freight and then also for tourists.

Starting in 1876, the so-called "St Kilda mailboat" was sometimes used - a piece of wood shaped like a boat, attached to a bladder made of sheepskin, and a small bottle or tin containing a message. Launched when the wind came from the north-west, almost two-thirds of the messages were actually later found on the west coast of Scotland



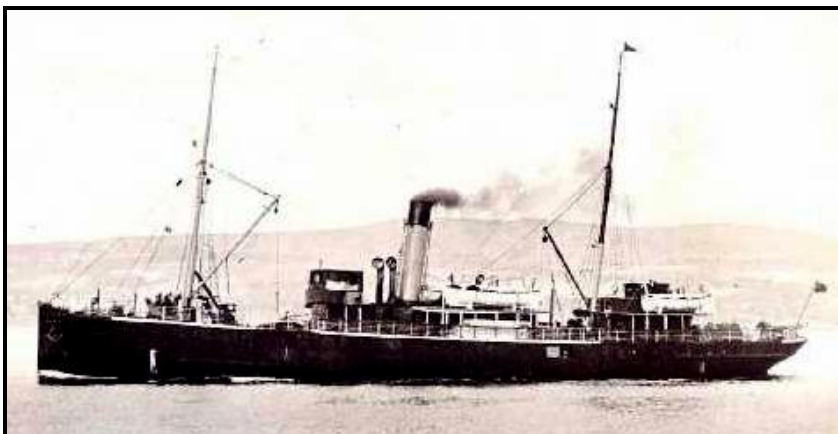
Launching the "St Kilda mailboat"

The islands little post office - which also served visitor who came with the tourist ships - was opened in 1899.



St Kilda's "Post Office"

To establish a regular service, provided by a steamship line, was an endless struggle though. For some time the steamship "Hebrides" provided this, dealing with both freight and travellers.



Ship "Hebrides"



Fauna and flora

Two different early sheep types have survived on these remote islands, the Soay, a Neolithic type, and the Boreray, an Iron Age type. Up to 2000 were kept by the St Kildans on the islands of Hirta and Boreray. Some of them are still there.



Soay sheep on Hirta

The islands are a breeding ground for many important seabird species: One of the world's largest colony of Northern Gannets, totalling 30,000 pairs, amount to 24 percent of the global population. There are 49,000 breeding pairs of Leach's Petrels, up to 90 percent of the European population; 136,000 pairs of Atlantic Puffins, about 30 percent of the UK total breeding population, and 67,000 Northern Fulmar pairs, about 13 percent of the UK total.



Atlantic Puffin (*Fratercula arctica*). Seabirds were the mainstay of the St Kildan diet.

There is/was also the St Kilda Field Mouse, an endemic species.

Plant life is heavily influenced by the salt spray, strong winds and acidic peaty soils. No trees grow on the archipelago! However, there are about 100 flowering plants.

Health trouble

For a long time the people living in St Kilda were, health-wise, amazingly robust. Yet that changed intensely when tourism began around 1850 - steam ships began to visit Hirta. The boats brought other previously unknown diseases to which the immune system of the residents was not adapted, such as coughing or the flu, and worse, cholera and smallpox.

An especially sad case was the illness "tetanus infantum", which resulted in infant mortality rates as high as 80 percent during the late 19th century, usually occurring within a few days.

From 1884 onwards Hirta had most of the time a resident nurse (often linked to the pastor or the teacher)- yet never a doctor. Seriously ill people could only be moved into a mainland hospital if a ship was coming to St Kilda.

Events in World War I

At an early stage the Royal Navy erected a signal station on Hirta, and daily communications with the mainland were established for the first time in St Kilda's history

In a belated response, the German submarine SM U-90 arrived in Village Bay on 15 May 1918 and, after issuing a warning, started shelling the island. The wireless station was destroyed but no loss of life occurred.



The 4-inch QF gun on Hirta looking towards Dùn

As a result of this attack, a 4-inch Mark III QF gun was erected on a promontory overlooking Village Bay, but it never faced military use.

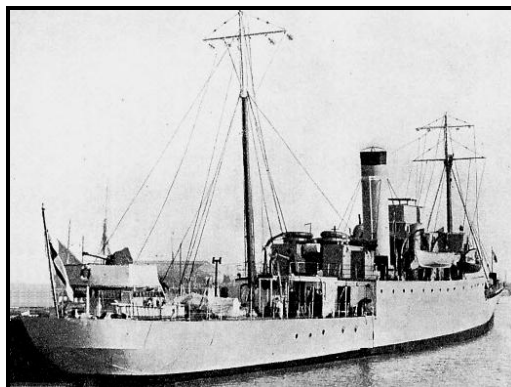
Cultural trouble

For a long time the people on Hirta were not really able to be a fitting member of Scotland. The main reasons were: Their language was Gaelic, not English; they could not read or write; they didn't know much about the world outside St Kilda, and they did not use, and thus couldn't understand, the concept of money. All this changed slowly when religion and education were imported to the island, and when ships with tourists started to come - but only for younger, not for older residents.

Evacuation: The end of St Kilda

After the war even tougher times loomed for St Kilda. During the 1920s a series of crop failures occurred. This contributed to a food crisis. Even heavier was the impact of the decision of many young people to leave the island, because they were essential for fowling seabirds and taking care of cattle. Furthermore, some people died because they could not be moved fast enough into a mainland hospital. The population fell from 73 in 1920 to 37 in 1929. A stern debate began in the government and other Scottish institutions whether Hirta could be maintained, by improving its facilities and links via ship procedures, or should be given up. Many residents had already resigned and voted for leaving.

So the end of St Kilda came. On 29 August 1930, the entire remaining population of 36 inhabitants was evacuated and brought to Morvern on the Scottish mainland. The ship "Horwell" took the passengers and their few packages. Following a tradition, the islanders had left an open Bible and a small pile of oats in each house.



Ship Harebell

All the sheep and cattle were loaded on the ship "Dunara Castle", and later sold, in order to reduce the evacuation costs..

This day had beautiful weather, the sky was blue and the sea calm. At first the St Kildans were in good mood - yet when the islands got of sight and seemed to disappear, quite a few people were sad, and some cried ...

Changes in Hirta after the village was abandoned

In 1931 Sir Reginald McLeod sold the St Kilda archipelago to the Marquis of Bute, who run St Kilda as a bird reserve. In 1956 the islands were bequeathed to the National Trust for Scotland.

From 1957 onwards the Scottish army established military facilities in Hirta, namely a radar station on a mountain to monitor missile testing, and buildings in the middle of the historic village - this is really a bad thing, because it damaged historic features. Yet at that time taking care of St Kilda's history was not yet seen as relevant. Anyway, in 2009 the Ministry of Defence announced that it was considering closing down its missile testing ranges, and potentially leaving the Hirta base unmanned.

In 1987 St Kilda became a World Heritage site - an incredible honour for an island where actually no one lives anymore! It is one of the few Heritage sites in the world to hold joint status for its natural and cultural qualities.

The Scottish government does not accept any settlement on the St Kilda archipelago. Visitors are welcome though.

In recent years some travel companies offer ship trips to St Kilda, e.g., in Oban or in Stornoway; these include to explore the historic village.

Media and the arts

The story of St Kilda has attracted many artistic interpretations, including paintings, songs, films and even an opera.

The steamship company running a service between Glasgow and St Kilda commissioned a short (18-minute) silent movie, *St Kilda, Britain's Loneliest Isle*. Released in 1928, it shows some scenes in the lives of the island's inhabitants. In 1937, after reading of the St Kilda evacuation, Michael Powell made the film *The Edge of the World* about the dangers of island depopulation. It was shot on Foula, one of the Shetland Islands. The writer Dorothy Dunnett wrote a short story, "*The Proving Climb*", set on St Kilda; it was published in 1973 in the anthology *Scottish Short Stories*.

In 1982, the noted Scottish filmmaker and theatre director Bill Bryden made the Channel 4-funded film *Ill Fares The Land* about the last years of St Kilda. It is not currently on commercial release.

The fictional island of Laerg, which features in the 1962 novel *Atlantic Fury* by Hammond Innes, is closely based on Hirta.

The Scottish folk rock band Runrig recorded a song called "Edge of the World" on the album *The Big Wheel*, which dwells on the islanders' isolated existence. The folk music singer/song-writer Brian McNeill wrote about one of St. Kilda's prodigal sons, a restless fellow named Ewan Gillies, who left St. Kilda to seek his fortune by prospecting for gold first in Australia and later California. The song recounts fortunes won and lost, his return to the island, and concludes with his inability to stay. Entitled "Ewan and the Gold", it was published on the album *Back O' The North Wind* in 1991 and is the subject of McNeill's audio-visual presentation about the Scottish diaspora.

In a 2005 poll of *Radio Times* readers, St Kilda was named as the ninth greatest natural wonder in the British Isles. In 2007 an opera (!) in Scots Gaelic called *St Kilda: A European Opera* about the story of the islands received funding from the Scottish Government. As part of its legacy, the production left a year-long time lapse camera on Hirta. *Britain's Lost World*, a three-part BBC documentary series about St Kilda began broadcasting on 19 June 2008.

St Kilda was also commemorated on a new series of banknotes issued by the Clydesdale Bank in 2009; an image based on a historical photograph of residents of St Kilda appeared on the reverse of an issue of £5 notes.



Banknote containing a St Kilda photograph

And even stamps were issued by the Post Office depicting St. Kilda in 1986 and in 2004.



Stamp presenting a St Kilda view

In 2006, the documentary film "On the Edge of the World" by director Sylvestre Sбилle was released. The film depicts the history of the life on the isle and follows UNESCO volunteers, working on St Kilda.

In 2009 Pròiseact nan Ealan, the Gaelic Arts Agency, announced plans to commemorate the evacuation on 29 August (the 79th anniversary), including an exhibition in Kelvingrove Art Gallery. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar are planning a feasibility study for a new visitor centre to tell the story of St Kilda.

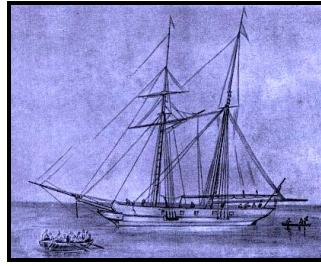


Art piece showing St Kilda

Given that in recent years travel companies in Oban offer ship trips to the St Kilda archipelago, painters may again be interested in the distinctive views of these unique islands.

The link between the Scottish St Kilda and the one in Melbourne/Australia

Actually the two are linked - regarding the name: Melbourne's St Kilda was named after a schooner "Lady of St Kilda", which had landed in Melbourne in 1841 - by the governor Charles La Trobe and the ship's master and early settler Lieutenant James Ross Lawrence.



Yacht "Lady of St Kilda" (pencil sketch)

The ship's original owner, Thomas Acland, had named it after Lady Grange (see info above).

In 1851, 36 islanders emigrated to Melbourne/Australia on board of the ship Priscilla. 20 died during the travel; the 16 arriving ones were settled near the St Kilda suburb.

Personal Postscriptum

<> I own several books about St Kilda in Scotland, which I recommend:

(1)

"St Kilda: A Journey to the End of the World", by Campbell McCutcheon (Tempus, 2002). It is full of interesting stories about how ships linked St Kilda with Scotland's main land.

(2)

"The life and death of St Kilda", by Tom Steel (Harper Press, 2011). This is the best-researched and most comprehensive book.

(3)

"St Kilda", by David Quine & Colin Baxter (Baxter Photography Ltd, 2008). This booklet contains excellent pictures.

<> Further information sources are:

(A)

Website "St Kilda" of the National Trust of Scotland, containing comprehensive information;

(B)

"St Kilda: Family, Community, and the Wider World", by Fleming, A. (2000), in Journal of Anthropological Archaeology 19, 348-368 or online at <http://www.idealibrary.com> A thought-provoking essay on the social history of St Kilda.

(C)

Text "St Kilda, Scotland" on the Wikipedia Encyclopedia, including many pictures.

<> In April 2015 I visited St Kilda with the Dutch sailship "Tecla".

We landed, using its dingy, and I could explore the historic village completely, including the cemetery, the school, and the St Kilda museum in a restored house.

<> The pictures presented in this essay are either photographs I made during my visit of St Kilda, or they are historic ones, taken from the "St Kilda" website.

