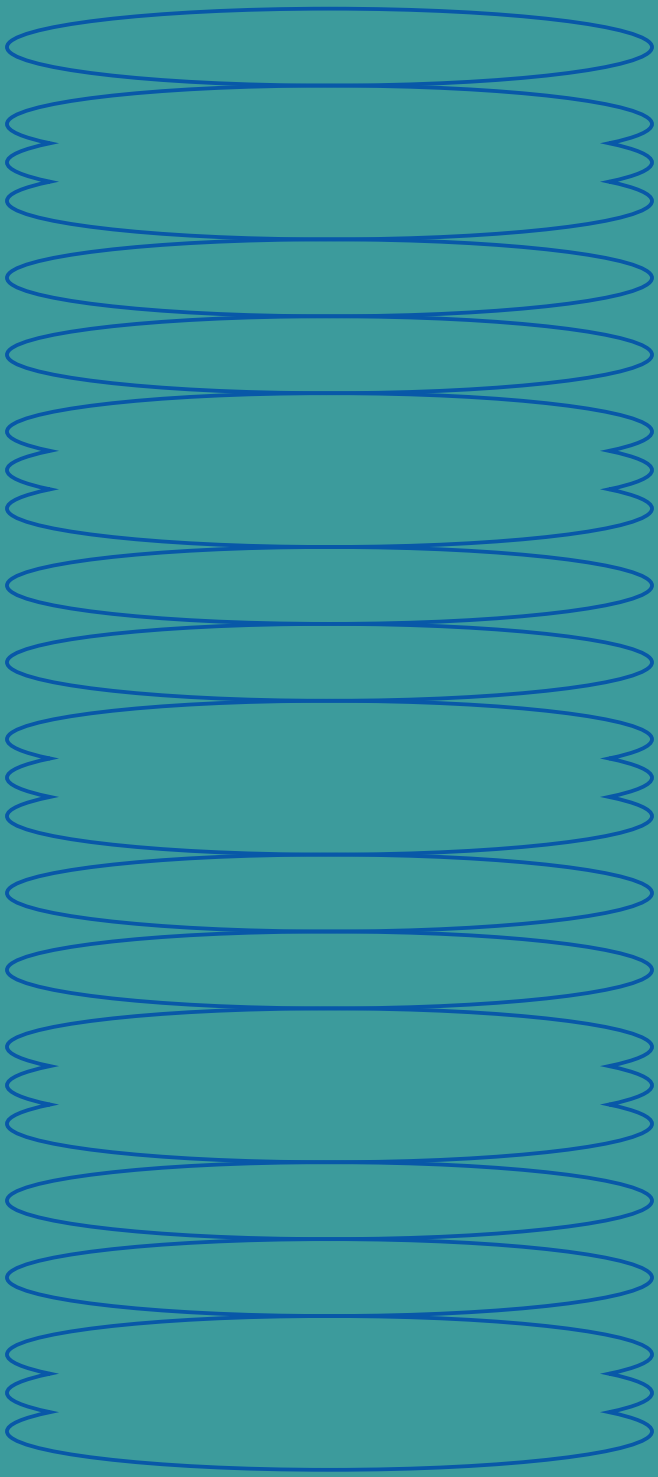


Ùir-sgeul is the fourth issue in ATLAS' ongoing series of chapbooks printed and bound by hand on the Making Publics Press —a book making studio that travels around Lochalsh and Skye which has all the equipment to print, bind and trim your own books and publications.

This chapbook emerges alongside the Ùir-sgeul exhibition by artist Eilidh MacKenzie, on display at the Skye and Lochalsh Archives in Summer 2025.

Eilidh was invited to take part in the Curious Travellers artist residency with ATLAS Arts and Sabhal Mòr Ostaig in 2024, as part of a wider, ongoing collaborative research project between the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, Glasgow University, the Natural History Museum, London.

In this issue, Eilidh shares her account of the research developed and collected during the residency. Her work draws together archival materials, field visits, and conversations to explore the writing and legacy of Thomas Pennant, and the histories of shielings and shieling culture, learning with school children, oral traditions, the figure of the Gruagach, and the role of song in seasonal and everyday life.

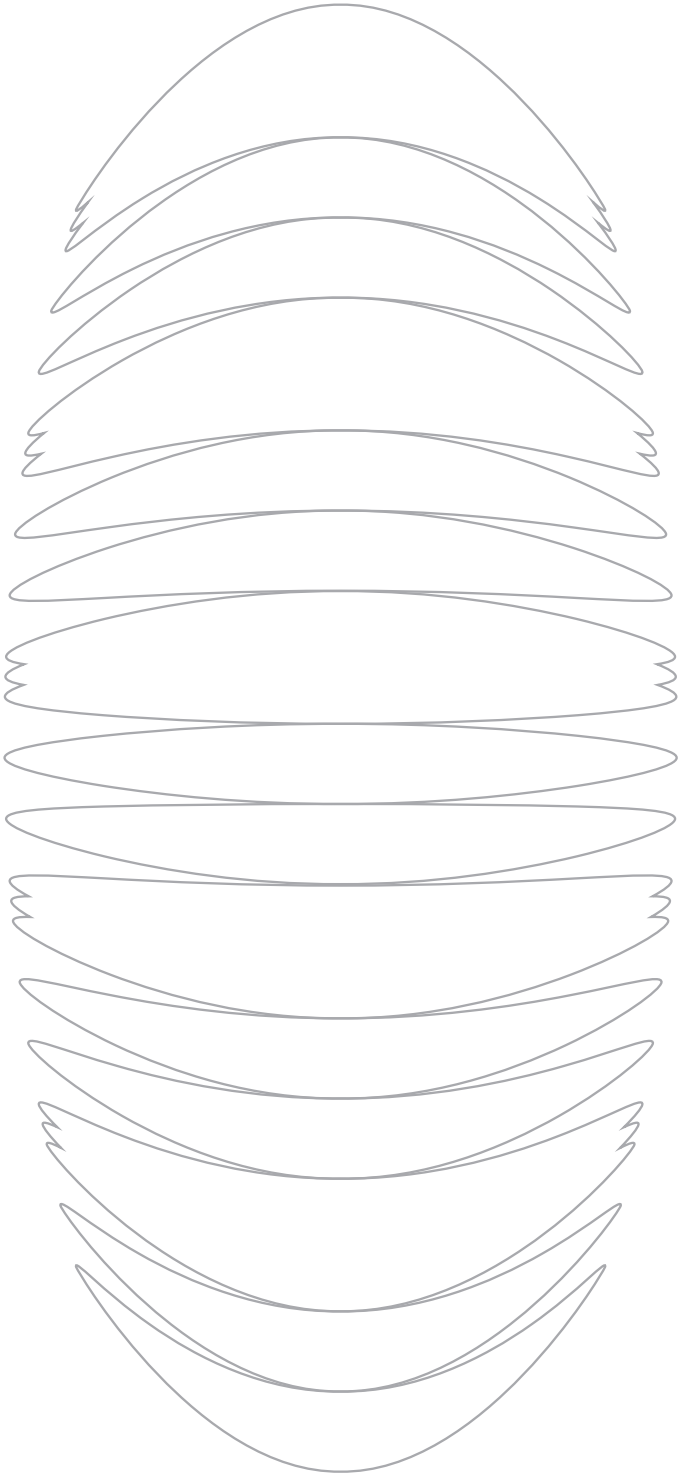
Through this research, Eilidh reflects on how knowledge of these places are held and passed on, how voices are represented, remembered or omitted. Her practice combines drawing, painting, sound, and sculpture, alongside collaborative research to bring these threads into dialogue with contemporary questions around language, learning and land.

This edition can be read as a different kind of travel companion; one that takes you to places visited less so today, where knowledge is held in soil, story, and song. Perhaps pop it in your pocket when visiting an àirigh near you; you'll recognise it by the vivid green surroundings, the presence of water, and the scattering of stones. And take a moment to pay heed to those who have been here before; both human and otherworldly.

We hope you enjoy reading and following Eilidh's research as much as we have.

Heather Fulton,
ATLAS Arts Producer

A Curious Traveller



Thomas Pennant (1726 – 1798) was a writer, naturalist and antiquarian born and bred in North East Wales. He became known for his travel journaling, describing his experiences visiting different parts of the UK and Ireland that were little-known to the wider British public at the time.

As well as possessing a curiosity-driven desire to explore other places he crucially had the means to do so, coming from a wealthy family background. In 1769 he made his first of two visits to Scotland, charged with the 'hardiness to venture on a journey to the remotest part of North Britain, a country almost as little known to its southern brethren as Kamschatka' [1].

Travelling with various companions—one of whom was an artist, Moses Griffith—his intention was to document his travels to rural and remote parts of Scotland, and it was during his second tour in 1772 that he made a trip to the Hebrides. Unlike his peers, in whose travels to the Highlands and Islands sought to demystify what lay beyond 'civilised' society of the Lowlands and describe the little-understood ways of the wild Gaels to enlighten their readership, Pennant had a keen interest in a deeper exploration of place through engaging with the people that belonged to it.

In April 1772 he penned a letter to The Scots Magazine

seeking information from people local to the areas he would be visiting, in order to gain a greater understanding of their place.

'To the lovers of natural history'

[...] Mr Pennant, a gentleman of family and fortune in Flintshire, made a tour of some months in Scotland in summer 1769; he observed every object with the attention of a philosopher, and with the sentiments of a gentleman, superior to those illiberal national prejudices, which is the offspring of ignorance, nourished by faction. He has lately published an account of this tour, which is no less entertaining than instructive. Mr Pennant, pleased with his former reception in Scotland, proposes to make another visit to it early this summer. In order to render this second tour as beneficial as possible, he has addressed a letter to the curious in general, but more directly to the clergy of Scotland..' [2]

Pennant's letter contained twenty-two areas of enquiry, including the following, requesting;

'To every gentleman desirious to promote the Publication of an Accurate Account of the Antiquities, Present State, and Natural History of Scotland';
1. What lakes, rivers, water-falls, or remarkable springs or fountains are there near you?
2. What remarkable natural caves, rocks, or mountains: what picturesque scenes worth drawing?
3. Any remarkable echoes? Have any remarkable storms, whirlwinds, earthquakes, or other singular phenomena, happened in your neighbourhood?
4. What are the predominant diseases of your country? and what are the means of cure used by your natural physicians? Have you lost any ancient distempers, or received any new ones?
5. Are there any people remarkable for their longevity, or for any particular accidents in body or mind? any bards? any ingenious self-taught artificers?'

In regard to Skye, Pennant's main correspondent was the Rev. Donald MacQueen from Kilmuir. In an exchange of letters [3], Pennant followed up with more specific questions, to which MacQueen's responses enabled him to place what he saw and experienced whilst on his travels in some context, with the benefit of this shared local knowledge and insight.

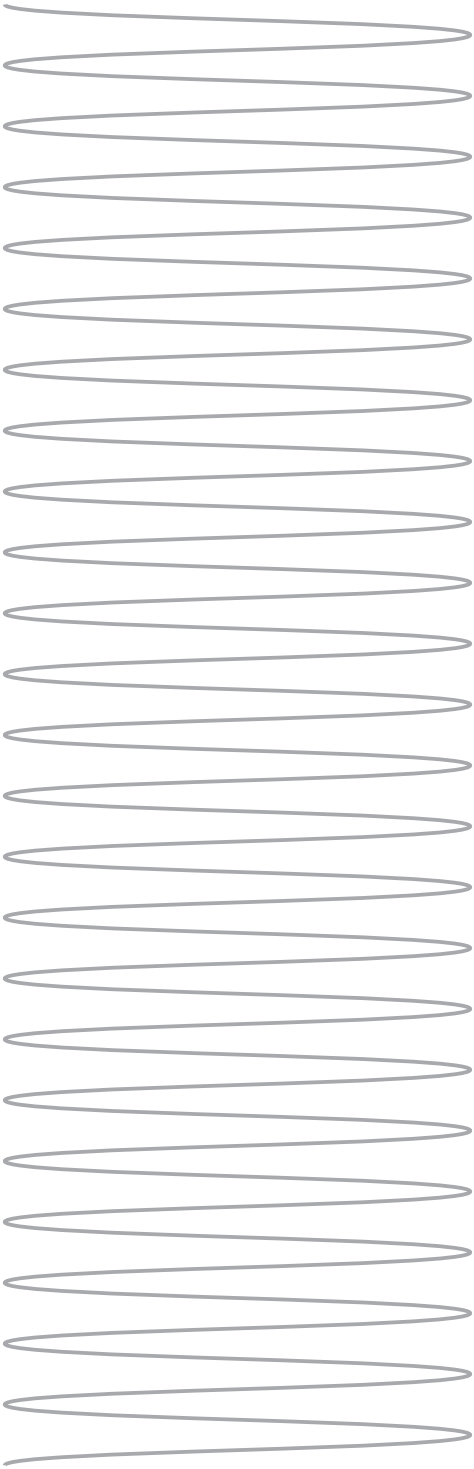
In Pennant's detailed first-hand observations of his journeys he is able to describe route and scenery, landscapes and agriculture, flora, fauna and wildlife, architecture and history; but with the added input from his correspondents of the district, he was also able to comment on the lesser-observed social conditions of the people, their customs, beliefs, habits and superstitions, in a way that was scarcely documented elsewhere. He travelled by boat, horseback and on foot and stayed with arranged hosts along the way, enjoying their generous Highland hospitality.

Footnotes

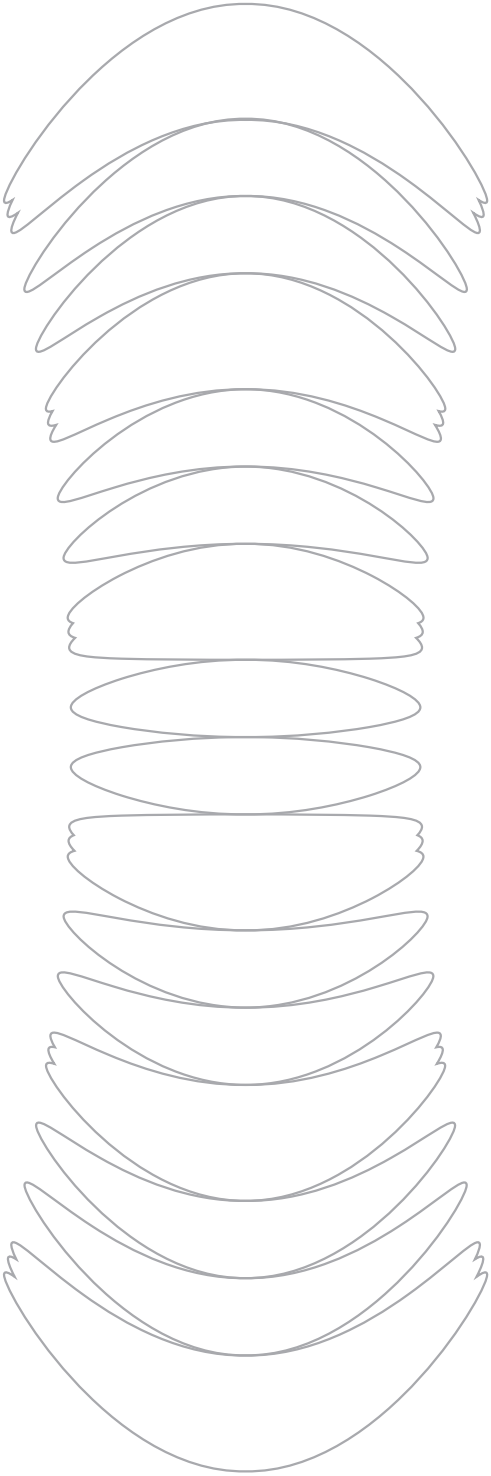
[1] Thomas Pennant, Literary Life (1793) [https://curioustravellers.ac.uk/en/]

[2] Letter Pennant, Thomas The Scots magazine, 1739-1803; Apr 1772; 34, British Periodicals pg. 173

[3] Correspondence between Donald MacQueen and Thomas Pennant 29 October 1772–15 March 1775 in Curious Travellers Digital Editions



Modern Travellers



Nowadays we travel and visit places for such different reasons, with a different mindset, different outlook, different expectations, and all with comparative comfort and ease. Tourism and hospitality are big business now and we are spoiled for choice in terms of information available about the places we choose to travel to. Much of what is presented to us tends to focus on places to see, where to stay, what to consume and where to shop, in beautiful, aesthetic, carefully-curated print and visual media, online marketing and social media platforms.

But the intangible cultural heritage that Pennant sought to understand—the unique histories, traditions, customs, language, stories or sounds of people and place—is less straightforward to display in the visuals-driven tourism industry or less interesting to those advertising it, therefore requiring some effort on the part of the visitor to seek it out. This has made way for alternative narratives to burrow, with newly-created visitor information, which in turn are taken as truth by those who don't have a deeper knowledge of the place. There now exists tangled amongst the reality a swathe of stories and even place names that are not truly of the place, rather that have been impressed on it from the outside.

How different travel looked in the eighteenth century.

Shielings and Shieling Culture

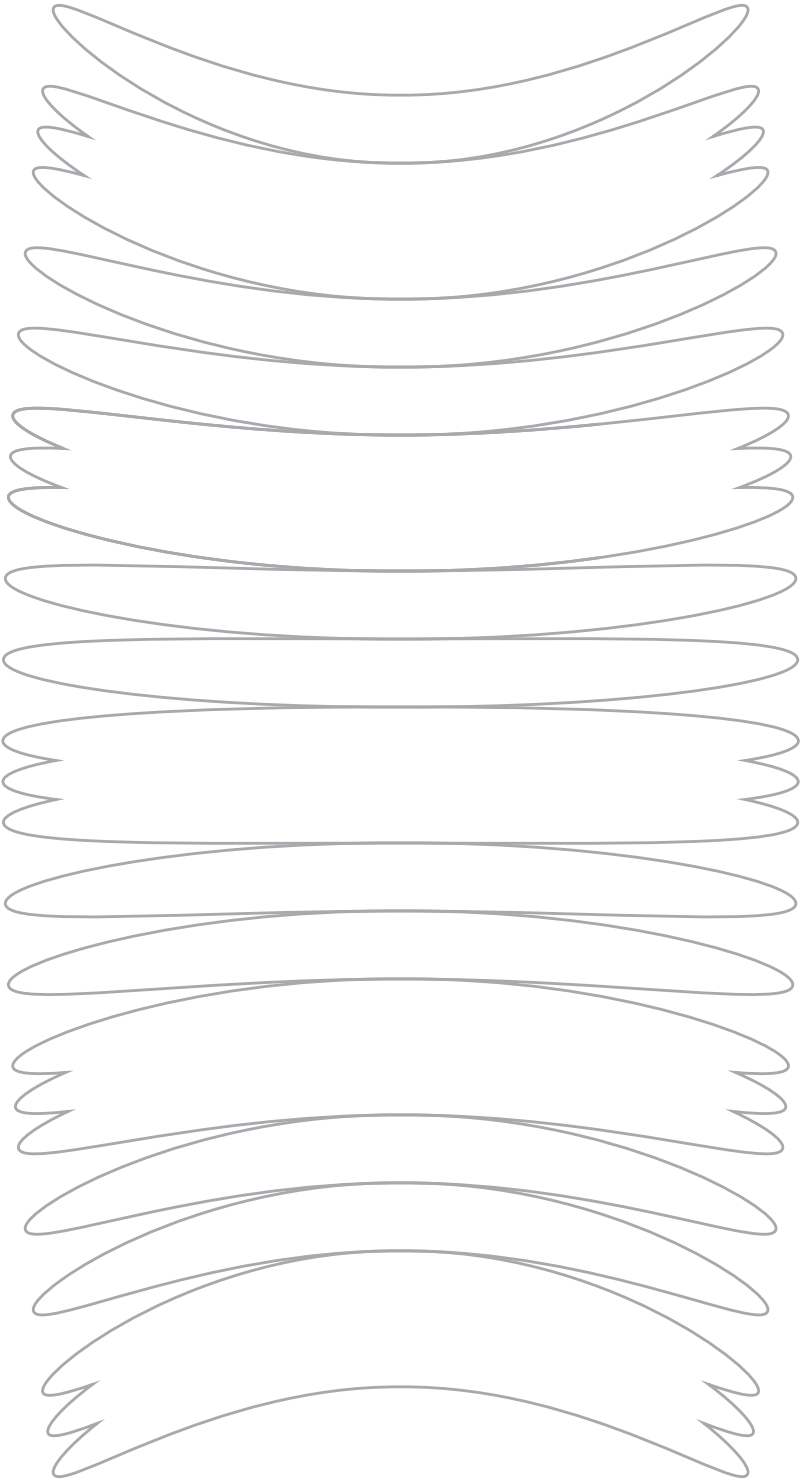


Figure 1. 'Shielings on the island of Jura and a view of the Paps' copy of engraving by Moses Griffiths, Thomas Pennant, A Tour In Scotland And Voyage To The Hebrides 1772.

One of Pennant's early observations in his travels through the Hebrides was of a community in their summer shieling. A widespread custom of the time whereby people drove their cattle to high pasture for the summer months and stayed with them in temporary bothies. His description of the scene is a rare eyewitness written account of the shieling culture of the Hebrides at that time;

> 'I landed (from the sea) on a bank covered with sheelins, the temporary habitations of some

peasants who tend the herds of milch cows. These formed a grotesque group; some were oblong, some conic, and so low that the entrance is forbidden without creeping through the opening, which has no other door than a faggot of birch twigs placed there occasionally; they are constructed of branches of trees covered with sods; the furniture a bed of heath; placed on a bank of sod, two blankets and a rug; some dairy vessels; and above, certain pendent shelves made of basket-work, to hold the cheese, the product of the summer. In one of the little conic huts, I spied a little infant asleep.' [4]

The unexpectedly conical shape of the 'sheelins' on the Isle of Jura in 1772, so beautifully drawn by Moses Griffiths, were so unlike the shieling form of my imagination that I was compelled to find out more. From here came the desire to be a curious traveller myself—although as much through the span of ages than in geographical terms. What follows is some of what I have learned through my research residency, about shielings and shieling culture particular to Skye (about which little recorded information remains), and into recorded folklore of a particular supernatural being connected to the cattle.

***

The shieling, or àirigh in Gaelic, is the name given to a summer pasture and often to the little turf and stone bothies constructed on it, which were historically used as shelter or dwelling during the summer months. The custom of droving livestock to the hill pastures in the summer was once widespread across Scotland and the reasons were twofold; the animals were to be kept away from the emerging infield crops to afford them a chance to grow, and the new seasons grazing on higher ground was beneficial for the cattle with calves at foot, fresh and sweet, having benefited from accumulative seasons' manuring and trampling.

There is much regional variation in shieling practices and culture, but generally it was communities

of women, young folk, and children that occupied the shielings and tended the herd for periods of time in the summer months. From around the beginning of May until August or September, they would milk the cows daily and process the milk into butter and cheese. As milk and dairy products formed a large part of the staple diet, and also a form of currency for exchange, cattle were precious.

This seasonal migration is also known as transhumance, and is a practice inscribed on UNESCOs Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity [5]. It exists across parts of South America, Scandinavia and central Europe, and was once widespread across Britain and Ireland. It is a practice that ensures productivity of the land and contributes immeasurably to biodiversity, allowing the use of marginal areas that are less suited for cultivation as arable land. A contributing factor to the system is the desire to make full use of whatever pasture is available, and the acknowledgement that a change in herbage and botanicals is beneficial to the health of the animals.

It was noted by a Skye landlord in the 1950s that

> 'such systematic grazing and dunging of the hill-ground was instrumental in maintaining grazing of a quality rarely seen in Skye today.' [6]

There are rich seams of culture attached to the practice of transhumance around the world; connecting food, stories, music, song, knowledge and skills, all passed down through generations, and that contribute to a strong sense of identity and continuity. Many of the cultural practices surrounding transhumance around the world are environmentally specific, reflecting both availability of local resources and cultural values, as was also the case in Gaelic-speaking Scotland.

In parts of the Outer Hebrides the 'shieling system' existed in some form into the mid-twentieth century, and it is from here that much of the recorded documentation and information we have about the culture originates.

For reasons largely due to factors relating to land-use and reform, the custom had come to be gradually abandoned elsewhere in Scotland from the late eighteenth century onwards, all but disappeared by the mid 1800s.

On *là na h-imrich* (the day of flitting), a different date or time of year depending on geographical location and regional variances, the journey to the shieling would be made by communities along with their animals across the moorland to higher ground.

They carried everything they would need for an extended stay there; from the precious roof timbers that were carried home again each year to prevent them from rotting, to blankets, food, and the various dairy vessels and utensils required for dairy processing. Some degree of structural repair or rebuilding would have been required to the bothan-àirigh each year, with turf, marram in island communities, rushes and heather forming part of the structure of roofs and doors as well as being used for bedding.

Bog cotton might be collected to fill pillows and you would sit on a bench fashioned from turf. In some places one of the tools that was brought to the àirigh was a metal rod with which to probe for precious bog timber in the peat banks [7], and once the shieling communities were settled the men, who had gone on ahead to help with the flitting or carry out repairs would return to the home to keep up with the work required there. Although distances varied, shieling sites were usually within a few miles of the inbye land, sometimes within daily commuting distance, and always near sources of freshwater.

However, shieling practices, beliefs, traditions and even materials used differed depending on the geography, climate or socio-cultural conditions of the locality or community, and the situation of the huts often dictated how long the community would stay there or how often they could return with the dairy produce. There is also the possibility that in different places the community moved around several shielings over the course of the

summer as grazings at a particular site became exhausted.

Much from the Gaelic oral tradition speaks fondly of shieling culture; through song, stories and memory, both written and recorded, and for the most part shieling life was remembered with affection. At a time where many folk did not have the means to travel and there was little in the way of free time, going to the àirigh was both a welcome change of scene and a release from ordinary labours and routines, with the promise of fairer weather and longer days.

In Skye however, the practice of transhumance and the rich culture connected to it has been so long lost in communal memory that little in the way of oral, written or recorded evidence particular to this place remains.

Memories and stories of Skye's shieling culture exist only in archival and estate maps, historical documentation and Gaelic song. The shielings are still there, if you know where to look or recognise what you're looking at, for the land itself holds the memory of the àirigh even if its people don't—shieling sites tend to be more verdant than their surroundings, even after a couple of centuries of disuse, which speaks to a long-standing heritage of a reciprocal working relationship with the land.

Some of the older bothans are almost completely covered in turf and could easily be mistaken for natural features of the landscape, standing out yet as little communities of rich, bright green patches or mounds on the brown moor—the colour described by the Gaelic word *gorm*.

I made several 'shieling quests', visiting shieling sites with the help of local knowledge, research carried out by others that had an interest in historical land use long before I had, and pouring over various maps, old and new, on paper and on screens, via satellites that orbit the earth.

One of the things I've found most striking is the physical proximity of our modern life and society to the vestiges of shielings from a different place in time. Several of these sites have been made much

more accessible over the years by the creation of roads and tracks either through them or nearby, to facilitate various industries, so occasionally there is no requirement to hike across miles of boggy moor. The àirighs I have visited are also in really beautiful situations, whether on the banks of hill lochs, beside waterfalls, under the shadow of mountain ridges, and are generally far enough away from busy modern roads and madding crowds to feel genuinely peaceful.

Sitting in a bothan-àirigh feels like being in something of a portal. It's a tangible connection to a bygone time of which almost nothing else remains, and there is a powerful feeling of connection that spans the ages through stone and soil. The last people to shelter within the walls of these huts would have had a relationship with the land that was built on generations of indigenous knowledge and communal living, and understood their animals and environment in ways we are no longer required to learn. The sense of loss in these terms feels overwhelming, and not just the loss of the indigenous knowledge and language so intrinsically connected to place, but a way of seeing and being that was completely shaped by belonging to the land.

In terms of physical proximity you can't get any closer than where I sit to the shieling culture that has otherwise disappeared, but in the intervening period between the last milking and my curiosity, almost everything else has changed.

Figure 2. The stone walls at a shieling site in Trotternish, Eilidh MacKenzie 2025.

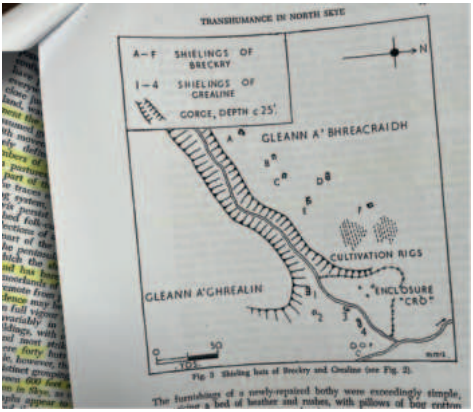


Figure 3. Image of research of shieling huts of Breckry and Crealine, Malcolm D. MacSween (1959) Transhumance in North Skye, Scottish Geographical Magazine.

Much of my initial research on Skye shielings came from an academic paper written by Malcolm D. MacSween [8], a research student in the department of Geography of Glasgow University in 1959. What caught my interest was his research on the locations of shielings in Trotternish, the part of the island in which I have spent most of my life and where my family has been rooted for generations.

MacSween's hand-drawn map detailing the locations of shielings of this peninsula was fascinating — not just because of how numerous

and widespread they were—but also because I had absolutely no prior knowledge of them, nor had I heard anyone speak much of shielings here. The extent of my knowledge came from teaching Gaelic songs about shielings to schoolchildren, and a quick scan of the accompanying song was as much as I had. My basic understanding was that the shieling was a small bothy on summer pasture where dairymaids looked after their cattle. The concept was a little quaint, romanticised, somewhat abstract, and none of the songs I taught related particularly to Skye.

Reading further, most of the information or memories about shieling life I found originated in the Western Isles, the Inner Hebrides, and a few from mainland Highland, Perthshire, Argyllshire. Any documentation specific to shielings on Skye contained not much more than a passing mention, and the practice appears to have been completely abandoned here by the early to mid-nineteenth century.

> 'More than sixty years ago, the writer had the experience of passing two nights at a shieling, and what was seen and learned at that time is the following.

Before the migration took place, the men-folk resorted to the locale to repair and refit the huts. These were of turf, with divot-covered roof, thatched with heather, and were disposed to ensure the maximum of shelter. Their dimensions were very limited, but, as life was spent in the open with the heather-scented breezes blowing about, the cramped accommodation mattered little. Then came the 'flitting'. The men carried any necessary articles, and shepherded the cattle, and the women the milk vessels, bedding and food. The cattle, on the rich succulent grass of the dells and hillsides, gave a markedly increased flow of milk. The young women milked, accompanying the work with a song or ditty suited to the operation. The milk was set in a different hut to the living one, and butter and curds were made in due course.

> The shieling life, which lasted for three months, was looked forward to in keen anticipation, and no wonder, as it constituted a welcome change from the labour of spring work, and a healthy, pleasant picnic midst the solitudes of nature.
>
> This practice at the period referred to was fast dying out. The older people remained at home, and the homes were visited daily by one or other of the campers.
>
> This does not refer to Trotternish, but to a more secluded part of the far north. As far as Trotternish is concerned, the shieling life had passed into oblivion long before this period, and nothing remains of the old shielings but the names—Airigh an Easain, Airigh Ghrimeasaig, Airigh Dhonnachaidh, Airigh Neill, Airigh Mhor etc.'

– William MacKenzie, Old Skye Tales, 1930 [9]

William MacKenzie was a former headteacher of Valtos Public School, to whom the land his house, 'Blarcrian', stood was gifted by local crofters grateful for his support during the period of land reform in the 1880s. It is not clear where the shieling he refers to was, nor the source of his information on shieling practice, but he was born in Melness, Sutherland—'the far north'.

Place names on old maps still evidence the existence of àirighean roughly within the Valtos area, even if they are much less visible now or otherwise forgotten; slightly south and west of Blarcrian is Druim Àirigh nan Seileach whose name indicates the presence of willows, Lòn Àirigh Mhic Fhearchair, a minding of the people (Fergusons?) that may once have used this shieling, Lòn Àirigh nan Sac, identifying the small brook with marshy banks.

Other place names in North Trotternish and East-Side, some recorded on OS maps and some not, include;

Bealach na h-Imrich (pass of the flitting), Biod a' Bhainne (the point for the milk), Blàr a' Bhuailte (the field of summer booths), Loch Àirigh Fhionnlaigh (the loch of

Finlay's shieling), Pairc Chearrari (a hybrid Norse-Gaelic name meaning the park of the shieling of the brushwood), Sròn a' Bhainne (headland of the milk), Lòn Coire na h-Àirigh (burn of the corrie shieling), Àirigh Luachrach (the shieling of the rushes), Àirigh na Caillich (shieling of the old women), Àirigh Àlainn (the picturesque shieling). [10]

Traditional shieling practice on Skye more than likely fell out of use due to changes in land use and how land was governed. The runrig system was mostly abandoned here by 1811, and the division of crofts was introduced in the 1840s. It would seem that shieling practice probably ended sometime in between.

However, with reference to two specific shieling groups on the East-side, MacSween suggests that these represent the latest survival of transhumance in Trotternish. According to his research the townships of Breckry and Grealin were among those in which the runrig system continued until around 1840 and which possessed the detached pasture on which the shielings are situated until 1906, when reorganisation took place. Certainly there are some shieling huts on these sites that are in a much better state of preservation than others, but there are also distinct vestiges of small runrigs very close by, which is unusual for summer pastures. They are also connected to the townships in name; Gleann a' Bhreacraidh and Gleann a' Ghrealin.

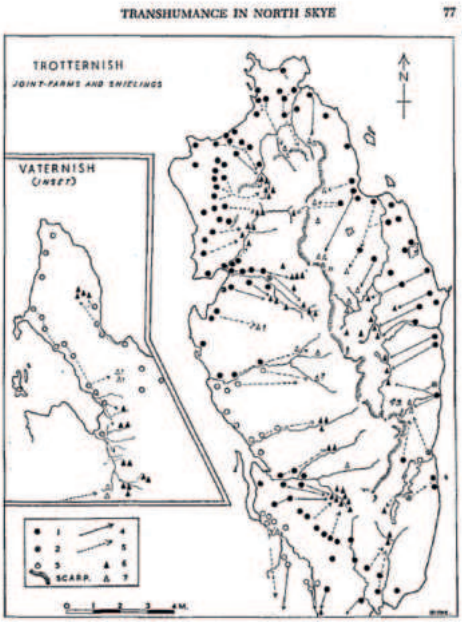
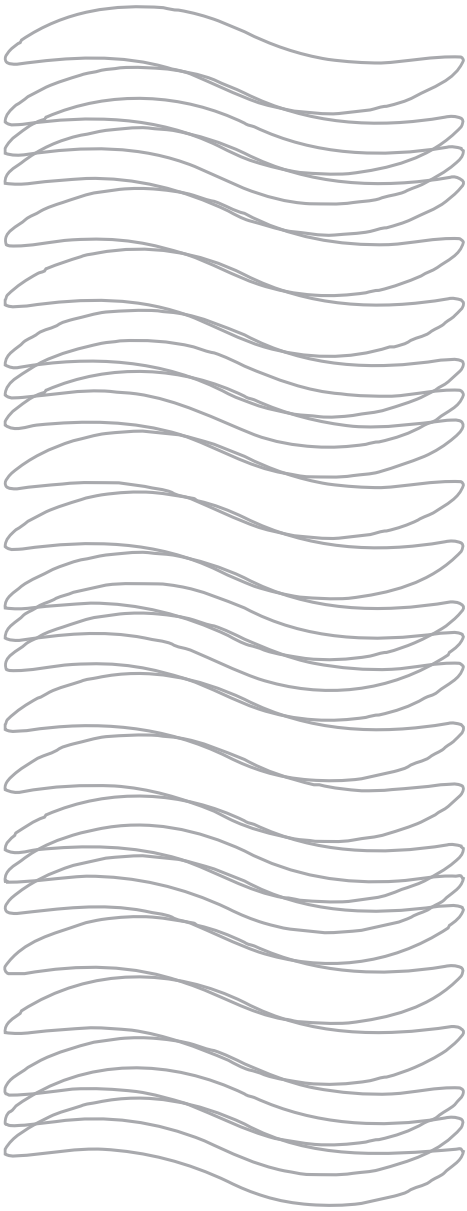


Figure 4. Map of Transhumance in North Skye, Malcolm D. MacSween (1959), Scottish Geographical Magazine; Trotternish and Waternish, Joint-farms and other tenancies recorded in the eighteenth century: 1. Joint farms and other tenancies recorded in the MacDonald Estate. Documents; 2. Other settlements shown on air photos but not recorded in Mac Donald Estate Documents: 3. Joint-farms and other tenancies not on MacDonald Estates; 4. Direction of transhumant movement (known); 5. Ditto (postulated); 6. Shieling huts known from field observations and air photos (one symbol = approximately 4 huts); 7. Shieling huts postulated from oral evidence.

Figure 5. Inside the walls of a shieling hut, Eilidh MacKenzie 2025.

Two family friends, born and raised in Valtos and generous keepers of a rich store of Gaelic language and local lore, have each told me of a shieling behind their township that they remembered being referred to by older folk as ‘Canada Àrd’—a place to where the poorest folk were ‘cleared’. A reference to the swathe of emigration across the Atlantic, the cottars without croft designation on the already

impoverished, overcrowded land were replaced in abandoned shielings on the higher pasture, ‘High Canada’. Much like the folk that once belonged to the Ascrib Islands off the coast of Waternish, who were reputedly re-settled in shielings on the Skye mainland in the mid-nineteenth century, suggesting that the practice was out of use by then. [11]



Footnotes

[4] ‘A Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides, 1772’ Pennant, T. Origin, 2019. op., dt. p216

[5] ich.unesco.org. (n.d.). UNESCO - Transhumance, the seasonal droving of livestock. [online] Available at: https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/transhumance-the-seasonal-droving-of-livestock-01964.

[6] MacSween, M.D. (1959). Transhumance in North Skye. 75(2), pp.75–88.

[7] ‘Cleachdaidhean nan Airighean Gàidhealach’, Chamshron A., 1926. Am Bàrd, Glasgow

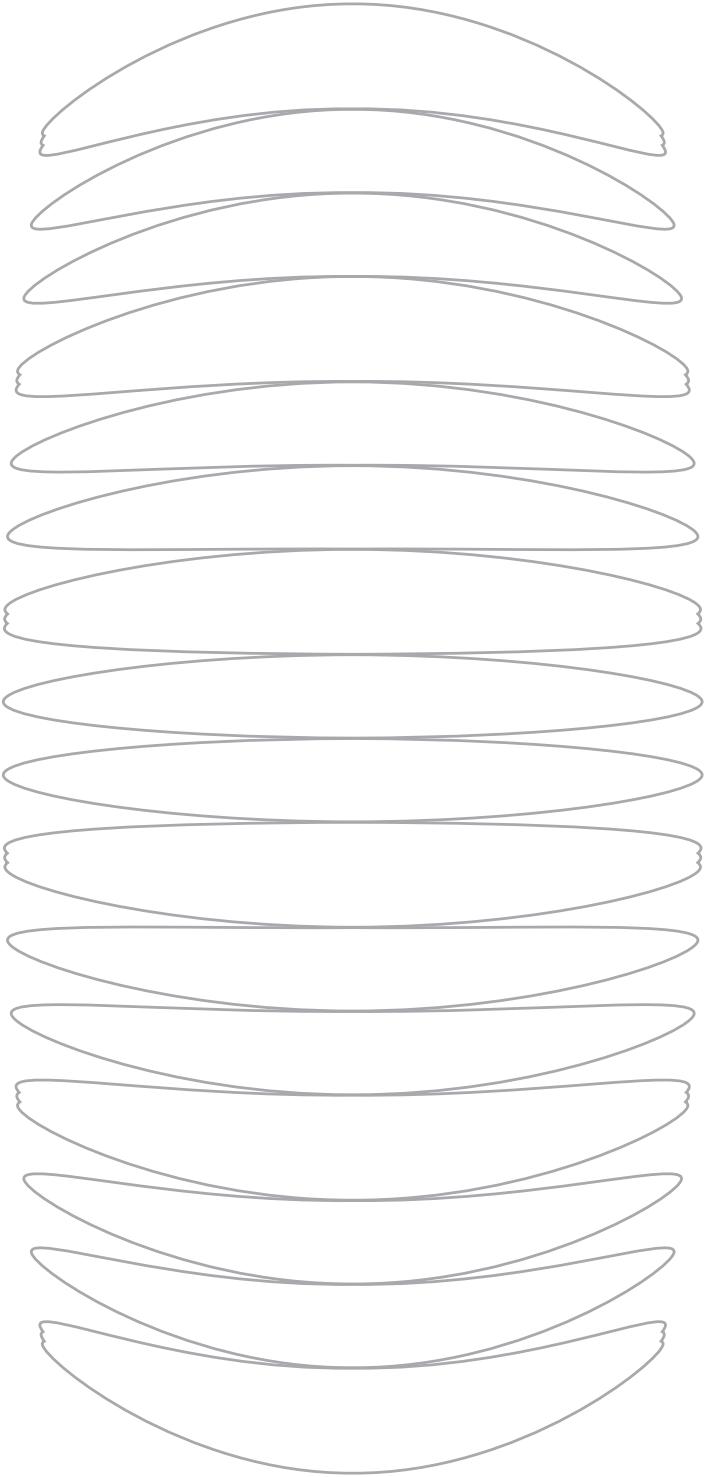
[8] Malcolm D. MacSween (1959) Transhumance in North Skye, Scottish Geographical Magazine, 75:2, 75-88

[9] ‘Old Skye Tales’, MacKenzie, W. Birlinn, 2002. First published 1930

[10] Guthan na Tìre: Ainmean-Àite Thròndairnis, 2023

[11] ‘Some Shielings in North Skye’, MacSween; Gailey. 1960

Àirigh na Creige



It was while researching a paper about shielings in another part of the Hebrides that I came across a reference to archeological surveys with multiple excavations carried out in the 1990s in Torrin, Strath. The site name was given as Àirigh na Creige, 'the shieling of the rocks', as told by Neil MacKinnon, Heaste.

The project was carried out by the Skye and Lochalsh Museums Service, precursor to the Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre, with archaeologist Martin Wildgoose leading the dig.

Digitised site records indicated the existence of some seventy-seven structures on the site, and showed a range of finds, including wheel-turned pottery sherds and wood from a scythe handle that are now housed in the Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre in Portree. Radiocarbon dating was carried out on some of the excavation material in two of the structures, one of which was found to have four stages of occupation, the earliest of which was estimated to be between 338 – 196 BC. Other finds included evidence of leather working, winkles, peat and wood ash, grains of barley, fragments of seeds, nuts and charcoal; tree species of charcoal included hazel, alder, willow and possibly rowan. There are no trees here now.

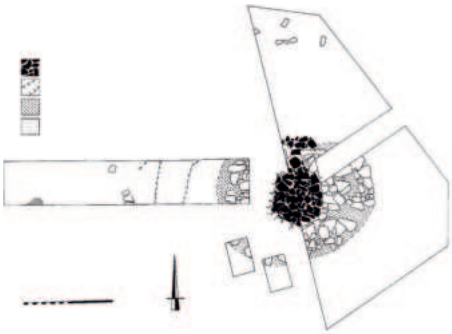


Figure 6. Archeological drawing of Airigh na Creige, Martin Wildgoose, Skye & Lochalsh Archive Centre.

There is a story about a shieling near this place, recorded in print both by Alexander Forbes in 'Place-names of Skye', and Otta Swire, who spent much of her life in Orbost in west Skye. She wrote what could be considered her own version of a travel journal in her 1952 publication 'Skye, the Island and its Legends', which included a re-telling of stories and folklore from around the island;

'Once upon a time seven girls and a young boy went to spend the summer in a shieling up above the waterfall where the burn rises. The girls went out to a wedding, leaving the child alone. In came seven large cats, seated themselves by the fire, and talked. The boy watched, amazed. The cats arose, took all the good from the butter and the cream, leaving but the appearance, and vanished. When the girls came home the frightened boy told his story and they, seeing, as they thought, butter and cream in plenty, laughed at his dream. Next night, back came the cats, and by the dawning all the girls were dead. Later that day their mothers came, as was the custom, to fetch the butter and cream. And each in turn, as she entered and saw the dead girls, cried out: 'Airidh mo dhunach' (the shieling of my misfortune).' [12]

A version of this story in Forbes' 'Place-names of Skye' suggests the wedding the girls went to was in Keppoch, a cleared village just beyond both the Àirigh na Creige shieling and a river by the similar name of Allt na Dunaiche. Another variation as remembered by Anne Beaton, Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre, whose family connections can be traced to Keppoch, is that the girls (maybe as cats) were killed by the terrified boy, who believed them to be shape-shifting witches.

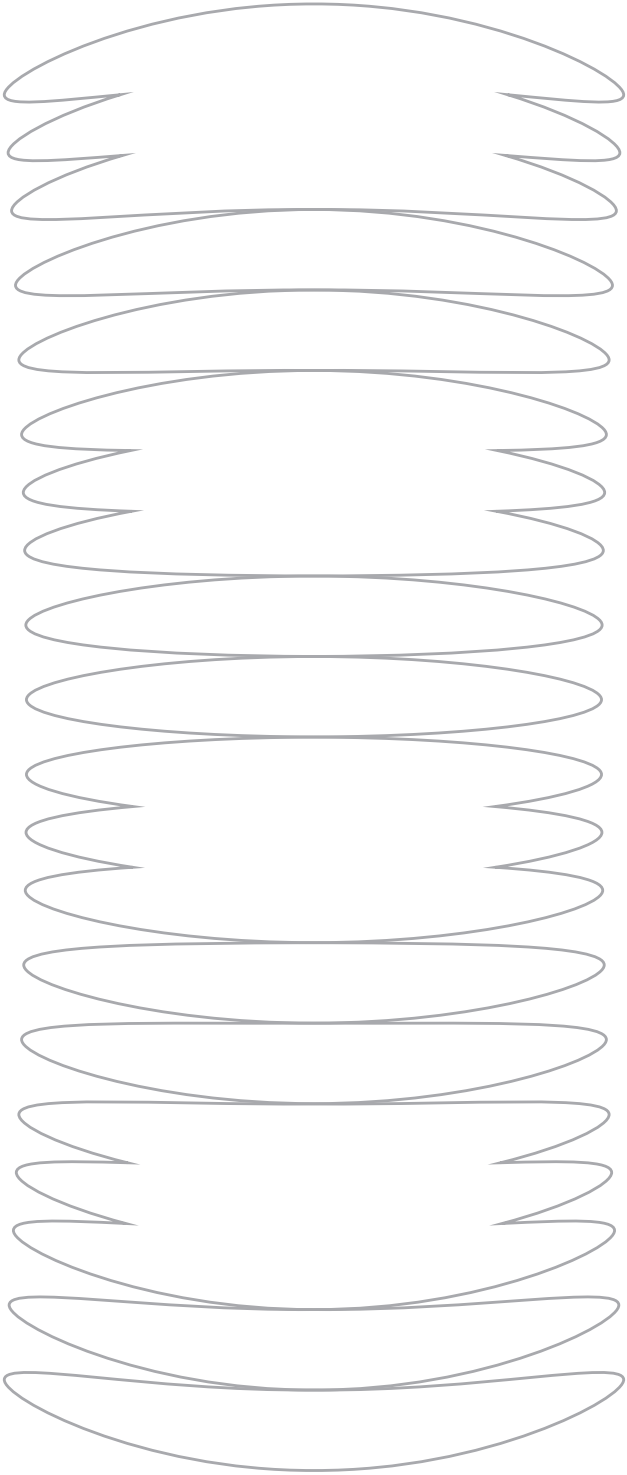
ATLAS Arts organised a public walk to Àirigh na Creige in May 2025, where we had the pleasure of the company of Prof Michael Given, a landscape archaeologist at Glasgow University. An expert on shieling culture, he was able to patiently answer a vast array of questions, guide us to see the landscape in ways we might not have considered before, and interpret the archaeological reports and carbon-dating results in easily-understood language.

Figure 7. Public walk with Eilidh MacKenzie and Landscape Archeologist Michael Given at Àirigh Na Creige, May 2025, ATLAS Arts.

Footnotes

[12] Otta Swire, 'Skye, the Island and it's Legends', 1952

Òrain an Eilein



Gaelic songs often conveyed the regard held for the time spent there, the lightness of spirit and happy memories that were made, camaraderie, companionship, news, fun, even courtship.

The song Àirigh Luachrach Ùige describes the shieling in Uig as a place of rushes, and in this verse the song-maker praises the beauty and skill of the girls who sing as they spin thread at the wheel;

‘S iomadh caileag bhòidheach loinneil
Bhiodh na suidh’ aig cuibhle,
Snìomh na rolaig, seinn nan luinneag-
Bhiodh gach tuireadh binn dhith,
An snàth bu bhoidhche, ruith fo meòirean,
Cothrom, còmhnard sìnte,
‘S falt ‘na dhual air cùl a cluaise
Ga thogail suas an cìrean.

Bho ‘**Àirigh Luachrach Ùige**’ [13], le Iain MacDhòmhnaill Mhic Alasdair

Caidil a Mhòrag, Caidil a Mhàireag

Caidil a Mhòrag, caidil a Mhàireag,
Caidil a Mhòrag hù ill òro,
‘S mòr mo chrodh-laoigh air an àirigh,
Caidil a Mhòrag, caidil a Mhàireag.

Caidil a Mhòrag, caidil
a Mhàireag,
Caidil a Mhòrag gheibh thu
nad phòca
Airgead an agh dhuinn 's
na làire,
Caidil a Mhòrag, caidil
a Mhàireag. [14]

This School of Scottish Studies audio recording, available to access through Tobar an Dualchais is of Rev Norman Macdonald sharing a short lullaby, recorded by James Ross.

The composer states that they have plenty of cattle and will get money for the heifer and the mare.

Cò Nì Bhùirich? [15]
(Who Will Bellow?)

Cò nì bhùirich?
Nì crodh h-Ùnais-
Cò nì citheaman?
Nì crodh Shnitheasord,
Cò nì gheumnaich?
Nì crodh Gheus-do.

Who will bellow? The cattle of Hunish-
Who will be complaining? The cattle of Snizort,
Who will be lowing? The cattle of Gesto.

Milking song collected by Frances Tolmie. Sung in the nursery at Bracadale Manse, Skye, 1861. This version is from the Gesto Collection, under the title '**Cradle Song**'. [16]

Footnotes

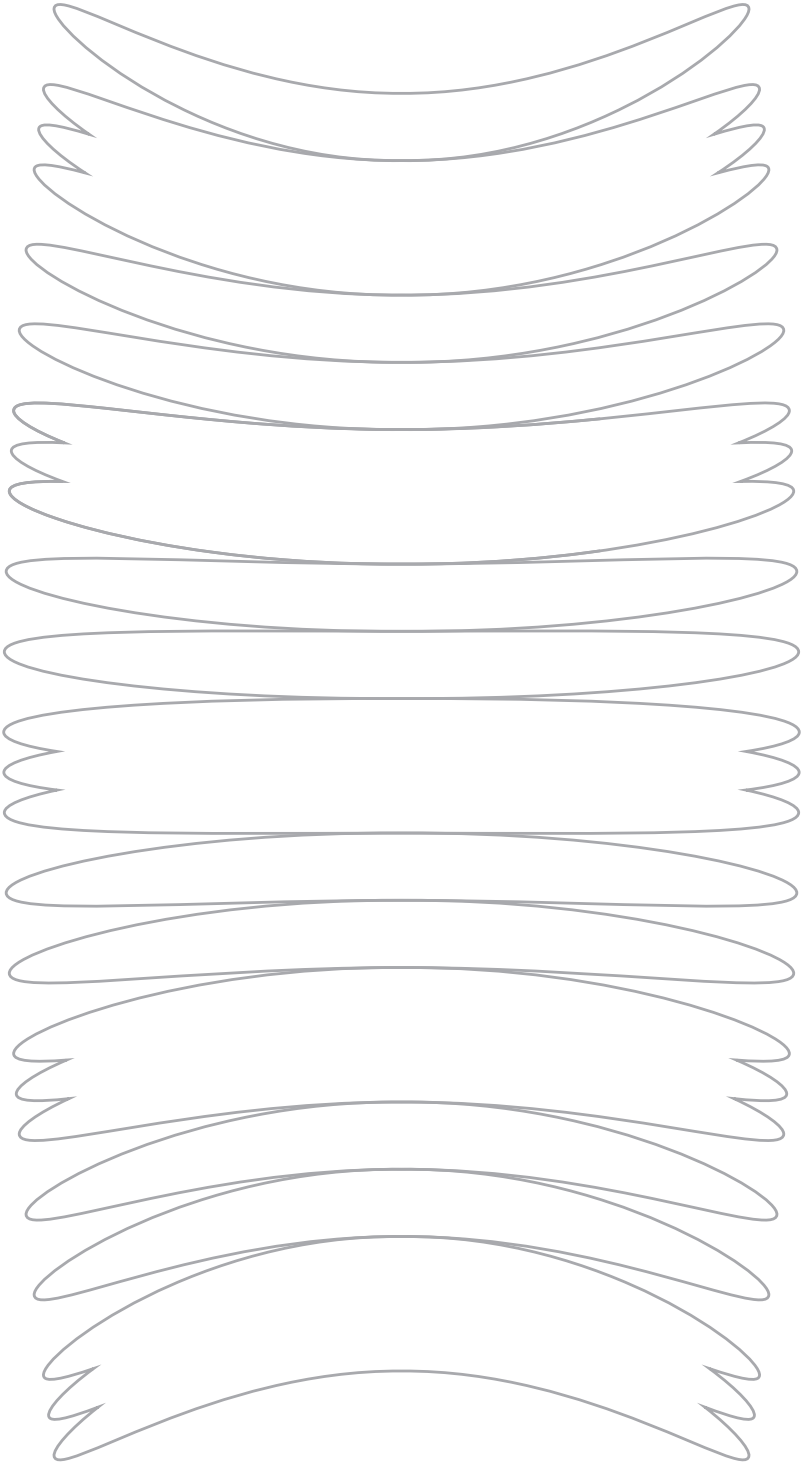
[13] ‘Òrain an Eilein’, Martin, C. Taigh na Teud, 2001

[14] MacDonald, N. R. (1956) Caidil a Mhòrag, Caidil a Mhàireag [audio recording], recorded by Ross, J., Track ID 70669, Tobar an Dualchais / Kist o Riches, SoSS Collection, Reel-to-reel tape SA1956.056.

[15] 14 ‘The Gesto Collection of Highland Music’, MacDonald, K.N. First published 1895. Reprint by Llanerch Publishers. Wales, 1997

[16] ‘The Gesto Collection of Highland Music’, MacDonald K.N. 1st edition 1895, reprinted 1997, Llanerch, Wales.

Bun-Sgoil Ghàidhlig Phort Rìgh



Early on in my research into shielings, I spent a day with clas 7 at Bun-Sgoil Ghàidhlig Phort Rìgh, sharing some of what I had learned myself of Pennant and his travels in Skye.

The conversation turned to being a traveller, a visitor in a new place; the things you observe while you're travelling, what you want to know before you go, why do people travel at all, and what do they do when they get there? How different being a traveller looked in Pennant's day to the scale of tourism we are growing accustomed to today.

We also thought about the shieling, about why people travelled there and what kinds of work they would have had to do when they got there. This brought us to work-songs, which make up a large part of the Gaelic song repertoire. We learned and sang a song that would have been sung while churning milk into butter, read and listened to what Skye's celebrated bardess Màiri Mhòr nan Òran remembered of shieling days when she was young. We recognised that none of this is work we do, or have to do today, and that even though the references are to a local place, local people, and work that would have been done by them here, none of it is familiar to us now. All that we can remember it by is in the songs.

The following are the two songs we looked at that day.

The first would have been sung during the laborious work of churning the milk, measuring by hand how quickly it was progressing and sung to keep a rhythm between the two women required to do it. The second, from the song 'Eilean a' Cheò' by Skye bardess Màiri Nic a' Phearsain, is the ground of a track by Skye electronic celtic fusion band, Niteworks. This verse tells of summer being a time of plenty, the cows with their calves on the àirigh and of the work of the young women, turning the milk into butter and cheese.

Am Maistreadh a bha aig Moire

Am maistreadh a bh'aig Moire
Air ùrlar a' ghlinne
A' meudachadh an ìme
A' lughdachadh a' bhainne.

[Séisd:] Thig, a chuinneag, thig.
Blàthach gu dòrn, 's ìm
gu uilinn,
Thig, a chuinneag, thig.

Tha glug an seo, tha glag
an seo,
Tha glag an seo, tha glug
an seo,
Tha rud as fheàrr na chòir
an seo
Tha rud nas fheàrr na fìon ann.

Thig, a chuinneag, thig.
Blàthach gu dòrn, 's ìm
gu uilinn,
Thig, a chuinneag, thig.

Tha glug an seo, tha glag
an seo,
Tha seilcheag mhòr air bhog
an seo,
Tha làn cuman Cairistiona
Do dh'ìm brèagha buidh'
againn.

Thig, a chuinneag, thig.
Blàthach gu dòrn, 's ìm
gu uilinn,
Thig, a chuinneag, thig.

'This is a churning song with references to the process of butter making and the sounds of the work.' See Tobar an Dualchais. [17]

Bho ‘Eilean a’ Cheò’ le Màiri Nic a’ Phearsain

Nuair thigeadh tùs an
t-samhraidh
Cha ghanntar a bhiodh oirnn,
Bhiodh pailteas bìdh is annlain

Anns a’ ghleann san robh
na seòid;
Bhiodh gruagaichean
air àirigh,
‘S an crodh len àl mun chrò,
‘S a’ dèanamh ime ‘s càise
An Eilean àrd a’ Cheò. [18]

***

An online search of archaeological sites had indicated the presence of a shieling site at the foot of Suidh’ Fhinn, closely behind the school building. We took a walk to have a look at it and spent some time where other folks once had been beside Lòn na h-Atha, recording on paper what we noticed and felt about the place. The shieling huts there were quite degraded but just about discernible with some stone structures amongst thick bracken and heather, maybe not the best example of a shieling but as a handy field trip and maths-dodge it was perfect. We drew some of the plants that we found growing there, took in the view across Portree Bay, Ben Tianavaig, Raasay, all the way up to the Storr, spotted the patch of *gorm* on the other side of the stream that signified the location of another shieling, learned how to identify bog myrtle (*roid*) as a midge deterrent.

Figure 8. Fieldwork at the shieling with Clas 7, Bun-Sgoil Ghàidhlig Phort Rìgh.

Figure 9. Fieldwork at the shieling with Clas 7, Bun-Sgoil Ghàidhlig Phort Rìgh.

Figure 10. Bun-Sgoil Ghàidhlig Phort Rìgh Clas 7 drawing from a workshop with Eilidh MacKenzie, 2024.

Figure 11. Bun-Sgoil Ghàidhlig Phort Rìgh Clas 7 drawing from a workshop with Eilidh MacKenzie, 2024.

There are some more modern structures near this àirigh, where people come nowadays in their *saor-laithean* (free days, another modern concept)—luxury holiday pods. We had a look at these too, observing that the pods are a bit like modern day àirighs (though we decided they probably have comfier beds) and the on-site plunge pool was similar to some river pools we have jumped in. People still make the journey to this hillside, which is some distance from where they usually reside, so they can enjoy a change of scene and routine and make happy memories here. Some cultural aspects have not changed that much.

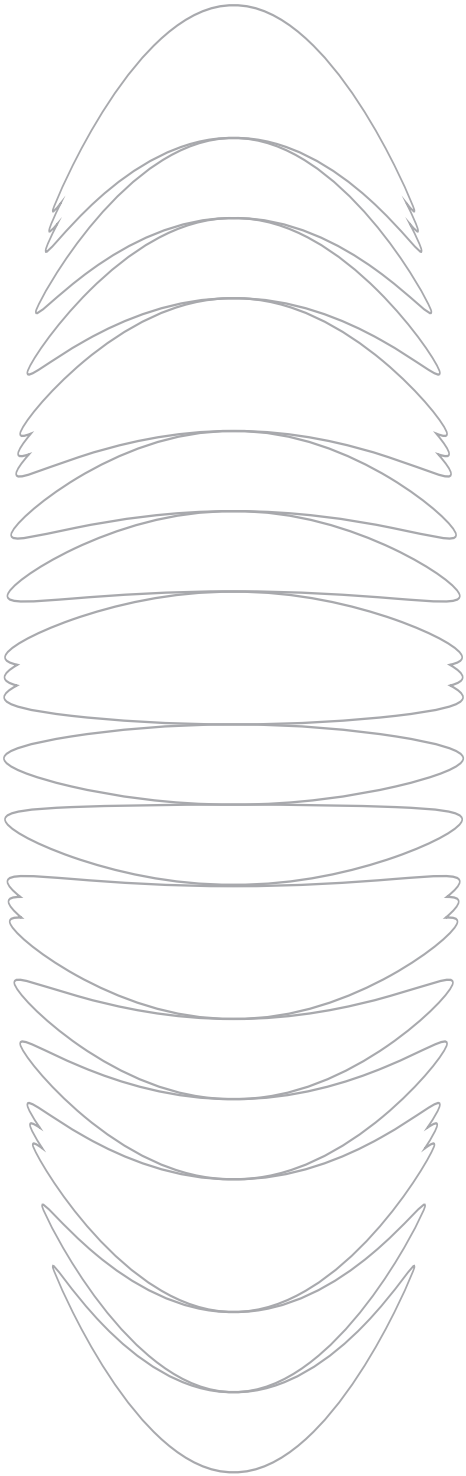
On the way back to school I asked one of the balaich where he would rather spend the night given a choice between the two places and he pointed up the hill to the old àirigh site. More opportunity for fun there there I reckon, there was certainly plenty to be had diving into thick clumps of bracken and rolling down hills (no child was harmed in this visit to this àirigh).

Footnotes

[17] Am Maistreadh a bh' aig Moire, Annie Johnston, Barra. Recorded by Dr John Lorne Campbell, TaD track ID: 93757. Original Track ID: CannaOT.XXVII Original Tape ID: CannaTape.0055

[18] 'Màiri Mhòr nan Òran', deasaichte le Dòmhnall Eachann Meek. Comann Litreachas Gàidhlig an h-Alba, 1998

Gruagach



I came across the song ‘Òran mun Ghruagaich’, ‘A Song about the Gruagach’, in the Tolmie Collection [19]. First published in 1911 it comprised a collection of mostly Gaelic songs collected or remembered by Miss Frances Tolmie, who had grown up in the Bracadale area of Skye. I was searching for references to shielings, which this had, but it also sent me down another path of research into the Gaelic Otherworld;

Òran mun Ghruagaich
Chaorain,
nach dèan thu solas dhomh!
E hò hì ri ri ibh o hò!
Gus am faic mi
Fear àrd a bhroillich ghil!
E hò hì ri ri ibh o hò
Hi ri, hò rann ò.

Buachaille luainneach
Mu bhruachan a’ ghlinne-s’ thu,
Air an d’fhàs a’ ghruag
Na chlannibh air!

‘S mis a’ bhean bhochd,
Tha gu brònach
‘S mi sa ghleannan seo
Nam ònar.

‘S mis a’ bhean bhochd,
Tha gu cràidhteach,
‘S mi gad chàradh,
Laoigh do mhàthar.

‘S mi gun phiuthar,
‘S mi gun bhràthair.
Rìgh nan Dùl,
Bi teachd làimh rium!

A Song about the Gruagach

Ember,
Won’t you give me light!
E hò hì ri ri ibh o hò!
That I may see
The tall one of the white bosom!
E hò hì ri ri ibh o hò
Hi ri, hò rann ò.

Swift-footed herd
On the slopes of the glen,
On whose head grows
The curling hair!

A sorrowful woman am I,
Mourning
In this glen
Alone.

Sorely afflicted
And in anguish,
Laying you out,
Darling of your mother.

Having no sister,
Nor brother.
King of Nature,
Be near me!

The song was notated from the singing of Oighrig (Effie) Ross in 1861/2, who was a significant tradition-bearer of her time and native of Waternish, although she had lived much of her life in Balgown, Bracadale. It came to my attention since it makes reference to a mother and daughter staying in a shieling together, but also the word ‘gruagach’ did not hold the meaning I expected. *Gruag* is the Gaelic word for hair (although falt is more commonly used on Skye) and a gruagach is a young maiden, but in this context ‘Gruagach’ refers to a tutelary being in Gaelic folklore who looks after the cattle and will strike dead anyone who mistreats them.

The song is sung in the voice of a mother whose daughter has died suddenly. She believes the girl, who had spoken harshly to the cattle as she gathered them into the fold at night, has been killed by a blow from the Gruagach’s switch;

‘The subject of this song is the lamentation of a mother over her daughter, who had died in a strange manner when they were staying together in a shieling in a lonely part of Glen-MacAskill, (Bracadale). One evening when gathering the cows into the fold, a cow became restive, the young woman drove her in with rude words and blows. But the Friend of the Cattle, known as the Gruagach, (occasionally assuming the appearance of a beautiful youth with long golden hair and a wonderfully white bosom,) was at that moment, though invisible, standing near, and on his smiting the girl with a rod which he always had in his hand, she straightaway fell down dead. Her mother was mourning over her all night, and the Gruagach, leaning against the upper beam of the dwelling, gazed at her till break of day, when he vanished.’

Tolmie adds: “The Gruagach was referred to as ‘i’ (she) always.” [20]

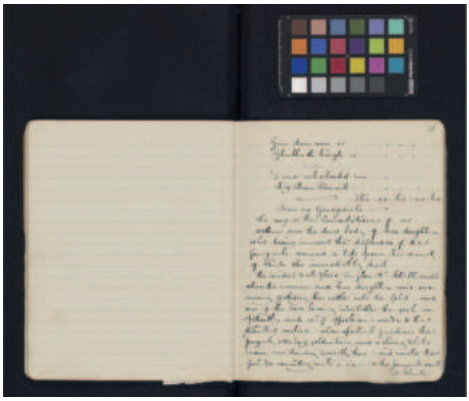


Figure 12. Oran na Gruagaich, Frances Tolmie’s handwritten notes, digitised and held in the National Library of Scotland (MS.14902). Reproduced by kind permission of the National Library of Scotland.

Figure 13. Àirigh aig Cruachan Gleann Mhic Asgill, Eilidh MacKenzie 2025.

The song was of particular interest as it appears to belong to this area of Skye. The reference to both shielings and the otherworldly Gruagach make it a rare example of oral evidence of transhumant practice connected with Skye, and also of the belief locally in this supernatural being. Though the melody of the song is beautiful its undertones are dark—referencing the sudden and otherwise unexplained death of a young woman—making it quite at odds with the more general shieling song themes of fond memories, youthful courtship and happy, carefree days.

An accompanying belief in the Gruagach was the custom of offering them libations of milk into a hollow in a specific stone in the area—the Gruagach stone. This was to be done on a particular day at a particular time, and if the practice was omitted there may be no milk from the cows at the following milking, or the 'substance' would have been removed from it. The idea of cattle having a supernatural guardian—a belief that that the whole community held as truth—coupled with the diligent offering of their precious milk into a named stone at a particular day or time to keep on the good side of that guardian, ensured that cattle would be treated well. No-one would be prepared to risk otherwise since cattle were such an important source of food, and there were these tales of folk coming to harm at the hands of the Gruagach for failing to take proper care of the cattle.

Storytelling in this way is a powerful tool well-used in folklore to embed cultural or ecological values, instill respect for nature and discourage harmful actions, which ensured a careful and convivial relationship between people and their animals.

***

Below are a selection of the many references to the Gruagach identified when researching this project;

'Gruagach, i.e. long-haired one, from *gruag*, a wig, is a common Gaelic name for a maiden, a young woman. [...] In parts of Skye, however, the fold-frequenting gruagach is a tall young man with long yellow hair in the attire of a gentleman of a bygone period, having a little switch (*slatag*) in his hand, and with a white breast as if he wore a frilled shirt.'
[...]
'This gruagach was attentive to the herds and kept them from the rocks. He frequented certain places in the fields where the cattle were. A gruagach was to be found in every gentleman's fold (*buaile*), and, like the *glaistig*, milk had to be set apart for him every evening in the in a hollow in a particular stone called *clach na gruagaich*, ('the gruagach stone') kept in byres. Unless this was done no milk was got at next milking, or the cream would not rise to the surface of the milk. Some say milk was placed in the 'gruagach stone' only when going to and returning from the summer pasture and when passing with milk.'

'[...] A woman was driving calves into the byre at Tota Roam in Scorrybreck. The gruagach amused himself inside by keeping them out. The woman, in a great rage, hastily cursed him. He gave her a slap on the cheek and killed her. All that night, however, he kept the fire alive for the woman that sat up watching the body.'

'[...] At Holm (East Side) and Scorrybreck (near Portree) the stones where the libations were poured out may still be seen.' [21]

All above: John Gregorson Campbell, 1900

One of Pennant's correspondents from Skye, the Rev. Donald Macqueen of Kilmuir, also wrote

a short dissertation, ‘Of the Gruagich’, which was published in the appendices of ‘A Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides’. He is also mentioned by Samuel Johnson in his subsequent tour of Skye with James Boswell, as the minister who ‘checked’ the belief in the supernatural being;

‘But tho’ the Gruagich offers himself to Every One's fancy As a young handsome man with fair tresses, his Emblems, Which Are almost in Every Village are no Other than rude Unpolished Stones of different figures Just as they Seemed to cast Up to the hand of the Druid who consecrated them.’ [22]

Rev. Donald Macqueen, letter to Thomas Pennant, August 1774

‘In *Troda*, within these three-and-thirty years, milk was put every Saturday for *Greogach*, or *the Old Man with the Long Beard*. Whether *Greogach* was courted as kind, or dreaded as terrible, whether they meant, by giving him the milk, to obtain good, or avert evil, I was not informed. The minister is now living by whom the practice was abolished.’

‘[…] The various kinds of superstition which prevailed here, as in all other regions of ignorance, are by the diligence of the Ministers almost extirpated.’ [23]

Samuel Johnson, 1775

There is a particular stone in Aird, Sleat, yet called ‘Clach na Gruagach’ by locals. The story of this stone is kept in local memory as one onto which offerings of milk were poured for the Gruagach.

Figure 14. Gruagach stone, Aird, Sleat, Eilidh MacKenzie, 2025.

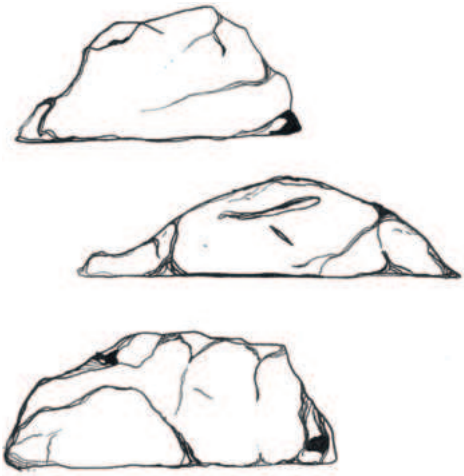


Figure 15. Three studies of Gruagach Stones, Eilidh MacKenzie, 2025.

Footnotes

[19] ‘Gun Sireadh, Gun Iarraidh’, The Tolmie Collection. Edited by Campbell, K, & Hamill, A. Acair, 2023

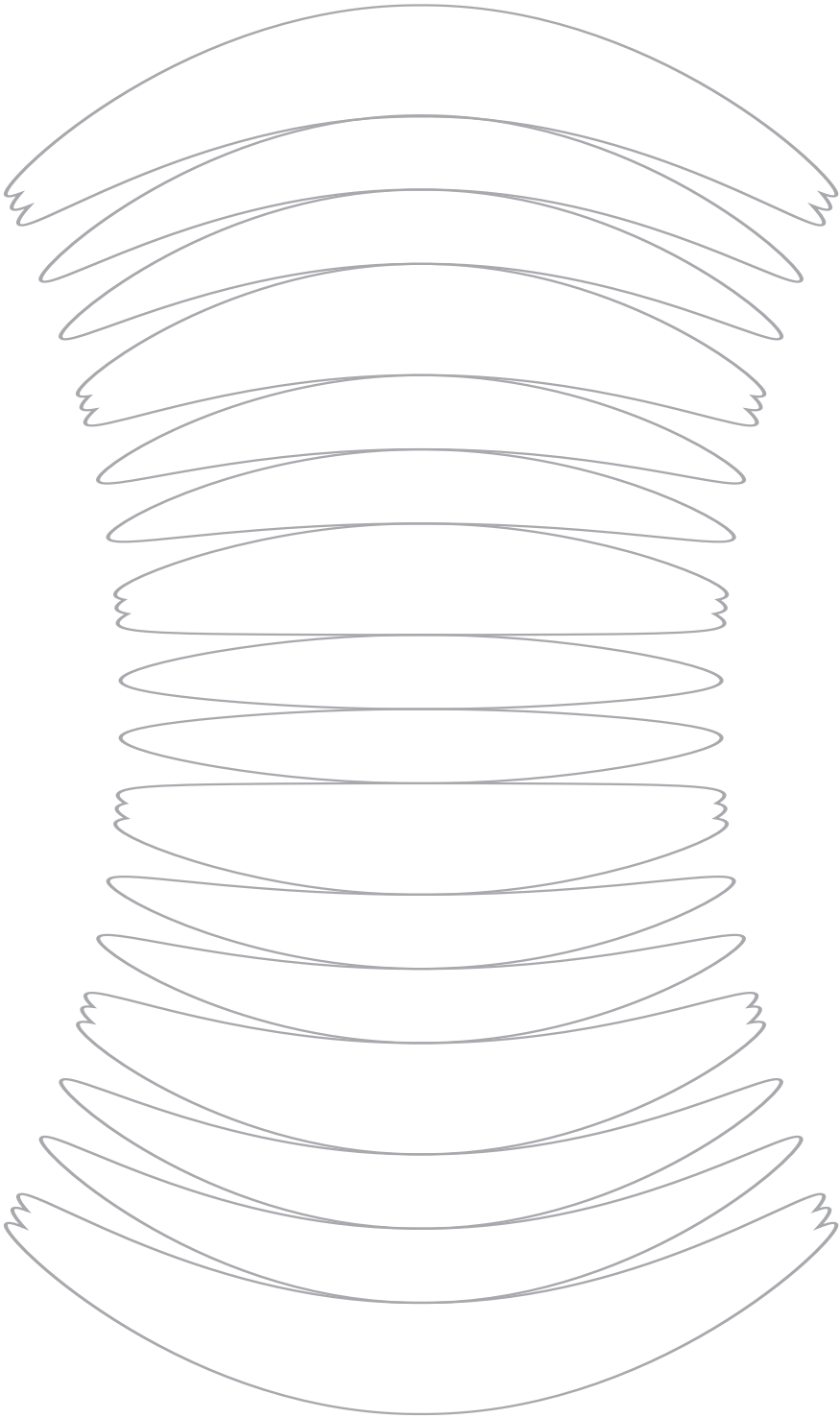
[20] ‘Gun Sireadh, Gun Iarraidh’, The Tolmie Collection. Edited by Campbell, K, & Hamill, A. Acair, 2023

[21] ‘The Gaelic Otherworld’, Gregorson Campbell, J. Edited by Black, R. Birlinn, 2019. Originally published as Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland’ (1900) and Witchcraft & Second Sight in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland (1902) by James MacLehose & sons, Glasgow

[22] ‘Donald MacQueen to Thomas Pennant 18 August 1774’ in Curious Travellers Digital Editions [editions.curioustravellers.ac.uk/doc/0416]

[23] w.Sc. 1775 S. Johnson Journey 247

Ùir-sgeul | *Earth-story*



The body of work and research, exhibited in the Ùir-sgeul | *earth-story* exhibition that opened June 20th 2025 in the Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre, included much of the information you have read here. I felt it was important to give as much context as possible to the whole and to share some of what I have learned about transhumance and shieling culture on Skye, the Gruagach, the Torrin excavation, and everything in between.

In several pieces of my own work I used pieces of fallen peat, heather and bogwood, found at the side of a peat bank on the way to one of the shielings I visited. I processed these in different ways to use on paper, canvas and clay, thereby using elements of place to create the artwork. In reports about the excavations on Skye I have read, the occupation material has included both peat and wood ash, charcoal and fragments of heather, so it made sense to me to use these materials to connect them to the place, and to this subject.

The Gruagach stones in the exhibition are made from clay, and one in particular was literally modelled on the Clach na Gruagach in Aird, Sleat. The clay makes an appearance to reference the croggan-style pottery found in shieling excavations in Torrin and Waternish- traditional croggan pottery was peat-fired and glazed with milk, an echo of the offerings placed in the

Gruagach stones. My clay stones were then coloured using ground bogwood charcoal, wood and peat ash.

Working on this project has been a joy and privilege and has opened my eyes to aspects of the landscape and culture I belong to that I hadn't been aware of beforehand. I have learned much from the generous sharing of all the different folk who have been involved in the project alongside me and who inspire me to continue to learn.

Acknowledgements & Thanks

Ùir-sgeul is Issue #4 of the Making Publics Press Chapbook series. Sales from the first edition run of the book will go towards Skye Mountain Rescue, a group of volunteers who provide assistance to walkers and climbers on the Isle of Skye on the west coast of Scotland. This issue is written by Eilidh MacKenzie, collated and edited by Heather Fulton and Ainslie Roddick at ATLAS Arts.

Eilidh MacKenzie

Eilidh MacKenzie is a musician, visual artist and educator from North Skye. She has a deeply-rooted interest in Gaelic culture and local lore, and in her place-based practice explores aspects of the island's physical and cultural landscape through various media. During this residency, Eilidh has undertaken a period of research at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, where she explored transhumance and wider shieling culture and practice in Skye, resulting in an exhibition and event series in June 2025 with Skye and Lochalsh archives centre.

Curious Travellers

Curious Travellers is an ongoing collaborative research project between the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, Glasgow University, the Natural History Museum, London. *Curious Travellers* focuses on the 18th Century travel writer Thomas Pennant, who visited Skye and the Hebrides in 1772, and on how travel writing may have shaped contemporary perspectives of the Hebrides. Eilidh was invited to take part in a *Curious Travellers* artist residency with ATLAS Arts in 2024 with collaboration and support from Sabhal Mòr Ostaig.

Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre

As part of the Highland Archive Service, the Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre in Portree is responsible for archives relating to Skye and Lochalsh. The records date from the 17th century to the present, and are strongest from the mid-19th century.

***

Ceud taing dha; Prof Mary-Ann Constantine, Prof Abigail Burnyeat, Dr Dòmhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart, Prof Hugh Cheape, Greg MacThòmais, Prof Nigel Leask, Prof Michael Given, Catherine MacPhee, Anne Beaton, The Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre team, Dr Ulrike Hogg at the National Library of Scotland, Màiri NicGillìosa, Richy Carey at Èist sound, Angus MacKenzie, Claire Flyn, Angela MacGillivray, Andy Black, Ewan Thomson, Maighread Stiùbhart, Christine Primrose, Ailig Dòmhnallach, Chrisann MacDonald, staff and C7 pupils of Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Phort Rìgh, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig and Sona Design.

Ùir-sgeul | *earth story* exhibition is funded by Highland Council Ward funding, supported through Skye and Lochalsh Archives, Highlife Highland, and ATLAS Arts, University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, Glasgow University, the Natural History Museum, London and Sabhal Mòr Ostaig as Part of Curious Travellers.

Colophon

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Published August 2025 by ATLAS Arts, Portree, Isle of Skye.
Design by Jeanne Constantin.
Printed by Highland Printers.

ATLAS Arts is a registered charity SC043393.

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The Making Publics Press is a book making studio at ATLAS Arts, with equipment to design, print, bind and trim publications on demand. A space for conversation and community building, the press supports the making of small runs of creative book projects, quickly and cheaply—getting books out into the world and across Skye, Raasay and Lochalsh. For us, publishing means to make new publics and new kinds of social spaces.

About ATLAS Arts:
ATLAS Arts organises collective art projects across Skye, Raasay and Lochalsh. We work with artists and local residents to have conversations that are rooted in this place and this time, through a programme of long-term projects, screenings, residencies, meals, workshops and sharings. We pay attention to the social, political and global significance of these conversations and the building of communities in between.

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