IONA
The Other Island

Words by Kenneth Steven
Photographs by Iain Sarjeant
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Contents

IONA: The Other Island 5
Traigh Mor 16
The Eastern Edge 18
The Glen of the Temple 20
Sandeels’ Bay 22
The West 32
Columba’s Bay 44
The Gully of Pat’s Cow 54
The Marble Quarry 56
The Port of the Young Lad’s Rock 64
The South West Corner 66
The Port of the Marten-Cat Cliff 70
Slabb Meadhonach - The Great Loneliness 76
The Abbey 78
Dun I 90
The North End 94
The South West Corner - Helen Steven 112
The Second Ark - Alastair McIntosh 114
On wanting to go to the Hermit’s Cell - Ali Campbell 116
The Dappled Dell (An Uiridh Raibhach) - Joyce watson 118
This book grew out of a shared vision. Both Iain Sarjeant and I had known Iona from childhood; we had been fortunate enough to be brought to the island summer after summer. All the Hebridean landfalls are special in their unique ways; it’s hard to describe those particular individual characteristics without using a great number of words. As shorthand, I like to think of it as varying colours; each colour has a different shade.

But Iona, for many at least, has something more, something deeper. It is an island that has a profound impact on people, whether they are inherently spiritually minded or not. George Macleod, the founder of the Iona Community, and the man responsible for the re-building of the Abbey last century, described Iona as a thin place. Somehow the veil was thin between this world and God’s. There are many who believe the centuries of prayer whispered in the Abbey stones is what brings that very thinness, and yet that is somehow rendering this quality man-made, and limiting it to one corner of the island. There was more than likely a reason for Columba’s choosing of Iona, not only because it lay right at the heart of the emerging Celtic kingdom, a stepping stone between Ireland and the country that was to become Scotland. We are told it was an island of druids, and therefore once upon a time it had been chosen by them too for a reason. So the power of Iona – and even the origins of its name – are shrouded in mystery. This story has to be about the whole island rather than one particular, special corner.
I go back in my mind to when I was three and four years old. I vividly remember arriving at Phionnphort with my parents and having my first glimpse of Iona. There was the ferry nodding by the jetty. Even now, forty years later, I am moved to write those words. I visited all manner of other Hebridean islands with my parents, but none could compare with the overwhelming power of this place and all that it meant.

And all that it meant. Those are crucial words, because I somehow felt the same wonderment that I experienced in the Abbey cloister as I did at Columba’s Bay or at Port Ban. There was no schism between the formally religious places and all the myriad other places I knew and loved elsewhere on Iona.
That was the starting point of this book for Iain and me, the shared desire to tell the story of those many other corners through images and words. Both of us knew all too well that so many thousand pilgrims visit each year, particularly in July and August, and simply have time to walk from the village to the Abbey and back again. The next place on their itinerary is already beckoning; the buses over at Phionnphort are waiting to whisk them back across Mull.

Iain and I were also aware that so many of the books on Iona are about the story of the island’s top right hand corner alone. Not that we would want for a moment to take away from the wonder and power of Abbey and Nunnery, it’s just that sometimes a reader who had never visited the island would have the impression this really is all that’s to be found here!

There’s perhaps a further reason for the creation of this book. One of the rather lovely evolutions of a writing genre or sub-genre over recent years has been in respect of micro-worlds. The looking at one type of flower, one particular season
or mountain or even field. Often this writing has an environmental core to it; often too there is a meticulous detailing of the subject. It is as though it is put under a kind of loving microscope. This writing is perhaps a backlash against the kind of contemporary guides that seek to sum up a city or even a whole country with a few throwaway lines. It is saying that small really is beautiful and exciting, that spending time slowing down and leaving the mad rush of this world’s frenetic pace reaps rich rewards.

This book is for those who come to Iona for that brief summer hour and are in danger of leaving feeling let down and disillusioned by the experience. It is for those who have known Iona well and have fallen in love with its many secret corners, and who want to remember and re-visit them. And it is for those who may not have been aware of the existence of those corners, and who want to return to make their own journeys to find them.

A word on exploration of Iona’s wilder corners. There are places where very real care needs to be taken; don’t be beguiled by the benign Iona that meets you when you land on a warm June morning. The south-east and south-west corners in particular have headlands and coves that offer real challenge to the best of walkers. It’s also very easy to get lost in both the north and south of the island where the terrain is all quite similar – confusingly so. When on the island for the writing of this book I set out one day for the Port of the Young Lad’s Rock. I must have struck off far too early and ended up wandering about on crags to the north of it. In the end I decided that discretion was the better part of valour and simply came back to do better planning. That hurt my pride, because I know Iona well. But don’t make the mistake of thinking it’s a tiny island that’s easily covered in a couple of days: that’s the whole intention of the creation of this book. It’s much bigger than you think. And if you’re better off enjoying the truly rugged corners from the safety of an armchair with this book, then good and well.
Five months after leaving a far language and a strange land under the soft nightfall of August and a fine rain – the sea smooth and a fur moon full in the northern sky.

Five months after the ravages of pirates (one vial broken by storm, another bartered for fresh well water): when thirst had thickened tongues to madness.

Five months after seas that held their breath, that would not move, were made of silence, that oar by oar were fought to cross.

This simple cove of rocks and monks who grateful come to share the lifting; to bring this cargo safe at last for love of letters.

For the Book of Kells

We know that inks used for the illuminated pages of the Book of Kells were brought from far away. We know too that it’s likely the Book – surely one of the great treasures of the Celtic Christian world – was begun on Iona and then taken to Ireland for safe-keeping during the years of the Viking raids.
Traigh Mor – THE BIG BEACH

It deserves a better name, in Gaelic and in English, especially when the island has such a wealth of evocative names for hills and glens and other beaches. But what it lacks in name, it more than makes up for in attractiveness. And even if walking is a struggle, reaching Traigh Mor should be possible for most. It is so near and yet so far. I associate the beach with toddlers learning to walk (since that’s who one sees here most often in the summer, and since it’s here I learned to walk myself).

At low tide a whole host of little boomerangs of smaller beach appear, all laced with minute worlds of shells. There are other beaches on the island that have such ‘lacings’, but none has cowrie shells as Traigh Mor does. They are little pink things the size of a child’s fingernail. When sitting up on the sand, so to speak, they’re just skin-coloured hummocks. Little bottoms. But underneath they have a ‘zip’ that stretches from one end to the other; an opening that reveals the inner, empty chamber of the shell. They are only one type of shell among many to be found on Traigh Mor; over a half hour of hunting one might hope to collect twenty or thirty. They’re easiest to find at low tide when all these beautiful stretches of shells have been left exposed.
The Eastern Edge

Even if you can’t walk far, walk here. Leave the village by turning left at the jetty, right down past the war memorial and the first beach that in my childhood was known as Coal Bay. I can remember the coal being unloaded here in my childhood, and it’s a fine little horseshoe of beach in and of itself. A place of happiness in high summer, with children tottering about at the water’s edge, and chasing dogs, and on days of cold brightness, of folk hunkered down in the sand dunes to escape the wind and find the sun.

But down beyond here, further on this east side road, there are all manner of little tiny coves that appear at low tide. Beaches that have no names but which are filled with luminous blue water washing whitest sand. Little wonder that the Scottish Colourists, the great painters of the early Twentieth Century, came out to Iona to capture these wild and beautiful hues.

These are places to sit a while in quiet. It may be that patient waiting will be rewarded by an otter, for they are here on the east side of Iona and I’ve seen them. But otters are not to be ordered. I spent the first years of my life trailing Hebridean beaches desperately hoping I would see one. In the end I gave up in despair. And then I saw one.
The Glen of the Temple

Sometimes even now there are places I can’t find:
Caves that go missing, beaches I search for that are lost –
There are times the island is bigger inside.
Once, as a child, I came down into the Glen of the Temple
All on my own. Everything was still around me.
The air hummed and fluttered with living things
And I realised I couldn’t see the sea, and for a moment
All the points of the compass jumbled
And I was in the middle, the very middle of the island,
In the middle of summer. And I wasn’t afraid.

out of that battered coast
and all the winter can throw
the days of flurrying snow
and the wind searching
the long and starless nights
high seas and the power gone
the spring comes suddenly
in the twirling song of a lark
a torn blue sky and the light
here and there in fragments
the jewellery of flowers
reds and blues and golds
rising from among the rocks
year after faithful year.

Can anyone dare to say
they do not believe in miracles?