

The last of the great auks: oral history and ritual killings at St Kilda

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Abstract

The story of the killing of the ‘last’ great auk (*Pinguinus impennis*) in Britain, apparently put to death as a witch at Stac an Armin in the St Kilda archipelago c. 1840, is well known. However, other accounts claim that an auk was killed on the main island, Hirta, having been condemned to death by the celebrated men’s ‘parliament’. The historical veracity of three differing stories, which recount discreditable deeds in a deeply Christian community, is evaluated; it seems that fewest difficulties are raised if *two* great auks were killed, one on Hirta and the other on Stac an Armin. It is argued that this kind of avicide was a ‘ritual’ killing, to be understood in its historical context. The auk-killing probably took place in the mid to late 1840s, after the St Kilda minister had departed in the wake of the Disruption of 1843 – a particularly unsettling time within this small island community. A possible sighting of a pair of great auks on Soay (St Kilda) in 1890 is also briefly discussed.

Naturalists and readers of the St Kilda literature will know the story of the killing of a great auk (*Pinguinus impennis*) in the middle of the nineteenth century.¹ The auk in question is widely accepted as the ‘last’ certainly recorded in Britain, and perhaps on the planet (depending upon when the killing is dated). The story, as retailed by John Love on the basis of nineteenth-century accounts, is that five men (three of whom have been named) went to Stac an Armin, a 196m tall rock stack within the St Kilda archipelago, having noticed a strange bird there. Spotting the creature asleep on a ledge, they crept up on it and caught it. They then kept the bird tied up at the bothy on the stack for three days; it made a great noise, not least by the frequent opening and closing of its bill. A storm arose. Thinking that the bird must be a witch and had called up the bad weather, the men beat it to death either with a stick or with two large stones (the latter process taking an hour); the same man, Lachlan McKinnon, was apparently the informant concerning both versions of the mode of killing.² The men then threw the body behind the bothy. Naturalists have satisfied themselves as far as possible that the bird in question *was* a great auk, and not a great northern diver, and that the configuration of Stac an Armin makes it quite possible that this flightless bird could have made its way halfway up its side, where it is said to have been seen.

Taking our source literally would place this event in July 1840, plus or minus a couple of years. However, in 2009 Love suggested that the killing is more likely to have occurred in the mid-1840s, after the island’s minister, Rev. Neil Mackenzie, had departed from Hirta (St Kilda’s main and only permanently habitable island) in the late spring/early summer of 1844. Mackenzie was very interested in birds; it is hard to believe that he would not have recorded such an ornithologically significant happening, either in his notes and diary³ or indirectly, in conversation with visitors arriving in 1840 or 1841 whose accounts have been preserved or published.⁴ More recently, Love has pointed to a note

¹ Errol Fuller, *The Great Auk* (privately printed, 1999), 75–6; John A. Love, *A Natural History of St Kilda* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2009), 127–30.

² J. A. Harvie-Brown and Thomas Edward Buckley, *A Vertebrate Fauna of the Outer Hebrides* (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1888), 158–60.

³ later partially published; cf. Neil Mackenzie, ‘Notes on the Birds of St Kilda’, in *Annals of Scottish Natural History* 14 (1905), 75–80; and J. B. Mackenzie (ed.), *Episode in the Life of Neil Mackenzie, at St Kilda from 1829 to 1843* (privately printed, 1911).

⁴ Love, *A Natural History*, 129.

made by the folklorist Alexander Carmichael which dates the auk killing to ‘about 1847’, which Carmichael later amended to ‘1848’.⁵ Love noted that one of the named participants in the killing, Malcolm MacDonald, apparently died in October 1846, which led him to suggest a date in the summer of 1846.⁶ However, noting that there was more than one Malcolm MacDonald on Hirta in 1846, and that there was a summer storm in July 1848, he tells me that he now prefers the 1848 date.⁷ His basic point is that the killing occurred after 1844, and thus *after* the killing, in Iceland, of the supposedly ‘last’ great auks on the planet.⁸

The story as summarised above was first published by Harvie-Brown and Buckley in 1888. It was based on information supplied to Professor Alfred Newton, ornithologist and Professor of Comparative Anatomy at Cambridge University, by Henry Evans, an English banker and naturalist from Darley Abbey in Derbyshire, who regularly sailed his yacht in the Hebrides and visited St Kilda several times. In the 1870s and 1880s the main informant was evidently Lachlan McKinnon (1808–95), one of the auk-killers. By the summer of 1880 another man involved in the Stac an Armin killing, Donald McQueen (1804–80), had lost all memory of the incident,⁹ though the previous summer he had been very much *compos mentis*.¹⁰

Other versions

There are, however, two other previously unrecognised stories. Story 2, which I will call the ‘parliament’ story, appeared in several newspapers in March 1898.¹¹ It came from Kenneth Campbell, who had been the schoolteacher on Hirta in 1884–5; in 1898 he was a doctor practising in Oban. According to Campbell, as reported:

[A]bout fifty years ago a strange bird was seen one day on St Kilda. It was agreed to try and catch it, as, though it had an enormous beak, it seemed to have very small wings. Several of the natives, who were adepts at bird-stalking, managed to get so near the strange monster that they threw themselves on the bird, and, after a successful struggle, were successful at capturing it alive. ‘When the huge bird was taken to the township, the “Island Parliament” was assembled to deliberate on the strange visitor, and it was agreed to tie its legs securely with strong cords, and to tether it for the night to a stout pin fixed in the ground near the houses, and to decide its fate next day. On the morrow the Parliament was called very early, as the bird had made such hideous noises during the night that hardly anybody could sleep. The bird was undoubtedly considered an evil emissary. After serious consideration the verdict was given to have the vile bird stoned to death, and the sentence was at once carried out.

To their chagrin, the islanders were told ‘months later’ that the bird’s carcass would have been worth £300–400 if they had preserved it; some of them then started to search for its bones. In the ‘parliament’ story, then, both the decision to tether the bird and the later decision to kill it were taken by the men’s assembly; details were given of how it was kept tethered for only one night, and then stoned to death.

⁵ John A. Love, ‘The Last Great Auk?’ in *Scottish Birds* 31, no. 4 (2011), 346; and ‘St Kilda’s claim to the last ever great auk’, in *Hebridean Naturalist* 19 (2019), 19–26.

⁶ Bill Lawson, *Croft History: Isle of St Kilda* (Northton, Isle of Harris: Bill Lawson Publications, 1993), 29.

⁷ *Personal communication*, 8 August 2021.

⁸ Recounted in Fuller, *The Great Auk*, 80–85; and Love, *A Natural History*, 130–1.

⁹ L. W. Rennison, ‘A Visit to St Kilda’, *Alloa Advertiser*, 5 February 1881.

¹⁰ ‘St Kilda: the place and the people: Part III’, *Greenock Advertiser* 5 July 1879.

¹¹ ‘The last great auk’, *Westminster Gazette* 7 March 1898; ‘The last great auk’, *Dundee Evening Telegraph* and others, 8 March 1898. For several similar articles on the same topic, search the British Newspaper Archive, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>.

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Story 3, which combines the key elements of Stories 1 and 2, was published on 21 August 1890 in a letter written by ‘Hirst’, of Oban, to *The North British Daily Mail*. Its publication was probably induced by a report of a great auk sighting on Soay (St Kilda) published three weeks earlier in the same newspaper.¹² It is quite likely that ‘Hirst’ was the pseudonym of Kenneth Campbell, and that the name plays on the pronunciation of *Hiort* (Hirta) by Gaelic speakers. ‘Hirst’ wrote:

[O]ne of the keen-sighted cragsmen directed his comrades’ attention to an object high up on the stack....after a bit of careful stalking they got near enough to see that it was a very large bird, and fast asleep. Two were upon it in an instant, and after a struggle, fiercer than they had bargained for, it became their defiant prisoner. Carried back to St Kilda in triumph, it was tethered in a small enclosure behind one of the cottages, there to spend the night. All night long the village resounded with its wild, hoarse, despairing cries. The St Kildans, who are exceedingly superstitious, were terrified. Could it be that something uncanny had visited them? They had heard from their fathers of a very large bird, possessed of very small wings. But did it roar like that? Satan was as powerful and vindictive as ever...what more likely than that he should visit them in the form of a sea-bird?

The ‘so-called Parliament’ met the following morning. ‘What was to be done with the wingless though feathered monster? The St Kildans are courageous, and know their Bibles well. “Kill it” was the verdict. With sticks and stones they set upon it... keen was the St Kildans’ disappointment when told some time after that they might have been £200 richer’.

Story 3 was also recorded by Alexander Carmichael, and is quoted in detail by Love.¹³ Carmichael visited St Kilda in 1865 and 1878. That his record dates by implication from c. 1887 is not necessarily anomalous; anywhere on his travels he could have encountered a St Kildan or someone who knew a St Kildan. Carmichael places the auk killing on Stac Li rather than Stac an Armin, which is a physical impossibility for a flightless bird; this does not inspire confidence. Apparently ‘they brought it home but did not know what bird it was, what to do with it nor what to make of the bird’. What followed does not essentially differ from the newspaper account quoted above, although it adds detail to the account of the killing:

Every man in the community set upon the poor bird with sticks and stones and staves and attacked him till he was dead. And as the bird took a deal of killing the people were the more confirmed that he was possessed of a demon and they belaboured him accordingly. The body of the bird was then thrown to the dogs of the village and torn asunder by dogs and children.

The killing of the ‘last’ great auk is a profoundly depressing tale, especially heard from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century. What happened was hardly in keeping with the finer instincts of late Victorian Christianity, and it is hard to believe that the islanders enjoyed telling the tale to visiting naturalists, especially after they saw how they reacted. It may well be that they talked about the demise of the great auk only occasionally and with reluctance.

Context: ritual killing

Before discussion of the relationship between the three stories, the historical context requires further explanation. Rev. Neil Mackenzie’s ministry lasted fourteen years, from 1830 to 1844. His writings demonstrate that he was in many respects a rational man, possessing considerable intellectual and scientific curiosity, and very interested in birds; in the early years at least, he accompanied the islanders on some of their fowling expeditions, and ‘did not hesitate to go with them into what they

¹² See the Appendix to this article, below.

¹³ Love, ‘The Last Great Auk?’, 346, and ‘St Kilda’s claim’, 345.

considered the most dangerous places'.¹⁴ He believed that his preaching and teaching had a beneficial effect on the islanders' morality and behaviour. However, he did not consider himself truly successful as a preacher until he broke through to them on a deeper emotional level, an effect which he first achieved in 1841.¹⁵ According to Mackenzie:

[T]he whole congregation became so agitated that they could not restrain themselves. The noise became so great that I could not be heard; some cried with vehement energy, some fainted, others sobbed.... the tears were not in drops, but in copious streams down their cheeks....our evening and Monday meeting were of similar cast. This state of things continues unabated to the present time. Many a troubled meeting we had during the season...the general cast of them was weeping aloud, crying for mercy with such pathos and energy as beggars description – women frequently fainting, some rolling themselves along the floor....

Mackenzie was scientifically curious about the effects he had created, seeking a detailed account from 'a very intelligent man' – who told him that the experience was 'highly disagreeable'.¹⁶

By 1844, Satan would have been firmly installed in the islanders' pantheon, as it were, of the forces of darkness. The emotional tenor of their experiences in church must have reinforced the St Kildans' belief in the power and ineffability of supernatural forces. After his departure in that year, Mackenzie was no longer available to dispel his flock's darker thoughts by deploying Christian teaching or his version of rationality. If a live auk had appeared on Hirta during his time there, we may be sure that his ornithological interest would have prevailed over the islanders' witch-finding instincts. After he left, in the wake of the Disruption of 1843, the Established and the Free churches tussled for nine years for control on Hirta.¹⁷ Their efforts resulted in sectarian strife, which culminated in the demographically disastrous emigration to Australia of one-third of the island's population in 1852. The mixture of island politics and sectarian dissension had proved toxic. Given this background, it should come as no surprise that sometime between 1856 and 1863 the islanders apparently wanted a woman put on trial for witchcraft. Their catechist, Duncan Kennedy, took no action.¹⁸

Among the islanders, the fairly recent arrival of an intense and uncompromising version of Christianity had by no means fully displaced older concepts of the supernatural and ways of counteracting its malign forces. This particular case of avicide was evidently a ritual killing. Why did people bother to capture the bird, and after they had done so, why did they not simply let it go? In the Stac an Armin story, why did they not kill the bird in a normal way, rather than beating it to death with sticks, or alternatively (the question is unresolved) taking an hour – presumably an exaggeration – to crush it between stones? Surely they could simply have broken or wrung its neck, like the men who killed the 'last' pair of auks on Eldey in Iceland?¹⁹ On Hirta, teenage girls were accustomed to killing dozens of puffins every year with their bare hands. In the 'parliament' and composite stories, the killing of the auk was evidently done by *several* persons (which was also unnecessary in practical terms). The parliament story mentions death by stoning; the composite story mentions sticks, stones and staves; the Stac an Armin story mentions both that it was killed with a stick and that it was crushed between two stones.²⁰ It may be worth noting that a female great auk was apparently stoned to death on Papa Westray in Orkney not long before 1812, though conceivably this was done for 'fun'.²¹

¹⁴ N. Mackenzie, 'Notes on the Birds of St Kilda', 75.

¹⁵ J. B. Mackenzie, *An Episode*, 32–8; 'Revival in St Kilda', *The Witness* (Edinburgh), 29 July 1843.

¹⁶ Both quotes Anon, 'Revival'.

¹⁷ Michael Robson, *St Kilda: Church, Visitors and 'Natives'* (Port of Ness, Isle of Lewis: Islands Book Trust, 2005), 385–411.

¹⁸ J. Sands, 'The witch finder', *Glasgow Herald*, 13 November 1885.

¹⁹ Fuller, *The Great Auk*, 82

²⁰ Love, *A Natural History*, 128.

²¹ Love, *A Natural History*, 125.

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In the St Kilda case it seems to have been important that the killing was a collective action, and that it was a long drawn-out affair, as the auk, being possessed by demonic forces, would naturally be hard to kill. It appears that the despatch of a witch demanded not only a special form of killing but also a 'twofold' death, analogous to the 'threefold killing' (stabbing, strangling, and a knock on the head) inflicted on some late prehistoric victims who became 'bog bodies', such as 'Lindow Man'.²² Such killings may be categorised as comprehensive, holistic or emphatic killings. In this context it may be noted that in England the practice of hanging, drawing and quartering lasted into the 1780s, with the last hanging plus beheading occurring in 1820. The last *sentence* of hanging, drawing and quartering was handed down in 1839, though it was commuted. The punishment remained on the statute book until 1870.²³

Eighty years before the religious revival, Kenneth Macaulay recorded the islanders' hatred of great black-backed gulls, and their strenuous efforts to catch them, which he described as 'a task far from being easy'.²⁴ A captured bird had its eyes plucked out and its wings sewn together before being cast into the sea. This was a twofold mutilation; either of the prescribed actions would have been enough to ensure the death of the gull, which in any case could have been dispatched more quickly and efficiently by other means. The islanders would also delicately extract the content of the gulls' eggs and then return them to their nests, so that the parent birds would waste their efforts sitting on them before 'pining away', as Macaulay put it. (The egg-blowing technique must have been later put to good use, indeed monetised, when visiting naturalists required samples of eggs). Although the eggs of the black-backed gull were 'among the largest and best' locally available, it was strictly taboo to eat them. The treatment of these birds clearly went beyond mundane pest control or occasional gratuitous cruelty; these were ritual killings.

The 'parliament' version recalls an episode which apparently took place sometime before the arrival of Mackenzie, whose promotion of a confessional atmosphere in the early 1840s was probably responsible for its coming to light. A woman, an outsider who had married into the community, was suspected of being the laird's spy, and consequently strangled with a loop of rope around her neck. The rope was wielded by 'all the men', and the important point is that the people took collective responsibility for the decision and for the deed, as well as for keeping quiet about it.²⁵ Sentencing a great auk to death by stoning would provide precisely the kind of long drawn-out event in which everyone present evidently had the opportunity, and perhaps the duty, to participate, sharing an infectious bloodlust and also demonstrating the community's celebrated solidarity. As Martin Martin wrote after his visit, 'the voice of one is the voice of all'.²⁶

Context: credibility and storytelling

The Stac an Armin story has been taken to be an account of a real historical event. What are we to make of *three* great auk stories? After the inauguration of the summer steamship service in 1877, naturalists visited the archipelago in much greater numbers than previously. Knowledgeable visitors may well have been asking about the great auk, perhaps showing the islanders pictures in their bird books; some St Kildans may have been tempted to make stories up. It is worth noting, however, that stories commonly told on Hirta were not private property, even if some self-evidently derived from the creativity of a particular individual. Several tales were duplicates of those told elsewhere (Harman 1997, 230). The oral transmission of history was firmly rooted in the community. In 1892, the Rev.

²² I. M. Stead, J. Bourke and D. Brothwell, *Lindow Man: The Body in the Bog* (London and Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

²³ *Wikipedia*, 'Hanged, drawn and quartered', https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanged_drawn_and_quartered.

²⁴ Kenneth Macaulay, *The History of St Kilda* (Edinburgh: James Thin, [1764] 1974), 158–9.

²⁵ J. B. Mackenzie, *An Episode*, 30

²⁶ Martin Martin, *A Voyage to St Kilda* (Edinburgh: James Thin, [1698] 1986), 38

Angus Fiddes, minister of St Kilda 1890–1902, described ‘an established institution of old standing’:²⁷

at the close of the harvest season generally each family has its “love feast” to which the nearest of kin are invited, when both apartments of the dwelling are filled – the men in one and the women in the other. The tables are spread with all the luscious varieties that these islands can produce of the fruits of the field. While willing hands are serving round goblets of wine from the teaplant, conversation flows freely on the days of yore. In this way we spread the close of the harvest evening until all the houses are gone over. On these occasions the old men repeat the traditions of their ancestors in the hearing of the youthful portion of the community, and by these means the feats of bravery and heroism on sea and land, with the unwritten history of bygone ages, are handed down from sire to son.

The oral transmission of history was thus in essence a communal tradition, and questions of accuracy and veracity would certainly have come under scrutiny in the wake of such occasions. As Bill Lawson’s genealogical work demonstrates, quite a few islanders born in the first couple of decades of the nineteenth century, who would have been in the prime of life in the 1840s, were still alive in the 1880s, able to tell stories or critique them.²⁸ Although the great auk killing hardly showed the islanders in the most Christian light, some visitors *were* told about it, even if perhaps rather shamefacedly.

Of the three tales, the Stac an Armin story is most convincing as an account of a historical event. It contains quite a lot of circumstantial detail – the spotting of the bird from far away, the frequent snapping of its bill, the worsening weather which sealed its fate, the mode(s) of killing and the disposal of the carcass. The tale has survived naturalists’ scrutiny of the great auk’s known habits and of the physiography of Stac an Armin: this was a flightless bird, awkward on land, first seen halfway up the stack. It shows the islanders in a relatively creditable light, attributing the ‘superstitious’ killing to a small group of men, rather than to a collective decision made in the name of the community.

What of the ‘parliament’ story? This account makes no mention of Stac an Armin, merely stating that the bird was ‘seen on St Kilda’ and that it was ‘taken to the township’. But it does contain circumstantial detail, mentioning the cries of the bird which robbed people of a good night’s sleep, the two decisions of the ‘parliament’, details of the tethering of the bird, and its unnatural stoning. It should also be noted that it was Hirta, rather than Stac an Armin, which could – and evidently once did – supply territory suitable for the flightless great auks to establish one or more breeding colonies. In 1900 Norman Heathcote was told that a rock where the garefowl used to breed was still called ‘the rock of the garefowl’; Henry Evans placed this rock at the mouth of *Loch a’ Glinnhe* (‘Glen Bay’), where the bare rock surface, although highly vulnerable to human predation, would have seemed a promising colony site for the birds.²⁹ The map of Hirta marks more than one shingle beach (*mol*) which might once have served such a purpose.

Kenneth Campbell, the teacher to whom Story 2 was told, was described as ‘very intelligent and obliging’.³⁰ He spent the best part of a year (1884–5) on Hirta. Campbell was a Gaelic speaker, so nothing in the story would have been lost in translation. By contrast, Henry Evans, seemingly the most prominent collector of great auk stories, was an occasional visitor, albeit one who developed a good relationship with the islanders.³¹ Evans had an estate on Jura, and a large steam yacht on which

²⁷ Rev. [A.] Fiddes, ‘St Kilda and its wants’, *North British Daily Mail* 1 August 1892.

²⁸ Lawson, *Croft History*.

²⁹ see Love, *A Natural History*, 133 for sources.

³⁰ Bailie Ross, ‘St Kilda or Hirt: No II: scenery and people’, *Northern Chronicle* 7 January 1885.

³¹ Harvie-Brown and Buckley, *A Vertebrate Fauna*, 88.

he spent two or three months in the summer.³² His stays at St Kilda were relatively short, however, and he would have needed a translator.

So, did the killing of the great auk take place on Stac an Armin or on Hirta? It might be thought that this question could be resolved to general satisfaction by accepting Story 3 – the composite story, in which the bird is found on Stac an Armin and killed on Hirta by parliamentary decree. However, Story 3 adds almost no extra circumstantial detail to its predecessors. We hear nothing of what should have been a dramatic part of the tale – the transport of the large bird across four miles of open sea. Was it tethered in the (presumably loaded) boat with four or five men, and perhaps a hoisted sail, or did they tie a rope to its leg and tow it? It needs to be remembered that events which took place at Village Bay were usually witnessed by the entire population, apart from those who might have been in Gleann Mór or on outlying stacks and islands at the time. If no auk killing had taken place in Hirta at the behest of the men’s assembly, stories to that effect would have been swiftly discredited if aired in public – especially if the Stac an Armin version was already in circulation. On the other hand, if the killing *did* take place on Hirta, such an event would have been lodged firmly in the memories of several dozen people; a couple of old men claiming to have been on Stac an Armin when the killing actually took place could hardly have contradicted them successfully. At first sight, one might imagine that the composite story is the ‘original’ one, which, over forty years or so, developed two different versions. However, it seems more likely to be a blend, created by someone who knew both stories and sought to resolve the differences between them. Its airing in 1890 – or perhaps a little earlier if one accepts the implied date of Carmichael’s note (‘about 40 years ago or so say about 1848’) – does demonstrate that the ‘parliament’ element of the story was established within Hirta’s oral tradition by the late 1880s.

What if one of the two main stories is true, and the other one false? If the story that the auk was killed on Stac an Armin by a small party of fowlers is the correct one, could the ‘parliament’ story have been invented in order to transfer responsibility for the deed to the community as a whole? This seems an unlikely initiative for a late-nineteenth-century Christian community which came under the regular critical scrutiny of respectable tourists. What if the parliament story is the true one? In that case one would have to ask why Lachlan McKinnon and Donald McQueen colluded in claiming responsibility for the killing by telling Story 1, which would have been repellent to visitors and, if untrue, contradicted by any islanders who heard of it. This might, of course, have been a story told only to the most inquisitive naturalists. It may have been financially rewarding to tell such tales to visitors, presumably through a translator. But why would these old men have agreed to lie about the circumstances of the killing? Is it really likely that they were mandated by the community to take the blame for the incident?

One may readily envisage circumstances in which no single enquirer acquired full and accurate historical information. At the Gaelic/English interface there might have been misunderstanding or mistranslation. Furthermore, most visiting naturalists had other things to do on their short stays than enquire after extinct birds: they had observations to make, eggs or bird-skins to acquire, and birds to shoot. Likewise, the local people had more financially rewarding things to sell than stories. And as already noted, auk-killing stories did not show the islanders in a good light, especially among naturalists; they would hardly have been eagerly volunteered. As the St Kilda literature and contemporary newspapers make clear, the people preferred to tell stories about the exploits of historical personages, fairies and quasi-mythological figures. If stories of the great auk killing/s were told infrequently, it is entirely conceivable that no outsider ever heard more than one version – except possibly Kenneth Campbell, who, as we have seen, promulgated Story 2 and quite possibly Story 3 as well. Evidently Campbell either did not know the full version of Story 1, or chose to ignore it. In any event, it is quite likely that the first non-St Kildan to debate the historical veracity of these differing stories is the author of this article.

³² ‘Obituary: Mr Henry Evans, Darley Abbey’, *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* 28 July 1904.

Discussion and conclusion

There is one solution to the conundrum described above which avoids many of the difficulties noted. What if there were *two* great auks - one killed on Stac an Armin and the other on Hirta, not necessarily in the same year? There would then be two stories – ‘Stac an Armin’ and ‘parliament’, respectively more credible for circumstantial detail and source respectability. Neither story would have been told frequently enough for outsiders to have subjected it to contentious comparison with its alternative. The fact that there is no record of dissension among the St Kildans themselves over the veracity of the stories may suggest that *both* were accepted as true. If so, the islanders would have been relaxed about hearing or telling Story 3, the blend.

If there were two birds, would they have been a pair, or two unrelated individuals? Professor Tim Birkhead tells me that ‘it is EXTREMELY unlikely that a pair of birds (i.e. those that are bonded) would occur at different sites during the same breeding season. Two “unbonded” birds could occur at two different locations, but two unbonded birds seems a bit unlikely at a time when Great Auks were so scarce generally’.³³ However, the Stac an Armin killing took place in July, after the breeding season. It is a matter for conjecture how frequently and in what circumstances *garefowl* would have been seen during the period when the species was close to extinction. In 1812, visitors to Papa Westray in Orkney were told that for many years a single male bird had visited the island.³⁴ In considering such matters, the longevity of these birds must also be noted.

If some St Kildans knew that *two* killings had taken place, one on Stac an Armin and the other on Hirta, why hasn’t a ‘double killing’ story survived? The answer to this question may be that not many naturalists visited St Kilda before the regular steamship service commenced in 1877 – after which they did turn up in numbers, soon ‘discovering’ the St Kilda wren³⁵ and the St Kilda mouse. Great auk stories, then, were probably not much *sought* until something like thirty or forty years after the killing/s took place. By that time, the Free Church version of Christianity had grown deeper roots; discreditable stories would hardly have been eagerly volunteered or openly discussed in an atmosphere of dispassionate historical enquiry. Indeed, enquiries may have been resisted or deflected, especially during the ministry of Rev. John Mackay (1865–89), who was regularly described as interpreting his role in a despotic or controlling fashion. It is possible that Donald McQueen’s amnesia in 1880, noted earlier, may have been influenced by the minister’s attitude. In such circumstances, a naturalist might have been fortunate to find out anything much on this topic.

It is quite possible that two auks were present in the archipelago in the mid 1840s. The suggestion that both birds were ritually killed has wider implications. The notion might seem surprising, given that in 1821 a great auk captured on a ledge on the east side of Hirta (perhaps near the shingle beach *Mol Ghiasgeir*) was sold for 10 shillings to the tacksman.³⁶ Knowing that the bird was greatly prized by ornithologists, and worth a good deal of money, should not senior members of the community have taken a more clear-headed and materialistic approach twenty years later?

Neil Mackenzie had been working hard, in pulpit and classroom. Nevertheless, it should be recalled that in the mid-1840s the islanders had had their purpose-built church and evangelical minister for only a decade and a half (from 1830; Mackenzie left in 1844). The twenty or so people over the age of forty-five at this time had spent their formative years under the ministry of Lachlan MacLeod, who had inherited the post from his father; the office had been held in the family since 1741. Lachlan was described as ‘a pleasantish, flattering, weak man’ who apparently liked to play the fiddle, took snuff, smoked tobacco and drank heavily. He spent a good deal of time away from Hirta, trying to secure better pay and accommodation. Eventually, MacLeod’s employers, the Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SSPCK), pointedly invited him to attend a

³³ Tim Birkhead, personal communication, 28 July 2021; his emphasis.

³⁴ Love, *A Natural History*, 125

³⁵ Love, *A Natural History*, 186

³⁶ Love, *A Natural History*, 127; Anon, ‘St Kilda’, *Glasgow Evening Citizen* 4 May 1881

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refresher course – an opportunity which he did not accept. They then pressed for his retirement, though he didn't formally resign until March 1822.³⁷ During the 1820s, John MacDonald, the 'Apostle of the North', conducted a series of missions to St Kilda, which formed a prelude to Neil Mackenzie's arrival in 1830. By the later years of Mackenzie's ministry, Christianity had made impressive progress on Hirta. However, its roots were evidently shallower than its promoters hoped.

It is not known when the first colony of great auks became established at St Kilda, or when humans started to exploit these birds. It seems that for a long time the islanders limited their predation in order to ensure the colony's survival. This self-restraint presumably included a time, probably in the Middle Ages, when they were apparently land-hungry enough to construct a field system, with a recognisable head dyke, on the steep slopes of the island of Boreray.³⁸ The 'Robert Sibbald manuscript' mentions garefowl oil as 'none of the meanest' of St Kilda's exports,³⁹ whilst Martin's description of the bird says nothing which implies that it was not a regular member of St Kilda's avifauna.⁴⁰ A preserved song mentions the auk and the gannet together, both as harbingers of spring and as desirable presents for a woman to receive from a suitor or husband.⁴¹ Presumably such a song was composed or set in a time well before the disastrous epidemic of c. 1727, after which the diminished Hirta population was augmented by the settlement of people from Skye and other parts of the Western Isles.

Available information suggests, then, that a St Kilda garefowl colony still existed in the late seventeenth century, presumably in a diminished state. The first half of the eighteenth century evidently saw its extinction. Few if any of the new colonists of c. 1730 would have seen a garefowl; by the early nineteenth century the bird would have been a folk memory. Anyone who saw it would have been startled and puzzled; even if they identified it correctly, it would still have been an anomalous bird, whose presence required interpretation. The ambiguous status of the great auk in decline is reflected in the life experience of Donald McQueen (1804-1880) who in 1821 was a member of the party which captured an auk on the east side of Hirta and sold it to the factor, who in turn gave it to two men who intended and attempted (unsuccessfully) to preserve the bird for science.⁴² In middle age, the same man took part in the Stac an Armin killing. McQueen was thus implicated in two very different responses to a garefowl sighting.

This is not the place for an inexpert survey of the anthropological and historical literature on witchcraft and ritual killing. The St Kilda literature itself says little about witchcraft. However, this near-silence is almost certainly deceptive. Witchcraft-related practices are not the kind of phenomena which visitors would normally encounter. Such matters were probably concealed from men of the cloth, who may well in any case have chosen to look the other way, being preoccupied with other explorations of spirituality; they would not have wished to draw attention to the continuing existence of 'superstitious' practices on their watch. Under Lachlan MacLeod's regime – and after Neil Mackenzie's departure – traditions and beliefs around witchcraft must have gone largely unchecked. They may indeed have flourished after Mackenzie left, with organised Christianity facing an uncertain future and sectarian tensions rising. In this context, the ritual killing of a great auk (or auks) may seem not so much reprehensible as cathartic.

³⁷ For an account of MacLeod, see Robson, *St Kilda*, 231–57

³⁸ Angela Gannon and George Geddes, *St Kilda: The Last and Outmost Isle* (Edinburgh: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, 2015), 63-4

³⁹ quoted by Fuller, *The Great Auk*, 44

⁴⁰ Martin, *A Voyage to St Kilda*, 27

⁴¹ Mary Harman, *An Isle called Hirta: History and Culture of the St Kildans to 1930* (Waternish, Isle of Skye: Maclean Press, 1997), 241

⁴² Love, *A Natural History*, 125–6

Appendix

It is worth noting a series of articles relevant to this discussion which appeared in the popular press in July and August, 1890.

First, an article from the *North British Daily Mail*, published 30 July 1890, reported that during the previous May a sheep-shearing party on the island of Soay (St Kilda) had disturbed a pair of large birds by their shouts and the barking of their dogs. The birds eluded their grasp, and ‘made for the sea, taking a northerly course’. Apparently two men who had taken part in the killing on Stac an Armin said that the birds answered ‘in every respect’ to the one which they had killed on that stack. The St Kildans said they had never seen such a large bird before, but having compared it with a picture of the gairfowl in their possession, were ‘persuaded that these were a pair of the same species’. The newspaper’s correspondent, writing under the *nom de plume* ‘One of Mother Carey’s Chickens’, discussed the precipitousness of the places where the auk was seen, both on Stac an Armin and on Soay, and concluded that the great auk could not, after all, have been flightless. He challenged ‘Nether Lochaber’ (the pseudonym of Dr Alexander Stewart, a respected scholar and minister of Ballachulish) to respond.⁴³

Two days later, on 2 August 1890, the same paper published Stewart’s response.⁴⁴ He evidently read the account carelessly, for he mentioned only ‘the pair of birds recently seen on *Stac an Armin* by the St Kildians’ [my italics]. Stewart suggested that, since the great auk was flightless, and could not have managed to reach such a precipitous site, the birds must have been great northern divers.

On 9 August 1890 an interview with The Rev. Angus Fiddes, minister of St Kilda, who had been a member of the May sheep-shearing party on Soay, was published in *The Northern Scot and Moray and Nairn Express*. He described how

we came across a pair of birds which answered in every respect to the description given in the text book and otherwise. The men viewed them from a distance of 100 yards. The male bird was black on the back; the other of a dark grey colour. They both had a small white spot upon the neck, with breasts all white. Their bills and feet were of a darker colour. These we could not see so well, as they frequently kept them hidden in their feathery breasts or the long grass in front of them. ...this pair were larger than any living person had seen before, and on comparing them with pictures of the gairfowl in their possession, they are fully persuaded that these were a pair of the same species. As near as they could reckon they were about the size of a Soa lamb....The pair we had seen escaped falling into our hand by means of their powers of flight. Therefore this fact of itself disproves the theory of the naturalists that the gairfowl cannot fly.⁴⁵

The final story connected with these events appeared on 21 August 1890, when *The North British Daily Mail* publishes Story 3 (see above), in the form of a letter from ‘Hirst’ of Oban.

Although the descriptions of the ‘flight’ of the birds seen on Soay leaves a great deal to be desired, the fact that the encounter was held to disprove the great auk’s flightlessness suggests that they were probably not great auks. Could they have been great northern divers? Love writes that ‘Newton has convincingly argued that the bird [on Stac an Armin in the 1840s] could not have been a great northern

⁴³ One of Mother Carey’s Chickens [pseud.], ‘Notes on St Kilda: The Great Auk or Gairfowl’, *North British Daily Mail*, 30 July 1890.

⁴⁴ Nether Lochaber [Dr Alexander Stewart], ‘The gairfowl or great auk at St Kilda’, *North British Daily Mail* 2, August 1890.

⁴⁵ ‘Affairs of St Kilda: a chat with the minister of the island’, *The Northern Scot and Moray and Nairn Express*, 9 August 1890. As this interview, as transcribed, uses some of the same wording to describe the Soay sighting as was used in the article by ‘One of Mother Carey’s Chickens’ ten days earlier, we may speculate that either the Rev. Fiddes was the pseudonymous author of the first article, or that the interviewer made use of that article in writing the follow-up story. Such practices were common in the nineteenth century.

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diver, which just would not be capable of landing on such a rocky shore let alone moving up the slope'.⁴⁶ Would the same argument apply to the sighting on Soay, where the birds were apparently seen in long grass? On the other hand, Charles Dixon, writing in 1885, evidently believed that great northern divers had been mistaken for great auks more than once.⁴⁷

Both the capacity and the propensity of great auks to scramble up steep slopes seem to be matters of surmise. Love cites the ornithologist Stuart Murray who has landed several times on Stac an Armin and who 'knowing the capacity of some penguins such as rock-hoppers, reckons that great auks were just as nimble'.⁴⁸ There is, of course, a risk of circular argument here. However, in the context of this possible sighting it may be noted that there was a 'ledge' on Soay which was also named after garefowl and associated with its breeding there.⁴⁹ In the St Kilda literature, then, 'ledges' (rather than shingle beaches) are associated with garefowl three or four times – which may provide confirmation of the bird's hopping or scrambling capabilities and affect our estimate of the credibility of the Stac an Armin and Soay sightings.

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⁴⁶ Love, *A Natural History*, 129.

⁴⁷ Love, *A Natural History*, 129.

⁴⁸ Love, 'The Last Great Auk?', 346.

⁴⁹ Love, *A Natural History*, 133.

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