

THE DESERTED HEBRIDES

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Islands, particularly small islands, appear to exercise a peculiar fascination. This is reflected, for example, in the public press wherein appear, from time to time, letters and articles lamenting the declining population of this or that island. Implied, if not specifically stated, is the thesis that depopulation reflects a failure to make best use of natural resources, expressed in emotional phrases such as "neglect of our National Heritage". The writers usually conclude with some plea for (unspecified) government action which, it is said, must be taken urgently "before it is too late". Too late for what? Does depopulation, particularly of islands, necessarily imply waste of resources?

In Britain this is particularly a Scottish problem. In the eighteenth century some seven or eight per cent of Scots lived on islands. Now the figure is less than two per cent. The recent establishment of a Development Board is official recognition that the Highlands and Islands are a major "under-developed" region of Britain. If, and there are good reasons, we include Bute as well as the Crofting Counties, islands account for about one-third of the population of this Highland region.

The problem, in essence, is the relationship between population density and economic development in restricted areas. It is seen in its most extreme form in the cases in which islands have become more or less completely depopulated. This paper is an attempt to assess the significance of these deserted islands, including a few which have been effectively deserted but which for one reason or another, recorded a small population, e.g. of seasonally resident shepherds at the 1961 Census.

Sources

There is no single, convenient source of an account of the deserted islands. A valuable description and summary was published in 1958 by the Rev. T. M. Murchison; this contains material from most of the well-known topographical accounts,

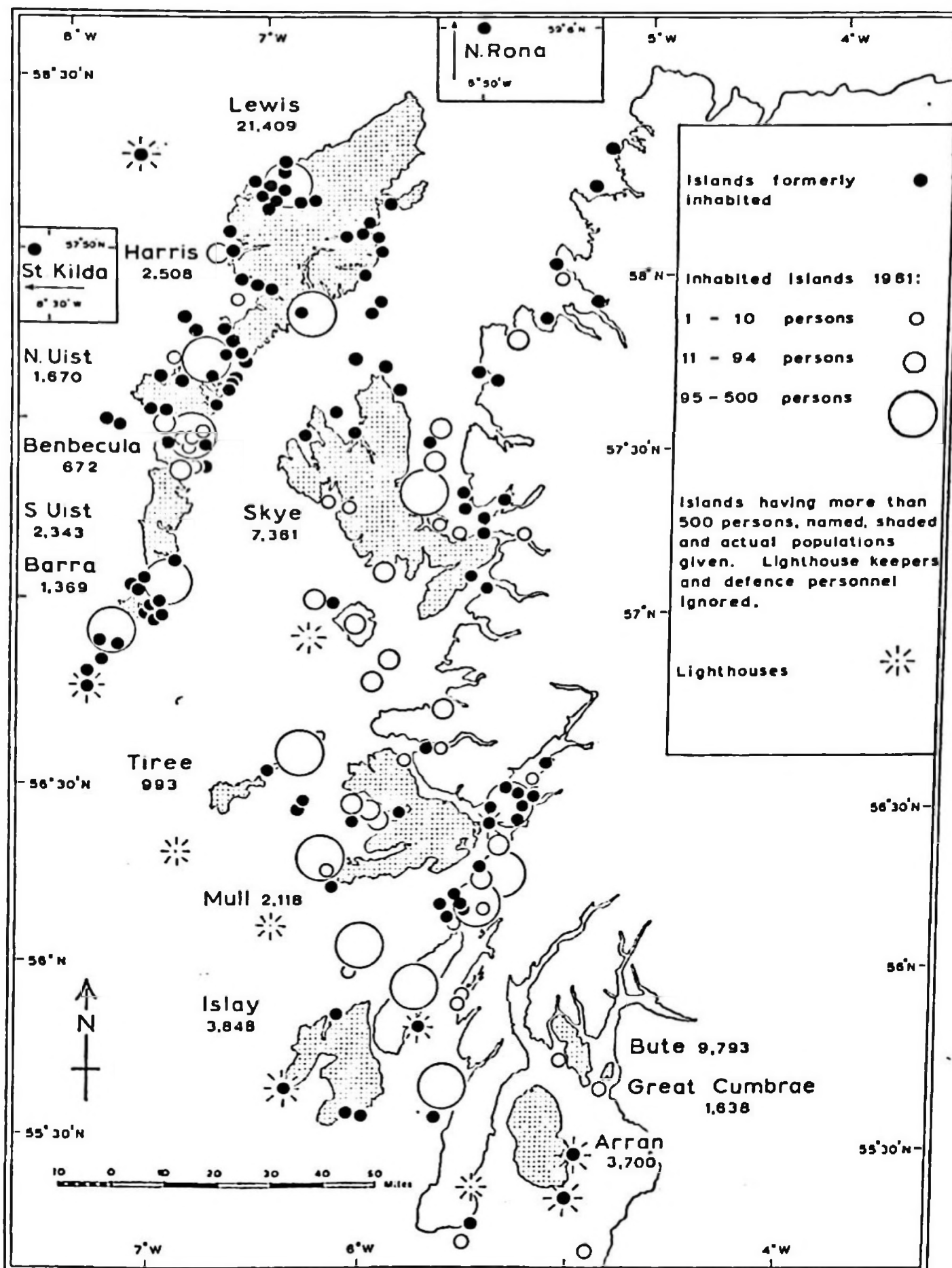


FIG. 1.—The deserted and the inhabited Hebrides, 1961. Note that, whilst in general this map is derived from 1961 Census data, certain small islands which were inhabited only seasonally are shown as deserted.

published Census Reports and some previously unpublished material (Murchison 1964:fig. 88). In 1962 O'Dell and Walton published a useful map (O'Dell and Walton 1962:298), showing some of the more important aspects of island depopulation. Their map, however, shows only a selection of the abandoned islands, and may be compared in this respect with a map prepared by the present writer (Fig. 1).

The principal sources for this new map are as follows:

- (i) Published Census Reports (not of much use for this purpose before 1851),
- (ii) Other published accounts, particularly for the period before 1851,
- (iii) Unpublished Census Enumeration books, particularly for 1841 and 1851,
- (iv) Personal enquiries in the field.

The Report of the 1851 Census was the first to make a particular tabulation of islands (Census, Gt. Britain, 1851: Appendix, table 43, cxxviii and cxxiv), arranged in three groups in anti-clockwise geographical order: the East Coast (Inchkeith, Inch-Colm etc.), the North Coast (Stroma, the Orkneys, Shetlands and Sutherland), and finally the West Coast (Ross and Cromarty, Inverness, Argyll and Bute); the islands of the west coast of Sutherland were included under the North Coast. Only total populations were given: the names of many uninhabited islands were included but the populations of inhabited islands were not necessarily stated and some were not even mentioned. Thus this tabulation can be most misleading. Great Bernera, Lewis, for example, with a population of 518 is not even named, whilst Luing (population 695), Seil (population 604) and many others are named but no population is stated.¹ Colonsay and Oronsay are given as one, whilst the stated population of Lismore (1,250) includes Kingairloch, which is not an island. Illeray, N. Uist, is given as a separate island from Baleshare whereas it is actually a township on Baleshare island.

Fortunately the 1851 tabulation can be checked and made more complete by examination of the manuscript Enumeration Books, preserved at Register House. This has been done; about thirty inhabited islands have been added in the Hebrides alone but, almost certainly, still others may have been missed because

it is not always simple, even with considerable local knowledge, to decide from the books the precise location of any particular family. The erratic incompleteness of the published tabulation is probably due to the same difficulty.

For the 1861 Census Report a more careful enumeration of Scottish islands was made, an island being defined as "any piece of solid land surrounded by water, which affords sufficient vegetation to support one or more sheep, or which is inhabited by man" (Census, Scotland, 1861:Report, xvii). For all Scotland, instead of the 386 islands separately indentified in 1851, 787 were found, of which 186 were inhabited (cf. 155 in 1851). For the Hebrides comparative figures are given in Table I.

TABLE I

	Islands named		Islands of which population stated	
	1851	1861	1851	1861
Sutherland	15	61	1	3
Ross and Cromarty	20	96	5	14
Inverness	55	250	44	49
Argyll	41	175	26	43
Bute	7	7	7	7
Total (Hebrides)	138	589	83	116

Note—Harris and Lewis counted in Ross and Cromarty and in Inverness but only once in total.

The tabulation for 1861 (Census, Scotland, 1861:Appendix, Table 5, xlv-xlvii) includes only the inhabited islands but gives more details than the 1851 tabulation including the numbers of:

- (i) Separate families;
- (ii) Houses: inhabited, uninhabited and building;
- (iii) Persons: male, female and total;
- (iv) Rooms with one or more windows.

The list is arranged in alphabetical order for the whole of Scotland and the parishes and counties are named for each island. It is thus a very useful permanent index of Scottish islands. Despite the obvious care with which it was done discrepancies may still be found, some of which have persisted to the present day. For example, several small islands in the North Ford were included with Grimsay, North Uist, and have continued to be so counted ever since. On the other hand, a number

of "islands", such as Ulva and Danna, Argyll, were counted as such even though they had been permanently attached to the mainland by reclaimed land or causeways.

After 1861 each Census Report contains a separate tabulation of island populations. The selection of islands for these tabulations appears to have been based on the 1861 definition and identification. Thus the Census Reports for 1861 and subsequent years, whilst much more useful than the earlier ones, must still be interpreted and adjusted in the light of local knowledge.

For the earlier years, before 1851, information is scattered and scanty. For 1841, as for 1851, the Enumeration Books are invaluable, but the identification of island households is not always easy because of the haphazard arrangement of entries for some areas; consequently small islands may easily be overlooked.

Before 1841 there are no Enumeration Books and the Census Reports give us only parishes and counties; the populations of particular islands are not given unless they happen to form a single parish, nor are the islands individually identified. The Old and New Statistical Accounts may contain details of particular small islands, as do some of the Reports to the Board of Agriculture. Histories and contemporary topographic accounts occasionally yield useful information, by far the best being that of Walker² for 1764, which gives the populations of each of 95 Hebridean islands. This is not, however, a complete list; it does not include Bernera, Lewis, for example, and several others which were certainly inhabited at that time.

Earlier, for 1755, Webster's Enumeration gives population by parishes, not islands, and therefore yields no information in respect of the smaller islands. For the seventeenth century many islands are mentioned in the papers of the Franciscan mission (Giblin 1964), and, for the sixteenth century there is Dean Donald Monro's orderly and detailed account for 1549, of which a hitherto unpublished manuscript has recently been edited and collated with other manuscripts by R. W. Munro (Munro 1961). Unfortunately the Dean does not give actual populations but many islands are described as "inhabit and manurit"; sometimes he leaves us to assume that an island is populated, confining himself to remarks such as "gude for corn store and fisching" or (even more illuminating) "is quiet for fostering thieves, ruggaris and reevaris"—the last applying to Ronay, Skye. For the purpose of this paper I have assumed that

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TABLE II—SCOTLAND

Hebrides: number of inhabited islands at various dates ¹

	1549	1764	1841	1861	1881	1901	1921	1931	1951	1961
ARGYLL										
S. Argyll	3	5+2	7	8	7	7	6	7	5	5
F. of Lorn	6	13	11	11	11	10	10	10	9	8
Loch Linnhe	12	5	4	5	6	6	4	4	4	3
Morvern	?	—+2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1
Islay Group	6	5	4	5	6	6	6	6	5	5
Mull Group	8+3	6	5+1?	8	8	8	9	9	7	8
Tirce Group	3	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Small Isles ²	4	4+1	5	5	5	4	4	6	6	5
INVERNESS										
Skyc Group	9+3	11	8	10	9	8	9	9	8	8
Harris Group ³	24+1	9	11	11	9	11	10	8	7	7 ⁴
Ardnamurchan	?	—	—	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
N. Uist Group	2	9	10	10	12	11	10	10	8	5
S. Uist Group	1	3	6	6	7	6	5	5	7	6
Barra Group	15+1	8	9	9	8	7	5	5	3	3
ROSS AND CROMARTY										
Inshore	4+2	2+5	7	9	5	7	7	3	5	4
Lewis Group	17	4+3	5	5	4	4	3	3	3	3
SUTHERLAND	?	?	2	2	—	—	—	1	—	—
ARRAN AND BUTE	5	6	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7
AYR	?	?	?	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
GRAND TOTAL	119+10	91+18	105	118	111	108	101	99	90	83

Notes: ¹ + indicates islands probably inhabited but not reported. ² Including Hyskeir (Inverness) and Eigg (formerly Inverness). ³ Harris and Lewis counted separately under each county but only once in the grand total. ⁴ Excludes St. Kilda (defence personnel only, 1961).

if Monro mentions corn, or that an island was fertile, it was inhabited; if he mentions only grazing, or fishing, and not corn (or "beir") I have not assumed that it was populated unless there is other evidence, either in his account or elsewhere. Monro's account is remarkably complete, including many small uninhabited islands "not of meikle profit", nevertheless there are some astonishing omissions. For example, whilst Benbecula and North Uist are apparently included in "the great Isle of Uyist" ("Ulindbhadla" or "Buchagla" is probably Benbecula), neither Boreray nor Grimsay, North Uist, is mentioned at all although they were certainly inhabited (see for example Mackenzie 1946:2-6.). On the other hand, a few of the inhabited islands which he does name are quite unrecognisable.

From such sources, supplemented by personal enquiries, Table II has been prepared, showing the actual number of inhabited islands at various dates, and Appendix A, which enumerates all the now depopulated islands which the writer has been able to identify and which are shown on the map.

The progress of desertion

The number of inhabited islands in the Hebrides appears to have declined slowly from the time of the earliest records until the mid-eighteenth century and thereafter to have risen to a maximum, of about 120, in 1861. Since then about five islands have become deserted every ten years, so that by 1961 the number stood at 73 (82 if lighthouses be included).

Dean Monro's account for 1549 suggests that some islands had already been deserted before his time. These were mostly religious seats, such as monasteries or nunneries, or places of defence or of refuge. The demonstrable incompleteness of the records, particularly of that for 1764, means that the slow decline in the number of inhabited islands between 1549 and 1764 cannot be regarded as thoroughly authenticated. Nevertheless it is not improbable that such a decline did take place: almost all the islands which appear to have become deserted are either very small, or difficult of access, or both. They include the Treshnish Isles, several islands off the east and west coasts of Lewis, some of the smaller isles in the Sound of Harris and some around Barra.

Similarly, it does seem probable that between 1764 and 1841 people may have moved into hitherto empty islands. This was a period when increasing population was putting pressure on the available land, a pressure which was made greater by the

clearance of sub-tenants from some estates in order to make large farms. From the proprietor's point of view the settlement of islands by such people offered the possibilities of land improvement (which was unlikely to be carried out in any other way), and of the development of fishing and kelp manufacture. And all these meant increased rents. To the unfortunate displaced families migration to a nearby island, however bleak and inaccessible, may have seemed preferable to the long, hard, and almost certainly irreversible journey to unknown and remote places such as North America.

Unfortunately few written records of such movements exist, but in Barra, for example, it is said that people cleared from townships in South Uist settled on the small islands between Uist and Barra: some later moved into the east coast townships of Barra itself.³ The presence of 108 persons in Hellisay in 1841 is probably a case in point; by 1851 it had been reduced to 7 and it is said that many of the people settled on Eriskay.⁴ The settlement of Scalpay, Harris, by families displaced from North Harris and of persons evicted from Skye on Raasay and Soay, are other cases. Eriskay and Scalpay are large enough to have sustained communities to the present day; the circumstances of their settlement are therefore remembered and passed on from generation to generation. Many of the smaller islands, however, were but temporary refuges and of them little or no record remains unless they happened to be populated at the time of a census. That these shifts of population were not a complete reversal of the long-term trend is shown by the facts that at least seven islands, populated at the time of Walker's account (1764) had become deserted by 1841, and that, although the total number of inhabited islands continued to increase until 1861, a further 12 were deserted between 1841 and 1861.

In each inter-censal decade since 1861 the number of islands becoming deserted has exceeded the number newly settled or re-settled. Cases of genuine settlement, or re-settlement, of previously uninhabited islands are virtually non-existent after 1861. Table III summarises the progress of desertion and near-desertion. Whilst the rate of desertion has not varied significantly since 1841 there has, in recent years, been an increasing number of islands of which the populations have fallen to less than 10 per cent of their maxima. Many such islands have become effectively deserted, being occupied by essentially temporary residents, such as shepherds, the real homes of whom are elsewhere.

Of the 83 islands recorded as inhabited in 1961, nine were merely lighthouses; a further twenty or so were not effectively separate islands, being joined to other islands or to the mainland at all states of the tide by causeways or bridges.

TABLE III

The progress of desertion

Column A: Number of inhabited islands recorded at the beginning of each period.
 Column B: Number of islands becoming deserted during each period.
 Column C: Number of islands, populations of which fell during period to less than 10 per cent of maximum.

Period	A	B	C	Period	A	B	C
1549-1764	· c. 130	c. 30	?	1891-1901	· 108	2	—
1764-1841	· c. 110	c. 10	?	1901-1911	· 108	7	2
1841-1851	· 105	7	—	1911-1921	· 106	3	2
1851-1861	· 104	5	1	1921-1931	· 101	5	5
1861-1871	· 118	6	—	1931-1951	· 99	12	4
1871-1881	· 115	4	1	1951-1961	· 89	5	6
1881-1891	· 111	8	1	1961-	· 83		

North Uist, Benbecula and South Uist, together with several adjacent smaller islands, are all thus joined, as is Bernera to Lewis, Gometra to Ulva, Seil to the mainland, and Danna to Ulva and the mainland. A few others are inhabited only seasonally, e.g. by shepherds. After allowing for all such cases, and for a few islands not separately distinguished, it appears that in 1961 about 50 distinctly separate islands remained inhabited whilst more than 100, once inhabited, stood deserted.

Which islands tend to become deserted?

The outstanding feature of the now deserted islands is that the great majority are very small and never supported more than a few families. Very few are really remote or physically difficult of access and almost all such, e.g. North Rona and the Treshnish Isles, had already been deserted before 1841.⁵ Although details are lacking, it is unlikely that many of the islands which became deserted between 1549 and 1841 could have supported more than two or three families. The diagram for 1841 (Fig. 2) shows that of 45 islands then having less than 40 people, all but 11 have subsequently become deserted. Many of them were close inshore, some even accessible by foot, or by horse and cart, at low tide.

In discussing the circumstances leading to depopulation of islands we should remember that, until well into the nineteenth

century, isolation was not a feature peculiar to insularity. In the absence of roads many small communities on the mainland and on the larger islands were equally, or even more, isolated than some of those on the small islands. Until the present century the sea provided the main means of access to many communities of southern Uig and of Lochs, Lewis, as it did to

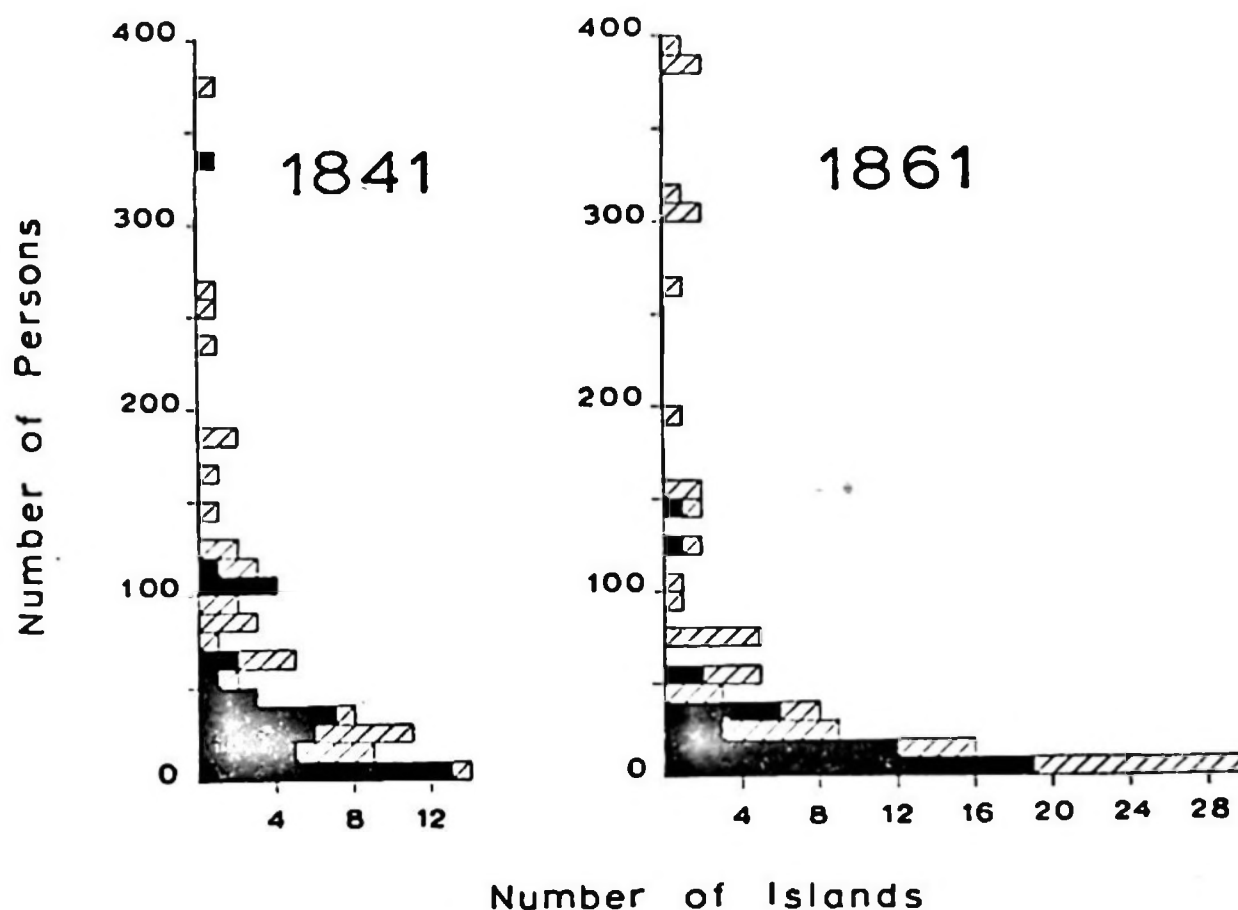


FIG. 2.—Size—distribution of islands having less than 400 inhabitants, 1841 and 1861. The heavily shaded parts of the bars indicate those islands which have since been deserted.

those of the Bays of Harris and at Applecross; the cattle from Valtos (Uig, Lewis), even went to the shieling by boat and the mail came that way until the late 1920's; at Tarbert, Harris, it was boats that brought many of the people to shop and to worship until the construction of the Bays road in the early 1950's. Many small islands were no more isolated than these places yet no less than 30 were deserted between 1841 and 1891.

The need to maintain a minimum number of able-bodied persons, to man a boat, and to pull it out of reach of storms, has been stressed by some writers as being critical.⁶ In a few cases it may have been so and the provision of slipways and winches was one of the activities of the Congested Districts Board between 1897 and 1912.⁷ But many of the now deserted small islands are in sheltered situations, close inshore, and the boats required cannot have been so large as to have been a

serious problem until the population was reduced to a very small number. Indeed, until well into the nineteenth century the need for communication was so seldom felt that some communities, even the most distant and isolated such as North Rona and St. Kilda, made no effort to provide their own link but relied on the seasonal visits of the factor (who was bound to collect the rents) and minister, and chance calls by fishing boats.

However, nineteenth century economic and social progress touched even the most isolated. More and more island families were no longer content with a sheer subsistence existence: at a pinch every man could be his own miller, blacksmith and tailor but it was not an economic existence, it left little time or energy to produce a saleable surplus, whether of stock, wool, tweed or fish, and an increasing saleable surplus was required in order to purchase imported food, clothes and other "shop" goods. The need for medical and educational facilities similar to those available on the larger islands and on the mainland was recognised and, just as today in Africa people are moving from the bush to settle beside the new roads and, in particular, in the vicinity of villages with dispensaries, schools and shops so, from the 1840's, Hebridean families began to leave the more isolated places, insular and mainland alike. In 1841 only 23 islands had less than 20 inhabitants; by 1861 there were more than 40. It was at that stage of decline that the inability to man a boat may have become critical; certainly almost all the islands which had less than 20 inhabitants in 1861 have since been deserted. Others have, of course, declined into that category and, in April 1961, there were 47 islands with less than 20 persons. Of these, ten were lighthouses, a few others were occupied only temporarily (e.g. by shepherds) and yet others are effectively joined to the mainland or a larger island, at least at low tide. Since it is now virtually impossible to bring up and educate children on such islands the inhabitants tend to be elderly or unmarried, or both, and in many cases they are merely paid employees who do not regard the islands as their permanent homes. Continuity of settlement has been lost.

Of the islands which ever recorded populations of more than 100 only nine have been deserted (Table IV). Of these Soay and Tanera have been re-settled. The demise of such relatively large island communities is worth particular attention. Although St. Kilda is best known, Pabbay, at its maximum, carried by far the largest population of all. In 1549 Monro described it as ". . . ane maist profitable Ile . . . maist

plentifull of beir, grising and fisching". In 1764 it had a population of 186 and the increase of 152 in the following 77 years was probably due in part to an influx of families cleared from the west or south of Harris. However, soon after 1841 Pabbay itself was cleared to make a farm. In 1851 only 25 people were recorded and by 1881 there were only 2 (at that time it was probably mainly used for shooting). It is an island of more

TABLE IV

The large deserted islands

Island	Maximum population		f. 1764
	No.	Date	
Pabbay, Harris	338	1841	186
St. Kilda, Harris	{ 180-200 151	1692-97 1835	92 95
Soay, Bracadale*	158	1851	14
Mingulay, Barra	150	1881	52
Belnahua, Jura	150	1845	95
Heisker, N. Uist	140	1891	70
Tanera, Lochbroom†	119	1881	?
Hellisay, Barra	108	1841	56‡
Oronsay, N. Uist	102	1841	18

* Soay was evacuated in 1953 but was later re-settled and recorded a population of 11 in 1961.

† Evacuated 1931. Re-settled 1938.

‡ Walker's list for 1764 does not mention Hellisay but gives a population of 56 for "Fuda", but by 1841 Hellisay had 108 whilst Fuday had only 5. It is possible that Walker's "Fuda" was Hellisay, since it was sometimes known in Gaelic as An t-Eilein Fuideach.⁸

than 2,000 acres, much of it in rich green pasture and former arable land. The bere produced on the sandy soil did not all find its way into barley bread; Pabbay people were famous for their whisky. Had Pabbay not been cleared it is likely that a substantial crofter population would have lingered into the present century. Landing is not as difficult as at St. Kilda or Mingulay; nevertheless it is certainly less readily accessible than nearby Berneray and this might have led to voluntary evacuation, such as took place from Boreray and Heisker. It carries a large stock of sheep and cattle; the farmer lives in South Harris; his shepherds stay on the island at lambing and other busy times.

The circumstances of the decline and eventual evacuation of St. Kilda are well-known and documented.⁹ The singular isolation of the St. Kilda community was due not so much to sheer distance from the Outer Hebrides as to the difficulty of

effecting a safe landing, particularly in winter. An important result of this was that the sea played little part in the economic and social life of the St. Kildans. They could not fish to any extent, a difficulty which was rationalised by the belief that fish in the diet produced boils, and they always seem to have depended on boats from the mainland, rather than on their own efforts, for communication. It may be significant that the similarly small northern isles of Foula and Fair Isle, both still inhabited, maintain their own boat connection (though now assisted by the County Council), as do such small island communities as Vatersay (Barra), Eriskay (S. Uist) and Bernera (N. Uist). Scalpay (Harris), for long maintained its own fishing boat ferry to and from Tarbert several times daily as well as a thrice weekly steamer. Now it has lost the latter but has a public ferry service instead.

Balnahua, Jura, "quhair thair is fair skailzie aneuch" according to Monro, in 1549, is also a special case. The community depended entirely on slate quarrying, it grew to about 150 (1835) and was prosperous until the 1870's. Then the slate began to meet competition from the cheaper Welsh product and from more easily worked Scottish slates. Water supply was always difficult—drinking water had to be fetched in barrels by boat and the laundry was taken to a near-by island. When slate quarrying ceased there was nothing to retain the population.

Mingulay was effectively evacuated in 1907 after the successful raiding of Vatersay farm. A few people remained until about 1931. The Mingulay community was not as isolated as that of St. Kilda, though landing was often difficult. They were crofter-fishermen and maintained frequent communication with Castlebay by their own boats besides which the Northern Lighthouse tender made, as it still makes, regular calls at Barra Head. But the island of Vatersay offered better land, including some machair, and was far more convenient to Castlebay. As a single farm it was virtually empty compared with overcrowded Mingulay (populations 13 and 135, respectively, in 1901). It is not surprising in the circumstances of the period, that the Mingulay crofters, as well as many landless families in Barra, coveted Vatersay, nor is it surprising that the raid, whilst not judicially condoned, was in fact successful. Thus this particular evacuation was triggered off by the apparent availability of Vatersay. Had they been more isolated the Mingulay people might well have remained content; the island provides good

grazing and is now used most successfully for sheep by a group of Barra crofters.

Until about 1823 Soay had contained only one or two herdsmen and their families; immigration of families cleared from Skye caused the population to rise to 158 in 1851. The immigrants eked out a precarious existence by fishing. About 1850 several East Coast boats worked the seasonal herring fishing from Soay and employed local men and women fishing and curing; in addition about half a dozen local boats were at work.¹⁰ Even so the population dwindled rapidly to 60 by 1901; fishing became less and less profitable and by 1951 only nine families, 30 persons, were left. In 1953, at their own request, they were re-settled on Mull. Subsequently Soay has been reoccupied but not by the original inhabitants; eleven persons were recorded in 1961.

Heisker (the Monach Islands), North Uist, is little more than a group of machair-covered skerries, open to the full force of the Atlantic; unlike Pabbay, Harris, it has no hill to provide shelter. Nevertheless it has a long history of settlement. In pre-Reformation times it had a nunnery and Monro describes it as "Helsker na caillach, pertaining to the Nunnis of Colmkill, gude corn land not well fyrit"; in 1595 it could raise 20 men of military age, suggesting a total population of at least 100. In 1764 Walker records a population of 70 and about 1800 it was reputed to carry 1,000 cattle (Murchison 1953-9:309) although in 1794 the Rev. Allan MacQueen wrote "The soil is sandy, yields very little grass at anytime, and is only valuable on account of its kelp shores and a small quantity of grain it produces" (MacQueen 1794:303). About 1810, possibly due to over-grazing, erosion became serious, the population was almost entirely removed and sea-bent was planted; gradually the ground recovered. In 1841 there were two farmers with their families, a female weaver and a herd, a total population of 39; by 1861 this had grown to more than a hundred not including more than 20 visiting lobster fishermen from Ireland and Islay. In 1864 the Monach Lighthouse was erected on Shillay, the westernmost island of the group, and thereafter the population was augmented by the keepers and their families. The maximum recorded population, 140 in 1891, includes 12 keepers and their families and about a dozen visitors, mostly fishermen. Almost all the able-bodied men are described in the Enumeration Book as fishermen. The ten crofts shared 414 acres of runrig arable and 396 acres of pasture; they also had a share of the general

common of North Uist where they also held a common croft. From the agricultural point of view, as crofters they were well-off, although fuel, as in Monro's times, was a problem. Nevertheless, after 1900 the population declined rapidly; by 1931 it was only 33 and about 1937 the lighthouse was abandoned. In 1942 the two remaining families left. Since then the islands have been used for cattle and sheep grazing and as a temporary base for Grimsay lobster fishermen.

Hellisay, Barra, and Oronsay, North Uist, carried large populations only temporarily, as a result of evictions from nearby islands but, unlike Soay, Bracadale, they soon declined:

	1764	1841	1851	1861	1871	1881	1891
Hellisay . . .	256	108	7	20	5	9	nil
Oronsay . . .	18	102	59	nil	nil	nil	nil

Tanera, Lochbroom, however, supported a large fishing population which reached a maximum of 119 in 1881; in Walker's account for 1764 it may be "Harura", with a population of nine. By 1784 there was a fishing station and by 1841 there was a population of 99. Its decline and eventual desertion in 1931 reflect changes in the life-pattern of the herring as well as changes in the economic pattern of the fishing industry. Its re-occupation in 1938 by Dr. F. Fraser Darling and his family, described in his books *Island Farm* and *Island Years*, may be regarded as an experiment which demonstrated the agricultural possibilities of such islands when not encumbered with an excessive population.

Not included in the nine large deserted islands (Table IV), is Boreray, North Uist, which deserves mention because it was the subject of a planned evacuation, in 1922-23, at the request of the 17 crofter-tenants. In the event one of the 17 decided to remain and thus obtained a croft of 87 acres, the remainder of the island being let as grazing to crofters of Berneray, Harris. This evacuation seems to have been singularly misconceived: the sixteen tenants obtained very unsatisfactory crofts, on the main islands of North Uist but without road access to the rest of the island, and with far less arable land. On Boreray they had an average of 24 acres of arable land, partly in fixed and partly in shifting runrig, which must have been a little inconvenient, it is true, and about 350 acres of common pasture including about 100 on nearby Lingay. Their peats had to be fetched from Lingay and their arable land had deteriorated

due to over-cultivation and failure to maintain the outfall from a loch; according to evidence given to the Napier Commission in 1883 they were not fallowing and were reaping only 10 bushels for every five sown (*Royal Commission*, 1884:804). Also after the tacksman left, about 1810, the pier had been allowed to fall into disrepair, making landing difficult. But, after allowing for all these (which could readily have been remedied) it is difficult to account for the evacuation except as a manifestation of the popularity of re-settlement schemes amongst crofters at that period. It is said that some of the families had become frightened by severe storms and that an absurd story, that the island would one day be swept away, had gained credence. Whatever the reason, the one who stayed behind certainly benefited more than any of those who left; he was able to carry at least four times as much stock as any of them and he and his family had still not been swept away in 1961!

Of these nine large islands which have been evacuated Tanera, Soay and Balnaha may be dismissed as special cases, their former large populations having depended mainly on fishing and slate quarrying. Their evacuations were probably inevitable as was that of St. Kilda, on account of its exceptional remoteness. Hellisay and Oronsay are also special cases, owing their large maxima to temporary settlement of refugees evicted from other, larger islands. The rest—Pabbay, Mingulay, Heisker and Boreray—are not particularly remote; their common feature seems to be the difficulty of ensuring a landing in the absence of an adequate slip or pier. The evacuations of Mingulay and Boreray were certainly triggered off by the possibility of re-settlement—on other islands, be it noted—rather than by poverty. In these large islands, as in the smaller, the ultimate, critical, factor leading to desertion has generally been social rather than economic.

The Significance of Desertion

More than 100 Hebridean islands have been deserted since the time of Dean Monro, 1549. For about 20 of these there is no record of their populations but they are all small: in total it is unlikely to have exceeded 400 and may well have been less than half that figure. The former populations of the remainder, at their various maxima (mostly around 1841-1861), totalled about 2,500. These figures may be compared, for example, with declines of 14,000 in Skye and 5,200 in Mull between 1851 and 1961 and of 9,000 in rural Lewis between

1911 and 1961. Thus the desertion of islands is a relatively small factor, though perhaps a dramatic one, in the depopulation of the Hebrides.

Only 44 of the deserted islands appear ever to have supported more than 20 people; only nine of these ever recorded populations of more than 100 and in several cases this was due to special circumstances such as fishing, evictions or quarrying. Thus it is the very small islands which have become deserted. The same feature has been noted in Finland, for example, where in the Åland Islands, it is the one- and two-family islands in particular that have been deserted.¹¹ In many cases those who leave the small islands settle on a larger island rather than on the mainland; they are escaping from isolation rather than insularity. The tendency is to move to areas or centres with better social facilities and, perhaps, with alternative forms of employment; thus in Lewis, Stornoway is growing just as is Mariehamn in Åland and some of the larger fishing settlements of Northern Norway (Hallstein 1960:140; Jaatinen 1960:51). Outlying islands, too, have lost their value as fishing bases as larger motor boats have replaced small, often open, boats and fishing has tended to concentrate on fewer ports with better facilities.

Small islands offer a special kind of environment. The usefulness to man of their characteristic climates, soils and minerals is inevitably modified by the isolation imposed by the surrounding waters. Rarely, advantages may accrue: the sea may yield fish or seaweed; an island may be so placed that its people may profitably engage in trading or similar activities—in the past including smuggling and piracy. But, in general, difficulty of access reduces the effective value of the intrinsic resources. It is not merely a question of physical accessibility; access can always be maintained—at a cost, as in the case of the defence establishment on St. Kilda. But, if the cost is patently in excess of the value of production from the island, it cannot be indefinitely sustained.

This is particularly significant in the case of those islands carrying communities too small to support even a minimum of social services. Formerly they were self-sufficient and satisfied with occasional and irregular access to larger communities. Nowadays, if daily access to primary school and medical facilities cannot be assured, they are almost certainly doomed as normal, self-perpetuating communities. If, however, the community is large enough to support at least a District Nurse

and a one-teacher primary school then daily access is not essential and the effective cost of maintaining access is reduced. Paradoxically, the smaller the community the greater the accessibility costs.

Thus, under contemporary social and economic conditions, there is a minimum size for an island community; if it falls below that number then further decline, and perhaps desertion, is inevitable. The minimum size for viability will, however, vary according to circumstances. If daily access cannot be relied on, the minimum is that number required to justify provision of certain services. No rule can be laid down; in the end this will be a political as much as an economic decision. As social standards increase it is likely that the minimum population required to justify the provision of services will also increase. At the same time, if the general level of incomes continues to rise, islanders will expect a corresponding improvement in their condition; because the possibility of achieving greater incomes from the limited natural resources of most islands is slight there will be a continued tendency to emigrate. This may enable the limited resources to be re-allocated to give more satisfactory incomes to those who remain but, at the same time, it may lead to a critical situation as regards provision of social services.

From the social point of view island communities are part of the larger national community and, as such, are entitled to services and facilities comparable to those provided elsewhere by national and local authorities. Since the usual range of services cannot be provided on an island, particularly on a small island, it may be argued that abnormal expenditure (e.g. on special educational and medical facilities or on a ferry service) is justifiable. To counter that no one is *compelled* to live on an island is to ignore the fact that people *are* there, as, in most cases, were their ancestors. To force them to abandon their homes on purely economic grounds would be both harsh and unjust.

A much more serious consideration concerns the utilisation of the resources of such islands. Does depopulation imply failure to make best use of land and natural resources? In fact even the smallest uninhabited islands are usually used for grazing, seasonally if not perennially; crofting communities often find them useful, escape-proof, pastures for the township bull or tups out of season. In the past they were sometimes used for horses, too, and a few are still used for young cattle. As grazings islands may be particularly valuable. Their mild climates allow

stock to be out-wintered without feeding or other attention; protection from disease and disturbance is achieved without the expense of installing and maintaining fences. (Foreign fishing vessels have been known to help themselves to an occasional sheep but such losses are not great.) If the grazing is properly managed no cultivation and little surface dressing is required. For these reasons many deserted islands are singularly profitable.

The deserted islands are the extreme case of the Highland and Island population problem--matching population to resources. Desertion does not imply dereliction and there can be little doubt that some of the deserted and near-deserted islands are now more productive and profitable than when they were congested with people. Desertion is not, of course, a universal remedy but the experience of the deserted islands does show that a degree of depopulation is not only inevitable but also essential in some districts if a viable relationship is to be established between population and natural resources. Depopulation may be regretted but the opportunities which it releases should not be ignored.

APPENDIX A

Maximum, and last recorded, populations of islands formerly inhabited

Lighthouse stations and purely military establishments are marked *. Islands, the only record of habitation of which is Monro, 1549, are listed separately at the end.

Island	Max. pop. recorded (and date)	Last record
SUTHERLAND		
Chorrie	1 (1931)	1 (1931)
Handa	65 (1841)	8 (1871)
Oldney	60 (1841)	4 (1881) ^a
(3 islands)	126	—
ROSS & CROMARTY (Inshore)		
Ba	5 (1861)	5 (1861)
Ban	*3 (1931)	*2 (1951)
Croulin	40 (1841-51)	7 (1921)
Gillean	*14 (1891)	*2 (1921)
Gruinard	6 (1881)	6 (1881)
Horisdale	46 (1901)	22 (1921)
(previous maximum)	37 (1871)	
Kishorn	6 (1861-71)	6 (1871)
Longo	35 (1841)	35 (1841)
Martin	54 (1851)	19 (1921)
Ristol	27 (1871)	27 (1871)
Scalpay	8 (1851)	8 (1851)
(11 islands)	244	—

Island	Max. pop. recorded (and date)	Last record
INVERNESS (Inshore)		
Shonaveg	12 (1851)	12 (1851)
Rasay	18 (1841)	13 (1851)
Ascrib	37 (1861)	37 (1861)
Isay	17 (1851)	17 (1851)
North Floda	6 (1764)	6 (1764)
Ornsay	47 (1881)	47 (1881)
(light only)	—	*1 (1961)
Troda	5 (1764)	5 (1764)
Wiay/Vuiay	6 (1841-61)	4 (1881)
Tigh	10 (1931)	10 (1931)
(9 islands)	158	—
ARGYLL—Morvern		
Friel House	3 (1871)	1 (1881)
Oronsay	54 (1851)	17 (1871)
(2 islands)	57	—
ARGYLL—L. Linnhe		
Sheep	8 (1891)	6 (1901)
Musdale Lt.	21 (1861)	*3 (1961)
Bernera	7 (1764)	7 (1764)
Balnagowan	7 (1764)	7 (1764)
Eriska	29 (1921)	20 (1951)
Duirnish	24 (1881)	6 (1901)
(6 islands)	96	—
ARGYLL—F. of Lorne, etc.		
Sheep	4 (1851-71)	2 (1881)
Lunga	40 (1764)	5 (1931)
Garvellachs (deserted 1881-1901)	11 (1764)	2 (1911) ^b
Eluchanuir	8 (1764)	8 (1764)
Balnahua	151 (1835)	32 (1911)
Pladda	16 (1861)	*2 (1951)
Fiolan Fiulta	3 (1841)	3 (1841)
(7 islands)	233	—
ARGYLL—Mull, etc.		
L. Colonsay	33 (1851)	3 (1931)
Sanday, Canna	171 (1841)	22 (1951) ^c
(2 islands)	204	—
ARGYLL—Islay and Jura		
Texa	8 (1764)	8 (1764)
Cara	11 (1841)	3 (1931)
Skervuile	*19 (1881)	*2 (1931)
(3 islands)	38	—

Island	Max. pop. recorded (and date)	Last record
INVERNESS—<i>Barra</i>		
Feala/Fiaray	10 (1764)	10 (1764)
Fladda Flodday	7 (1841)	7 (1861)
Fuday	56 (1764) ^d	4 (1901)
Hellisay	108 (1841)	9 (1881)
Pabbay	26 (1881)	5 (1911)
Sanderay	41 (1911)	20 (1931)
Mingulay	150 (1851)	3 (1931)
Berneray	57 (1881)	17 (1901)
(light only)		*3 (1961)
(8 islands)	455	—
INVERNESS (OUTER HEBRIDES)—<i>North Uist</i>		
Hut	10 (1881)	7 (1891)
Kirkibost	28 (1764)	6 (1951)
Heisker	135 (1891)	33 (1931)
Monach Lt.	*13 (1881)	*3 (1931)
Ronay	9 (1841)	6 (1931)
Vallay	59 (1841)	2 (1951)
Oronsay (deserted 1861-91)	102 (1841)	7 (1921) ^e
Vorgay/Mhorgay	9 (1851)	6 (1881)
(8 islands)	365	—
INVERNESS (OUTER HEBRIDES)—<i>South Uist</i>		
Calavay (deserted 1851-71)	39 (1841)	6 (1881) ^f
Wiay	10 (1891)	4 (1901)
Sunamul	—	— (1951)
(3 islands)	49	—
ROSS & CROMARTY (OUTER HEBRIDES)—<i>Lewis</i>		
Little Bernera	8 (1841)	8 (1841)
Flannans	14 (1764)	*3 (1961)
Mealasta	25 (1841) ^g	7 (1861)
Oronsay	2 (1891)	2 (1891)
Pabay	17 (1861)	9 (1881)
N. Rona	9 (1764)	9 (1764)
Shiants	22 (1764)	8 (1901)
Vacsay	9 (1861)	9 (1861)
Vuiavore	46 (1841)	46 (1841)
(9 islands)	152	—
INVERNESS (OUTER HEBRIDES)—<i>Harris</i>		
Tay/Tahay	36 (1841)	36 (1841)
Flodday	16 (1861)	16 (1861)
Hermitray	8 (1841)	8 (1841)
Killegray	48 (1764)	5 (1931)
St. Kilda	200 (1692)	73 (1921)
also	110 (1851)	36 (1930)
also*		*50 (1961)
Scotasay	20 (1911)	19 (1921)
Soay	16 (1901)	16 (1901)
islands)	344	—

*Islands inhabited in 1549 (according to Monro) but no later record
nor details of actual population*

ARGYLL—*probably near Lismore and Kerrera*

Ellan na Gaorach (L. Linnhe)
Inchair
Garbh Ellan
Ellan Cloich
Flada
Greazay (? Creag)
Ellan Moir (? E. nan Gamhna)
Ransay (? E. Ramsay)

ARGYLL—*probably near Jura, Islay, etc.*

Ellan na Calrach (Caorach)
Ellan Nefe (Nave)

ARGYLL—*probably near Mull, Coll or Tiree*

Ellan Challmain
Eorsay
Ellan na Monadh (Fladda, Treshnish)
Lungay (Treshnish)
Gunna

ARGYLL—*Skye*

Ellan Tuylmen
Ellan Lindill

INVERNESS—*Barra*

Fladay
Buya Moir
Hay (? Heileim)
Gigay
Lingay (sheiling only, perhaps)

INVERNESS—*Harris*

Soa (? Shillay)
Stroma
Sagha Beg (Saghay B.)
Sagha Moir
Gillinsay (Gilsay)
Ferelay
Soya Beg
Soya Moir
Ellan Isay
Seuna Moir
Slegan (? Sleichan)
Tucmen

ROSS & CROMARTY—*Lewis*

Kcallasay
Kirtay (E. Kearstay)
Bwya (Vuia) Beg
Sigrm (Shiarain) Beg
E. Huilmen (Holm)
E. Viccowill
Laxay
Ere (? Keose)
E. Chalmkle (E. Chaluim Chille)
Turray
Sencastell (may be off mainland shore)

SUMMARY

	No. of deserted islands	Maximum population recorded
Sutherland	3	126
Ross and Cromarty, inshore	11	244
Outer Hebrides	35 (+28)	1,365
Inverness, inshore	9	158
Argyll	20 (+17)	628
Arran, Bute and Ayr	3	—
	81 (+45)	2,521

Islands of which precise populations are not recorded are noted in parentheses, thus (+3).

Notes to Appendix A

- Oldney: 1861,14; 1871,nil; 1881,4 (last record).
- Garvellachs: 1871,10; 1881 to 1901,nil; 1911,2 (last record).
- Sanday, omitted from the published report of the 1961 Census, in fact had a population of 7.
- Fuday: the population of 56 in 1764 may refer to Hellisay (see text).
- Oronsay: 1851,59; 1861 to 1891,nil; 1901,11; 1921,7 (last record).
- Calavay: 1851 to 1871,nil; 1881,6 (last record).
- Mealasta: the population stated may have been on the mainland of Lewis in 1841.

APPENDIX B

Islands retaining, in 1961, 10 per cent or less of their maximum populations

Island	Max. pop. recorded (and date)	Population recorded in 1961	Notes
ROSS AND CROMARTY			
Tanera (i)	99 (1841)	6	Deserted 1923-38
(ii)	119 (1881)		
INVERNESS—Skye			
Rona (Portree) (i)	165 (1841-51)	13	(Including 3 light keepers, 1961)
(ii)	181 (1891)		
Scalpay (Strath)	90 (1841)	2	Deserted 1953, later re-settled
Soay (Bracadale)	158 (1851)	11	
INVERNESS—Hebrides			
Ensay	60 (1764)	2	} Occupied only seasonally (shepherds), 1961
Pabbay	338 (1841)	2	
Taransay (i)	88 (1841)	5	} Evacuation planned for 1922 but one family remained
(ii)	76 (1911)		
Boreray (i)	181 (1841)	5	
(ii)	156 (1861)		
Leiravay	25 (1911)	2	

Island	Max. pop. recorded (and date)	Population recorded in 1961	Notes
ARGYLL			
Carna	60 (1841)	2	
Shuna	14 (1871)	1	
Muck	321 (1821)	29	
Canna	436 (1821)	24	
Rum (i)	443 (1795)	40	Minimum 1920: 20 persons
(ii)	394 (1821)		
Ulva	570 (1841)	28	Minimum 1951: 19 persons
Earraid	122 (1871)	1	Shepherd only, 1961
(cf. 1861, 9; the increase being due to the construction of Dubh Artach lighthouse)			
Easdale (i)	571 (1851)	16	Formerly slate quarrying
(ii)	504 (1871)		
Shuna	69 (1841)	3	
Scarba	60 (1764)	5	
Ulva	54 (1851)	5	} Now joined to mainland
Danna	142 (1841)	10	
Oronsay	48 (1871)	2	
22 islands	4,150 (maximum)	214 (1961)	

NOTES

- ¹ The populations given here have been obtained by adding together the appropriate household figures extracted from the manuscript Enumeration Books. The writer is indebted to the Registrar-General for Scotland and his staff for access to the books.
- ² Walker 1808:22-3. Dr. Walker visited the Hebrides in 1764 on behalf of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.
- ³ Verbal communication, Mr. Archibald Macdonald of Allasdale, Barra, to whom I am indebted.
- ⁴ Personal communication, Dr. J. L. Campbell of Canna, to whom I am indebted.
- ⁶ It is said, in Barvas, that there was a shepherd on North Rona until about 1844. Many years later two men went into voluntary exile there and were found dead in 1885.
- ⁶ For example, Darling (1955:283) suggests a minimum of four able-bodied men.
- ⁷ See the *Annual Reports of the Congested District Board*, 1897-1912, for examples.
- ⁸ Personal communication, Dr. J. L. Campbell of Canna, to whom I am indebted.
- ⁹ Summarised, for example, in O'Dell and Walton 1962:319-25.
- ¹⁰ Reports of the *Highland Destitution Relief Society*, 1849-1850, quoted in Murchison 1964:321.
- ¹¹ For examples see Jaatinen 1960:46, and Moisley 1964:36.

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