

Scotland in print

The pick of new books on a range of Scottish subjects: food, fact and fiction



Above Gathering seaweed for fertiliser on Eriskay in 1962, by Dr Kenneth Robertson. Below South Uist interior, 1934

Sightlines

Kathleen Jamie (Sort of Books, £8.99, *£8.54)

The poet Kathleen Jamie's latest collection of essays takes her from the 'cliff-ridden and bird-weathered' archipelago of St Kilda via North Rona—'surf, and seal-song, and petrel glee'—to a Greenland fjord where, 'shrill with cold', she and a cabinmate watch the 'bright teal green' spectacle of the Aurora Borealis. Based in Fife, the author is drawn to isolated northern extremities, where she is exhilarated by not only the wildlife, but also the fragile traces of human occupation. Themes of archaeology are interwoven with references to modern life—the aeroplane from which she glimpses a reddening Moon; cells examined through a microscope in a pathology lab—all described and contemplated in a precise, lyrical style that does not lose sight of humour. 'I sail on the surface of understanding,' Miss Jamie says, but her writings (see also *Findings*, 2005) can touch on deeper truths.

Lifting the Lid

Claire Macdonald (Birlinn, £20, *£18) Famous for her cookery writing and demonstrations, Claire Macdonald tells a remarkable story of guts and determination in this memoir, which has the added bonus of some of her recipes. She and her husband, Godfrey, inherited vast debts and doomed estates in Skye in their early twenties, just as they were settling down to married life in Edinburgh. With modesty and infectious humour, she tells of the nightmare struggles they overcame to build up a flourishing business at Kinloch, now a top-rated hotel and restaurant on the Sleat peninsular of Skye.

The Big Music

Kirsty Gunn (Faber, £20, *£17) Kirsty Gunn uses the structure of bagpipe music to create her story. In the soulful style of the *piobaireachd* (*pibroch*, meaning 'piping') or *ceòl mòr* (the 'big music', as the classical music of the pipes is also known), she leaks out the lonely secrets of

a Sutherland family rooted in the far north of Scotland. The themes of parents and children, roots and returning roll the story along, folding into one another like those in a piece of music. Her writing is almost meditational in places, with repeated words and sentences, so that you may feel it's not a novel at all that you're reading, but a poem or song.

Island of Wings

Karin Altenberg (Quercus, £7.99, *£7.59)

This haunting novel tells of a marriage foundering against the harsh backdrop of St Kilda in the 1830s—a metaphor for the deeper crisis within the Church of Scotland. Neil MacKenzie is a clergyman determined to save the souls of his new ministry, but he doesn't understand the islanders or their pagan ways, is haunted by his past and neglects his wife, who is left to pursue her own tragic, if ultimately rewarding, path. Karin Altenberg's debut novel is an impressive work of research and descriptive writing about Nature and place in a second language (she's Swedish). It's also a penetrating insight into the psychology of a religious zealot and a relationship rolling inevitably towards destruction.

A Swedish Field Trip to the Outer Hebrides, 1934

Alexander Fenton (National Museums of Scotland, £25, *£22.50)

Oighreachd ar Sinnsearan: Catching the Spirit of South Uist and Eriskay

Photographs by Dr Kenneth Robertson (The Islands Book Trust, £20, *£18)

No other part of rural Britain is photographically so well documented as the Western Isles. The main reason is their remoteness, which preserved a way of life vanished elsewhere that has long drawn professionals and amateurs to record it. In their travels, they discovered a culture and people little affected by the homogenised, secular ways of the modern world. Sven Kjellberg was a Swedish museum director who, in 1934, bicycled with his

assistant from Lewis to Barra in search of ethnographical evidence linking the Hebrides and Scandinavia. Their photographs, diaries and sketches form the basis of Alexander Fenton's book, enhanced with his own expert information. By the mid 20th century, that old world was fading fast, but there was still much to record, as Kenneth Robertson's accomplished photographs in the second of these books reveal. They chart the changes that took place in the Southern Isles from the 1950s to the 1980s, conveying the 'warmth, vitality and exuberance of the people', the modest dignity of their homes and the bleak beauty of their landscape.

Travels in Scotland 1788–1881

Ed Alastair J. Durie (Boydell Press, £25, *£22.50)

Six accounts convey how tourism in Scotland changed over the span of a century, from soon after Johnson and Boswell made their famous Highland tour in 1773. The travellers range from a lady of independent means and a self-important youth to a middle-aged lawyer, none of whom were writing for a public audience, but for family and friends. The editor gives a good overview of early tourist travel to Scotland, and introductions to each account. He highlights the value of each journal, but is not averse to expressing criticism: Alan Bald, travelling in the late 1790s, had a prose style he calls 'self-indulgent, very wordy and over-complicated, knee-deep in contrived pseudo-education'.

