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Hugh's News

Newsletter of
The Friends of Hugh Miller



MAGIC QUILT SEES THE LIGHT

It is called the the gold and silver darlings ceilidh quilt to represent the stories which run through it. It can also be said to hold the azure blues and turquoise greens of the Moray Firth seas in sunlit glory.

You might say it has proved the perfect antidote to this miserable summer!

It is set to have its public launch before an invited audience at The Old Brewery, Cromarty, on Sunday, 25th September.

This gorgeous applique and patchwork art quilt has been created with several communities up and down the coast under the guiding hand of artist and storyteller Lizzie McDougall of Conon Brae, brought to together with the quilting skills of Brenda Sanders. It took almost a year to complete.

Lizzie first gathered traditional tales that have been told along the coast for generations to inspire her illustrations. She then invited contributors to cut out, sew and stitch the pictures and ornamentation, in six areas of the North and Inner Moray Firth.

All the contributors were invited to see the quilt and celebrate the artwork's completion at a tea party in the Tar-

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Top: Lizzie shows the quilt
Below, left to right: St Kessock; Stine Beag; The Mermaid





Top: Children admire the quilt with Lizzie
Above: The quilt border

bat Discovery Centre, itself a site bearing centuries of Christian and pre-Christian craftsmanship. The guests represented communities from Dunbeath, Cromarty, and Rosemarkie, down to Strathpeffer and Inverness.

She gave special thanks to Christine Gunn of Dunbeath Heritage Centre who organised for some one hundred or so of the Caithness village's residents, including every child in the place, to take part in the project supplying stories, applique work and delicious refreshments at all the many sessions held there.

Not surprisingly, fish and other sea creatures featured prominently in many of the 12 panels. There were Dunbeath-born writer Neil Gunn's herrings from his novel *The Silver Darlings*, and the salmon of wisdom from *The Well at the World's End*.

St Kessock who brought dried fish all the way from the Holy Land and cast their crumbs into the Moray Firth, thus created the silver darlings known as the Kessock herring. Friends member Elizabeth Sutherland contributed this and many stories of the Picts and St Columba as well as the Brahan Seer and his Seeing Stone. Avoch fisherman and poet Willie Skinner also inspired tales of the last days of the herring fishing in the Firth.

Two stories came direct from the pen of Hugh Miller and his folklore masterpiece, *Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland*, related by Lizzie with her customary dramatic relish. In one, witch Stine Bheag of Tarbat grants weather-bound Cromarty fishermen a

fair wind to sail them home, only to nearly perish in the storm she raises to punish them for disobeying her for fear of their minister.

In the second, The Mermaid, worthy Captain John Reid forcibly compels the siren to grant his three wishes, safety at sea, prosperity, and the hand of village heiress Helen Stuart, a tale which continues a strong local favourite to this day.

Lizzie went on to enthrall the guests with a rendering of an even more familiar legend, that of the Brahan Seer, his prophesies and terrible demise.

There are dozens more stories bursting out of the quilt.

Unfortunately, in a sense, Lizzie has not recorded them in any permanent form. They come with the quilt, and her special gifts of rediscovering and reliving them, in the true oral tradition.

However, she will be taking the quilt to many venues over the coming months including The Word on the Street Book Festival in Dingwall and The Archeology Festival when she will share the stories connected to the Picts at the Highland Museum of Childhood on 16th October. She hopes to exhibit the quilt at Groam House Museum. She will also be taking the quilt to the Edinburgh Festival.

At the Tarbat party, Lizzie thanked Inverness Caring and Sharing Shop, Dunbeath Heritage Centre, Tasgadh Fèis nan Gailidh, Creative Scotland, High Life Highland, Cromarty Arts Trust and the Museums Galleries Scotland grant-aiding body for their support.

LOVELY OPEN GARDENS SHOW



Both our Museum gardens - Miller's Yard: Garden of Wonders, and the Lydia Garden behind the Birthplace Cottage, were shown off to the public at a Cromarty Open Gardens Day on 9th July. Property manager Alix Powers-Jones said she could not praise too highly the efforts of the gardens maintenance volunteers who achieved the finest of presentations.

Cromarty East Church, where the devout Hugh worshipped for some twenty years, staged its own magnificent Art and Flower Show, among more than 20 private properties who exhibited. They raised sums for charity in four figures.



A summer treat for visitors was served up on Saturday, August 6th, with a performance in the Miller House parlour by a folk band, the National Trust for Scotland's very own volunteer group, simply named NTS Folk. They perform regularly at Culloden Battlefield visitor centre cafe, and have appeared at Brodie Castle, and the Inverness Museum and Art Gallery. This was their second concert at Miller House.

The band can number up to 10. That afternoon half of them played, Barbara Shaw, Claudia Spencer, Emm Warmbath, Margaret McDonald and Leslie Proctor. They first got together while attending tutored classes organised by the Highland Council offshoot, HighLife Highland, and were taken on from there by Katie Boal, the Culloden learning manager.

The occasion lit up with the attendance of Emm Warmbath's family to enjoy the music, including son Stewart, his wife, Vietnamese Tran Thi Ngoc Hong, and their daughter, Fiona Tran Warmbath. They were over from Vietnam to visit grandmother Emm in Inverness.



IMPORTANT FAMILY RELIC REAPPEARS

IT is the plainest, most humble hearth imaginable, but it kept a lonely old lady - Miller's Aunt Jenny - warm in her last years, and soon the public will be able for the first time to appreciate its importance in bearing witness to the kindness of her young nephew, Hugh the stonemason.

For a century and more, the ingle, and the remaining walls of the cottage it served, have more or less remained completely hidden from view, as part of Paye House, the private property which lies adjacent to the Birthplace Cottage.

The space served as a laundry area for Paye House's resident families during the 20th Century. Latterly it lay almost wholly concealed by an ugly shed. The floor is of hard concrete and to the left sits a large oil tank, until recently surrounded by breeze blocks. The significance of the humble dwelling as a surviving relic of the young Hugh's skills as a jobbing mason had been all but lost.

But now the National Trust for Scotland has plans to open the space to the public. NTS owns Paye House, and until 2009 it served as a tied house to accommodate the Museum property manager. Since then it has been let out as one of the Trust's two holiday cottages in Cromarty.

Two years ago, on the initiative of the present manager, Dr Alix Powers-Jones, what had been the top half of the Paye House garden became part of the Museum's grounds.

Supported by a donation of £1,900 from The Friends, and other important donations, she started a conversion of the area into to a "garden room," as part of her programme to extend the Museum's facilities for lifelong learning.

The area has been re-cleared this summer by the Trust's Highland region conservation volunteers, and the shed and breeze blocks removed. It is planned to screen the oil tank with ornamental wrought iron railings, to which the NTS London Members' Centre has contributed £4,000.

Thus the stage is clear for the re-emergence into public view of the remains of Aunt Jenny's cottage. Three of the four walls, rubble-



This page, top to bottom: What remains of Aunt Jenny's cottage; The cottage seen from the front, the oil tank is due to be screened off; ingle close-up.

Facing page, top to bottom: Part of the garden room, with bench installed; The well in the Birthplace garden, adjacent to Jenny's place; The Paye.



built in the local Old Red Sandstone, survive to a height of about seven feet. The ingle sits in the centre of the south wall; the west section adjoins the top of the Birthplace Cottage garden, beside the well.

The building represents a minor, but moving part of the Miller family history. Hugh tells the story in his autobiography, *My Schools and Schoolmasters*, about how he had just quit work as one of a mason gang working all over the Highlands, aged 20, his health already broken by toils in "wet ditch and ruinous hovel."

He wrote: "I was now my own master, and commenced work as a journeyman on behalf of one of my maternal aunts. Aunt Jenny (Janet Wright, born about 1777) had resided for many years with an aged widow lady, who had lived apart in quiet gentility on very small means; and now that she was dead, my aunt saw her vocation gone, and wished that she too could live apart, a life of humble independence, supporting herself by her spinning wheel, and by now and then knitting a stocking. She feared, however, to encounter the formidable drain on her means of a half-yearly room rent; and, as there was a little bit of ground at the head of the strip of garden left me by my father, which bordered on a road that, communicating between town and country, bore, as is common in the north of Scotland, the French name of the Pays, it occurred to me that I might try my hand, as a skilled mechanic, in erecting upon it a cottage for Aunt Jenny. Masons have, of course, more in their power in the way of house-building than any other class of mechanics. It was necessary, however, that there should be money provided for the purchase of wood for the roof, and for the carting of the necessary stones and mortar; and I had none. But Aunt Jenny had saved a few pounds, and a very few proved sufficient; and so I built a cottage in the Pays, of a single room and a closet, as my first job, which, if not very elegant, or of large accommodation, came fully up to Aunt Jenny's ideas of comfort, and which, for at least a quarter of a century, has served her as a home."

The tale will we trust be told again as part of the display in the new garden room.

MG



WRITTEN IN STONE: GEOLOGY AND GRAFFITI IN ORKNEY

by Antonia Thomas

The author is an archæologist, and a Trustee of the Stromness Museum

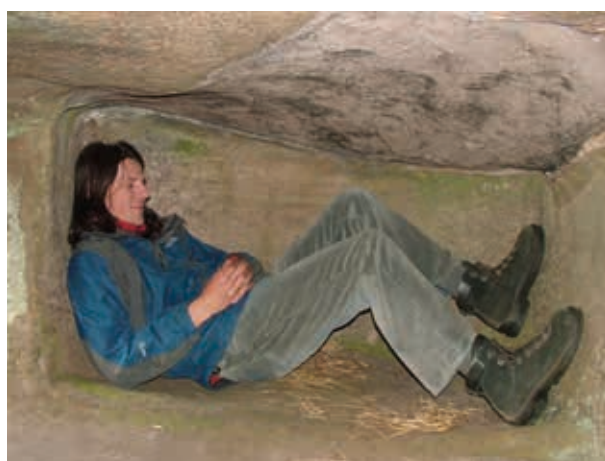
*This piece took second prize in prose in the "Testimony of the Rocks"
Hugh Miller National 2015/16 Writing Competition*

Orkney's story has always been written in stone. Underneath its rich soil lie thick layers of Devonian flagstone, laid down as sediments when the islands were submerged under Lake Orcadie millions of years ago. The ghosts of old sun-cracks and wave ripples are often visible in the strata, along with the fossilized remains of ancient fish: the ichthyolites of the famous Sandwich Fish Bed. These lake deposits helped form the rolling landscape of Orkney today; soft hills giving way to sea-cliffs, indented by deep geos along lithic flaws in the readily-fractured flagstone. Its properties have been exploited from the earliest times, quarried for walling stone and roof-slates from the Neolithic to the present day.

Old extraction scars punctuate the landscape. On the edge of the west coast just outside Stromness lie the remains of the Black Craig quarry, opened in the 1770s to satisfy the exploding population's demand for building stone. Slates were loaded straight onto boats and transported to customers throughout Scotland. Within 20 years, it was producing some 30-40,000 slates annually, and they were considered the best available. But this boom industry was not to last. By the early 19th century, they were not worthy of export, and in the Ordnance Survey map of the 1880s, the quarry lies unmarked. It was not, however, forgotten.

Known as an excellent site for ichthyolites from at least the 1830s, T.S. Traill, Professor of Geology at Edinburgh University, collected fossils from the area, corresponding with Louis Agassiz and sending him drawings and maps. Orkney's west coast was, Hugh Miller exclaimed, a "Land of Fish". At the height of the Black Craig's slate industry, Miller was still a quarryer, yet to discover the fossil fish that dominated his life. But in 1846, by now a renowned geologist, he travelled to Orkney to see the Old Red Sandstone and the fossil fish sandwiched in its ancient layers.

By the time of Miller's visit, the Black Craig quarry was no longer worked, its spoil tips explored by fossil hunters rather than stonemasons. No accounts survive of the men who once worked the slates. But in the geo just downslope of the quarry, where they would eat their lunch shielded from the wind, they left a different record. Whether because the need to work stone was so ingrained in their daily life, or



Top to bottom:

The huge boulder housing the hollow in which Hugh once took shelter from a storm and carved his name beside others on the wall.

Here the name and date H MILLER 1846 is clearly visible below that of a probable quarryman, P FOLSTER 1830.

A postgraduate student poses in the space on a field trip led by Professor Nigel Trewin.

perhaps because they just had to make their mark, those quarrymen carved their names, and sometimes dates, on the geo's flagstone walls.

Those who visit the site today are surprised by the palimpsest. The soft flagstone is vulnerable to the elements and many of the earliest dates have been eroded, replaced by new inscriptions or suffocated by encroaching black lichen. A generation ago many more carvings dating from the late 18th century were visible; local names – Mowat, Linklater, Cursiter, Budge – mingling with less familiar ones. There are hundreds of names and dates now, ranging from the 1770s when the quarry was opened right up to the present day. Most, however, are from the mid to late 19th century: declarations of identity in a new age of literacy and leisure.

By that time, tourists had become a familiar sight along the west coast, fossil hunting amongst the spoil of the old quarry, carving their names and taking lunch in the sheltered geo. Promoted by writers such as Miller, geology had become an exciting and fashionable new hobby, whilst a generation of Victorians had grown up with the work of Walter Scott romanticising the Highlands and Islands to tourists. Scott had visited Orkney in 1814 on a six-week summer cruise with the Northern Lighthouse Board collecting folk-tales. Many were later integrated into *The Pirate* (1822), but one stands out in particular: the Dwarfie Stone. A massive block of Old Red, it is one of several in a remote valley at the north end of Hoy, but unlike the others, it has been hollowed out forming a small chamber. Presumed to be a Neolithic tomb, it was immortalised in *The Pirate* as the home of the dwarf, Trollid.

A generation later, during his own summer cruise to Orkney, Hugh Miller visited the infamous Dwarfie Stone. With his stonemason's eye he found a 'compact' stone that he estimated he could carve out to order in a matter of weeks. But as was often the case with Miller, what intrigued him was not just its geological properties, but the human story it told. Inside the tomb he found numerous graffiti, including the inscriptions of H. Ross 1735, and P. Folster 1830. And just as quarrymen and tourists had felt compelled to do in the geo below Black Craig, Miller also felt moved to leave his mark:

*'The rain still pattered heavily overhead; and with my geological chisel and hammer I did, to beguile the time, what I very rarely do,—added my name to the others...which, if both they and the Dwarfie Stone get but fair play, will be distinctly legible two centuries hence. In what state will the world then exist, or what sort of ideas will fill the head of the man who, when the rock has well-nigh yielded up its charge, will decipher the name for the last time, and inquire, mayhap, regarding the individual whom it now designates, as I did this morning, when I asked, "Who was this H. Ross, and who this P. Folster?"'.**

His words were rendered all the more poignant by their posthumous publication. On Christmas Day 1856, Hugh Miller shot himself dead. But the legacy of his writing engaged an entire generation, contributing to the new era of popular science which would come to define the 19th century. His story too had been written in stone: firstly as a quarryman, latterly as a geologist. It is fitting that his name lives on in Orkney, 'distinctly legible two centuries hence', written into the very fabric of the Devonian sandstone that defined his work and life.

* *The Cruise of the Betsey*, p.514

FUTURE WRITING PROSPECTS CANVASSED

SUCH was the success of the 2015/16 Hugh Miller national writing competition that the strong desirability of holding another one is already being discussed.

The first one succeeded because of an extraordinarily generous amount of voluntary effort by the Scottish GeoDiversity Forum, the Friends, the sponsoring bodies and the judges' panel. Everything was freely given, from the time spent by the organisers and judges, to the donation of prizes and the award-giving ceremony. Inspiration, and exhilaration aroused by the entries in both quality and number, were the driving forces behind the whole enterprise.

We have to recognise that such an inspired venture cannot possibly be sustained a second time or on future occasions. A well-organised, structured, and adequately funded exercise has to be put in place before we start. Our colleague Lara Reid has outlined how we can take this forward.

She has set out a plan to establish a committee for organisation and promotion by the organisations involved in the first competition, with new sponsors invited to join. And a budget should be set, she has suggested of between £2,000 and £3,000. This would cover a fee for the main organiser, a marketing budget for poster/flyer printing costs, judges' expenses, prize fund, venue hire for the awards ceremony, and a fee for the prizes' presenter. Promotion to schools should be a key focus, especially in areas relevant to Hugh Miller.

An early opportunity to attract a wider field of entries among Scotland's creative writers could occur at the StAnza poetry festival to be held in St Andrews, to which The Friends of Hugh Miller have been invited.

The second competition could be suitably launched with appropriate fanfare on Hugh's anniversary, 10th October 2017. Comments from our members are welcome on this programme which has such obvious potential to promote Hugh's legacy.



Lara Reid



MEMBERSHIP FORM



I WISH to become a member of the charity, The Friends of Hugh Miller (SC037351), in order to support its work in making Miller's life and work better known, and in particular to assist in the development of the Hugh Miller Museum and Birthplace Cottage in Church Street, Cromarty.

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