

St. Kilda

Conachair was a granite stronghold rearing from the water. Ringed by mist, the suddenness of the land was frightening. The abrasive, somber face of the stone reminded Angus of the ill-lit cathedral and churches of the grey Aberdeen streets of his childhood. The sunlight struggled to penetrate the early summer fret, appearing only as a buttery yellow glow far above. Angus lashed the sail to the boom and yanked the pull chain for the outboard motor. The seasoned engine lazily spluttered to life. Looking out from under the rim of his tatty Sou'wester, his keen eyes scanned the rocky coast, searching for a safe place to moor. Seabirds preened on the cliffs, watching him skillfully pick his way between threatening chunks of stone to a calm patch of water, encircled by rocks. This was to be his bay. Angus unwound the sturdy rope and lashed it to the closest rock, carefully ensuring he did not rock the boat enough to disturb the supplies he had with him, or the beady listeners perched on the lofty cliffs to his right.

Angus, steadying himself with the rope, swung his leg onto the dense rock of St. Kilda. A tide of relief hit him. After an arduous year of planning, hope and anticipation, his ambition to visit the island was realised. As he walked the perilous few feet to the pebbly shoreline, Angus' heart swelled with joy. He had worked overtime, meticulously planned and researched his journey to St. Kilda. Chartering the boat; ramshackle as it was, cost close to a week's wages. None of that mattered, though. The tide prevailed, the boat held, and he was moored. Angus strode up the stony beach and sat on a tussock to digest his accomplishment. All the years he had yearned to visit this mysterious place, and he was finally here. Fascinating, inaccessible, beyond his experience. He was raised on the Scottish tales of highland and island life, and of these, perhaps the most compelling was that of St. Kilda, with its lithic cliffs and crofts scattering the fields and slopes. He recalled the stories he had read of "the clearings" in the 1930s, in which the islands were completely evacuated of their inhabitants in a matter of days, and the way of life that had prevailed for centuries on the isle was lost. Many times Angus had imagined the empty hearths, ash unswept. Wooden window seats were bare and unoccupied. There were no mice to eat what little was left, so in his mind the small piles of oats left behind by each household still remained next to the open Bibles left with them.

Angus awoke from his thoughts. He regarded the bay. A seal lay idly on a flat block of granite, absorbing the daylight. High above, Fulmars shrieked and wheeled on the warm midday currents. Thousands of beetles and insects mingled in the viscous bed of seaweed that spanned the shore. The rocks shifted and crunched under his feet as Angus crossed the beach and arrived at the foot of the huge, granite crag. Conachair was the highest peak in St. Kilda, its intimidating face gazing westward. Hiking up his pack, he dug in his toes and started up. The sun was brighter, and the mist that had earlier encircled the island was beginning to burn away. Memories of his war years, so recently concluded, began to ebb away as Angus left his boat behind.

Remembering the binoculars slung on a leather strap around his neck, he set out to study the seabirds and their burrows and nests in the side of the hill. Puffins chatted on jutting projections, their colourful beaks a comical splash against the dull grey cliff. Daring sea thrift grew in patches of dusky pink and white, blown ragged, yet stoic. Walking up the hill began to strain on the healed wound in Angus' leg. His feet sank into the mossy ground, tough from the wind and sodden from the spray. Thick sea grasses crunched under his boots. Tired yet resolute, Angus marched more quickly. The tops of buildings began to slip into view; settled old homesteads stood weathering against the cloudless sky. Ancient, ashen walls ran down a centre street, darting off left and right. Small side-lanes linked the back gardens of crofts and homes, jutting off the main street. Angus considered the path, broken by moss and grasses, and bordered by brambles and nettles. Further along, a wheelbarrow rotted against a wall, the rough nails that held it together rusted and flaked. He began to imagine how these people had lived; a life of simple community and hardship, relying on the nests of seabirds and what little the land and sea would yield, to survive. Houses once alive

with peat fires and the music of ceilidh dances now lay silent, apprehensively awaiting the return of their inhabitants, not knowing they would never return.

The path began to peter out and lost definition as the croft cottages thinned, the terrain became wilder as Angus ascended the corrie. Seagulls and terns swooped and dived, enjoying the afternoon light and currents of warm air. His boots struggled for grip on the loose scree, sending a shard of flaky shale bouncing back to the village. A stocky cleit stood halfway to the top, looking northwards. Angus was thrilled at this discovery as he had read about cleitean used for storage on the island. He peered inside, but it contained only the smell of wet stones and some sparse moss. Angus looked to the sky. The sun was beginning to warm the western face of the hill. He stopped, sat on a small grassy tussock, and unpacked the sandwiches he brought with him. Breathing in the clear sea air, Angus scanned his surroundings. The silent village looked like a broken toy set from his perspective; the rocks and remnants of human habitation, once orderly, now decorated the hillside. The cairns on the surrounding hills cast shadows down them like monolithic sentries. As he cast his eyes left, he saw something peculiar. A thin column of wispy smoke. He rubbed his eyes in disbelief and looked again. Shading his eyes, he could clearly make out smoke rising from a point in the distance. Pushing his lunch aside, he rose, and began to make his way hesitantly towards the source of the smoke. It appeared to be coming from over a hillock; the grassy mound just north of the main village. Angus' mind was racing. He was taken by frantic speculation, anxiousness and uncertainty. He began to walk more quickly, ignoring the stiff bracken and nettles that whipped against his legs. The ground rose as he climbed the bluff, he began to feel the wind on his face, and with each step grew more and more apprehensive. He reached the top of the mound, and looked down upon a small valley, sheltered on both sides and sloping down onto the shorefront. Cobbled walls spanned either side of this heathered lowland, holding a small flock of sheep in a natural corral. In the centre of this was a tumbledown homestead. Angus could not believe his eyes at first. There was smoke emerging from a small chimney on the side of the house, and the sheep appeared well shorn and fed.

Angus slowly approached the house. A grizzled man sat outside. He wore a tatty woollen jacket, a knitted jumper and black dungarees. A Greek fisherman's cap sat at an angle on his head, and a grey-ginger beard hung matted from his jaw. A scarred bucket sat by his foot, and he was filleting mackerel with a large fish knife. Angus tentatively approached, and the man looked up. He had icy blue eyes that were sunken into his face, giving him an expression of foreboding and slight displeasure. Angus spoke first. "Hello", he said. The Fisherman had a deep, gruff voice. His accent had a hint of Scottish, but sounded vaguely Scandinavian to the unaccustomed. "Who are you, and what do you want?" asked the Fisherman. "I am Angus. I have sailed over to explore the island. I thought it abandoned. Who are you?" asked Angus in a frightened, yet polite tone. "It does not matter who I am. Kilda is not abandoned. This is my home, and I do not take kindly to those snooping around it." replied the Fisherman. Even more unnerved than he was before the conversation began, Angus mulled over his reply carefully. "I am very sorry that I disturbed you, but I was looking to see where the smoke was coming from. Forgive me for my intrusion, but I do not mean you any harm." The Fisherman, not wholly satisfied with the answer that Angus had given him, and still wary of newcomers, said in the same rough voice "If you are here to remove me, I will not go. I left once, I am not going back to the mainland." This interested Angus. "I am not here to remove you," he replied. "Forgive me for asking, but if you were removed, why do you still live here?" The man paused for a second, and thought before replying in a slow measured voice "Lad, I was born in this house. My father was born in this house, and for all I know his father was too. The only things I know are the fields, coasts and people of this island, and that won't get you far on the mainland. I'd rather die in my own house next week than live another twenty years away from the place I love." He continued, "It was nice meeting you, but I have a flock to tend to, and tea to make." The man gave him a stern look. "My way of life is secret. Do not tell anyone what you have found here." The only response Angus could muster was a reticent "of course. Goodbye, and good luck" and a frantic nod. He turned, and began to retrace his steps.

Angus was in awe. As he crested the brow of the hill, he turned to see a picture of life as it was on St. Kilda. The peat smoke was rising steadily from the chimney, a formidable backdrop of dramatic cliffs framing a smooth sea behind. Angus reflected upon the events of his day, and smiled. He had discovered not only the man who was keeping St. Kilda alive, but also glimpsed the way things were, he had rediscovered the way of life that was hitherto lost, and the peace that he was searching for. Angus walked back to the shore, and to his boat. The birds still circled high above, the sea thrift clung on. With the flame in St. Kilda still smoldering, he untied the rope, pushed off the boat, and sailed for the mainland.

First Prize
Willoughby Whittle – St Ninian’s High School