

# SCOTTISH ISLANDS

Explorer

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# Inspired by Tìree

Mavis Gulliver reveals how her *Cry at Midnight* evolved

Tìree, with its wealth of sandy beaches and huge expanse of sky is an inspiration to many people. Portrayed in paintings and photographs, and described in poetry, it is a stunningly beautiful island. My visits have been in order to walk as much of the island as possible, to take a boat trip out to the Skerryvore lighthouse, and to learn about the landscape, history and wildlife.

I always hope to write a poem that captures the essence of each island that I visit. On Tìree I found myself comparing the view from our cottage window to a woven picture. The lines of fences, the change of one type of vegetation to another and the skyline formed the warp. Fence posts and reeds became the weft, while slubs of knotted wool represented the yellow iris heads.

I found inspiration in the contrasting landscape of The Reef (An Ruighe) and Kenavara (Ceann a' Mhara or Ceann a' Bharra). The former being a flat expanse of machair which was used as an airport in the Second World War, but is now an RSPB Reserve. The latter being the wildest corner of Tìree with dramatic cliffs and the remains of St Patrick's Chapel which dates back to the year 700.

## A Story for Children

Poetry was foremost in my mind, but by the end of the fortnight's holiday I was deeply involved in a story for children. Why? Where did the idea come from? Where does any idea come from? This question is frequently asked by adults and children alike. I think the answer has to be - from anywhere. An object, a place, a rabbit diving into a rabbit hole can all be starting points.

It is a case of being observant, of using all one's senses and giving free rein to the imagination. Ideas often come from the most unexpected sources, and that is what happened to me on Tìree. Close to the cottage where we were staying was an isolated fence post. It was old, twisted and weathered to a silver-grey; but it immediately filled me with excitement and enthusiasm.

Viewed from three sides it was nothing more than a fencepost, but from the fourth, it was in the rough shape of a horse's head. I could see the muzzle, the nostril and the eye. And although the two ears were somewhat splintered, to me, they were definitely horse's ears. From that simple beginning, a story began to take shape.

## An Erratic Boulder

I walked to the Ringing Stone which lies on the coast between Balephetrish and Vaul. I learned that it was an erratic boulder carried from Rum during the last Ice Age, and that it was made of granodiorite, a much younger rock than Tìree's ancient Lewisian rock. I was impressed by the inscribed cup and ring marks which date back to around 2000BC. ►





Previous Page: The white shell sand beach of Traigh nan Gilean with the rocky headland of Ceann a' Mhara (Kenavara) beyond. (Mavis Gulliver)

Above: The location of Fang an t-Sithein (The Fairy Fank) is not given on the Coll & Tiree Explorer Map. (Mavis Gulliver)

Opposite Top: From the book cover (Richard Gulliver)

Opposite Below: The author, seated on the Ringing Stone, gives a sense of scale to this huge cup-marked erratic boulder. (Richard Gulliver)

I read stories of folklore, of how, if the Ringing Stone breaks or disappears, Tiree will vanish beneath the sea. But my imagination took me in a different direction. I walked to the Stone again. I climbed up and sat on top of it. I walked round it. I lay my cheek against it, tapped it with a pebble and listened to the incredible ringing sound.

In experiencing the magic of the Ringing Stone I realised that the story had to be filled with magic. It would be for young readers. It would be a fantasy adventure and the Stone would have to play a very important part. In the strange shape of the fencepost I had found a beginning for my story. In the Ringing Stone I had found an end. Now I needed a middle!

## As Humans on Land

I watched seals, both common and grey, and almost without my intending to include one, a Selkie appeared in my story. Selkies are said to be seals which live in the sea, but which can appear as humans on land. I read Selkie stories from different cultures and found them to have remarkably similar elements. I 'borrowed' some of the ideas but also developed ideas of my own.

I imagined the horse as a real horse, visiting the places I visited. I thought how wonderful it would be to gallop along the sands of Traigh nan Gilean in the west, and along Gott Bay in the east. I explored Dun Mor broch, a fortified structure which dates from around 60AD. The parallel walls enclosing steps and chambers were fascinating.

Besides shards of local pottery, excavations there have revealed bronze and silver rings, glass beads, a comb carved from bone and items which were used for both weaving and for the working of metals. The broch itself, and the items found within it, could all have found a place in my story, but there were too many ideas for one book and I had to leave them out.

## An Ideal Hiding Place

I read of a souterrain (from the French 'sous terrain' meaning 'under ground'). This Iron Age structure may have been a larder or a hiding place in times of invasion. I was told that it had been filled in, but knowing the ones on Canna, I could imagine its stone-lined walls and roof. The fact that no-one could tell me its position made it an ideal hiding place for one of my characters.

In *Coll and Tiree* by Erskine Beveridge, first published in 1903, I came across a reference to Fang an t-Sithean - the enclosure or fank of the fairies. This sounded like an ideal place to set one of my scenes. I made a few enquiries but, like the souterrain, no-one I asked could confirm its location. I expect there are people who know, but I had to go on what I could discover at the time.

With a mixture of details from the book, some judicious map-reading and a careful scanning of the landscape I was able to find this small, but distinct green mound. It has become a major location in my story and is described in detail. I have purposely not described the location here, believing that I have given sufficient clues for anyone who really wishes to find it.

### Carried to Tiree

As I wandered round Tiree I collected natural objects, some of which have important roles in my story. I found yellow periwinkle shells, a snail shell tinged with deep purple

lines, and a stone in the shape of a heart. I picked up a sea-bean, a tropical fruit carried to Tiree by ocean currents; and a hag-stone - a stone with a hole through it that is said to repel witches.

Places and objects swirled together in my mind. The story has grown into a 57,000 word novel and will be published by Cinnamon Press in time for launching at the Islay Book Festival during the first weekend of October 2014. Neither the characters nor the plot will let me go. Quite unexpectedly, this book, *Cry at Midnight*, has become the first part of a trilogy.

Parts Two and Three will find me revisiting other islands. There will be references to real locations, there will be continued adventures and there will definitely be more magic. As I wrote at the beginning of the article, it is a case of letting my imagination take flight. Over and above that, I have to thank Tiree for the fencepost which triggered the story - and for the island itself for providing such a beautiful and inspiring location. ■

