

HEISGEIR SCHOOLHOUSE by John A Love 2021



With the death of Professor Richard West in Cambridge on 30 December 2020 a remarkable and oft forgotten chapter in the story of the Schoolhouse on Heisgeir (Monach Isles) came to a close. At the age of 93 he was the last of a trio of Cambridge students who had purchased the building to save it from dereliction. Since then they always maintained close touch with the folk of Grimsay, especially the Morrison family.



The Monach Schoolhouse, Heisgeir in 2004 (Photo J Love)

The schoolhouse (photo) was built by Inverness County Council around 1880, when the population of Heisgeir was 111 – pretty much its peak, all on Ceann Ear except for 13 (in 3 families) at the lighthouse on Shillay. At one time as many as 60 pupils might be attending the school but by 1935 only 8-10. By then there were only 4 families, 3 lightkeepers and one teacher. When naturalists Robert Atkinson and John Ainslie visited 12-15 July 1938 there were only two occupied croft houses with only 5 children at the school. In his classic book *‘Island Going’* Atkinson describes the two Macdonald brothers as being ‘the finest specimens of bullock physique I ever saw’. Two young botanists were also camping on Ceann Ear at the time, listing plants and collecting insects with a hand net.

When the lighthouse was closed down in 1942 the last crofts on Ceann Ear (occupied by the two Macdonald brothers and their families) were abandoned. The last entry in the school logbooks was in June 1942, (about 59 years after the first.) Angus ‘Moy’ MacDonald aged 14 was one of the last pupils. His family settled on Moy Farm near Fort William, while the other brother Seumas Ailig went to Islay. The building again functioned as a school when the Morrison family resettled Heisgeir from Grimsay in 1945. Aged 55, it was Peter Morrison’s (Pàdruig) vision to see the island inhabited again and his 12 year old son Archie was taught by his 18 year old sister Anne which was sanctioned by the Education Department of Inverness County Council, (an older sister Mary Flora was training to be a nurse in Glasgow). Vital to their success on Heisgeir was of course Pàdruig’s wife Flora and their 22 year old son Lachlan. However, no other families were to follow their example and in 1949 when the Morrisons returned to Grimsay the island was deserted once more.

The Education Authority put the schoolhouse up for sale in 1952. It was bought, I am told for £50 (equivalent to about £1500 in today's money) by three Cambridge University students - Richard West aged 28, Franklyn Perring aged 26 and Michael Locke aged 23. They were keen that it continued to be open to the Grimsay fishermen when they were working lobster pots around the Monachs. But it was also used as a base by a succession of researchers from various institutions studying the islands's wildlife, rocks and history.

Youngest of the new owners was Michael Locke, born in 1929 whose scholarship to Cambridge was interrupted by National Service in the RAF. He obtained a Double First in Natural Sciences, going on to achieve a PhD there under the distinguished insect physiologist Sir Vincent Wigglesworth, author of so many classic texts in entomology. Michael's first academic post was in Jamaica before he moved to universities in Ohio and finally Ontario, where he died in 2013, a Canadian citizen.

Two years older was Franklyn H Perring who was to be described as 'one of the most influential botanists and nature conservationists of the 20th century'. He saw Army National Service in Ireland, Malaya and India before completing his first degree in Natural Sciences at Queen's Cambridge, followed by a PhD on the plants of chalk grasslands. He went on to co-author or edit over a dozen floras and wild flower guides notably, with Max Walters, the monumental 'Atlas of the British Flora'. But perhaps of greatest interest to Curragh members, he was the founding Head of the National Biological Recording Centre at Monks Wood, from 1964 to 1978, encouraging the creation of regional biological record centres across the UK. Having first visited the islands in 1949/50, Frank (with Roland Randall) published an annotated flora of the Monach Isles in 1972. He later became the General Secretary of the Royal Society for Nature Conservation and was a key player in the modern Wildlife Trust movement culminating in an OBE in 1988. After his retirement he organised wildlife tours and holidays before his death in 2003.

Born in 1926, Richard West was a year younger than Perring and, like him, did his National Service with the Army in India before enrolling at Clare College in Cambridge in 1948 where he studied Botany and Geology. Specialising in Botany he obtained a First Class Honours and undertook his PhD research into the stratigraphy and palaeobotany of lake deposits at the celebrated Middle Pleistocene site of Hoxne in Suffolk. He went on to become a lecturer at Cambridge and by 1977 was the Professor of the Botany Department there. He maintained his interest in Quaternary Science throughout his career until his retirement in 1991. His pioneering terminology of Hoxnian, Ipswichian and Cromerian stages of the Pleistocene remains in use today. As well as inspiring three generations of research students, he published numerous reviews, over 120 papers and 9 books. He died at the end of December 2020 aged 94.

On their early visits to the Monachs the botanists became firm friends with Lachie Morrison, being of similar age. The Morrisons, and other Grimsay fishermen, continued to use the schoolhouse while Perring and West would return north regularly to stay with them in Grimsay (where I was privileged to meet them for the first time - see photo). The Monach Isles became a National Nature Reserve in 1966 under a Nature Reserve Agreement with the owners, North

Uist Estate (Lord Granville having purchased North Uist five years earlier). The island of Shillay with its lighthouse built in 1865 was however the property of the Northern Lighthouse Board but they too sanctioned the agreement. But when the Nature Conservancy approached Monks Wood Experimental Station to offer accommodation for their scientists, they were surprised to be told that the Schoolhouse and its playground were not actually part of the NNR. And the person they were speaking to, Dr Frank Perring, was himself part-owner! He and his co-owners (Locke was by now living in North America) graciously offered one room for use of Conservancy staff and visiting scientists.

One key researcher has been Roland Randall, a geography Professor at Cambridge who had undertaken various studies of machair and coastal processes on the Monachs (and elsewhere), of its feral cats (now wiped out it seems) and of rabbits (introduced in the First World War). There are Pygmy Shrews, Long-tailed Field Mice and a few Otters. Randall's annotated flora with Frank Perring as senior author (listing 205 flowering plants), documenting the situation before the advent of myxomatosis in the early '50s. Few have been added to the list since. The studies and regular counts of grey seals have also been of considerable importance, since, after the people left the Monachs have become the second largest colony in the world (after Sable Island in Canada). The number of pups born in the autumn seem to have levelled out at some 9,000 (although the North Sea colonies continue to increase). The Outer Hebrides produces about 12,000 pups in total and so with some 45,000 in the UK, Britain holds some 40% of the world population of this species (data from the Sea Mammal Research Unit website).

Some Species lists for the Monach Isles (various sources compiled by J Love)

Plants	Lichens	11	Fungi	5
	Liverworts	2	Mosses	37
	Algae	13	Ferns	3
	Higher plants	205		
Animals	Molluscs	77	Earthworms	5
Invertebrates	Colembolans	28	Sea slaters	4
	Amphipods	2	Millipedes	2
	Bristletails	2	Earwigs	1
Insects	Dragonflies	4	Bugs	23
	Butterflies/moths	16	Beetles	176
	Bees	6	Ants	1
	Spiders	21		
Vertebrates	Freshwater fish	2	Reptiles/amphibians	0
	Land mammals	6	Birds	151

Although SNH (as the Nature Conservancy had become and it is now Nature Scot) were able to enlist the help of the RAF in North Uist to fit protective shuttering to the windows and to render the roof more watertight, little repair work had been done on the schoolhouse so Perring and West approached the Uist office in 1996 (and where I was working at the time) to see if SNH would take over ownership and care of the Schoolhouse. However, I felt that it would be easier for an outside body to access grants for repairs etc so I encouraged the botanists to open negotiations with the Grimsay Community.

This provided for the future of the schoolhouse, with the Grimsay Community Association proposing a rescue package in 2004. Although Frank Perring had died in Nov 2003, SNH facilitated discussions with Frank's family, and (thanks to the Morrisons) with Professor West. The latter was one of the editorial panel of the famous New Naturalist series of books, in which capacity I was later to correspond with him. Frank's daughter Emma was married to Ewen Thompson in Fair Isle who made my fiddle; and I knew his mother and his grandfather Dr Ian Pennie, an ornithologist in Sutherland. I later met Frank's widow on Fair Isle. The Perrings and Professor West all generously permitted ownership of the schoolhouse to be transferred to the Grimsay Community Association in September 2004. Over succeeding summers, volunteers organised by the Community Association not only undertook substantial renovations to the schoolhouse, but also reroofed the Mission House. A modest financial contribution was made to these works by SNH, through its community grant scheme. The repairs to the roof and interior were completed by 2006. Interpretive panels were erected in the Mission House on the human story of the Islands, and to which I was able to contribute text and photos. Accommodation is let out to Cairdean an Taigh-Sgoile (Friends of the Schoolhouse) and to other bona fide visitors.

The Monachs ceased to be a National Nature Reserve in May 2018 but is now absorbed within a much larger Nature Conservation Marine Protection Area, 62 sq km of sea to safeguard the marine life, the seabed geomorphology and the feeding grounds of the islands' seabirds. Happily, the Schoolhouse remains in safe hands and will continue to play a vital role in the future of Heisgeir.



Young Pàdruig Morrison, Dr Franklyn Perring, Lachie Morrison and Professor Richard West (Photo J Love)