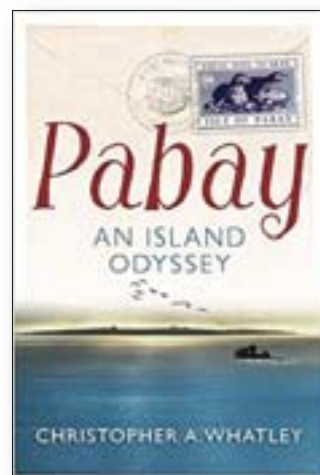


BOOKS

ROGER
HUTCHINSON

A selection of money-spinning Pabay stamps

An island history almost without comparison

The three statistical reviews of Scotland in 1795, 1845 and 1951 were not edited, let alone peer-reviewed. Parish ministers were asked to report on the condition of their domains, and they submitted their own unfettered contributions.

They consequently contained more than a few idiosyncrasies. In 1951 the Church of Scotland minister of Strath, Reverend Murdo Macleod MacSween, chose to inform the nation that whatever defects might be present in post-war south Skye, "as far as is known, there are no communists in our midst".

Reverend MacSween was aware that the new owner of Pabay, a flat little island about a mile in diameter which seemed somehow to dominate the view of Broadford Bay from his church and his manse, was named Len Whatley.

He will not have known that Mr Whatley's forename was not, as is usual among Lens, an abbreviation of Leonard. It was a shortening of Lenin.

In 1919, two years after the Russian revolution, the future resident proprietor of Pabay had been christened Arthur Lenin Whatley. He would be known ever after as Len.

Len Whatley's father was a former farm servant from Wiltshire. An autodidact — he had begun labouring at the age of 11 years — he was, as his son would become in a far less evangelical manner, a Fabian socialist and a Labour voter rather than a Bolshevik, which might slightly have appeased Reverend MacSween. Although had the minister known it, having himself served as a Church of Scotland chaplain in the Royal Navy during

the Second World War, the fact that Arthur Lenin Whatley had been a conscientious objector would not have given him pleasure.

Len's wife, Margaret, came from equally radical stock. Between the wars the Whatleys and the Hilditches moved in the same utopian, pacifist social and political circles. Margaret's father, Henry Hilditch, was a businessman who, having experienced the horror of the First World War battlefields, had joined the Labour Party in 1921 and who sold his scrap metal business in Birmingham immediately after the outbreak of the Second World War to avoid contributing to the armaments industry.

That left Henry Hilditch with a lot of money and spare time. After fighting and losing the 1951 General Election as a Labour candidate in England, he was a highly-energetic and entrepreneurial man of only 60 years.

Henry Hilditch upped and travelled with his family to live in Broadford, where Henry oversaw the finances of the Whatleys' operations on Pabay and he and his son Harry built the Dunollie Hotel.

The Whatleys had first seen Pabay "bathed in sunlight" while on holiday at Kinloch Lodge Hotel in Sleat in the late 1940s. They heard that the little island was for sale, and they were hooked.

AS THE ARCHAEOLOGY shows, Pabay has been inhabited for several thousand years, although its peak population was probably never more than a couple of dozen people.

It had an early medieval reputation as a wooded place which offered safe haven to brigands. Like all the other Pabays, Pappas, Pappays and Pappars off the coast of Scotland, its name

derives from "Priest's Island", which suggests at some point in history an eremitic presence.

For the previous couple of centuries Pabay had been a law-abiding part of the Scalpay Estate. That was an insular property comprising the two inhabited islands of Scalpay and Pabay and the two lumps of rock and heather to the north and west of Pabay called Longay and Guillamon.

Until the middle of the 20th century, Scalpay Estate followed the pattern of most other Highland and Hebridean estates. It was the playground of one rich and titled gentleman after another.

The last of these was the shipping and mining magnate Sir Donald Currie. Currie was, like his predecessors, mainly interested in Scalpay. By his time at the end of the 19th century Pabay's population was down to single figures. He did however build a jetty, a farm house and a steading in the south of the island facing Broadford and, although this supposedly once forested place was by the turn of the 20th century denuded of trees, Currie planted a few as windbreaks.

Currie died in 1909. Pabay was let to Colonel Lachlan MacDonald of Tote, then sold to Sir Henry Bell. He effected a few more minor improvements on an island whose future everybody agreed lay in being a sheep farm.

Bell and his Portree factor also found themselves with Pabay's last two native inhabitants: "am bodaich", the brothers Angus and Donald MacKinnon. The bodaich ran the island under the factor until 1940, when at the age of 61 Angus MacKinnon married Mary MacInnes from Broadford.

Angus and Mary left. Donald,

unable to work Pabay alone, soon followed them. Pabay was put on the market. A few years later the Whatleys went on holiday to Skye.

Len Whatley's nephew Christopher first visited Pabay shortly after his uncle bought the island, when he was about three or four years old in 1950 or 1951. Thereafter he spent almost every boyhood holiday, including Christmas and Easter — and of course the long, sublime summer months — with his Uncle Len, Aunt Margaret, his contemporary Stuart and a growing band of younger cousins.

He remembers as clearly as any Hebridean exile the thrill of the journey north and the joy of finally reaching Broadford pier where he would stand, suitcase in hand "like Paddington Bear", waiting for one of Len's surviving boats to collect him and deliver him in fair weather and foul to Margaret's loving embrace in the farmhouse at the south of Pabay.

Until they left almost two decades later — by which time Christopher Whatley was anyway pursuing a young man's interests in Glasgow — Pabay was to Christopher a heaven on earth.

Despite leaving school at the age of 16 years and working as a shop assistant and machine operator, Christopher Whatley attended night classes, took his Highers at Clydebank College, entered Strathclyde University, graduated as a Bachelor of Arts, completed a PhD and became a highly-respected Professor of Scottish History at Dundee University.

Before she died, his Aunt Margaret asked him to write a book about Pabay. Christopher Whatley

now has a house in Waternish and he wrote the book, 'Pabay, An Island Odyssey', in that house.

THERE ARE many books about small Hebridean islands. There has, to my knowledge, never before been one devoted entirely to the tiny Pabay in Broadford Bay.

Nor has there been written quite so good a book, on this or any other Scottish subject. On the shelves of island histories, only John Lorne Campbell's 'Canna' bears comparison.

Christopher Whatley has produced an extraordinary book. It is in part a fond and funny tribute to his remarkable Uncle Len and in part a history professor's deft biography of one of our less heralded islands. Combining the two was a daunting ambition. Professor Whatley has accomplished it with skill and immeasurable charm.

Nobody now lives on Pabay. Len and Margaret sold it to Ted and Ann Gerrard, who lasted 10 years before sailing to Madeira in 1981 and settling there for the next 21 years. The island they left behind has reverted to that common fate of being a rich man's holiday home.

But the local legacy of Len and Margaret Whatley is, as their nephew points out, notable.

Len and Stuart began throwing pots while still on Pabay. Along with their livestock, their Pabay stamps, their selling of eggs and newly-hatched chicks, their knitting machine initiatives, pottery was a way of diversifying Pabay's export income.

When they moved to north Skye the livestock and eggs were abandoned. But the pottery became

Edinbane Pottery, an enterprise which, following Len's premature death in 1974, Stuart Whatley built into one of Skye's emblematic businesses of quality.

Margaret's father and brother were, as we have seen, responsible for the Dunollie Hotel, although not for its current standards.

A research scientist named Donald MacLachlan, who with his artist wife Judy washed up on Pabay in the mid-1960s and became close friends with Len and Margaret, established the extraordinary Gaeltec in Skye in 1971.

A friend of Stuart's named Alex Welford helped Lyn Rowe to recreate Raasay Outdoor Centre, became one of the island's best football goalkeepers and then established in Portree the marine equipment company Bow & Stern, drawing on "some of the seafaring experience and resourcefulness he had acquired on Pabay".

Following Len's death, Margaret married the inimitable Charlie MacKinnon of Geary. Between them they turned Edinbane Hotel (now the Edinbane Inn) into the haven of hospitality that it remains.

Before her death at the close of 2005, Margaret MacKinnon, née Whatley, née Hilditch, had become deeply involved in a variety of voluntary organisations from Skye and Lochalsh Arts and Crafts Association to Help the Aged and the Dunvegan Show.

She had also persuaded her nephew Christopher to write one of the finest Highland books of the 21st century.

'Pabay, An Island Odyssey', by Christopher Whatley; Birlinn, £20



Two cousins: Stuart and Christopher Whatley, each aged about 10 years, at Broadford pier in the late 1950s



The island of Pabay in Broadford Bay, as seen from the summit of Beinn na Caillich



An amphibious vehicle bought by Len, which flooded and sunk on its second journey between Skye and Pabay



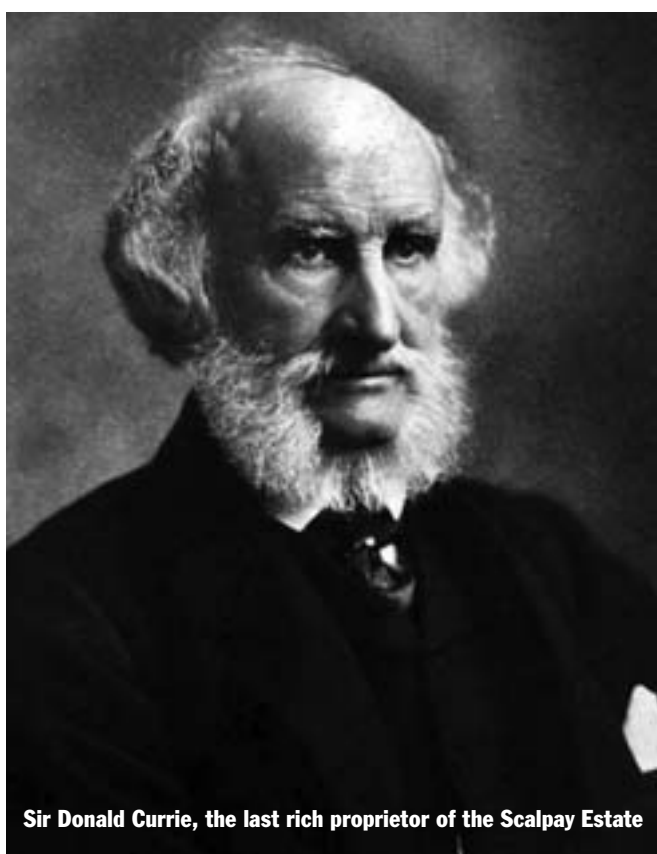
A growing island family: Anthea, baby Rachel, Margaret, Len and Stuart on Pabay in 1952



Len packaging day-old chicks for export to Skye and beyond



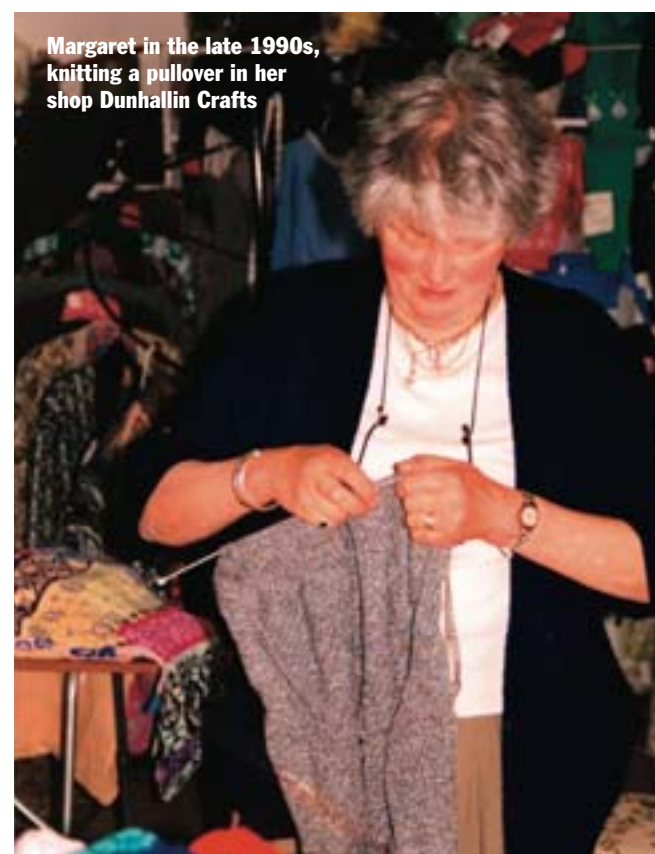
Stan Robinson, who worked with the Whatleys on Pabay, collecting seaweed for manure



Sir Donald Currie, the last rich proprietor of the Scalpay Estate



Stuart Whatley throwing a pot at Edinbane



Margaret in the late 1990s, knitting a pullover in her shop Dunhallin Crafts