The Ferrymen

A photographic documentary

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Introduction

This e-book is the progeny of a documentary photographic exhibition held at the Feolin Centre on the Isle of Jura in November of 2004. The following commentary is from the exhibition statement that opened the photographic display:

The “Ferrymen” photographic documentary is a cultural snapshot of the working lives of the ferrymen who keep the economic life-blood of the Hebrides flowing. Many writers and researchers have dredged up the detritus of various histories and photographic archives to tell us, and sell us, “how it used to be” on the ferries of the West of Scotland. But they explain a place and time in which the Hebrides were tied intrinsically to the boat and ship, unlike today where airplanes and cars dictate the schedules of the ferries. The degree of change can be demonstrated with a simple test. What is a “puffer”? Simply mention the word “puffer” in the Hebrides today and the average person will think that you are talking about a bird, whereas the last generation of Hebrideans would have known instantly, and responded with a knowing twinkle in their eye, that it was a small coastal ship, capable of landing just about anywhere-and usually did.

So this is about the here and the now. Some of the ferry men and women shown in this exhibition can remember with great affection the grand old ships and the wee puffers—others have only known the modern and powerful vessels of “King David”, or Caledonian-MacBrayne. But each and every ferryman has a wealth of stories, for they have literally seen and experienced, for better or worse, a great sampling of humanity.

Yet the intimacy of ferrymen with the islanders that they serve goes even deeper. If you are born to island parents, it is likely that the first person to see you after them is the ferryman bringing you home – and if your working life is spent away from your native island, when you embark on that last great voyage into the unknown, it is the ferryman whom will bring you home to rest.
Much has been said, and much will continue to be said about the role of ferries, ferry companies, government policies, ferry costs and ferry subsidies. All this is but water beneath the keel. At the end of the day it is about people, both ferrymen and islanders both, and their choice to live their lives in a place of remarkable beauty and not in a contrived and controlled urban landscape.

However, the maritime seascape of the Hebrides has mirrored the decline of the landscape of the islands, which has affected the livelihoods of all concerned. Cattle once drove the economies of Islay, Colonsay and Jura, with many thousands being shipped each year. At one time Jura, functioning as a natural land bridge, had seventeen major and minor ferries with a population near 1,300. Today it has a population of less than 200 and one minor ferry. Forced economic migration, uncompromising land ownership policies and uncomprehending government agencies have pushed the island’s culture to the edge, both economically and culturally.

But these are facts and figures, for as any economist or geographer will tell you, islands need lots of boats and ships to be successful. It’s that simple. Meanwhile, this exhibition is simple as well; it is the photographic record of ferrymen carrying out their jobs without fail, sometimes under less than ideal conditions, but with a sense of duty that we all sense is lacking in many occupations in the modern world.
Southwest winds, building Force 7 to Force 8: the Mull of Kintyre
Davy: chart reading off the Isle of Arran
Last log entry: Arthur McEachern, 36 years of sea duty end
The Hebridean Isles: preparing to land at Port Askaig, Islay
Ian McNeill, at the 'other job': lifting creels before the Hebridean Isles ties up at Port Askaig, Isle of Islay, Scotland
Lochranza, Arran Island: from the *MV Eileen Dhiura* on her refit cruise
Last run of the day: the MV *Eilean Dhiura* struggles home before a NW, Force 5 gale
A century of experience: Archie Campbell (l), retired Jura ferry pilot, Arthur McEachern (c), and James Jamieson, (r), Jura ferry crewman
From the port bow of the MV Eilean Dhiura: Arran Island
MV Eilean Dhiura: view to the bridge while sailing off the eastern Mull of Kintyre
View aft: Arran Island from the stern of the MV Eilean Dhiura
Fitting to cradle: the MV Eilean Dhiura at the Rothesay Shipyard being tied down by shipyard fitters
Moving into the gale: the MV Eilean Dhiura sails along the west coast of the Mull of Kintyre as a southwest storm builds during her annual refit cruise.
The Shipyard: fitters, engineers and mechanics of the Rothesay shipyard stride aboard the MV Eilean Dhiura as she finishes the outward portion of her annual refit cruise.
Unscheduled landing: the MV Eilean Dhiura finds herself grounded after a rogue gust of northerly wind pushes her stern about while manoeuvring to back off the Feolin Ferry landing slip.
Entering the Kyle of Bute: Alisdair McLeod as the MV Eilean Dhiura sails through the kyle
Temporary help: The Caledonian-MacBrayne ferry, the MV Eigg on a return run to Port Askaig, Isle of Islay, Scotland. The MV Eigg performs the duties of the MV Eilean Dhiura when she is away for refit.
A bit of housekeeping: Jura ferry pilot John Paterson (l) and Ian MacNeill (r) give the deck of the MV Eilean Dhiura a good scrub down after a week of hard use.
Sea stories, Part 1: the delivery (left), Part 2: the punch line (right). Jura ferry pilot John Paterson cracks a story with Alisdair MacLeod, temporary engineer, during a break from steering duty on the annual refit cruise for the MV *Eilean Dhiura*
Last load: Part 1 - James Jamieson (l), crewman on the MV Eilean Dhiura discusses with ‘Gilby’ (r) that he’s carrying Arthur MacEachern’s last load on the Jura ferry after 36 years.
Part 2 – Not even the last load was easy as Arthur MacEachern looks down from the aft portion of the pilot’s deck to see if the ramp
The Sound of Islay meets the Sound of Jura (1 and 2): Jura ferry pilot John Paterson keeps the head of the MV Eilean Dhiura steady as she piles into heavy seas off MacArthur’s Head, Isle of Islay, during her outbound refit cruise.
The shape of the sound: the bell for the MV Eilean Dhiura as she lies at anchor in Port Askaig on the Sound of Islay with the Paps of Jura in the distance.
Ian McNeill: end of a shift
The refit crew: a light moment on the cruise to Rothesay Island
The Ferrywoman: Terri Ferguson of Ballygrant, Isle of Islay, catches the first line from the Hebridean Isles as she ties up at Port Askaig, Isle of Islay.
North gale getaway: island visitors race for the ramp of the MV Eilean Dhiura after being stranded on Jura for two days during a hard north gale.
Refit yard at Rothesay: the mascot
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