

Early women photographers documenting Highlands and Islands Scotland: MEM

Donaldson

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Thank you for inviting me to Highland Folk Museum to speak about MEM Donaldson and her work. I am particularly excited as following this invitation, and in reading *'The Making of Am Fasgadh'* (National Museums Scotland, 2007) the account by the founder of Highland Folk Museum, Isabel Frances Grant, I learnt that the two women were known to each other. When researching a person and her work, these are key moments when you begin to also trace her through the words and views of others.

In the book, Isobel Grant talks of staying with Mrs MacDougall of McDougall at Dunollie Castle, Oban. She describes her host as a generous woman welcoming those to her home who worked for the appreciation of Highland culture, including Miss M.E.M. Donaldson, who, in the words of Grant, *'...wrote such racy accounts of her rambles in the Highlands'* (P.41)

Later in the book, as both Grant and Donaldson shared a passion in vernacular Highlands architecture, Grant writes of an expedition to Ardnamurchan: *'I was most anxious to see the arrangements in the house that Miss M.E.M. Donaldson had built in the traditional style but with modifications to suit modern ways of living, including 'mod cons'. I have always thought this a splendid idea.'* (P74). Grant goes on to describe that she journeyed out to Sanna from Acharacle. *'I thought that Miss Donaldson was pioneering a most valuable idea and wanted to see what her house was like. I had, however, looked forward to calling upon her with some trepidation for she could be a formidable lady and I knew in some respects we did not see eye*

to eye. It was not with unmixed disappointment that I learned she was from home. I went to look at the outside of the house. This was hampered by the presence of a very inquisitive bull.'

I should note that MEM Donaldson's fiery temperament was not only alluded to by Isobel Grant.

Let us listen to the arrival of fictional characters at MEM Donaldson's door. I believe that Compton Mackenzie, satirized MEM Donaldson in his 1940 book '*Hunting the Fairies*'. The book follows two competitive American amateur folklorists coming to see fairies and collect songs from Scottish islanders. He re-casts, I propose, Donaldson as a male poet called Aeneas Lamont, living with his sister at '*The house of two hearts*'. Donaldson lived with a female companion, the children's illustrator Isabel Bonus.

The architecture of the poet's home in '*Hunting the fairies*' matches that of Donaldson's unique home and building project at Sanna Bheag. I read from the point our fictional visitors arrive at '*The House of the Two Hearts*:

'Welcome in', said their host brusquely. 'And, oh dear, what an exceedingly picturesque house,' Mrs Urquhart-Unwin exclaimed.

'It isn't old. It was only finished two years ago', Mr Lamont hissed. 'I wanted to show it was possible to design a twelve-roomed house in the style of a crofter's cottage'. (P.125)

I digress. I will return to the house later, through the eyes of another woman photographer.

To the facts of Donaldson's biography and how she perceived her life. MEM Donaldson – Mary Ethel Muir Donaldson - was born in England in 1876 and brought up in Surrey. She felt her family's Scottish ancestral connection strongly, writing: *'my father was a descendant from some MacDonaldds who escaped from Glencoe and translated the name for safety's sake'*. These quotes are from a letter from MEM Donaldson to the journalist Marion Lochhead, St Columba's Day 1929. There are two letters only in Donaldson's hand, held at National Library of Scotland. The family's money came from a connection to a shipping line which allowed her a degree of independent means to support her travel during a time where the woman's place was seen in the home. Donaldson felt that she was not supported by her own family in her choices and stated it in the strongest terms: *'As regards to my literary and photographic efforts, they received every discouragement... I had no influence whatever – nor have I yet – to help me along and indeed in this and every other department of my interests... I have had to fight alone with my back to the wall.'*

Most poignantly, MEM Donaldson felt that she had *'always had a hard life, for I never was one who could fall into any conventional sort of moulds'*. In the same letter to Marion Lochhead she continues to write, *'My fervent desire in those days was to be a boy who could run away and be a gypsy, always living in the open'*.

This adventurous spirit led her to journey to Scotland often, to write the first of her travel books, *'Wanderings in the Western Highlands and Islands'* (1921), and *'Further Wanderings- Mainly in Argyll'*, (1926). Her photographs were illustrations for her books. Donaldson undertook the whole process with developing glass plates and printing, taking a course in chemicals in order to learn about the process. For her fieldwork she had the 'Green

Maria' made; a pram contraption that could carry '*my half-plate camera, six slides, two lenses... a box of photographic plates, map, writing paper*' [FOOTNOTE, P. 3, 'Herself', DUNBAR, J.T.] as well as clothes she required if camping overnight.

Donaldson then built and settled in Sanna in 1927, on the Ardnamurchan Peninsula. The house was complete with photography studio and she lived there until 1947. In the 1930's there were two further books, '*The Country of Clan Ranald*' (1931) and '*Scotland's Suppressed History*' (1935); the latter a diatribe on Presbyterianism in Scotland. Donaldson's photographs were of the landscapes from her walks, stones, crosses and other landmarks, crofters from the Scottish locations she visited and those from the Ardnamurchan community. Donaldson also photographed those closest to her such as Isabel Bonus, her companion, other friends and the ghillies and guides who accompanied her on many of her walks.

Donaldson covered the widest range of Scottish landscapes and locations in pursuit of her writing. Island locations include Eigg, Skye, Oransay, Colonsay, Islay, Jura and Iona. From the Highlands there are photographs of Kintyre, Kintail, Wester Ross, Appin, Arisaig, Glen Affric, Lochaline, Loch Linnhe, Ballachuilish, Kingussie, Glen Affric, Roy Bridge, Knapdale, Morvern, down into the Trossachs.

Who were her photographs viewed by at the time she took them? It is important to note that we read these images differently, according to our own experience. I am a similar audience, thanks to where I live in Glasgow, as Donaldson's main readership was. Hugh Cheape asserts

that as her photographs were to illustrate literary work, the perceived audience would have been those who were *'probably town-based'*.

Over one thousand of her photographs are held by two archives, Inverness Museum and Art Gallery hold her landscape photography - as part of the Highland Photographic Archive [[weblink ambaile.org.uk](http://weblink.ambaile.org.uk)]- This collection was gifted by the widow of Donaldson's biographer and custodian John Telfer Dunbar. The National Museums Scotland has the original negatives and prints of the portraits she took of the people she encountered over the Scottish Highlands and islands.

Whilst looking through the Inverness Collection, at landscape after landscape, I began to think Donaldson's landscape photography mirrors West Cults author Nan Shepherd's [1893-1981] writing, [in particular I am thinking of Shepherd's book 'the Living Mountain'] where the experience of the landscape is a physical and psychological journey 'into' (in Shepherd's case, the Cairngorms) rather than merely a simple passage over. Donaldson's landscapes are not composed as passive views to be looked at; they are to be journeyed into. The photographs circle lochans, dip into glens and cross plateaus. In particular *'In Glen Carrich'* has a sequence of photographs that show the terrain unfolding. The eye traces the route in front of the camera, spotting the gap in the stones in the foreground, cutting round the corner of a rocky mound, tracking left around the hill with the three trees to the hidden landscape beyond. In others, a device such as a meandering burn, an intermittent path or rough track takes you further into the photograph. Donaldson wrote:

'Certainly to a lover of the wild, the monotony a level stretch of high road, with its dull, even surface, doubles the distance, while the interest of a constantly varied and often ill-defined

track, full of surprises and with a marked individuality, seems actually to halve the distance. '[P.142]

Donaldson's portraits also express the figure's relationship to their surroundings, whether photographs of villagers, or those she employed to accompany her over the terrain of the highlands. Whether they either have a long way to go or want to get as close as they can to the landscape, both categories really *inhabit* the land.

What can we glean from Donaldson's photographic treatment of the highlander or islander? How does it differ in the Inverness part of the collection from the portraits in Edinburgh? In one Edinburgh example, there is a close up in profile view of a seaweed gatherer, bent with the weight of the load he carries in a basket on his back. In another photograph from the Inverness collection, Donaldson has zoomed out, placing this figure in the landscape. His figure can be made out on the beach, framed by rocks in the foreground, and showing the contours of the island of Rum beyond. By reducing the scale of the figure and placing him within the landscape, as the viewer we see how far he must walk, and therefore the physicality and difficulty of his labour.

Another photograph shows the ghillie John Mackenzie, lying horizontal on rocks, to drink from the Red Burn. The informality of this photograph, as he lies like Narcissus, is again in contrast to the norm in Victorian photography of people formally seated or standing.

There is a naturalism to Donaldson's photography, of catching people as they are involved in their task. For example, here are Walter Blaikie's photographs of Eriskay islanders in 1899. The islanders were asked to 'stage' their labour outside, primarily as much of the activity

took place in the dark interiors of home, and no flash was invented at that stage. In particular in this photograph, you would never naturally get islanders all demonstrating these tasks in the same frame. In comparison to Donaldson's natural portrait of John Mackenzie, we see from her framing, the intimacy of someone literally stepping out of their 'type' with Donaldson's portrait of John MacKenzie.

For Donaldson, the photographs, in particular her landscape photography, were linked to the walks themselves, and her need to engage her mind and body in this task. Also, highly religious, Donaldson viewed her walks into the landscape as a way to commune with her Creator. The sharpness in focus of Donaldson's photographs, which she processed herself, encourages a level of active looking. From her photographs in the Cuillins, the lines of the ravines on the flanks of the mountains in the background are as precise as the sheen of the wet stones of the plateau that gently coruscate in the foreground. Nan Shepherd describes a changing the focus of the eye, and the ego, to see the landscape anew: *'As I watch, it arches its back and each layer of landscape bristles... Details are no longer part of a grouping of a picture around which I am the focal point, the focal point is everywhere... This is how the earth must see itself.'*

Donaldson's photographs of landscape also encapsulate this shift of the ego from the person to land. Her work, given this reading in the context of Shepherd's work could be said to represent an 'embodied' knowledge, which arises through the physical experience of the terrain. Shepherd writes of an embodied knowledge, where touch, taste and experience are the agents of her understanding the environment. Donaldson also placed an emphasis on a physical sense of her body, and often mind, in the landscape. Her books *'Wanderings of the Western Isles'* and *'Further Wanderings-Mainly in Argyll'* are full of descriptions of how she

traverses different terrain. In her fictional book '*Islesmen of Bride*' (1922, Alexander Gardner, Paisley), the unnamed narrator who is the main protagonist could be read as intriguingly genderless, as the other characters never refer to the narrator as a man or woman. The narrator takes on the rowing of the boat to the island ferry for a summer, is involved in heavy labour and crosses great stretches of the islands on foot. Donaldson's own desire to walk and be active can be directly aligned with her own sense of freedom, which was thwarted in her childhood as she was a female.

Her landscape photography therefore takes on poignancy for me, as a place where Donaldson felt closest to her '*founding spirits*'. [8] Again in '*Wanderings of the Western Isles*' Donaldson writes:

'The mountain lover finds solely amongst the mountains what the sailor finds alone upon the sea - that sense of limitless freedom so essential to the well-being of the free spirit - life in its purest, simplest, physical sense.' [9]

It should be noted that whereas Shepherd referred to a more ambiguous presence in the landscape, Donaldson attributed all to 'the Creator' [10]. A deeply religious person, the landscape was, for her, the place she could experience and be closer to God.

Shepherd talks in '*The Living Mountain*' [6] of the mountains having an '*inside*'. Throughout the Inverness collection of Donaldson's photographs there is a series of studies of cave mouths including Cathedral Cave and St Francis' Cave on Eigg, Fingal's Cave in Staffa and Prince Charlie's Cave, at Ceannacroc, Glenmoriston. Whilst Donaldson undoubtedly visited the caves for their history and associated stories for her books, the photographs themselves, freed of titles and any references again suggest the desire to go 'into' the landscape. Indeed, one portrait of MEM Donaldson, shows her with just head and shoulders remaining above

ground. .The other people who are in these photographs really *inhabit* the landscape too. Caught in the middle distance or far distance, any figure that appears in the Inverness collection is part of the landscape that surrounds them. A tall, thin man stands in the empty 'o' created by a rock formation. Two people are mysteriously held in the deep channel created by two massive boulders.

Whilst mapping the journeys across Scotland of Donaldson, and in my other research of early Scottish women photographers and film-makers, I have found out about a fourth, photographer Violet Banks (1986-1985) who went on to set up her own commercial studio in Edinburgh in 1935 but in the 1920s and early 1930s made her own photographs of the Scottish Highlands and Islands, which can be viewed in Historic Environment Scotland Archives. The journey of a woman photographer's work to the safe holding of an archive can be a precipitous and risky route. Veronica Fraser, an archivist at Royal Commission on the Ancient & Historical Monuments of Scotland recounts, Banks' photographs were discovered by John Dixon of Georgian Antiques, in a drawer in a sideboard that had been part of a furniture purchase and then gifted to RCAHMS to become The Violet Banks Collection. (P67-78. '*Vernacular Building 32*', Scottish Vernacular Buildings Working Group 2008-2009) ISSN:0267-3088).

At an appointment to view the Violet Banks Collection, whilst looking through her albums of travels in the Western Isles and Highlands, I came across her photograph of MEM Donaldson's house in Sanna, Ardnamurchan. Paths are beginning to cross. From again the point of view of this researcher, with the two photographers framing the same places, it gives an opportunity to compare Banks and Donaldson's approaches.

Both Donaldson and Banks photograph key landmarks on Eigg, in particular An Sgurr, the distinctive pitchstone outcrop, the highest point of the island and the Massacre and Cathedral Caves. Donaldson's photographs of An Sgurr place it within the context of one of her walks, here, in the distance, from Laig Bay with its unique brain coral stones; later, showing the approach to it from a route that can be traversed across a plateau. Banks chooses to show An Sgurr by placing a woman in scale with its highest point, called 'the Nose'.

To conclude this presentation, let us circle back to how Donaldson described herself.

Donaldson corrects Marion Lochhead at the conclusion of a follow-up letter, dated 18 June 1929, having read a draft of an article for 'Bulletin' that Lochhead had written on her:

"I who have never left these shores, have never thought of myself as a 'traveller', but having looked it up in the dictionary and see one definition to be 'a wayfarer', in that sense the description is correct".

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