RESEARCH METHODS IN THE OUTER HEBRIDES

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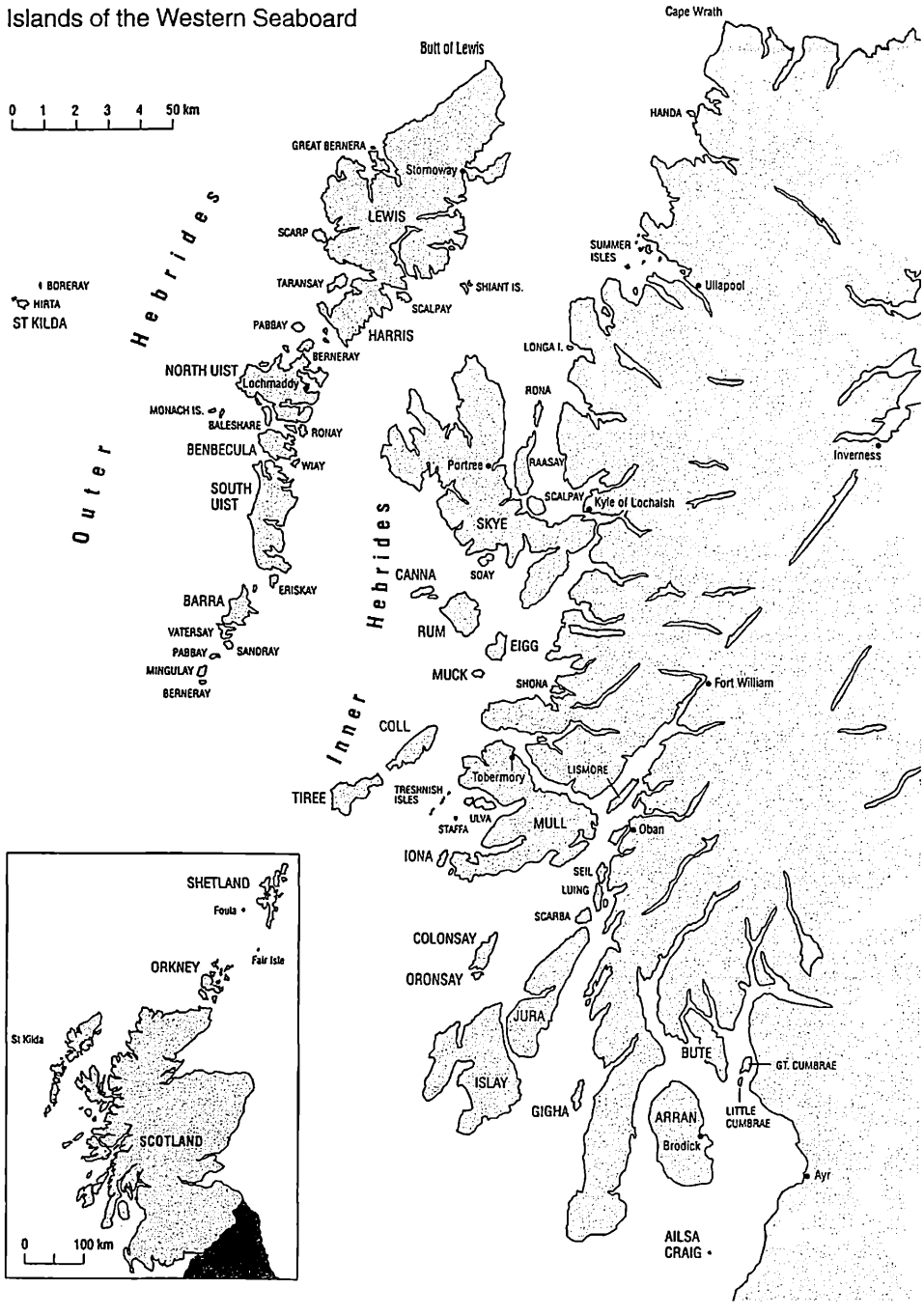
The vernacular furniture of the Outer Hebrides is a subject largely untouched by the furniture historian. The remote location of the chain of islands, some forty miles west of the Scottish mainland, has not made it an immediate focal point for research (Figure 1). In Ireland from 1935 onwards, the Irish Folklore Commission had ensured that the country's Gaelic culture was recorded before it disappeared – a plan of action the British government has not followed for Scotland. Although the Outer Hebrides have been regarded for centuries as the heartland of the Scottish Gaelic culture, by the end of the Second World War changes had begun to take place. Fortunately, I. F. Grant and Alexander Fenton had proceeded to undertake studies of folk life in the Highlands and Northern and Western Isles of Scotland. Although furniture was recorded during their explorations, all aspects of traditional life were noted. However, they did realise, as Christopher Gilbert later noted, that it was 'impossible to divorce furniture from social history'.[1] This could only be observed through spending time living amongst the people, recording their memories and surviving traditional lifestyle. As I. F. Grant stated in accounts of her research, word of mouth was fundamental to the location of her information. A notable individual such as a District Nurse, Priest or Minister would know the communities they served and provide introduction to individuals. Nowadays advertisements placed in local newspapers can attract replies from owners of vernacular furniture. I used this method for my own research and placed a successful advert in the *Stornoway Gazette* during the Spring of 2000. Replies formed a branch-like structure, with one introduction leading to another. Together with visits to museums, heritage centres and fieldwork to locate furniture in private homes and abandoned ruins, a complete picture of Outer Hebridean life could be formed.

In 1991, Christopher Gilbert alerted furniture historians to the decline of surviving furniture in Arnol, Lewis, in his major study *English Vernacular Furniture*. I. F. Grant had collected many pieces of Highland and Island furniture for her *Am Fasgadh*, knowing that a change in lifestyle was already taking place. However, the pieces abandoned once the thatched houses were vacated simply disappeared in the Atlantic weather. Their decline is poignantly shown in two pictures taken of the same Highland dresser, the first in 1991 by Christopher Gilbert and the second by myself in 2000 (Figures 2 and 3). The fact that a link was not established, until the roofs of the houses beyond were compared, illustrates the dresser's decoration in a space of nine years. Although a few pieces are still kept as heirlooms within private homes, it is increasingly the *Museum Nan Eilean* collections and locally run heritage centres that retain the repertoire of furniture once found in the traditional dwellings. Fortunately, the Isles Council have observed the need for a permanent museum. *Museum Nan Eilean* (Museum of the Isles) currently employs two curators to work in both the northern and southern Outer Hebridean islands. These individuals actively encourage the collection and protection of furniture. They frequently rely upon islanders in order to locate pieces



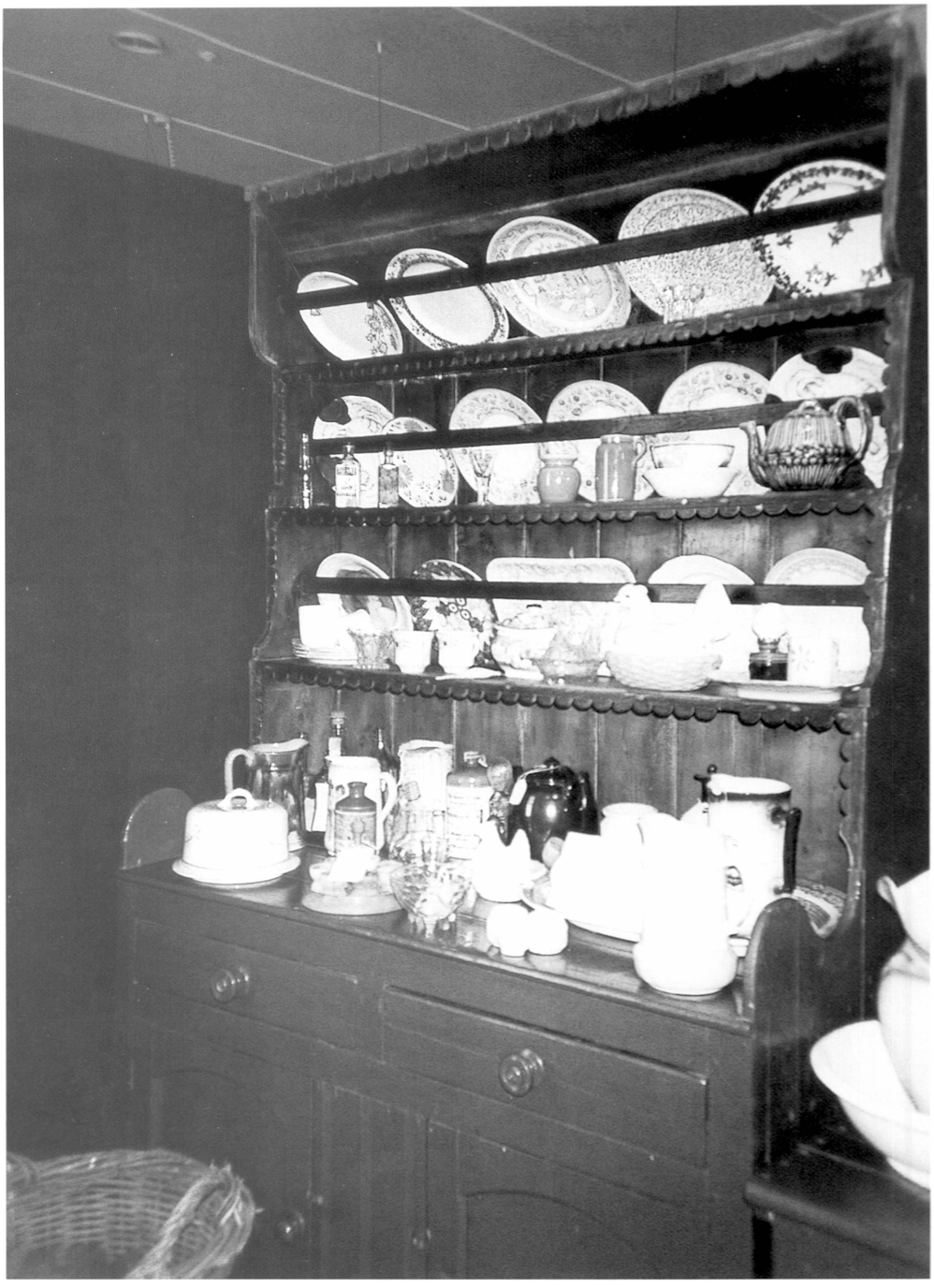
1. Map showing the position of the Outer Hebrides and its individual islands.

and unfortunately find that the long period of time between hearing about furniture and its final retrieval has had a detrimental effect upon its final condition. Working alongside this museum are the heritage centres, run by local people aware of the need to record their township's history. It is here that one can not only examine individual pieces, but also look at archives of photographs collected by the community over a period of time. These photographs act to reinforce the identification of furniture types and their position and usage within the interior. Apart from the survival of Arnol Blackhouse on Lewis, it has become difficult to photograph the repertoire of furniture in its original setting. Both Christopher Gilbert and Claudia Kinmonth's work on English and Irish vernacular furniture highlights the importance of pictorial/photographic records within their research. Inventories, a further important source for the furniture historian, are scarce for the Outer Hebrides, apart from those relating to sequestered items when a tenant fell into arrears with his rent. For example, in 1822 Donald MacDonald of Skaladale, Lewis had to part with household goods, '3 chests, 1 press, 1 table and 1 chair.'[2] Other very important piece of evidence in establishing the original layout of an interior are government reports into the condition of crofter housing. Although these deal with the condition of dwellings as a whole, they frequently describe the furnishings of interiors within individual townships. A *Report into the Sanitary Condition of the Lews* of 1905 states that the sleeping apartment of a thatched house in Back, Lewis, 'contains two and sometimes three box beds arranged along one side of the room and covered by wooden roofing, which slopes towards the wall to keep off the rain which finds its way in through the thatch. Along the other side are placed three or four boxes which contain the belongings of the household.'[3]

With such a large and geographically varied area to be researched, I decided to focus my field study on two main areas, the northern Outer Hebridean islands of Lewis and Harris and those of North Uist, Benbecula, South Uist and Barra to the south. Throughout, it was crucial to draw upon the research methods established by former historians of this area. Time spent completing interviews with local people was combined with a systematic, almost scientific analysis of the surviving furniture. It was through contact with individuals that I became aware of pieces previously unrecorded, although some time was spent independently exploring ruins in the townships. Replies to my advert yielded a number of people who either owned pieces or had memories to be recorded. As is the case in many regional furniture surveys, it was the older generation who were of greatest help in this kind of research, being the last to have grown-up surrounded by the traditional furniture. One notable crofter/weaver in Stornoway, had spent his life collecting furniture to form his own museum in a garage on his croft. For this he has received very little recognition and was only too pleased to share his knowledge. In a series of interviews with him I was able to discuss the Gaelic terminology for the furniture. This often highlighted the particular use of a piece and the influence of outside cultures, a method followed by Alexander Fenton in *The Northern Isles: Orkney and Shetland*. A very important point to bear in mind is that Gaelic is so often not pronounced as it is written. To make research more difficult one also finds that dialects can change dramatically between islands. Therefore, the use of a dictaphone during interviews was important to record the spoken words for later analysis.

2. Dresser, Arnol, Lewis.
Photographed by Christopher Gilbert, 1991.

3. Dresser, Arnol, Lewis
Photographed by the author, 2000.



4. 'Enclosed' Highland dresser, mid to late nineteenth century, South Uist. *Kildonan Museum, South Uist.*

Whilst much of the furniture located could be easily placed in groups relating to type, it proved exceedingly difficult to link furniture to a particular maker. This was due to the fact that on the islands furniture was either made by individual crofters or a township craftsman. A basic inherited blueprint was followed by the maker for each type, yet ingenuity often played a large role in the finished furniture, due to the reliance on random sized pieces of driftwood. Certainly, through identifying stylistic similarities one can establish traditions in for example, chair making. Islands were divided into areas in which types developed certain stylistic characteristics particular to that place. In some cases overlaps could be identified between areas. Through drawing together both constructional and stylistic features it was sometimes possible to identify the signature of a particular maker. However, with no written records of makers, it was exceedingly difficult. One example was a single dresser by a known maker (Figure 4). Through close examination of his work, one was able to identify further dressers as possibly from his island workshop. The abundant use of scallop-shell edging to decorate the plate rack was noted as a prominent signature, along with a broad, three shelved plate rack and an enclosed base with two long, narrow drawers, onto which the plate rack was separately attached.

To locate surviving craftsmen was a bonus. One such cabinet maker on the island of Benbecula was the last in a line stretching back to his great grandfather, the skills being passed from one generation to the next. Time was spent discussing construction and use of materials in his workshop and it was a most rewarding experience to witness continuity of design in the furniture he produced. He could recall previous craftsmen and their work and directed me to an abandoned piece known to be by a local nineteeth century maker.

Once the furniture was located, the process followed to record pieces was in many cases very different from that adopted on the mainland. Ingenuity played a large role when it came to photographing Hebridean furniture. The correct principles to record finds had so often to be altered as one found oneself undertaking a risky balancing act to measure and photograph a dresser plate rack. Although concise notebooks of measurements and locations are essential for later comparisons, good photography is of paramount importance. A piece of furniture seen one day may not be still in its original position on a return visit. This view in mind, it was not surprising to find that over one thousand photographs had been taken by the end of the research. As a back-up measure for a faulty film, detailed sketches were also made.

Once back on the mainland the hardest part of the furniture historian's work was yet to be completed, that of piecing together the jigsaw formed from the research. As Bernard Cotton discusses in his article *Regional Furniture Studies in the Late 18th and 19th Century Traditions: An Introduction to Research Methods*, the vernacular furniture historian must learn to collect different types of evidence in order to form a collage of information.[4] This was certainly of significance with regard to the Outer Hebrides. One had to successfully combine interviews that were both factually informative and emotionally filled, with extensive fieldwork and examinations of museum collections and archives. This had to be completed firstly for each of the islands and later comparisons made between them. To record not just the furniture, but the memories of a soon to be

lost culture served to reinforce the importance of the vernacular furniture historians work.

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