



Sketch of the North Coast of Rum

Earlier this year, I was very happy to be awarded a Des Rubens and Bill Wallace Grant, to complete a “wild” Tour du Mont Blanc where I would field sketch the impact of climate change on the mountains. My aim is to use art to conserve views of changing landscapes affected by climate change, to inspire others to take more time in and observing nature and encourage the protection of wild places which we all love.

Unfortunately, due to the final year of my PhD being more demanding than I expected, and a lack of support for further travel expenses, I have had to postpone the longer Alpine trip to next summer. However, I was able to travel to the Small Isles as planned. I applied to the Des Rubens and Bill Wallace Grant because I am hoping to alter the course of my future life and career. I started my PhD student in structural geology at the University of Aberdeen with a solely academic focus, but after a year of lockdowns and delayed fieldwork I found my priorities had changed. Finally allowed out on fieldwork I painted the rocks on my breaks and discovered a different way of thinking that changed everything. I want to focus more on our connection with landscape and the methods we use to understand it. I also want to start filming my work to allow me to share my ideas and understanding!

I was very pleased to complete the first of my planned painting expeditions to the Small Isles, thanks to additional support from the Geologist's Association Curry Fund and the History of Geology Group. In July I went on a week-long sailing expedition, participating in an Artist's Residency with Sail Britain and Ellis O'Connor.

My trip started in Aberdeen on a very wet Saturday morning with the news that my train to Glasgow had been cancelled! Luckily, a friend was keen to go kayaking at Arisaig and responded to a desperate Instagram post for a lift within 10 minutes. We were soon on our way across Scotland in a heavy-laden car with a kayak on the roof and my two small rucksacks crammed into a corner. One for clothes and toiletries, and one for art

supplies and filming kit! We'd been asked to pack light, and this was the lightest I'd ever packed. I was dropped off about 2 hours early in a very wet Mallaig and sought refuge in the shelter for the ferry to Knoydart. Views of the Small Isles were non-existent due to the low cloud and persistent rain, but I had been here before, and even the memory of the silhouettes of Rum, Eigg and the Cuillin Ridge was enough to keep the rising excitement for the start of my adventure going.

At 6pm I headed towards the marina and luckily bumped into some fellow artists joining the trip on the way! Climbing up onto the deck I realised our ship (Merlin) was a lot smaller than I had expected and dropping down into the saloon (the main room of the boat, an open plan kitchen/dining room with comfy benches and a captain's corner) I discovered it was even smaller inside! We had a lovely cup of tea and chat to get to know each other better. There were 9 of us in total, including Oliver (captain), Ellis (head artist) and Will (first mate). I soon was informed that as one of the younger and shorter members of the crew, I'd be part of the "saloon crew" - my bed for the night was a small, coffin-like hole in the wall above the padded bench, where we kept our things during the day. There was even a net to keep me in at night, in case the sea was too wild! Additionally, there were two bedrooms, one at each end of the stern, and two bathrooms, each with a sink and a loo - useable only after a lesson on how to flush (20 vigorous pumps of the lever). Settled in, the weather started to clear up and we enjoyed a dry evening out on the deck with beautiful sunset colours lighting up the sky, and a cosy nightcap chatting in the saloon as it got dark. I already could tell I got on well with everyone and it was going to be a great week. Settling down in my bunk I felt ready and keen to get sailing the next day!



The Saloon and fellow crew!

The next morning, we went through the necessary safety briefing and sailing instructions to keep us informed and safe for the week. And then we were off! Motoring out of Mallaig we passed the ferry terminal and traffic lights, a strong contrast with the open sea beyond. The motor was turned off, Oliver and Will got the sail up quickly, and we were sailing! It was a choppy day, and we were heavily buffeted by the waves and wind on our way northwest to Skye. It was at this point the crew quickly discovered who was seasick and who wasn't. I was very relieved to be in the latter group and could enjoy the changing views of Rum and Eigg as the squalls dashed across the skyline. Moving along the coastline of the Sleat peninsula I started to see my first geological features, dark caves along the shore and cliffs cut by long, thin dykes. I took the wheel as we rounded the headland and changed course, steering us north towards Elgol. I felt for the first time the powerful connection with the environment you have when steering a sailing boat in rough weather, so aware of every wave slapping the boat, every gust of wind filling the sail. The energy reverberates through the mast and down into the boards of the ship, up and across the circumference of the wheel, tingling the tips of your fingers and vibrating deep into your palm as you grasp the spokes. Just keeping the balance, on the edge of control. Riding a wild dragon through a stormy sky.



Merlin under the Cuillin

The weather calmed as we moved into the shelter of Skye, slowly gliding into the deep purple shadow cast by the jagged mass of the Cuillin ridge which filled the whole skyline above us to the north. We anchored for the night in a small, calm bay next to the hut and landing steps. Heading ashore to explore the area, we walked along the shore of Loch Coruisk and painted by the river. I painted the ridge in ultramarine, the rocks in moonlight and the views out through the narrow valley towards Rum and Eigg on the horizon in cobalt. We sat on boulders and walked over slabs made of the same rocks - brown, grainy and filled with holes. I had no idea what they were. Everywhere was cut by dykes of all different sizes and colours, you could trace them across the valley floor and up the steep hillsides. Their presence indicates volcanic activity, and their absence, the erosion of the landscape by glaciers and weather. I already knew some of the geological history of Skye, but here I could see the clues left behind for myself, it really felt like I was walking into a volcano that had cooled and been carved out by ice. Ellis and I swam in the sea off Merlin, and it was indeed glacial when we first got in!



Dubh Slabs and Loch Coruisk

Monday was a bright and calm day and in the afternoon we headed west away from Skye, towards the tiny dot of Canna – the western most of the Small Isles. We were “million-dollar sailing”, conditions so perfect that Merlin kept herself in perfect balance, practically steering herself! We passed surprisingly quickly along the wild north coast of

Rum, and I sketched the landscape as it changed. I could see the rocks that formed the low cliffs were different to those on Skye, but again I had no idea what they were. Behind the heather covered plains, the Rum Cuillin loomed above, deep purple in shadow, and strongly layered - indicating another different rock type. As we neared the northern end the cliffs were formed of massive grey slabs, dipping sharply into the ocean and covered in shrieking, swirling sea birds.

As we approached Canna, I could see the cliffs were different again, they had a strange spiky texture. Anchoring on the east coast I excitedly sketched the cliffs as the others made dinner below and Skye on the eastern skyline turned slowly pink. Closer too I recognised the basalt columns! But I couldn't quite remember how they formed, so I painted them - strong grey pastel lines to bring out the columns.



Basalt Columns on Canna

The next morning was tropical! We lay out on the deck eating a leisurely breakfast and watching the hundreds of jellyfish that drifted around us. Everyone was keen to explore, and we walked over to the village, stopping to buy an ice cream in the village shop. We

wandered up to a viewpoint with views of the westernmost point. As far as I could see the land was formed of layer upon layer of these horizontal columnar cliffs. Back at the beach we swam in the water (with a few leftover jellyfish), and I jumped out quickly to explore the exposed rocks along the beach. The hexagonal columns were clear, and in between were dark, pebbly rich layers. I realised that these must have formed on the land surface as lava flows which cooled quickly, cracking into columnar joints. Then, in between each lava flow, a layer of pebbly river sediments was deposited, as the rivers claimed back their land and carried eroded material downstream. Relieved, I could start to answer some of the questions from the other crew members and show them the clues I was using to understand.



Compass Hill by me (left) and Sir Archibald Geikie (right) (Haslemere Museum)

Back on board, we prepared to set off East, and I grabbed my sketchbook to quickly paint Compass Hill, a view I knew that Archibald Geikie had painted in the late 1780s on his visit to the island. Comparing the two images when I got home, I noticed the strong similarities in our paintings – bringing out the dark red colours and strong layering of the rocks, and the remarkably similar silhouette! I only had time to paint quickly and as Canna was becoming smaller and smaller, as we headed back along the desolate coast of Rum. This time we followed the even wilder southwestern coast, which faces the infinite Atlantic Ocean – no land until the Caribbean. Today the sea was gentle, and we moved at a glacial pace leaving plenty of time to paint the steep and fractured grey slabs along the coast. As we reached the bay where the famous Mausoleum came into view, the cliffs disappeared into a huge open valley with sweeping slopes all the way up to the jagged ridgeline of the Rum Cuillin high above us. The hills were strongly layered, and I picked out the lines with my pastels, mixing colours to match the change in rock types, and happily listening to my crew mates chatting and the gentle slosh of the waves.



Rock type change on Rum

As Eigg and Muck started to grow closer in front of us, the wind speed increased and there was a shout as Rhoda spotted a pod of dolphins heading straight towards us! It was the most magical experience as they rose and fell in the water next to us, riding the waves produced by the prow. One turned on its side as it passed, and I could see deep grooves scratched along its pale grey stomach.

The dolphins stayed with us so long that it was a surprise when Eigg and Muck were suddenly so large on the horizon! Their geology was recognisably like Canna, and I noted the strikingly steep columnar cliffs that make up the Sgurr of Eigg. However, here there were white specks of houses dotted around in between the cliffs. That evening, from our anchorage next to Muck, we could hear families laughing and see people walking their dogs on the beach. Oliver and Will went to help another boat next to us whose anchor had become stuck, caught on a disused concrete mooring. I watched with interest the rescue attempt through binoculars. Two seals slipped through the still water around them, equally fascinated.

I stayed out on deck and the sounds of the others getting ready for bed filtered up from below. The sun had long disappeared behind the peninsular and the orange glow was fading to blue behind Rum, Skye and Eigg. I sensed a feeling of pure adrenaline within me, conscious of the vast space before me, endless sky and sea, yet beyond them the

stars appearing even further away. I saw the seals below me, gliding together through the cool water and seaweed forest. Would I ever come here again?

We woke to choppy water hitting the ropes against the side of the ship. A storm was coming in, due on Thursday. Quickly, we headed towards the mainland to shelter deep in Loch Moidart, anchoring in a tiny gap next to the infamous Castel Tioram. The weather funnels through the narrow rocky passage, pulling the boat around on the anchor. Our last night I lay awake listening to the creaking of the boards and the howl of the wind caught in the mast. Peering over the side of the boat, I watch the flow of debris, carried back and forth between the sea and the head of the loch as the tides turn. I caught a solitary mackerel in the rain and Oliver fried it, enough for us all to share a mouthful. The rocks here are much older than the islands and I recognised metasediments, layers twisted and folded into each other. My artwork became monochrome, mimicking the layers of clouds heralding the passing storm. We could see the wind whipping the waves white out to sea, but where we were was calm, bright sunlight highlighting the hills.



Monochrome in Loch Moidart



Passing Eigg

On Friday morning we headed back to Mallaig and after thankful goodbyes, I was pleased to meet up with a friend Hannah, who has recently moved to Fort William. I wasn't ready to leave the islands behind yet, and a further weekend of adventure sounded ideal. Together we took the ferry over to Rum! It was strange being on the ferry, so noisy and disconnected from the sea conditions. I was accustomed now to being so aware of how we were moving through the water, a ferry felt like teleportation in contrast!

On Rum we entered a different world, although Kinloch is a lively village (with a population of 40!) that day was very quiet. Walking through it felt very deserted and eerie, so we hurried past the witch's cottage! We passed by Kinloch Castle, another historical relic of oppression, although now covered in scaffolding and home to a friendly dog. We headed up through the forest to the ridge line. The rocks were the same brown and grainy type that I'd seen on Skye, again cut with dykes of all shapes and sizes. Hannah told me it was peridotite, and I was surprised as this is a rock type I have studied in detail and even have a specimen on my mantelpiece! Outside the rock has weathered and oxidised to such a rusty brown that it's unrecognisable.

Leaving our camping supplies hidden under a large boulder at the col, we dropped down towards Harris and the base of our climb, passing through the territory of a large herd of goats, who nervously watched our every step. Unfortunately, traversing across the uneven, steep ground increased my dizzy feeling of "land legs", so I moved very slowly. We soon reached the start of the climb, getting out our equipment and roping up. Hannah led us up Broad Buttress and then Narnia Arete. Two amazing climbing routes on beautiful rock!



Me on Narnia Arete – Peridotite!

We bivvied that night on a little nobble above the lochs and bogs on the northern side of Rum. A spectacular sunset set the sky on fire, burning in gorgeous yellows, oranges and reds, then fading through pinks and purples into an inky blue sky. I painted as we chatted, and the light shifted. These moments with Hannah, that evening, I remember so well, admiring the amazing landscapes together and talking about our hopes for our future lives. Hannah and I first met at Durham University in 2019, and I'm so grateful for her continued presence in my life.



Sketching from our bivy spot on Rum!

Leaving the islands behind, I was so aware of how little I knew of the geological history of the islands. Scientific understanding of the islands has been built from over 200 years of ideas and theories being shared and collaborated upon by many different people. Rum has been the focus of world leading research into specific complex volcanic processes. In a week of mainly sailing, I'd barely scratched the surface.

The islands are not just lumps of rock but living breathing ecosystems, home to many people, plants and animals with a bloody history of oppression and death. Although it doesn't seem like anything has changed since the first geologists visited, really, I know that much has. People have been cleared and displaced. The effects of climate change and pollution may not be so visible, but we can still find it; the emptiness of the

hydrophone listening to the scarred ecosystem below us in Loch Moidart, the litter left rolling in the wind on the Rum Cuillin, the rings of fish farms off Muck and the wash of a passing motorboat by Skye.

Yet in that week, ten more people came to love and understand the islands a little more. The way we each connected with these landscapes is important, in our own way we saw what was previously invisible to us. The different ways we responded creatively are just like scientists using different methodologies. Whether making art, or steering a boat, or climbing on the rock, we slowed down and became more aware of our whole bodies, our simple presence in nature. Then with a raindrop on an inky page, the wind catching the sail, or the touch of a fingertip on weathered rock, nature responds through us. Science may have moved on from its descriptive beginnings, but we still have much to be inspired from by those first scientists, who looked deeply at a place for all it is and felt moved.

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I have also made a short film of my experience, called The Lost Art of the Land. The film was shown at the Earth's Canvas conference on geology and creativity at the Geological Society of London in September 2024. I am planning to submit to future film festivals and screenings so if you know anyone who would enjoy the film please feel free to contact me at phoebe@sleath.co.uk

<https://phoebe.sleath.co.uk/small-isles/>