

**A HOLIDAY IN NORTH UIST,  
A LECTURE. DELIVERED  
IN THE PERTH DISTRICT  
ASYLUM, NOV. 17TH, 1865**

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A holiday in North Uist, a lecture. Delivered in the perth district asylum, Nov. 17th, 1865 by  
Anonymous

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A HOLIDAY  
IN  
N O R T H U I S T.

*A Lecture*

DELIVERED IN THE PERTH DISTRICT ASYLUM,

NOV. 17th, 1865.

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1865.

## PREFATORY REMARKS TO THE AUDIENCE.

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I HAVE collected a few scattered notes, made during my absence from you in summer, and strung them together by aid of recollection to form the following lecture, which consists of such general topics as might interest and amuse you, with the assistance of the accompanying specimens, coloured sketches, and drawings. I acted on the principle, specially applicable to our case, that those who have opportunities of visiting interesting places at a distance should, if possible, be mindful of those at home, who, perhaps, in this respect, are placed in less favoured circumstances. You will thus have the advantage of going over the same ground in imagination, if not in reality, of seeing *some* things in their most pleasant aspects, and of being saved all the discomforts of travelling to and sojourning in such a land.

The bleak and barren surface of North Uist at once negatives all glowing descriptions of natural scenery, and confines the describer's rhetorical pinions to a somewhat narrow horizon; yet, in scanning its wild shores mantled with sea-weeds or draped in sand, its glistening lakes and quiet inland seas, its green morasses, rude gray rocks and heathery hills, the visitor cannot but agree with the sentiment expressed in the beautiful lines of Schiller, in the 'Bride of Messina,'\* that,

" On the mountains is freedom ! the breath of decay  
Never sullies the fresh flowing air ;  
Oh ! nature is perfect wherever we stray ;  
'Tis man that deforms it with care."

\* Quoted in Humboldt's 'Views of Nature,' translated by Miss Otté and H. Bohn, 1850.



## A HOLIDAY

IX

### N O R T H U I S T.\*

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To visit an island, and for the most part reside at a place characterised by a celebrated geologist as "a brown peaty and boggy tract, so interspersed with lakes and rocks as to be nearly impassable, and producing a scanty and wretched herbage for a few animals during the driest months of summer, while in the winter it is resigned to wild geese, ducks, and swans, who divide its waste and watery region with the sea-gulls which the ocean can no longer protect or feed," may hold out little inducement to the ordinary traveller, more especially as almost the sole human inhabitants consist of rude people, a compound of the fisherman and peasant. Yet this very abundance of water, in some cases, may constitute the chief attraction. Not that it is viewed in the light of Dr. McCulloch, the geologist above mentioned, who thought that in point of value, with respect to vegetable produce, the difference was much in favour of that element, when contrasted with the land; but either for the sake of the splendid salmon-fishing, or as the home and haunt of many curious marine animals which the mild gulf-stream, travelling unbroken from the tropical regions of America, at once laves with its genial waters, and fosters with a vigour unknown

\* It is well to state that in its present condition the lecture is shorn of much of its interest, seeing that it was illustrated by about fifty large coloured drawings, and many specimens, which at least amused the senses, if the lecturer failed in attracting the intellects of some of his audience. The blank, however, has been partially supplied by the skill and industry of a lady relative, who fashioned the woodcuts with her own hand.



in more civilised parts of Scotland; a country, indeed, almost uninvestigated by the marine zoologist, where the curious and rare *Salpa*, a free-swimming, shell-less mollusc, was whispered to dwell; though the celebrated Professor E. Forbes, during three voyages which he made round the coasts of Scotland, could not find a single specimen. Where, moreover, enthusiasm fashioned out of the hazy mist of the unknown the outlines and tints of new forms, many of which were, doubtless, fated to be obliterated by the brush of experience. Whether zoological or piscatory, therefore, the inducements were equally encouraging; but while occupied with the capture or study of what are generally termed the lower animals, the habits and haunts of the higher animal, *Man*, were not passed over, as, indeed, became an observant angler or a liberal zoologist.

Having to many, perhaps, a prior interest, and seeing that man stands at the head of the zoological series (though, to be sure, it is not uncommon for modern naturalists with scientific modesty to commence with the lowest forms of animal life), his habits in these regions will first claim our attention. And it may at once be stated that, in the subsequent remarks, nothing like a connected or exhaustive description is aimed at, but simply a narration of such facts as might fall under notice in a hurried and busy visit.

The outer Hebrides are separated from the north-west of Scotland by the Minch, from the inner islands of the same name by the Little Minch, and, with the exception of St. Kilda, are about the most remote parts of Scottish territory. Formerly they were much more inaccessible than now, since it is only of late years that the excellent steamers of D. Hutcheson and Co. have put them within three days of Glasgow.

North Uist, the island which chiefly concerns us, lies in the centre of the group, but yet is less readily reached than the most northern island, Lewis, as it is placed out of the usual track of the ships, and is visited only once a fortnight, in summer, by the screw steamer 'Clydesdale,' which calls at Lochmaddy, the best harbour, but not the most populous portion of the island. There is, indeed, another route by crossing the Little Minch from Dunvegan, in Skye, in the mail packet, a small though seaworthy smack; but the stormy nature of the trip, for the greater part of the year, renders this mode anything but agreeable to most travellers; and during winter it is no uncommon thing for the letters of the islanders to

lie at Dunvegan for a fortnight, till the wild waters become more passable. The sail from Dover to Calais, or other port on either side of the Channel, is, for a short voyage, usually considered bad enough in stormy weather; but a trip in the Dunvegan packet, in the teeth of a south-west wind, and with plenty of the everlasting mist and rain of these regions, is a somewhat better test of seamanship. Though by no means overcome, one hails with secret satisfaction, under these circumstances, the bleak coast of North Uist, on the one hand, or, on the other, the stern perpendicular wall of rock that guards the stormy point of Dunvegan, beneath whose shelter the traveller is enabled to look with comfort at the dreary cave that once shielded the fugitive Prince Charles.

The voyage on board the steamer from Glasgow (and if one has much luggage this is preferable to the swift route by the Crinan canal) is usually pleasant enough, for at some of the nearer ports it is not unlikely that one meets with old acquaintances, it may be, under odd circumstances, and there are many opportunities for forming new ones. A motley group, indeed, are the cabin passengers of these vessels; and since there is little temptation to trouble the novels, or even the more sedate works in the cabin library, I will engage myself in briefly glancing at them. Three well-marked *genera* at once present themselves, *viz.*, the travellers for mere pleasure or sight-seeing, those on business, and those bent on sport. Authors, artists, physicians, clergymen from the most distant parts of Britain and on very diverse errands, merchants, sportsmen, and typical tourists, compose the group. Conspicuous amongst the others (to take a return trip *via* Skye) are three Oxford students, who are evidently no seamen; for on rounding the stormy points on the west coast, the cigars they flourished unceasingly in the quiet water soon disappeared, and there was an evident donning of sober looks. One of the party vigorously assists himself to the contents of his brandy flask, and at least faces the danger boldly. The other two are less combative, and allow themselves to fall meekly into the inevitable. They are not present at dinner. One amateur artist makes sundry original and, it may be, praiseworthy efforts to transfer the Scur of Eigg (a very bold, rocky eminence) to a small pocket-book, on the paddle-box; and, satisfied with his rough outline, proceeds, with equal perseverance, to delineate the cliffs that border the sound of Mull. Another gaunt individual, distrustful of his

memory, unpacks his knapsack, and commences most energetically to take notes, apparently, of surrounding scenery and events, though several in his neighbourhood seem to think of *persons* likewise. To most the scenery is the chief point of interest; and, indeed, the ample variety and strange character of this, bleak though it often is, cannot readily be equalled in so short a voyage. There seem to be few passengers in the front of the ship. A couple of Eves selling apples; a number of volunteer artillerymen; a newly-married pair, both very sick and very loving, and in a very sorry plight; and an old man, who goes hat in hand round the company, to make a living from the sympathy excited by an assumed shaking palsy—are amongst the most noteworthy. Such steerage passengers as are present have little room to display themselves on deck for herds of sheep; thus the fate which in their native parts is said occasionally to sacrifice their occupation of sheep-tending for the sake of deer-forests is, in this instance, conversely troublesome.

But I am startled from further observations on this subject by an alteration in the course of the vessel. The 'Clansman' has turned her bows up one of the wild lochs on the west coast of Scotland, and is about to supplement her cargo by a host of heavily laden herring barrels. This is an agreeable variety to those whose time is not limited, and even those whose every hour is of consequence must bear the delay as best they can, and put into practice the old Roman maxim—"To bear is to conquer fate." Little is seen on entering the loch but the bare bleak hills, many of which are so steep towards their summits that even the heather cannot find therein a root, and whose sides are flanked by a precipice of loose stones that must set climbing at a discount. After sailing up the loch for several miles, a sudden bend discloses a sight of considerable interest even to a pleasure-seeker. The little bay which has just opened before us is one mass of small ships—smacks, schooners, and sloops, fishing-boats and water-craft of every size downwards. Flags flaunt gaily from the masts of the larger vessels, and the decks of all are alive with busy fishermen (some of them scarcely professional in appearance, yet none the less bustling), who prepare to transfer their little cargoes to the hold of the giant steamer. There are numerous huts on shore, screened by a massive drapery of herring nets suspended on poles; while the smoke from many fires dotted along the beach, each with a busy cluster of men,