FRED SCHLEY
To the Edge of the World:
from mainland Scotland to St Kilda
January/February 2015
Front cover illustration: From Conachair (detail)
Oil on canvas, 130 x 160 cm

Boreray producing cloud
Oil on canvas, 50 x 70 cm
FRED SCHLEY

To the Edge of the World: from mainland Scotland to St Kilda

Featuring the Isle of Skye, the Orkneys & the Scottish Highlands
An extraordinary journey through 50 paintings

January 31st - February 21st 2015

Open 9.30 am - 5.00pm Monday to Saturday
INTRODUCTION: St Kilda and Fred Schley

St Kilda is one of the remotest outposts of the British Isles. An archipelago comprising the islands of Hirta, Dùn, Soay and Boreray, it is also known for its precipitous sea stacks rising sheer from the water; these are home to some of the largest colonies of Gannets, Fulmars, Petrels and Puffins in the world. Formed as a result of volcanic eruption in prehistory, the outcrop lies some forty miles west north-west of North Uist and the best part of a hundred miles off the west coast of the Scottish mainland.

Having been occupied for two thousand years, the last residents of the main island of Hirta were evacuated in 1930 due to the dangers of starvation and infection.

Despite a regular boat service it remains an extremely difficult location to journey to and an even more difficult location to explore. Landing in the main bay of Hirta can be easily interrupted by forty foot waves and consequently crossings cannot be guaranteed.

Fred Schley has been a long term visitor to the Western Isles as well as official artist in residence on the Isle of Skye. This exhibition now combines new paintings of the St Kilda archipelago as well as Skye, Orkney, locations in the Scottish Highlands and the east coast of Scotland.

John Davies
January 2015
INTERVIEW: A conversation between Fred Schley & John Davies - January 2015

JD: You have had the ambition to spend time on St Kilda for many years; we have seen paintings of yours featuring the archipelago from an earlier trip or trips, but I don’t believe that you had stayed on the main island of Hirta for any length of time prior to this last visit. I know that there is a boat service to Hirta from the Isle of Harris, was this route that you took?

FS: This sounds like there is something of a regular service to and from St Kilda. Indeed I took this route but not like getting on a train. It is not like that at all. Many people have to be disappointed when finally arriving at the pier where the boat is leaving from Harris in the Outer Hebrides. It is quite a trip to get there in the first place and from there on nothing is certain. There is always the chance of gales or wind blowing from the wrong direction so you won’t be able to enter into the bay of Hirta. You get regular updates before the trip from the skipper, Angus Campbell. Sometimes you have to wait for a week or more before the conditions are finally right. There are many stories of people coming from all over the world, having planned a trip for twenty five years, only to find the last leg of their journey to St Kilda isn’t possible. This part of the world has the most unpredictable and most complicated weather systems. That’s why it is so appealing to me in a visual way. For most a visit is a once in a life time experience if you are lucky, so if you have been able to go there two times on a one day trip and one time for a whole week (including all the risks involved of not getting back as planned) you are extremely lucky. For me this was needed to get familiar with the place.

For this last trip, The National Trust of Scotland gave me permission to stay in the Factor’s house for a week. You have to bring in all your food yourself, but I also was screened OK to use the bar of the Military where they served very cheap drinks. There are many rules and regulations in respect of St Kilda being a protected area.
Mina Stac
Oil on canvas, 35 x 40 cm

JD: This really brings it home to one. If one is lucky, how long might a good crossing and disembarkation take?

FS: Around four hours there and four hours back. In the past it took twice as much time by a regular ship to cross, but nowadays it can be done in a day because these boats are so much faster. Because of the power of these boats, it can happen that the engine has to stop for a short while. The last time I went the sea was dead calm after days of strong winds. But then suddenly a huge wall of water creeps from the west upon you, so the speed of the boat can be too much and it leaves the water. Very spectacular!

JD: I believe that you shared the accommodation with a protected and unique species of house mouse...

FS: As I mentioned there are a lot of rules and regulations. One of them is to cover all your food by sealing it off. Food waste too. This has to do with the St Kilda mice. Because they are unique, found nowhere else in the world, they are protected. And they move around the house; you hear them and see them often. They are big, almost the size of a rat. I thought it was rather nice having them around in such a lonely place. There are more unique species there too, including a wren, the famous Soay sheep as well as rare plants.

JD: I have seen photographs of the ruined ‘High Street’ of the village on Hirta; presumably these were taken in the 1940’s or ‘50’s, long after the last thirty-six people were evacuated in the 1930’s. I note that one or two of the single storey cottages have been restored; is it in one of these that occasional visitors such as you stay?

FS: No, at the beginning of this street there is a two storey building, white washed, the most important building at the time, where the Factor stayed when visiting St Kilda. I had the whole house to myself. Very basic, but at least with a bath, toilet and a telephone which the other one storey buildings don’t have. In the other houses some scientists were staying: two studying mice and the other sheep.

This street is rather strange in such a place; here there is enough space to have some privacy. I think it is an indication of people needing to form a group; very different from the other similarly isolated island of Foula, still inhabited in the Shetlands. Here people live far apart from each other.
JD: From photographs of Hirta and the village, it is possible to see a road travelling in the direction of Conachair. I imagine that it must be pretty scary territory to explore, with the cliff face on the seaward side and rising some 1,400 feet sheer from the water. Can you tell us something about your experience walking and climbing to the vantage points that you used?

FS: The road you can see in the picture is the road the Army built in the 50’s to get from the shore to the radar station near the top of Conachair. Obviously it is very steep, as is any path you take here, but actually not too scary to me. I am used to these circumstances in other places. As long as you keep away from the edges of the cliffs you are fine. But as the stories go, quite a few St Kildans, as well as sheep, were occasionally blown over the cliffs. Indeed, some visitors too. One day there was absolutely no wind at all and I was standing near the edge of a cliff and suddenly, out of nowhere, I got a push from wind apparently accelerated from the bay below. When the wind from the west gets over the cliffs into the bowl of Village Bay it seems to accelerate up the surrounding hills which have no backs to them, so to speak. Then I understood you could meet your end 400 meters down below rapidly.

I explored as much as I could and also going back to places. This means I covered the whole main island of Hirta, except some cliff routes which St Kildans would take. The most frightening thing was the tunnel, one of the natural wonders of St Kilda, which is rarely visited. It is a huge tunnel through a headland. To go into it you have to come down a long rocky slope, not advisable if it is wet. At the end of the slope you can turn into a cathedral like space. But the sea is tunnelled through this headland with great force and can be wild. At the same time water from the roof comes down making the shore extremely slippery. If you are not cautious enough you simply glide down into the cold black deep water and play with the many seals for a short while and drown thereafter, because you won’t have a chance to get back on to the slippery shore.

I also covered the islands from the sea. On two occasions Angus sailed me, on my direction, around and between the islands and stacks. Spectacular views not many people have seen. Of course I knew most of the views from photos published in books but when I was there, there were many completely new to me.
You must be used to working in locations in which it is rare to encounter another human soul but I imagine you would see next to nobody around St Kilda, compared to Skye for example…

Around the house on the main street you see some activity of army personnel and the occasional scientist. But further afield there is absolutely nobody. So my days were filled with nobody except at the end of the day when I made rare visits to the bar. A very large TV screen with quiz-like shows were mainly for the army personnel and this seems so surrealistic and artificial in that environment.

Am I right in thinking there is quite a lot of sound though? I expect there is a wonderful distant hush from the ocean, pierced by quite a lot of bird call. I believe the largest colonies of Gannets, Puffins and Petrels are established here, vast numbers…

Of course this is all there, also a very deep silence. On Hirta there can be an eerie sound from the army generator, and there are islands in the group which were much more pure in that sense. I was completely on my own on deserted Mingulay and on North Hoy in Orkney where I didn’t see people for many days, also on Foula. With a few people living far apart you can easily see no people for a week or more. There is much interest in St Kilda so it is also visited by tourists on cruises. But almost all the people do not go further than the main street. So the rest of Hirta is completely left alone. Birds are everywhere and you get attacked by the big ones, Bonxies or Artic Skuas. They dive to get to your head in order to defend their terrain which is everything except for Village Bay. If you have a stick above your head they will go for that so then you are safe.

It all sounds quite hazardous but you seem to take it in your stride. It was very interesting to hear about circling the isles and stacks (Stacs) and finding very unfamiliar viewpoints. Please tell us more about Angus…

You must know that for many years St Kilda has been an obsession to me. It seemed the ultimate landscape. And because it was very hard to get to, especially in earlier days, it intensified my longing to see it and experience it for myself. But it seemed out of reach. The only thing I had were the many books available and even more importantly collecting all the images (including films) I could lay my hands on. I found so many blank spaces. I studied from maps combined with the available photos and descriptions of how it could look. And now with the help of
Angus the skipper, who knows these waters intimately, I could go where ever I wanted. It was like paradise or as a child in a candy shop. I mapped with thousands of photos all the blank areas I had found before. I was left with many surprises and viewpoints I couldn’t have dreamt of. We passed the whole coast of the islands and sailed in between the many stacs sometimes very narrow, as in the strait between Hirta and Soay; here the so called Pussycat and the Owl are like uncomfortable stepping stones filling the space between the two islands. So impressive, even more so when you know that the St Kildans climbed the stacs bare footed for harvesting birds. Most of them rising directly from the sea (and what kind of a sea) are slippery, high and sometimes even overhanging.

JD: It must be extremely exciting exploring this sort of territory, but vital to have someone like Angus the skipper. Is he based on Harris or one of the Uists?

FS: Yes it is vital. These waters are very treacherous because everywhere there are rocks just underneath the surface and of course there are unexpected currents because of this. Plus the weather can suddenly change. He is from Harris, and as a fisherman, an authority on these waters. You only can feel safe in his hands.

JD: I was wondering if Angus might have another occupation; it would seem difficult to sustain oneself as a guide if there are so few visitors. To return to literature on St Kilda, I raised the point that you had once told me that some four hundred books had been published on the subject, but when I raised the matter again recently, I think you corrected the number to five hundred. Have you read a few of them?
FS: Yes, recently I read somewhere that five hundred have been published. I have got a small collection and read them. I still love the Colin Baxter ones photographed with much feeling and a lovely text by Jim Crumly. A classic is Tom Steel’s “The Life and Death of St Kilda”. And a quite recent book written by someone who has actually lived there called “The Truth about St Kilda” by Donald John Gillies, I found quite interesting. Life there was not at all romantic, no variety in food, always depending on the harsh weather conditions for everything. But there was no crime and a totally democratic way of living. Nobody was in charge. But because tourists from the Victorian Age onwards came to visit these “savages” they became slowly aware of other possibilities of living less harshly and with the possibility of some luxury. This, together with the illnesses that tourists brought, undermined the reasoning to try and sustain living out there. They simply had to move, although many of the elders were very reluctant to go, and ever since have suffered from homesickness. As there were no trees on the island, the mainlanders helped them by giving them work in the forestry......

JD: It really does bring it home to you just how very cut off St Kilda is when one learns that even when Hirta was occupied, for example in the mid 18th Century, it became apparent that the islanders had never heard of King George II. Wikipedia reports that a population of between one and two hundred souls scraped by there for about two thousand years, but in the mid 19th Century the community had dropped to less than a hundred. Sustenance was a relatively marginal business; fishing was difficult because in all seasons waves reaching twelve metres were typical. While it was possible to cultivate some crops, the area of reasonably level, well drained ground was limited. Cattle and sheep were kept in limited numbers, with the indigenous Soay sheep milk being turned into cheese. Diet was then supplemented with Gannet and Fulmar, and their eggs harvested to be eaten fresh or cured for later consumption. But as you mentioned Fred, harvesting these from nesting grounds three and four hundred feet directly above the turbulent ocean was a precarious business.
Apparently various reasons lead to the evacuation of the last thirty-six inhabitants in 1930. Many of the men left after the First World War, and a number died of influenza soon after that; then a series of crop failures in the 1920's sealed the islanders' fate.

This history must make a visit a very poignant experience, even when one is engaged in absorbing the magnificent scenery. At the same time I imagine that you have little or no time to rest while seeking out all the possible viewpoints. When the opportunities of getting to and from a location are such serious undertakings, I imagine that the urgency of covering the ground must be a top priority. Can you expand on this?

**FS:** Absolutely! As you know all these things you mentioned when entering Village Bay for the first time is a moving experience. Seeing the remnants of this culture and knowing their fate. Nevertheless it isn’t why I came here. My interest lies with the landscape on its own terms which you can clearly see in my paintings, but the knowledge of how people could survive here intensifies the perceiving of the landscape. The human experience through the ages of the place enhances your own responses to it. It broadens the understanding and deepens your feelings I guess.

Because it is such a unique opportunity to actually live here for a while you have to be absolutely focused and leave out the things, although of much interest, which are secondary to your focus. That hurts, but it is not a holiday. This means you have to be around during the daytime and in the evenings, working hard on the groundwork that you have done to decide what your plans will be for the next day; exploring new territory or getting back to places already visited in different circumstances or finding a missing view so far.
JD: I can understand all this. It must then be quite an anxious time for you in the studio recreating the scenes from your groundwork. But from the results we can see in this catalogue, it is evident that your preparatory work on site was pretty intense and comprehensive. Although it wouldn’t surprise me if you said that you would like to return...

FS: Of course I would like to return, although I must say it was also a relief to get off the island. I knew the weather was going to deteriorate. I was picked up just in time. After that, St Kilda couldn’t be reached for two weeks. I could have been stuck there with very limited food.

Processing the material begins as soon as I come home. This time it took quite a long time before I could set myself to paint. The Netherlands work like a sieve to me. At first you stick with what was overwhelming to you. But that is not a good basis for a painting. So you need time to get to the point where the overwhelming impressions tone down a bit to a more comprehensible form. Only then you will be able to handle the image. And once I got to this point, the paintings came like more or less one or two big eruptions. I had done paintings of St Kilda from an earlier visit, but back home this time, by immersing myself in a big group of paintings more completely in this wonderful subject, I hope that I have given the viewer a more comprehensible experience of what it is like.

I can come back again and again yet still feel that my thirst will never fade. Every time I visit it feels new and fresh. And by becoming more and more familiar, like knowing the back of your hand, I can roam more freely and see the region from different perspectives.
JD: Well this is certainly a most engaging and substantial group featuring St Kilda but in addition we have some new and very engaging paintings from Skye and Orkney. You have such a commitment to this region and yet you still find the time to paint portraits in addition. Is the self portrait that we have illustrated on the inside back cover your first?

FS: The self portrait I avoided for long. It is not entirely the first one. Deep down in the past I did something in that direction. In fact it is just a model you have always around and feel you are entitled to do with it whatever you like.

JD: That is an interesting way of putting it! In addition, it must be refreshing to turn from landscape for a while.

FS: It is refreshing. The landscape painting reinforces the portrait painting and vice-versa. It works both ways. Both have my interest to the full. It is like zooming in and zooming out. Also totally different subject matter needs a totally different approach. The embracing broad vista in which you can disappear into the landscape, as opposed to the personal and intimate confrontation with an individual in the portrait.

I am much looking forward to the exhibition and hope the viewer will be embraced by the paintings in the way I experienced the landscapes on the actual spot.

JD: Thanks Fred. And we will be looking forward to hanging it.
Soay Stacs
Oil on canvas, 50 x 100 cm
Clagan na Rusgachan
Oil on canvas, 140 x 100 cm
From Hirta
Oil on canvas, 80 x 160 cm
Stac and cloud
Oil on canvas, 120 x 180 cm
From Conachair
Oil on canvas, 130 x 160 cm
The Peaks
Oil on canvas, 130 x 160 cm
Skye

Trotternish Ridge
Oil on canvas, 50 x 100 cm
The Storr in snow
Oil on canvas, 35 x 40 cm

Old Man of Skye
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 cm

Skye Ridge
Oil on canvas, 35 x 45 cm

Trotternish Ridge
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 cm
Quiraing sunset
Oil on canvas, 35 x 40 cm

Glach Glas Ridge
Oil on canvas, 35 x 40 cm

North Quiraing
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 cm

To the top, Skye
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 cm
The Sanctuary
Oil on canvas, 50 x 70 cm

Old Man of Storr
Oil on canvas, 40 x 50 cm
Also see website for:
The Quiraing, Isle of Skye
Oil on canvas, 100 x 140 cm

Quiraing
Oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm
The Storr
Oil on canvas, 70 x 70 cm

In Pinn
Oil on canvas, 70 x 50 cm
Storr Top
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 cm

Cleat
Oil on canvas, 50 x 70 cm
Orkney

Rackwick Cliffs
Oil on canvas, 50 x 100 cm
Also see website for:
Rackwick Bay, oil on canvas, 130 x 160 cm
Rackwick Cliffs, oil on canvas, 120 x 100 cm

Rackwick Bay
Oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm
Other locations in the Scottish Highlands and off the Scottish Coast

Ben Alligin
Oil on canvas, 50 x 70 cm
Stac Polly in cloud
Oil on canvas, 35 x 40 cm

Sgurr an Fhidhleir
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 cm

Stac Polly
Oil on canvas, 25 x 35 cm

Cairngorms
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 cm
Bass Rock
Oil on canvas, 50 x 70 cm
Moon over An Teallach
Oil on canvas, 50 x 70 cm

Also see website for:
Suilven, Assynt, oil on canvas, 24 x 40 cm
Dibadale, oil on canvas, 40 x 50 cm
FRED SCHLEY

1957  Born 's-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands
1983  Graduated at Academie Voor Beeldende Vorming, Tilburg
1983-95  Teacher of Art and Art History

Selected Group Exhibitions
2003  Artfair Realisme 2005, Amsterdam
2005  NBKS, Breda, De Salon
2006-07/09  Galerie Peninsula, Eindhoven
2007  Holland Art Fair, The Hague
2007-09  AtticSalt Gallery, Edinburgh
2008  VAS Annual Exhibition, Edinburgh
2009-09  Society of Scottish Artists Open Exhibition, Edinburgh RA Summer Exhibition, London, shortlisted for Insight Investment Newcomer's Prize
2009-10/14  The Mall Galleries, London, Discerning Eye
2010  The John Davies Gallery, Moreton-in-Marsh
2010-14  Mystery Portraits, National Portrait Gallery, London
2011  BP Portrait Award Touring
2011  Unneag dh’han Aird am iar, Sabhal Mor Ostaig, Skye
2011/14  The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh
2012/14  ZomereXpo, Gemeete Museum, The Hague
2013  Threadneedle Prize Exhibition, London

Selected Solo Exhibitions
2003/06/14  Galerie Achter de Kan,'s-Hertogenbosch
2005  Galerie Molenaars, Breda
2006  An Tuireann Art Centre, Portree
2007  AtticSalt Gallery, Edinburgh
2008/13  Galerie Peninsula, Eindhoven
2009  Museum Slager,'s-Hertogenbosch
2010  Taigh Chearsabhagh, North Uist
2013  An Tobart, Isle of Mull
2014  Aros Centre, Skye
2010-14  The John Davies Gallery, Moreton in Marsh

Selected Portraits
George Mackay Brown, poet
Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, composer
M. Tabaksblat, Chairman Unilever
A. Burgmans, Chairman Unilever
J. Franssen, Mayor of Zwolle
J. Stekelenburg, Mayor of Tilburg
Y. van Rooy, Chairman University Tilburg
Prof. J. Leune, Chairman Dutch Education Council
Prof. P. Nieuwenhuis, University Groningen
Prof. A. W. T. Konings, University Groningen
Sorley Maclean, poet
Mary MacPherson, known as Màiri Mhór nan Oran, poet
Dr. Marcus Miele and Dr. Reinhard Zinkann, Directors Miele
Dr Peter Zinkann, former Director of Miele
Prof. Uniken Venema, University of Groningen
J. Oosterhof, Mayor of Kampen
Professor Dr.A.M.L. v.Wieringen, Chair Education Council of The Netherlands
Prof. Donald R.A.Uges , University Groningen
Prof. Ed van den Heuvel, University Amsterdam
Prof. Dr. G.T.M. ten Dam, Chair Educational Council of the Netherlands

Public Collections
Accenture, London
Chalmers Lawyers, Edinburgh
Highland Council, Scotland
Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh
An Tuireann Art Centre, Portree, Isle of Skye
Unilever Rotterdam
Orkney Museum, Kirkwall
Royal College of Music, London
Royal Bank of Scotland, Stockholm
University Tilburg
Rijksuniversiteitsmuseum Groningen
Dutch Education Council, The Hague
Municipalities of Tilburg, Zwolle, Kampen
Miele, The Netherlands
Turcan Connell, Edinburgh & London
Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums
Stadschouwburg, Amsterdam
University of Amsterdam
Fred Schley - Self portrait
Oil on canvas, 40 x 50 cm