

How novels drew inspiration from Harris visits

By Katie Macleod

Elisabeth Gifford fell in love with the Isle of Harris after spotting a photo of a white holiday cottage in a newspaper's small ads nearly 20 years ago. The Drinishader holiday cottage – which the author and her family reached on a track, pushing their luggage in a wheelbarrow – was run by artists Willie and Moira Fulton, and is now Ardbuidhe Cottage Gallery.

"We were totally smitten," says Elisabeth, who lives in Kingston upon Thames and has been visiting the islands ever since. "There was a culture on the cusp of changing, and Willie had so many stories about Harris in the Seventies, and people's memories going back to the war, and I felt I wanted to write something to retain that... That was the magic that got us all started."

One result of those early visits was the bestselling *Secrets of the Sea House*, Elisabeth's debut novel, published in 2013. Based on a real letter to *The Times* in 1830 by a Scottish clergyman reporting a mermaid sighting, the story follows a couple who have recently moved to Harris and find the bones of a child underneath their house.

The Lost Lights of St Kilda, released on 5th March this year, is also set in the Hebrides, but told from the point of view of islanders themselves. "The impetus for writing the book was I'd always wanted to know what it was like to live on St Kilda," explains Elisabeth, who started writing the book ten years ago. "I had this picture of a man sitting in a very dark prison cell, who'd lost his hope, and then the idea of St Kilda, and the people he knew there and their faith, giving him the hope to make this terrible journey home again, so he can get back and find the people that he loved there."

The man in the prison cell is Fred Lawson, a prisoner of war from the 51st Highland Division who has been captured by the Germans at Saint Valery. As he embarks on a dangerous escape through France, he is sustained by the memories of the summer he spent in St Kilda in 1927, and the islander, Chrissie, who he fell in love with. Switching between Fred's journey through occupied France in 1940, and Chrissie's experiences of the last years of St Kilda before the community was evacuated in 1930, the novel is deeply atmospheric, transporting readers to islands that have captured imaginations for centuries.

The Times included *The Lost Lights of St Kilda* in their list of best new historical fiction this spring, describing it as a "fascinating nugget of Scottish history" turned into a "gorgeous, melancholy love story." Readers across the country have called it "evocative" and "haunting," while bestselling author Katie Forde praised it as "desperately romantic, lyrically written and with a fascinating plot."

To capture the atmosphere of St Kilda on the cusp of change, Elisabeth "read just about everything" she could find on the islands, spoke with Bill Lawson at the Seallam! Centre in Northton and visited St Kilda on a research trip with Sea Harris. "Historically, I tried to keep it as accurate as possible, so that people could know what it felt like to live there," she explains.

Her research was so extensive, in fact, that she was able to match the names and photos of each of the last families to live on St Kilda to their cottages on the island – something that had never been done before. The information is now being made into a tourist booklet by the National Trust for Scotland, who own and manage the World Heritage Site. "I'm proud of the compilation of names and faces for each



of the last families in each cottage that I was able to bring together for the first time after researching the book. And I'm so glad that people are interested to hear about the brave men who got left behind in France. I think it is important to remember their contribution to the war."

Elisabeth was due to return to Harris in June, for a book reading at the Isle of Harris Distillery in Tarbert. That has now been postponed indefinitely, along with her London book launch, due to the global pandemic. But in a way, the replacement digital events bring her writing story full circle. Willie Fulton – owner of the holiday cottage that brought her to Harris, and who she describes as "such an inspiration for my writing" – filmed a reading from *The Lost Lights of St Kilda* in Ardbuidhe Cottage Gallery, which was shared on the Distillery social media channels. Lorna Macaulay, who runs the restaurant at the gallery, has also recorded a digital reading; it was her father, historian John Macaulay, whose work on seal people myths originally inspired *Secrets of the Sea House*.

"I am loving how people tell me that reading the book makes them feel like they are there on the island, experiencing a now lost way of life," says Elisabeth of the reaction to *The Lost Lights of St Kilda*. "The Hebrides has a strong, living link with its Gaelic history, but things do change constantly, and I feel proud that *The Lost Lights of St Kilda* might be helping to preserve the islands' history in some way, which is exactly what I hoped."

