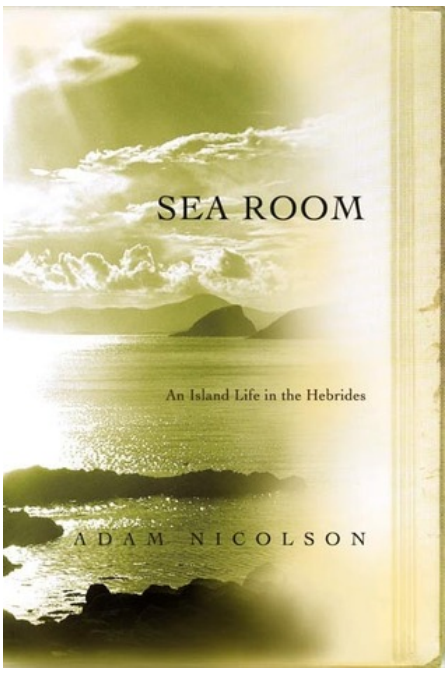

Sea Room: An Island Life in the Hebrides

Adam Nicolson

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In 1937, Adam Nicolson's father answered a newspaper ad—"Uninhabited islands for sale. Outer Hebrides, 600 acres . . . Puffins and seals. Apply . . . ".

In this radiant and powerful book, Adam describes, and relives, his love affair with this enchantingly beautiful property, which he inherited when he was twenty-one. As the islands grew to become the most important thing in his life, they began to offer him more than escape, giving him "sea room"—a sailing term Nicolson uses to mean "the sense of enlargement that island life can give you."

The Shiants—the name means holy or enchanted islands—lie east of the Isle of Lewis in a treacherous sea once known as the "stream of blue men," after the legendary water spirits who menaced sailors there. Crowned with five-hundred-foot cliffs of black basalt and surrounded by tidal rips, teeming in the summer with thousands of sea birds, they are wild, dangerous, and dramatic—with a long, haunting past. For millennia the Shiants were a haven for those seeking solitude—an eighth-century hermit, the twentieth-century novelist Compton Mackenzie—but their rich, sometimes violent history of human habitation includes much more. Since the Stone Age, families have dwelled on the islands and sailors have perished on their shores. The landscape is soaked in centuries-old tales of restless ghosts and ancient treasure, cradling the heritage of a once productive world of farmers and fishermen.

In passionate, keenly precise prose, Nicolson evokes the paradoxes of island life: cut off from the mainland yet intricately bound to it, austere yet fertile, unforgiving yet bewitchingly beautiful.

Sea Room does more than celebrate and praise this extraordinary place. It shares with us the greatest gift an island can bestow: a deep, revelatory engagement with the natural world.

Sea Room: An Island Life in the Hebrides Details

Date	:	Published June 1st 2002 by North Point Press (first published 2001)
ISBN	:	9780865476363
Author	:	Adam Nicolson
Format	:	Hardcover 391 pages
Genre	:	Nonfiction, Cultural, Scotland, Travel, Autobiography, Memoir, Environment, Nature, History

From Reader Review Sea Room: An Island Life in the Hebrides for online ebook

Liz Gray says

Nicolson's book is a well-researched and heartfelt homage to the Shiants, three tiny islands in the Outer Hebrides that were purchased in 1937 by his father. He reconstructs the history of the islands using the few artifacts found there, with a particular focus on the lives of the various tenant farmers and shepherds who occupied them over the centuries. My favorite parts of the book, however, are his poetic descriptions of the flora, fauna and geology of the Shiants. I read the first half of the book while visiting Lewis and Harris this past spring, the hazy outlines of the islands visible from the house where I stayed; reading the second half in my suburban home outside Boston brought me right back to the desolate and captivating beauty of the Hebridean landscape.

Ashley Thomas says

A disclaimer: I bought this book in a tiny bookstore/post office while on a trip to the Isle of Skye off the Northwest coast of Scotland, and read the first few chapters while sitting on a log at the edge of the tiny harbor in Port Righ just before sunset. So I might be a little biased as to its quality or significance.

If you've never had a chance to travel to the outer islands off the coast of Scotland, then you should most definitely read this book. It does for the Hebrides what Frances Mayes' books have done for Tuscany - only it includes a lot less people and a lot more sheep, puffins and seals.

There is something undeniably haunting about the Scottish isles. The extremes of weather and situation that exist there make life an endless struggle, and as Nicolson notes in his book many of the islands are now uninhabited for that very reason. The book spends quite a bit of time on the history of the islands and the various groups of people and animals who have attempted to sustain life there (Nicolson is a historian so he's in his element here). Yet, to me, the book's best moments are found in the descriptions of the islands themselves and their wild austerity. If you ever do have the chance to visit the islands off the coast of Scotland, you'll see what Nicolson means when he discusses the fascination and repulsion they generate. They're so breathtakingly beautiful that you feel you must experience life among them, but they offer little softness or respite to those who make the attempt.

This is a great book to read while traveling - and take my word for it, if you ever actually visit the islands you should most definitely take this along and read it while in the background fishermen shout to each other in Gaelic as they dock their boats for the night.

Michael says

This was a surprising pleasure to read by the author of “Why Homer Matters”. I readily enjoyed its core as a sustained poetic reverie during his extended stays on a trio of remote islands in the Hebrides off northwest

Scotland, the Shiants. These he received as an early inheritance from his father at age 18. Though only 500 acres of cliffs, meadows, and hardy vegetation devoid of trees, the islands are also a major nesting site of many seabirds, including puffins, skuas, gannets, kittiwakes, and geese. For a number of years Nicholson was content to visit alone during summers via a sailboat trip from a Harris Island port 5 miles across the treacherous tidal channel called the Minch. He retreated to a 19th-century two-room rock homestead without electricity and mediated on the vistas and on the violence of waves meeting cliffs. We experience him pursuing amateur naturalist observations in his explorations, reaping treasures and indelible visions.

For example, I love his contrasting experience of puffins and the cormorant-like shags:
Ludicrous and loveable puffins! Their sociability is as stiff and predictable as an evening in Edwardian London. Gestures of deference are required of any newcomer, and a little accepting dance of acceptability is made by those already settled with cigars around the fender. …the are more capable of looking embarrassed than any bird I have seen. So polite is this world, in fact, that most of its members seem struck dumb by their sense of propriety.

…If puffins and gannets are from different worlds, the shags are from another universe. Nothing can really prepare you for the reality of the shag experience. It is an all-power meeting with an extraordinary, ancient, corrupt, imperial, angry, dirty, green-eyed, yellow-gaped, oil-skinned, iridescent, rancid, rock-hole glory that is Phalacrocorax aristotelis. They are scandal and poetry, chaos and individual rage, archaic, ancient beyond any sense of ancientness that other birds might convey. …There's a fluster of rage, resentment, and clumsiness as the big, black webbed feet stomp around the sticky, white, guanoed mayhem of kelp stalks and wrack branches that is its nest, in the back of which, creeping for the shadows, you see the couple of young, half-formed embryonic creatures, shag chicks, rat-birds, serpentine, leathery, hideous.

Nicholson has a facility of slipping about the timescales as his perception of the here and now reveals how small we are in the life of this realm. For example, the oldest fossils of shags are pegged at 60 million years, which was not long after the dinosaurs met their cataclysmic extinction and ichthyosaurs still swam the seas. Eventually the strange architecture of headlands of soaring dolomite columns sets him to pursuing knowledge of the geological history of the islands and shares his delights in how the frozen conformation is rendered into dynamic flux of magma flows and foldings in the minds of geologists who visit him there. The mysteries of old foundations and walls on his tours of his land sets him to dwelling on the human communities who dwelled like him back into in the mists of historical time and the vast pre-historical periods. Nicholson give up his precious isolation to invite some archeologists to come do some digs, and their discoveries at Stone Age, Iron Age, and Medieval sites helps him with a more informed imagining of what life was like there.

The middens (i.e. garbage piles) dug up at different sites on the Shiants reveal evidence of times of famine, as indicated by concentrations of limpet shells, a meal of last resort. Some modeling of available land resources for gardening versus grazing of sheep and cattle suggests that only a handful of families could ever be sustained on the island and that overpopulation with occupation by as few as 40 humans could tip the balance toward disaster and starvation. I got the same sense of human adaptability and risks of life on the edge from Jared Diamond's inquiries into the Viking settlement of Greenland for three centuries in his "Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed."

A particularly old artefact pulled off the bottom of the sea off the Shiants is a Bronze Age necklace or

armband known as a torc, which is elegant in the simplicity of twisted and fluted dual bands. He imagines it cast into the sea as a tribute to the unknown forces at the edge of the known world. Nicholson also tracks references to a visit of a prominent Roman to a resident in the Shiants Other records indicate mystics hung out there, including early Christians. The Vikings in their sojourns gifted their names to many headland and inlets. The Hebrideans harbored a large population of Catholics, much oppressed over long time periods. Nicholson finds in his house a Medieval gravestone with a carved cross within a circle being used as a hearthstone by the later house builder. But the cross was hidden on flip side, suggesting resolute defiance of persecution. Over the centuries, political rebels sometimes hid out on the Shiants, as apparently did pirates. Murderous clans vied for territory in the Hebrides, occasionally wiping out a whole family. Gaelic names of various geographical sites on the island appear to reflect historical events of tragedy and mystery later blown up in oral tradition to mythical or miraculous proportions. The name Shiants means hallowed or blessed from one angle, haunted from another. Consistent with that he finds in history excursions much evidence of priests and reclusive saints who found spiritual refuge on remote Hebridean outposts like this, as well as records of myths about magical or evil presences. Despite these extremes, the archeological evidence points to residence in the Shiants mostly by ordinary farmers for many generations into the 16th century.

By the 17th century, feudal lords and aristocratic landowners cleared off most of their peasant tenants from many properties in the Hebrides and used their estates for summer leisure activities. Island like the Shiants changed from being places that were “empty and difficult for the Hebrideans” into sites that “became beautiful and empty for outsiders.” One exception was one landowner of the Campbell clan who resided on the Shiants with his family in the 1860s, commuting as needed to Harris or the mainland by boat and receiving suitors to his fair daughters by boat. Through most the 18th and 19th centuries, the Shiants largely became a site for temporary sheep grazing and fishing stations. Nicholson kept the tradition of his father and predecessors of allowing sheep herders access to grazing on the island. In a particularly fun section, he details his participation with the shepherds in the fascinating and exhausting work of driving the sheep form many a rough spot to a beach and loading them on a barge to move them from one island to another.

One reason Nicholson’s account of this rocky place on the Atlantic appeals to me is because I feel the northeast coast of Maine where I live is like its mirror image, split from the British islands by ancient shifts of the tectonic plates. I am especially fond of hiking high cliffs facing the stormy sea, and I marvel at the endurance of fishermen and admire a man a few miles down the peninsula who tends a flock of sheep. Not so long ago, sheep were similarly transported to small uninhabited islands for grazing. We have one island offshore of my town where puffins thrive, though nothing like the hundreds of thousands that nest in the Shiants. We have a lot of eagles and ospreys, yet I had to go north into New Brunswick to experience soaring gannets and their plummeting and deep dives into the sea for mackerel. Nicholson’s account of sea eagles, collosal and majestic, nesting on the Shiants in earlier centuries and signs of their return in recent years was uplifting for me.

At times it can seem he is making mountains out of molehills, at others on the trail of wisdom expressed in the Leonard Cohen line, “We are so small between the stars, so large against the sky.” In the following example I find a useful outlook, while others may see purple patch:

Islands are made larger, paradoxically, by the scale of the sea that surrounds them. the element which might reduce them. … has the opposite effect. The sea elevates a few acres into something that could never be if hidden in the mass of the mainland. The sea makes islands significant …they are not-sea within the sea, standing against the sea’s chaos and massive power, but framed by it, enlightened by it. In that way every island is an assertion in an ocean of denials, the one positive gesture against an almost overwhelming bleakness. …The state of siege and an island, in short, is life set against death, a life defined by the death that surrounds it.

This combination of lyrical immersion in an austere but rich environment, explorations of a special ecology, and speculation on human affinities for remote island life conforms a subgenre of non-fiction I admire which could be called “Biography of Place.” Among the couple of dozen books I voted for on the Listopia list for this category, are two I loved by Tim Robinson which are the most similar in scope and style to this one (“Connemara” and “The Stones of Arran”). I look forward to reading Nicholson’s recent book on sea birds, as well as his book on Homer.

Ron says

Ah, what a fine book this is. Reading it is like spending time with a new friend. Nicholson has a sharp and curious mind and a generous spirit. You may not think you can be much interested in a group of three little islands in the Outer Hebrides - the Shiants - their climate, wildlife, prehistory, geology, archeology, socio-economics, agriculture, shepherding, folk literature, the sea currents around them, and the host of other topics covered in this book, but Nicholson draws you in. Soon you are immersed in whatever there is to be known about what amounts to less than a square mile of rock, cliffs, beach, and meadow.

The book is organized around the turn of the year, beginning with Nicholson's first journey to the islands in his own boat in the spring, and ending with the first gusty wet weather of autumn, as he sits at the window in a two-room cottage writing. Into this annual cycle he interweaves story upon story, often speculative, of how the islands came to be, how they came to be what they are, and the people over thousands of years who have lived here.

As the year passes, Nicholson sketches in the broad sweep of recorded history from St. Columba to the present, noting the several hands through which the islands have passed, including his father's and his own. A team of archeologists identifies the remains of Iron and Bronze Age settlements and spends a summer uncovering a long abandoned farmstead. The discovery of a buried cobblestone with an ancient inscription sends him on one of many attempts to unravel mysteries that he uncovers.

The book is based on considerable research, and Nicholson pieces together a previously unwritten history of the islands with references drawn from many old documents and interviews with historians and other experts. He helpfully illustrates his text with many photographs, drawings, and maps.

This book is for anyone who feels the magical pull of islands. You will not regard them quite the same way again.

Patrick Carroll says

I found this book inconsistent, some sections were really interesting but some diversions simply failed to hold my interest. I did find the initial self-justification a bit irritating because this is ultimately a "rich man owns islands" book and whilst there is a lot of excellent prose and diversions into the local history there was always little "socialist" voice in my head saying "He just traveled up from London for the summer". Whilst I appreciate the whole "authentic" sailing boat thing I rather think the locals are using highly powered metal skiffs and ribs to eek a living from the sea and land - but it's all so romantic.

Adam Nicholson is a very good writer, some truly lovely prose but I didn't warm to the author.

Nick Davies says

This concerned a subject - the author describing the isolated Hebridean Shaint Islands, and those who have lived on it - about which I would've professed an interest. In the end though it made for a slightly over-long read, slightly over-dwelling on aspects of less interest to me, slightly over-doing the romanticism and (like I have felt of the likes of Robert Macfarlane) leaving me somehow both envious of them and irritated in a 'it's alright for you, nipping to your wild paradise to write poetically about it whilst normal people have to earn a proper living' manner.

Nicholson writes well, and tries very hard to be fair and complete and thorough. Had I read this at a more leisurely pace, in snatches rather than cover-to-cover in a few days, I may well have got more enjoyment from it. As it happened, it just came over a little repetitive in places - there is only so much one can say about a limited geographical area, and perhaps as a consequence I found the historical detail a bit much overall. There were plenty of bits that were witty and interesting and stimulated further interest, but there was a lot in between that wasn't so compelling. I didn't feel completely satisfied either with the balance of all of the discussions of tenants and landowners, and farmers and fishermen, the social history of it all.

Paul says

Superb Book

Helen says

Loved this: Adam Nicolson inherited the Shiant Islands in the Hebrides from his father Nigel Nicolson at the age of 21, bought at the behest of Nigel's mother Vita Sackville-West. The islands had long been uninhabited, although there is a usable house there, and life there is pretty primitive (rats, no toilets). This is not quite what you imagine the holiday home of a Bloomsberry to be, in other words. Adam Nicolson is sensitive to all the possible accusations of being a posh English landowner with a plaything, meets them all head on, and provides here what must be a definitive history of the islands, every aspect of them. Fantastic.

Nick says

Just a lovely and interesting book about three small islands west of Scotland--their wildlife, their geography and geology, their history. A beautiful book about an isolated place that ranges through archeology, natural history, human history, literature and family memory. Read it slowly, savor it.

Tim Martin says

This was a beautifully written biography of a place, not quite like any I have read before. Entirely devoted to three Scottish islands known as the Shiants ("one definite, softened syllable, 'the Shant Isles', like a sea shanty but with the 'y' trimmed away"), they are an archipelago of three islands in the Hebrides, about 550 acres in size, about four miles off the coast of Lewis, located in a body of water called the Minch, their names Garbh Eilean, Eilean an Tighe, and Eilean Mhuire. The author intended in the book to immerse himself in the islands in an attempt to tell their whole story "in as many dimensions as possible: geologically, spiritually, botanically, historically, culturally, aesthetically, ornithologically, etymologically, emotionally, politically, socially, archaeologically, and personally."

Right away in a very early paragraph you can tell the author loves these islands, lands "with black cliffs five hundred feet tall dropping into a cold, dark, peppermint sea, with seals lounging at their feet, the lobsters picking their way between the boulders and kelp and thousands upon thousands of sea birds wheeling above the rocks." Again and again he describes the feel of being on the islands any time of day or night, all year long, of being in the waters around them, climbing the rocks, being among the wildlife and the sheep, of spending time with the locals who have made either a living there fishing and shepherding or with scientists have studied the island's geology, biology, and archaeology, all described with a novelist's eye and amply illustrated with photographs and maps.

Geology fairly early on is very well discussed, with the author noting that the Shiants are the "most northerly extension of the British volcanic landscape" and the "most northerly example" of columnar dolerite, the author vividly describing the geological origins of these and other rocks in the Shiants, what they look like, and the sometimes deadly dangers of climbing them. The columnar rocks were fascinating, as from time to time entire columns collapse into the sea as the base of each column gets eaten away by the ocean, as "the columns of which the islands are made are scarcely more bound to each other than pencils in a box and once the base has gone, knocked out by a winter storm, there is nothing to withstand the force of gravity." Said to be similar in some ways to a glacier calving, where the splits occur "the remaining edges are as sharp as knives," while the "bare unlichened stone smells of iron or even blood, because blood smells of iron too."

Though not getting a lot into botany per se, Nicolson never failed to note the surprising number of flowers that bloom in the archipelago, noting early in the book for instance that in summer "the grass on the cliff-tops is thick with flowers: bog asphodel and bog pimpernel; branched orchids, the stars of tormentil and milkwort," with other plants including wild thyme, purple knapweed, hart's tongue ferns, forget-me-nots, meadowsweet, yellow flags, and watermint. Of all the natural history subjects covered in the book this was probably the one he spent the least amount of time on, though he was far from "plant blind" and always noted wildflowers and other plants wherever they occurred (and not just through dull listings but describing what they looked like and sometimes what they meant to him or in the past to the previous inhabitants).

Birds more than any other wildlife were described again and again in truly well written prose, everything from snipe ("fluting at night over their territories" in the marsh) to short-eared owls (cruising "low over the rushes for the voles that are its only prey") to white-tailed sea eagles (with a "leonine presence," "the only truly imperial creature in the British Isles"), to ravens (which gleefully harass the eagles playing "like Messerschmitts around" them). Most of the all the seabirds are well discussed, as the Shiants are "one of the great bird places in the world," boasting between 15,000-18,000 guillemots, 8,000 to 11,000 razorbills, between 4,000 and 6,000 fulmars, about 2000 kittiwakes, about 1500 shags, a few hundred gulls of various species, 26 great skuas, and 240,000 puffins ("about one in eight of the British total and two per cent of all the puffins in the world"). The seabirds are especially well detailed, the author vividly portraying what they look and sound like, what is it is like to see them in such dense numbers in the breeding season (and perhaps not see them at all outside of that season), of how they subdivide the various ecological niches around the island, with for instance noting how gulls and kittiwakes dabble at the surface while puffins dive to depths of

30 to 40 feet, while the guillemots plunge “much deeper, often to a hundred and fifty feet, and going much further afield.” My favorite descriptions were of the shags, as nothing “can prepare you for the reality of the shag experience. It is an all-power meeting with an extraordinary, ancient, corrupt, imperial, angry, dirty, green-eyed, yellow-gaped, oil-skinned, iridescent, rancid, rock-hole glory that is Phalacrocorax aristotelis,” a creature that lives in a “stinking slum,” which if one approaches, “hawks and spits at you, its gizzard shaking in anger and fear, its whole head prodding and prodding towards you, like an angry finger.”

Additionally, it was interesting to read accounts of when the birds used to be trapped and eaten (or the eggs collected and eaten), with the author reproducing a chart compiled by Cambridge zoologist HB Cott in the early 1950s in which he rated the various how the eggs of the various seabird species tasted when scrambled, which ranged from “very good” for the lesser black-backed gull and kittiwake to “unpleasant” and “off” for the shag.

Rather late in the book he delved into a subject that is around the edges the entire time one reads this work, scurrying in the walls of the single house still fit for human occupation on the island (in that it has walls and a roof), of the sounds heard at night as he slept next to the fire, evidence of their nocturnal excursions obvious the next day; rats. Possibly as many as three thousand rats call the Shiants home. No one knows how they got there originally or how long they have been there, but it was interesting that they weren’t “the rats you find at home in the barn or the sewer,” the brown rat (Rattus norvegicus), but instead now a rare rat in the UK, the ship, black, or plague rat (Rattus rattus). One might have thought they would have denuded the islands of their numerous seabirds, but Nicolson went to offer theories as to why there may actually be some sort of equilibrium between nesting birds and the rats.

I really liked how the author made the waters around the islands come alive, describing them as dynamic places with almost a personality, of how the water, far from being a static thing, moved and pulsed in response to the winds, tides, currents, and often most of all the undersea topography, of how the water could be very unpleasant for instance where it was squeezed between islands in narrow channels, perhaps further agitated as it was “forced to run over a knotted and fractured sea-bed.” He learned to be wary of the many underwater rocks around the Shiants, that though dangerous became familiar to him like an “ill-tempered dog,” mindful of some rocks that looked “black and bitter, the knobbled spine of a half-submerged creature.” It wasn’t just the author who saw creatures and animate beings in the often chaotic waters around the islands, as the “Sound of Shiant is also known as the Sruth na Fear Gorm, the Stream of the Blue Men, or more exactly the Blue-green Men,” as the “adjective in Gaelic describes that dark half-colour which is the colour of deep sea water at the foot of a black cliff” but also that according to folklore and tall tales, describes the Blue-Green Men, who “are strange, dripping, semi-human creatures who come aboard and sit alongside you in the sternsheets, sing a verse or two of a complex sign and, if you are unable to continue in the same metre and with the same rhyme, sink your boat and drown your crew.”

Though the islands, uninhabited for well over a century, are regarded as wild, remote, and nearly wilderness, Nicolson never lets the reader forget this is very much a human landscape. Much of that history is told through accounts of personal triumph and more often tragedy, either recorded at the time or what he can be discerned from what archaeologists and he himself found on the island showing the lives of inhabitants from before the Middle Ages all the way up into the 20th century, everything from a very rare and valuable golden torc to a “hermit’s pillow stone, the medieval brooch, the decorated craggenware, the stone stools, the scrimshawed plate, the kelp irons, the boat nails from the house roof,” to a fragment of a lovingly crafted wooden toy boat, each item vividly described, often illustrated with photographs or sketches, each one opening up to a reader a lost history, one very rarely written down or with any named individuals attached to it.

Again and again in the book, Nicolson shares his thoughts on what islands mean to the human spirit and day-to-day life and how this changed through time for the inhabitants and visitors of the Shiants. Over the centuries the islands went from being rich places, able to provide a living to their inhabitants and part of the wider world around them, the inhabitants benefitting from the local markets as much as they benefitted from them, of the islanders being part of local churches or clan conflicts or even rarely larger tides of history, that "to be on the Shiants was to have the benefits of good soils, the riches of the birds and fish…[i]t was not to be deprived of anything the mainland could offer…a sea room with sea room, a place enlarged by its circumstances, not confined by them" to eventually with the coming of modernity in the eighteenth century being felt even by the those who loved the place as a realm that was cut off and just too isolated for people to remain, a place that was forgotten and unneeded. When the islands emptied, they became seen as awful places for a time as illustrated by the views of Robinson Crusoe, the author writing the Shiants were seen, just as Crusoe viewed islands, "in some ways a prison, a symbol of…suffering, divorced from the company of men."

Still later the islands after they emptied of families who had lived increasingly hard lives (even facing at times starvation) they began again to be seen as wonderful places, such as viewed by authors as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (not specifically writing about the Shiants), as places where the solitary self could flower, a place where "dreamy-eyed travelers from the south were coming to see…as a vision of earthly beauty" (or derisively by authors such as DH Lawrence who according to Nicolson islands are "not so much islands as I-lands, where the inflated self smothers and obliterates all other forms of life"), a decidedly modern and romantic view.

Either because of his love for history and to immerse himself in the islands, or perhaps conscious of his own at times romanization of the Shiants, Nicolson notes that one, in appreciating the island's modern, wild, isolated nature, should never forget the human cost behind such a thing. The author described at length what life was like on the Shiants for centuries, of how at one point there were originally five family farms located there, but with the changing markets due to globalization, demands of distant landlords that the inhabitants couldn't meet and also produce enough food to eat, and perhaps the desire of the island's owners to squeeze more money from the islands, profiting much less from resident farmers and shepherds and much more from seasonal kelpers and shepherds, the islands began to die by the 1720s. Instead of being rich places or at least decent places to live the Shiants became at the very least a place where "[i]nsularity was now a symptom of backwardness and isolation a kind of failure" to at worst "a kind of hell," the islanders either left of their own accord because they couldn't make a living there or were (somewhat less likely in the case of the Shiants) forced out. Nicolson wrote that because of the "continuing resonance of the Clearances" that there are those who strongly hold beliefs that the empty, uninhabited lands of Scotland "are an insult to society," with some even going so far as to call for an end to private land ownership, a subject the author address again and again towards the end of the book, of hard feelings about how "southerners with southern money came to entertain themselves in a romantic and deserted island," islands that once had families and where people fished and collected seaweed and took care of sheep and were born and died. I think Nicolson tried to walk a razor's edge between noting that the islands were once very much homes to people for centuries, places abandoned either under the duress of poverty and starvation or the greed of distant landlords, while at the same time loving, treasuring, and working hard to preserve their modern beauty of windswept wildflowers, dark sea cliffs, wheeling, screeching seabirds, and Viking-era ruins.

The author's own views of the islands, what the idea of islands mean to him, as owner of the islands (having inherited them from his father and not long after he published the book said he would hand them off to his son), were that being on the islands excited him, that the island's "wonderful sea room, the surge of freedom which a moated island provides" enlarged him, a feeling that he carried with him even when far from the Shiants. Again and again Nicolson came back to what the islands meant to him. Far from finding this boring

or self-indulgent, I enjoyed reading this as it was an exploration in a sense of what the Shiants meant to previous generations and what islands in general mean to people who love them.

Donna says

Memorable book! Among the best I've ever read. Engagingly written and endlessly fascinating. Learning the Shiants had evidence of homes as early as 1000 led me to learn more about sea travel in the North Atlantic in the 800s and 900s and that led to learning the difference between Vikings and Norse and that led to an interest in Viking ships/boats...and so it goes.
Loved his connection to this bit of land he owned and his desire to learn more about all its inhabitants over time.
So happy I read this book.

Catherine says

3.5 stars

There were places where I really liked this book, and they were in some of Adam's descriptions of the islands and the peoples. His love of the Shiants is clear. However, I was thrown off a little by his conversational style. Two lines into a story about someone or something and Adam would veer off into an aside that sometimes felt longer than the story itself. It made the narrative a little choppy.
I found my attention wandering a little throughout and I am not sure if I was in the mood to read this book when I began it. Unfortunately for me and the book, I was reading from a library loan so I could not afford to put it to one side a return to it when I felt like it.

Amanda Brookfield says

Amanda Brookfield's Reviews > Sea Room: An Island Life in the Hebrides

Sea Room by Adam Nicolson
Sea Room: An Island Life in the Hebrides
by Adam Nicolson
25327464
Amanda Brookfield's review Jul 24, 14 · edit
5 of 5 stars
Read from June 30 to July 24, 2014

This is not my usual type of read. Memoirs-style descriptions of remote Scottish islands, the Shiants, populated by puffins,rats and, sometimes sheep, which have to be transported to and from the mainland by boat....nope, not my bag at all. But a friend recommended it to me. A good friend, one of those whose tastes you can trust absolutely.

I was out of my comfort zone a lot of the time. It meant I had to concentrate, a bit like when one is trying a new - and scary - type of food. This was made easy however by Adam Nicolson's mesmeric and powerful narrative style. He writes like a poet, with an extraordinary eye for ordinary detail and a lyrical, natural turn of phrase that draws you in.

I like books that tell stories. In the case of An Island Life the 'story' operates on two levels. First there is the fascinating history of the islands themselves, which Nicolson tracks back over the centuries, deploying the skills of a forensic scientist as well as a poet in the process. Then there is the account of what the islands have meant to his own family, legal owners for a hundred years. Bequeathed to him by his father when he was twenty one, Adam Nicolson is fast approaching the same milestone with his own son. It is a poignant tradition, plainly not about the handing on of an 'asset' so much as granting the next generation privileged access - the opportunity to connect with and learn from a small, beautiful and truly wild part of the world.

I could not envisage managing the journey, let alone the harsh existence on the Shiants islands myself, but thanks to Adam Nicolson I feel I have been there anyway. But that's what a good book does: takes you somewhere other, and then brings you safely home.

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

Karen says

Author Adam Nicolson has been the only writer I've contacted to say how much I loved his book. I didn't expect an answer in return, but he is a lovely, humble man and we had a short bit of back and forth. This book is about a small, uninhabited island off Scotland that the author inherited. His account is rich with information: the island's ecology, weather, ancient history, sporadic inhabitants, etc. A wonderful book for the armchair traveler, about a very isolated and rather bleakly romantic locale.
