An island history almost without comparison

The three statistical reviews of Scotland in 1795, 1845 and 1951 were not edited, let alone peer-reviewed. Parish ministers were asked to report on the condition of their domains, and they submitted their own unfettered contributions.

They consequently contained more than a few inaccuracies. In 1951 the Church of Scotland minister of Strath, Reverend Murdo MacSween, chose to inform the nation that whatever defects might be present in post-war south S'kay, “as far as is known, there are no communists in our midst”.

Reverend MacSween was aware that the new owner of Pabay, a flat little island about a mile in diameter which seemed somehow to dominate the view of Broadford Bay from his church and his manse, was named Len Whatley. He will not have known that Mr Whatley’s forename was not, as is usual for Len, an abbreviation of Leonard. It was a shortening of Leniam.

In 1919, two years after the Russian revolution, the future resident proprietor of Pabay had been christened Arthur Leniam Whatley. He would be known ever after as Len. Len Whatley’s father was a former farm servant from Wiltshire. An autodidact — he had begun labouring at the age of 11 years — he had begun studying at the age of 11 years — he had begun studying the sciences, the history and the languages of Europe, soon becoming a linguist of vast erudition. He had also begun to study the history of the island's ancient inhabitants, the Pictish and the Norsemen, who had settled in the island long before the arrival of the first Christian missionaries.

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Len Whatley was anyway pursuing a career as a businessman who, having made his fortune in the textile industry, had turned his attention to the history and the culture of the Scottish Highlands. He had established the Edinbane Pottery, an enterprise which, following Len’s premature death in 1974, Stuart Whatley built into one of the island’s most successful businesses.

Margaret’s father and brother were, as we have seen, responsible for the Dunollie Hotel, although not for its current standards.

A research scientist named Donald MacLachlan, who with his artist wife Judy washed up on Pabay in the mid-1960s and became close friends with Len and Margaret, established the extraordinary Gaelic school on Skye.

A friend of Stuart’s named Alex Welford helped Lyn Rowe to recreate the successful Pabay Inn from a former croft house.

Another friend of Stuart’s named Ted and Ann Gerrard, who lived on the island for more than 10 years, established the Edinbane Pottery, an enterprise which, following Len’s premature death in 1974, Stuart Whatley built into one of the island’s most successful businesses.

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Sir Donald Currie, the last rich proprietor of the Scalpay Estate

Stan Robinson, who worked with the Whatleys on Pabay, collecting seaweed for manure

A growing island family: Anthea, baby Rachel, Margaret, Len and Stuart on Pabay in 1952

Len packaging day-old chicks for export to Skye and beyond

Margaret in the late 1990s, knitting a pullover in her shop Dunhallin Crafts

An amphibious vehicle bought by Len, which flooded and sunk on its second journey between Skye and Pabay

Stuart Whatley throwing a pot at Edinbane

Anthea, baby Rachel, Margaret, Len and Stuart on Pabay in 1952