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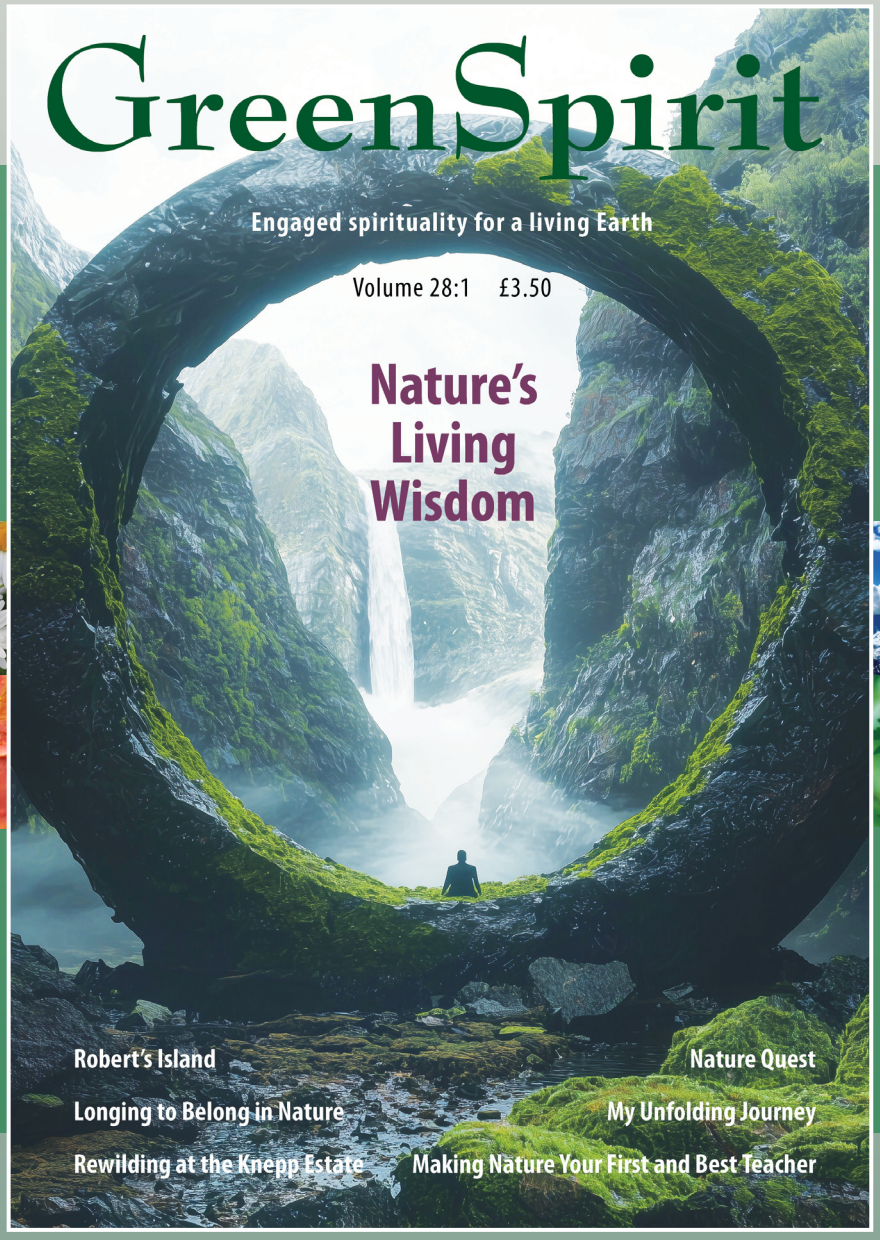
GreenSpirit magazine

Engaged spirituality for a living Earth



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Robert's Island

SPECIAL PLACE

MARIAN VAN EYK MCCAIN

Robert Louis Stevenson had a special love of islands. His childhood was filled with first-hand experience of the sea, of ships, and of island life. When he became an adult, he wove all these into the stories, essays and poems which made his name famous... Long after his death in 1904, each new generation has been thrilled by his word pictures of ocean and shore, of rock and shipwreck, especially that best beloved of all rollicking adventures, *Treasure Island*.

What many people do not know is that to Robert, one island above all others was particularly treasured. An obscure place, whose name is unknown even to many well-travelled folk. This was the tiny islet called Erraid, which sits close by Mull, off Scotland's western coast.

Most of the tourists who pour on to the ferry from Mull to visit the sacred island of Iona and its famous abbey, have no idea that Erraid is right next door. It sits there basking quietly, anonymous and undisturbed, wanting no unexpected visitors.

Which is exactly how it was the day the young Robert first caught sight of it:

> "... framed in the round bull's eye of a cabin port, the sea lying smooth along its shores like the waters of a lake, the colourless, clear light of the early morning making plain its heathery and rocky hummocks. There stood upon it, in those days, a single rude house of uncemented stones, approached by a pier of wreckwood. It must have been very early, for it was then summer, and in summer, in that latitude, day scarcely withdraws; but even at that hour the house was making a sweet smoke of peats which came to me over the bay".

Robert's father, Thomas Stevenson, was a builder of lighthouses. Out on the treacherous reef of Dhu Heartach, fifteen miles into the Atlantic, a new tower was to be constructed. This would be hard, dangerous work, lasting several years, and Thomas, with his young son aboard, was in search of a suitable base station for his operations. Erraid was chosen.

The next time Robert visited, it was to stay, and to deepen his acquaintance with this pretty island. It would become, for him, not only the setting for one of his famous tales, but also a significant spot in his personal story; the place where childhood's timelessness yielded to the urgencies of growing up.

On his second visit, the scene had changed.

> "And behold! There was now a pier of stone, there were rows of sheds, railways, travelling cranes, a street of cottages, an iron house for the resident engineer, wooden bothies for the men, a stage where the courses of the tower were put together experimentally, and behind the settlement a great gash in the hillside where granite was quarried. All day long there hung about the place the music of chinking tools..."

A pretty place ruined? It seems not. Despite the small size of the island – little more than a square mile – it remained largely unspoiled by this assault from nineteenth century industry. Robert wrote:

> "The lighthouse settlement scarce encroached beyond its fences; over the top of the first brae the ground was all virgin, the world all shut out, the face of things unchanged by any of man's doings. Here was no living presence, save for the limpets

Balfour Bay

> on the rocks, for some old, grey, rain-beaten ram that I might rouse out of a ferny den betwixt two boulders, or for the haunting and the piping of the gulls. It was older than man…"

And so it remains. Magically, mercifully, and thanks to a few far-sighted people who believe in living sustainably and leaving things 'undeveloped,' nothing much has changed in all this time. 130 years after the teenage Robert wandered and dreamed among its granite boulders and heathery hills, Erraid is still very much as he described.

Though granite was still quarried here even after the completion of the lighthouse, and exported from the great stone pier, by the turn of the century this had ceased. The "music of chinking tools" gave way again to the natural rhythms of wind and waves, birdsong, and an occasional bleat from one of the blackface sheep which graze most of the island.

Being a tidal island, Erraid can be reached on foot for a little while each day, when the seas recede from the small inlet separating it from its parent island, Mull. Only rarely, however, does anyone venture across that way. Visitors to the island usually come only by invitation.

Erraid has been for many years the property of a Dutch family which uses it for summer vacations. For the rest of the year, the little stone cottages, with their large, walled gardens of fruit, vegetables and flowers, are occupied by a small, hard-working group from the spiritual community of Findhorn, on the northern Scottish coast. Erraid serves as a retreat centre, where people may come for a week or more to work, sing and meditate alongside the community members, eat healthy, nutritious – mostly vegetarian – meals, and learn the skills of organic gardening, candle making and low-tech self-sufficiency.

Sometimes, on one of those perfect days when the sea shimmers under a pure, blue sky and the rocks are warm in the sun, work is laid aside. A short walk through the heather leads to the glorious secret of the island – its large, sandy beach – and to the promise of a safe, and deliciously bracing swim.

Here it was that Stevenson placed one of his famous characters. David Balfour. Davey, hero of the story *Kidnapped*, struggled ashore when the brig Covenant was wrecked upon the Torran reef. Wet, miserable and despairing, he existed for several days on shellfish, gazing out towards the ocean. Only later did he discover that if he went the other way, at low tide he could walk across the damp seabed to Mull.

Its Gaelic name, Traigh Gheal, means 'white sands,' and white they are. White and clean, in a double crescent,

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Erraid

embracing calm, clear, blue-green water. The locals, however, call it Balfour Bay in honour of poor Davey whose lack of lateral thinking kept him there two days longer than necessary. And in honour, also, of Robert himself, who bequeathed to his hero one of his own names. Robert Louis Balfour Stevenson had spent many happy hours in that same spot.

Long years of grazing have taken their toll upon the diversity of the island's plant life, of course. But one large area has been fenced off, as an experiment, to see how well the land would regenerate. And already the difference is striking. Delicate little orchids and asphodels, and many other types of plants are appearing once again amongst the grass and heather.

On the leeward side of the hill behind the quarry, a small wood has been planted with many different species, and the trees are thriving. Unlike many places in our modern world, Erraid is, in fact, becoming ever more natural and beautiful rather than less so. It is one place where human beings are making restitution to the land for what they have taken and are finding ways to bring back the richness and biodiversity which the area would have known before human habitation, perhaps even to enhance it.

I spent a wonderful week on this lovely island and it is an experience I have never forgotten.

You can find out more about staying at Erraid here: www.erraid.uk/stay-with-us/

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