

Loch Computer Presentation

8th September, 2014

Turing Room

School of Informatics

University of Edinburgh

Introduction



As you'll know I was asked to take a series of photographs of Iona for our Loch Computer project. This was partly to give you an idea of the island itself and partly to come back with a tangible body of work which would form part of our collective response to the project itself.

To do this I spent a week on the island this summer - from the 9th to the 15th June and this morning I'm going to show you a selection of the photographs I took during that time.

I very much hope that these photographs will provide some kind of stimulation or springboard for your thinking about your own contributions to this project.

You'll remember when we met in March to talk about the themes of *remoteness and connectedness in the digital era* we learned that the contributions each of you will make will have some link, some connection, to Iona. So when you're looking at these pictures I'd like you to think of them as offerings that might excite your imagination and give you some ideas.

This won't be the only opportunity to see these pictures as these and quite a few other photographs from the trip will be available through a special Loch Computer link which you'll hear about in the afternoon from Alice and Colin.



Iona is a little island (only about about three miles long and a mile and a half wide) which is part of the Inner Hebrides off the west coast of Scotland. The population is about 160. It sits on the 56th parallel - just off the south-western corner of the much larger island of Mull. In fact, 56 degrees and 3 minutes north which strangely happens to be exactly the same latitude as St Andrews.

To get to Iona from Edinburgh you first go to Oban. From there you get a ferry for the 45 minute north-westerly sail through the Sound of Mull to Craignure on the island of Mull. And from there it's a thirty-five mile drive west through southern Mull to the small town and ferry port of Fionnphort.

Finally, there's a five or ten minute crossing on a much smaller ferry over to Iona itself. The whole journey takes about six or seven hours. But if you're thinking about how far away Iona is it's not just the time that's significant.

The journey there is one where you *really* do feel you are heading to somewhere remote. I hadn't expected this at all but by the time I had locked up my car – you aren't allowed to take a car over to the island – I was quite excited by the distance I felt from home and the way this might influence what I saw over the week ahead.

Before I show you any pictures, I'd like to share with you some of the names on the island that I found on an old map that Robert lent me:

Bay at the Back of the Ocean

Well of Eternal Youth

Port of the Dead Man

The Eminence

Hill of the Angels

Big Hill of the Strangers

I found these names very evocative – each I felt with a story to be discovered – and had them echoing in the back of my mind all the time I was there.

I've arranged the photographs into eight sections - a bit like chapters in a way.

The first of these is :

JOURNEY

For me, this was all about looking.

A significant part of my work in the past has been reportage – unobtrusive observation of people and how they behave, - catching the moment.

The first photograph I'm going to show you is of me being watched in turn.



Waiting in the queue for the ferry at Oban. In what I called the chancers' lane as I'd arrived in time to get the earlier ferry. And this big gull on the roof of the camper van next to me was looking hard at me – or more precisely, at what I was eating.



The main thing I focused on during the crossing was the way in which people were so absorbed in looking at what was around them.



I was very aware I'd be doing a lot of this which is I'm sure why I found others

doing this so interesting.



Some people were taking photographs and others looking through binoculars.



And there was plenty to keep the attention of both. This is Lismore Lighthouse, designed by Robert Stevenson and which had been sending life-saving pulses of white light every ten seconds for nearly two hundred years. Which in itself links directly to the themes of remoteness and connectedness.



Arrival on Iona. What interested me here was the processional nature of the arrival – no cars, no noise – just people, quietly walking off the boat. I think it's only in Venice that I've come across a similar scene. Because nobody was able to zoom off in their different directions the group was somehow lent a sense of purpose which was unusual in this kind of situation.



Strictly speaking the ferry isn't the only way to get on to the island. While I was there a family arrived in their private helicopter and one day a large cruise ship anchored off shore so it could use its lifeboats to bring passengers over for a brief visit to the Abbey.



Departures were sometimes a bit more of a do than arrivals. On this extremely wet morning a group who had been on a retreat were being given a send off in a manner which was clearly a well established tradition. The ferry was a long way out before this line eventually broke up and people stopped shouting, waving and repeatedly bowing.



And there were other ways of saying farewell!

COASTLINE

We move now from journey to coastline. One way of looking at a coastline is as an all-round wet border which defines an island, which gives a piece of land this special identity. It's a constantly changing – and never silent - edge whose shape is controlled by the moon and the wind.



Iona's geology means that there is tremendous variety in the coastline and great beauty. There are stunning white-sand beaches and an Aegean blue sea. The many rocky outcrops lend character and a stage for story and history. I thought you might like to hear a short selection of the place names you come across as you read round the coastline on a map of Iona:

Island of Storm
White Strand of the Monks
The Beach of the Seat
Cove of the Little Cross
Port of the False Man



This particular beach, in the north-west, was very popular with the Scottish colourists. Francis Cadell's paintings from this area were shown a number of times in exhibitions at the Royal Scottish Academy in Edinburgh.



While some of the beaches are gentle and sandy, others can be rougher and stony. This is the Bay at the Back of the Ocean. Although only a couple of miles from the

village, this felt quite wild and remote.



Columba and his followers first came ashore on this beach almost fifteen hundred years ago in 563. This is known as Columba's Bay or Port of the Coracle. A coracle in those days by the way was not the kind of small upturned mushroom looking craft which we think of but much more of a proper small sailing boat which would carry seven or eight people.



Up on the north east coast, I discovered this water spout. Every thirty or forty seconds there would be a tremendous 'bloop' noise followed by a spray of water thrown up just above the rocks. Each sound and spray was quite different - I was being presented with a wonderful series of unique sounds and water formations. My very own 3 D installation.



Here, in the late evening, the shore is in shadow and the hills on Mull catch this beautiful coppery light as the sun moves down towards the Atlantic horizon.

TERRAIN

And now we move inland



I thought you could get a good feel for the island from a vantage point and this is one of the best there is - right at the top of the highest point in the island called Dunn I. This looks out on to the northern tip of Iona and the Island of Storm with the famous Island of Staffa - with its Fingal's Cave which so impressed Felix Mendelsson - sitting on the horizon just to the left.

You can also see that beach I mentioned earlier that was so popular with the colourists and other artist on the far left. And on the right you might just be able to pick out the small road that leads to the village and which ends just about opposite the big white building to the left of centre which is a Youth Hostel -apparently voted the best Eco hostel in Scotland.



And if you turn round you see this - with the abbey in the centre of the picture. You can also see the ferry which has just left Fionnphort and is making it's way over the Sound of Iona to the pier by the village. This would be around half past five in the evening.



I found the island very sculptural. This large section of exposed hill with its rakish angle and verdant undergrowth was like a giant meteor to me which had hurtled in from the heavens and half buried itself thousands of years ago.



This roughed up water is Loch Staoineig - aka Loch Computer. A gentle westerly had sculpted the water just enough to give the blue-black surface some life allowing it to mimic its salty counterpart on the beach below. Somehow the darkness of it all made the water look thicker, more viscous. I like the way the photograph has frozen the movement of these little waves in a pattern which could never be repeated – a truly unique configuration.



And here is a broader view of that same Loch which is in our project's title. The loch sits on the high ground just south of a flat belt in the middle of the island and used to be the island's water supply. Drinking water is now piped over from Mull. Scottish Water sold off the Loch about five years ago and it's now a nature reserve and home to a large number of birds.

The path in the foreground takes you right to the southern tip of the island.



For me light is a very important element in photography. The whole process is of

course dependent on light but it's not just that. A lot of my work is as much about light, or *lack of it*, as the subject itself. This photograph is very much about light as well as the irises growing through the grass. It's also about time - or perhaps timing. These moments don't last very long so for me it's very much like capturing someone's behaviour – a special look, a move say in a busy street or in a room bustling with people.



Here you're looking at pretty much most of the village - the only settlement on the island. There are various houses scattered about the island but this is where the one food shop is, the post office and the ferry pier. Again you can see the Abbey in the background which is probably just ten minutes' walk from the ferry pier.



And on the other side of the street in front of the houses you've just seen are some very well cared for gardens. Such order and careful arrangement always came as a bit of a surprise at the end of a day spent immersed in the rougher transitions of the landscape.



As well as the sculptural aspect of the island I was very struck by the many textures and forms that were around. This rough grass is a very good example of this. The

way it caught the wind and light made it seem to me like a rough tapestry of some sort. I was interested too by the way that one surface – the grass - could display so many individual and distinct parts.



Before I went to Iona I was fairly sure that the photographs would be in black and white. It was scenes like this which changed my mind. I have never seen so many buttercups and daisies. Much of the land was just carpeted with them.



One more of the many sculptural pieces I came across was this large lichen-covered rock. I liked the way it seemed to be made up of a mixture of vertical layers (not flat as you'd expect) and, particularly on the right, individual pieces. The texture appealed to me as well. When I was looking at this through the viewfinder I thought the photograph would be stronger if the vertical lines were off-centre which is why I framed it at a slight angle.

ROUTES

I discovered many different routes and paths in my exploration of the island. All of them connected different places and each of them had a different feel, a different character in their appearance and in how they felt through my boots.



There are probably only about two and a half to three miles of metalled road on Iona - just over a mile of that runs from the village up towards the north end of the island which you might remember from the first photograph I showed you from the top of Dun I. The rest runs straight across the flat central area linking east and west sides of the island. And this is where I took this photograph as I was heading west towards the Bay at the Back of the Ocean. There are a few houses and farm buildings in this area with most of the land either side used for grazing sheep.



I turned round to take this shot with Mull in the background. You can see some of those sheep on the left and also lovely yellow irises which flank large stretches of the road.



This east/west section of the road we've been looking at doesn't quite reach the far side but peeters out five or six hundred yards before the beach when it hits the golf course. I'd turned left at that point and by the time I took this photograph I was

heading up the rough track towards the far south of the island where you might remember Columba first landed. In the distance just to the left you can see Dun I the highest point on the island and from where we looked down on the abbey earlier on.



This is about the highest point on the *southern* half of the island , very close to Loch Staoineig. You can see the path hasn't improved much and is still nothing more than bare undulating rock.



A bit further on and there is a distinct change in the landscape. Bracken appears for the first time and the whole area has a lushness not seen anywhere else on the island. That earlier roughness and ruggedness has been smoothed away so that it's much more like a kind of long-abandoned parkland. Even the path has taken on a more manicured look with its neat edges and carefully positioned steps down the slope.



Earlier on we had a look at the incredible numbers of daisies and buttercups. Apart from just the sheer spectacle of this I was interested to see varying patterns within this broad coverage. In different areas either buttercups or daisies would dominate

the path which, depending on where you were, led to lovely yellow or white bands guiding the way.



This path led to a beach which I think is called the North Beach. It's on the east side. This combination of white sand, sea and grassy hillocks bordering a beach was very evocative for me as it was such a familiar landscape from my childhood in Ayrshire. I liked the proper little gate before the beach which added some formality to this rough border as field changed to shore and made it feel as if I was walking onto a stage set of some sort.



A detail here of a historically important route called Street of the Dead. This ancient cobbled street, once *lined* with crosses, was used to bring the coffins of Kings and clan chiefs to the royal burial ground by the abbey from where they were brought ashore at Martyrs' Bay. When I took this photograph I had in the back of my mind the many unmarked gravestones I'd seen (by the nunnery as well as at the abbey) and also the people who might have walked behind the coffins in the hundreds and hundreds of sad processions which had used this route.



I liked the way this little path was winding its way through the abbey's graveyard

and had been kept so narrow and neat despite the large numbers of tourists – like an indicator of respect. I also liked the notion of movement this path gave to the photograph - coming in at an angle from the top left, turning back just before the middle and a small, last minute change of course to glance that bottom edge.

BELIEF

No account of Iona would be complete without reference to the island's incredible historical importance in relation to the religious development of this part of the world. There is no end of material with which you can find out about this but with such limited time I thought I would concentrate on what interested me most and that was that so much of it - from as far back at the 11th century - is still in evidence. And apart from the beauty and interest of it all this history exerts a tremendous influence on the economy of the island and its inhabitants.



The centrepiece is the Abbey built by Benedictine Monks around 1200 although there is some low level original stonework which dates back to the 9th century. This is just the chancel so the building is huge. It felt peaceful rather than forbidding though. I'd chosen my time carefully, right at the end of the day when the day trippers were well on their way back to the mainland.



These two effigies, carved so beautifully from Michelangelo's favoured stone - carera marble, are relatively new in terms of the abbey's history - early nineteenth hundreds - and are of the 8th Duke of Argyll and his wife. It was the Duke who started the restoration of the abbey. But here it was the light which I was really interested in - perfect, like a gift.



Most people will recognise the carved cross as a kind of Ionian leitmotif. All but three of the 360 carved crosses on Iona were destroyed - so this one from 1500, Maclean's cross, is particularly precious.



The abbey is not the only substantial historic building of interest. Just outside the village, opposite the Spar shop, is one of the best preserved nunneries in Britain dating from about 1200 like the abbey. These are gravestones in the grounds of the nunnery - all plain with no names or embellishments, just this crude reference to the human form. I suppose what struck me most about this scene were the various layers of reverence - the carefully ordered stones themselves, the modest little metal surround so generous with its crosses..... and the mowing and brushing of the grass.



St Oran's Chapel is the oldest intact structure from the medieval period and

predates the abbey by several decades. Kings and noblemen were laid to rest here before being buried and now it seems to be very much the focus of pilgrim groups who will gather here for readings, singing and prayers. I know this all too well, as on more than one occasion, I walked in on what was obviously an emotional time for them



In marked contrast to the plain unmarked gravestones at the nunnery which we've just been looking at is this worked piece of stone which I think shows the effects of time rather than deliberate damage. Many such gravestones at the abbey, and in particular the faces, had obviously been deliberately damaged. I was attracted to this because I felt the features had been worn away simply by touch and I thought that added a sense of value to this piece of sculpture - the soft skin of hands having smoothed that hard stone. I even wondered if the little hands themselves had somehow encouraged people to think of touching it. Difficult to say!

BOUNDARIES

Boundaries are, of course, an integral part of connectedness.



This is one of the simplest boundaries on the island - a barbed wire fence. When I took this photograph I'd been on the island long enough for this to make me think of a cross - the wood above the wire the head, the barbs linking to the crown of thorns, the all-important horizontal. The surface too interested me - dry and clean like new parchment waiting for a message.



Far less abstract but I did like the colour coordination with the garage!



These steps cross a boundary fence on a path just beyond the long sweep of the Bay at the Back of the Ocean. Once over the steps you're just about ten minute's away from the rather sinister sounding Port of the Dead Man. Some styles you come across can be awkwardly small – almost grudgingly allowing you to defeat the fence – so I appreciated the generosity here in the length of the steps and the thoughtfully positioned holding post in the centre.



I liked the tension that was created here. A simple solution provided for a big problem in the nunnery's boundary wall, through the permanent push of these poles. From the state of some of the wood here this device had kept equilibrium for quite some time.



This is all about divisions of space and surface - access, land, rock, horizontal, vertical. And I loved the way the fence stops dead at the rock. It seemed abrupt somehow after the steady direction of the wires. But then later I found myself wondering if I was right in assuming this was the end of the fence rather than the beginning. And would it matter anyway?



To finish this set of boundaries I thought one with some context – [if only because it's not often you get this close to a sheep and they still want to look at you. I was equally as curious.]

LANDLINES

This next set of photographs is another take on the theme of lines which we've just been looking at but has a much more literal link to connectedness as these photographs look at BT's presence on the island.



I wasn't able to get any signal on my mobile phone for the whole time I was on Iona

but one day there was a very important call I had to make. This took me to the one public phone box on Iona. The first thing I noticed was that it was sporting this Peter Pan type logo -one that had been replaced eleven years ago by a kind of multi coloured football which I found out later was called 'connected world'.



Inside, I was interested to see that someone had gone to the trouble of writing a little notice (with diagram!) about being able to speak to people when the call got through.



Then again, by the dialing buttons, there was another scrawled instruction. It seemed odd to me that here were all these fancy options – volume control, last number redial, next call (whatever that was) and even a choice of language – but there was evidence people were having difficulty just getting through. My suspicions were right and despite following all the advice I couldn't make it work – all I got was a sense of deep irony, frustration and disappointment.



This little wooden BT hut looks out over a very significant part of the island – Martyrs' Bay named in the aftermath of a murderous Viking raid in the beginning of

the ninth century when 68 monks were killed on this beach. It was also here that the coffins of Kings came ashore and were processed along the Street of the Dead up to the Abbey. And in more recent times the Clyde Puffers beached on these sands to unload their cargo of coal.



And on the side of that little hut an extraordinary notice – BT premises. Unauthorised access is trespass. Only for the use of BT vehicles!

FOUND THINGS

This last section contains some of my favourite pictures and ones that don't easily fit into any of the previous categories. I see them in some ways like a kind of visual mortar, filling in the gaps and binding the other pictures together. They were discoveries.



These dried up bits of seaweed are called tangles on the island. To me they were a fascinating illustration of connectedness which despite their absolute desiccation gave off a real feeling of movement. And later on I was able to link this to a strikingly similar pattern on St Martin's Cross at the front of the abbey which is known as snake and boss.



More connectedness thrown up by the sea, this time in the form of a vine wrapped round a branch.



Loch Computer's core concerns of remoteness and connectedness *and* my reason for being on this island made this 'discovery' absolutely extraordinary to me – an amputated and abandoned relic of the copper wire age - which over the years must have helped carry thousands and thousands of telephone calls both within the island and far beyond its shores. How, I wondered, could this obsolete, cruciform flotsam have been washed up on this empty beach?



This strange little thing was made purely by the lapping of the incoming tide washing over stringy seaweed, rolling it down the sandy tide line and then rolling it back up again.



It wasn't that unusual to come across various things people had left or made - cairns, arrangements of stones or shells. This painting was one I came across tucked in behind a rock near that little spouting rock I showed you and it must have taken a long time to do.



So often it's the sea that delivers surprises. This serpent-like seaweed was about twelve feet long and up until three or four paces away from it I really did think it might slither away - or try to wrap itself round my ankles. It has a really beautiful form to it and I loved the strong suggestion of motion given by the long undulating sides.



Something I had never seen before. This carefully constructed little bundle, no bigger than clasped hands, is a skylark's nest: its loose weave cleverly blending in with the surrounding dead grass so you'd never see it while on the move. I thought this was a perfect example of animal creation and endeavour - yet almost invisible.



A beached Thomas the Tank Engine balloon was not what I expected to come across. I'd noticed it flickering from quite some distance away as I came down the track towards Columba's Bay but couldn't quite work it out. When I did finally see what it was I could only think it had been placed there in remembrance of a child who'd died. You wouldn't really have a balloon like this as a play thing - particularly on a fairly inaccessible stony beach right at the southern edge of the island. Who knows?



This branded code on one of BT's totemic poles brought me straight back to the idea of connectedness and remoteness and got me thinking about signals and how they move about differently now - no need for poles or wires, no evidence, no rows of balancing birds, no more noise in the wind.



I liked this – real Turner Prize material and as good as anything Monet was looking at over 120 years ago. He'd have loved it - especially if the weather had been a bit better. Still, I didn't mind the diffuse light which had been brought in by the low

cloud. It meant colours were less saturated and contrast was minimal allowing the shape and texture to come through a lot more which I think in turn helped to emphasise its extraterrestrial appearance.



I met and walked some hours with a crofter, Gordon Grant, who showed me some of his island. He'd very nearly lost his life a couple of months previously when one of his new cows had knocked him over and crushed him. But luckily for Gordon remoteness and connectedness were not at odds that day which meant he was able to be airlifted to hospital and come back with a new hip.



Gordon told me this caravan had been here for fifty years, - owned by a husband and wife from Oban, both doctors, who he said were a couple of real characters. They'd come here every summer, towing the caravan a bit further down the slope so they could get the light. Then it would go back under the rock for shelter in the winter. She had died just a few years ago, not that long after her husband, so this much loved space was now just abandoned.

I liked the way it was so absolutely embedded in its surroundings yet so antipathetic - another reminder of how things can contain so much personality even though the people involved are missing.

Conclusion

So, to conclude, I very much hope you will have taken something from this

presentation that will help you in whatever it is that you will be developing around our shared theme of remoteness and connectedness in the digital era.

In selecting the photographs to share with you, I have deliberately chosen those that should give you an overview of the island and its geography; and the details within which particularly caught my attention - whether from the present day or from the past.

As I mentioned earlier I've loosely grouped the photographs under the 8 themes of journey, coastline, terrain, routes, belief, boundaries, landlines and found things. But I hope you will find your *own* meanings and connections.

And remember that a fuller set of photographs will be available on the Tumblr site which Alice and Colin will be telling you about after lunch.

For each of you, there's a booklet I've put together as a memento of the day and as a Loch Computer aide memoire.

I've also brought some printed photographs for you to have a look at so you might get a better idea of the quality of the work I've brought back from the island. And before lunch, I'd like to leave you with one final beach, one final found thing!

