

Chapter & Verse

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Choruses of Stars: Anna Adams (1926 - 2011)

Although Anna Adams was born in London and lived for many years in Yorkshire, her poetry will forever be associated with the tiny island of Scarp in the Outer Hebrides. In the early 1970's, she and her husband, the distinguished painter, Norman Adams bought an abandoned croft on the island for just £200. Summer after summer, they returned to live on Scarp, long after the island had become depopulated. In 1991, she published a series of poems and prose passage about life on the island, entitled **Island Chapters**. The book which contains abstract watercolours of the Hebridean landscape by her husband is beautiful and moving and offers an unique insight into the death of a small and remote community. It's sad that this book is now out of print but is still available on Amazon and in other second-hand booksellers. Anna's adherence to writing in rhyme and metre insured that her poetry is not fashionable.



Although Scarp is separated from the larger island of Harris by just a few hundred metres of sea, the frequent storms and lack of a safe harbour on Scarp made life extremely difficult. In the middle of the 19th century, Scarp had a population of over two hundred

but by the time Anna came to the island, the population had gone down to less than a dozen and she witnessed the final abandonment of the island by its resident population. Everything seemed to conspire against the people of Scarp. The Hydro Electricity Board ignored all pleas to bring electricity to the island; the Church of Scotland did not bother to replace the island's lay preacher despite the devoutness of the islanders.

In 1967, the primary school closed and then the post office, meaning that no mail was delivered. The telephone cable was damaged in one of the many storms and was not repaired. It was if the authorities were forcing people off the island as they were viewed as a mere inconvenience.

In 1934, Scarp achieved a brief period of international fame as it was the setting for the first and only attempt at rocket post. An eccentric

German inventor attempted to launch a rocket containing letters from Harris to Scarp. Unfortunately, the rocket exploded and fragments of singed letters landed in the Atlantic Ocean.

When Anna first set foot on the island, she was astonished at its beauty with the extraordinary array of wild flowers and the dazzling white of the shell and beaches. She writes that *it was as though we had disembarked on the flowery shores of Heaven. We trod on carpets of flowers - field gentians, bog asphodel, milkwort, speckled orchids, tiny saxifrages, and stonecrops.*



Island Chapters is an account of a small world which echoes still of the countless generations of those who have gone. If you hold an ear against the walls of the now roofless church and listen intently, you can almost hear the psalms which were once sung. In *Hebridean Sabbath*, Anna writes of the islanders' strict rituals each Sunday when all work and play ceased:

The Sabbath closes doors and hushes speech,
manacles hands, hives feet, suppresses each
workaday wish for play, deserts the beach,

while people from the seashore houses wear
their Sunday best expressions, oil their hair,
and walk in polished boots to meet for prayer

In the following poem, the traditional dwelling, the Blackhouse with its peat smoked walls is given a voice. She is perceived as a mother who has now lost all the children she had for so long protected. No returning tide will ever bring them home. *Winds have stolen all the seed she bore.*

Blackhouse Women

1

I am, myself, the house that shelters them.
My nerves extend into this skirt of stone,
this shawl of thatch. These windows are my eyes.
I am a hollow room, enfolding them.

The peat fire is my heart. This hearth is warm
always, for them, but through the open door
sometimes shy happiness steals in to me.
The sun lays yellow carpets on the floor.

My children bring home hunger, men bring storm,
and I absorb in quiet the sea-birds cry,
and breakers roar, till in the sleeping room
oceans and mountains lie.

They leave no room for me in my own womb;
by them, and by their dreams, my lap is filled;
I spread my skirts to shield them, I am home,
content to be my one forgotten child.

2

They were my life; what is the use of me
now that my fire is out? I smell of soot
not smoke, wear dock and ragwort in my hat,
importune passing mountains of proud sea.

A broken thistle mutters by the bay
that winds have stolen all the seed she bore.
Mine also. Through roof ribs, laid bare, declare
me dead, worm-riddled, far gone in decay,

my emptiness craves fullness, as the shore
craves the returning tide. I welcome birds,
cherish the weaving spider, suckle weeds;
lacking my lord let nettles crowd my door.

Anna notes that the fertility of the island which gave rise to such an extraordinary range of wild flowers can be enhanced by human cultivation and by the grazing of cattle so long as it's done with the care and sensitivity with which the islanders treated the land. In other words, depopulation leaves the botanical nature of the land impoverished as our culture is impoverished by

the loss of a unique way of being.

Oats, rye, barley and potatoes are also botany, and also beautiful. And one of the beautiful things about them is that they grow at the behest of people, beneath untameable crags and beside untrustworthy seas, enclosed in the bright geometry of fields.

In one of the last poems in *Island Chapters*, the drama of the island continues like *The Tempest* but with no human actors to perform in it and no audience to view it. It is a drama of light, storms and sea with silent *choruses of stars*.

from Depopulation Play, Set on the island of Scarp, With a Cast of No One

The safety curtain falls and
sticks half way,
blots out the stage while scene
shifters wheel in
the same old rocks and
mountains, then
rainbows and storms, lost
properties,
a lobster-boat from a far distant
play,
some ships of fools, opposing
winds,
alarums and excursions,
silences.
A squall sets waves to smiling
false white smiles;
the beach is strewn with wigs
and litter hurled ashore by
hissing seas.
The script is wordless, may be
meaningless,
by poltergeists, or by the
Lightning Man.
The drama is of light. Topping
the bill
are tightrope-walking Sun,
Trapezing Moon.
The sea itself changes its
coloured lights,
gives Winter matinees, and
plays all night
to choruses of stars.

