

Cycling the Archipelago
Book review by Laura MacIver

APPARENTLY more people speak Punjabi than Gaelic in Scotland.

This is one of those salient facts that Radio Journalist Lesley Riddoch would seize upon and use as a rally cry for Gaels, for her mission in new book 'Lesley Riddoch on the Outer Hebrides' is to inspire islanders on the west coast of Scotland to grasp their own futures and forge an indelible mark for themselves on the Scottish consciousness. Ms Riddoch is a formidable force; feisty, passionate and with the ability to shame the most ardently apathetic person into action. She has the same charm that great orators and generals have demonstrated, the kind of charm that Wallace and De Moray led their armies with, the kind of charm that could persuade Inuits to buy freezers.

It is this particular skill that makes her controversial views so palatable.

The reserved pride and stoic nature of islanders stands up well to criticism from incomers but also immediately and quietly alienates them the length of the great archipelago.

Not so with Ms Riddoch, who swoops in with highly critical opinions, but does so with such passion and so obviously with the island's best interests at heart that she is continually welcomed with the warmth, humour and self-deprecating culture usually reserved for those brought up in the community.

It is this welcome that has infused her book with similar qualities.

Setting off on a bike tour in the summer of 2006 as part of a BBC series, Lesley starts in Barra and Vatersay and makes her winding way up the islands, stopping to take in stories and culture on the way and continually astounding herself with the contradictions between mainland Scotland's negative and derogatory opinion of the 'Isles of strangers' and the quiet accepting reality.

While contentious issues such as transport links and depopulation are snatched at, ripped apart and glued back together again in new and thought-provoking shapes, stories and characters are dealt with with tenderness and delicacy that could only come from someone with rural links themselves.

And along with the care and passion comes knowledge. Be you a born and raised islander, or a traveller investigating some of the furthest reaches of Europe, Lesley's book will tell you something new, not so much about the histories of the islands which can be found anywhere, but about the culture of the people.

She has a way of shining the magnifying glass on a well-documented place in a new and exciting way matching every beauty with a cultural wart that builds to create one of the most unfalteringly real images of the islands – all the more astounding for coming from an outsider.

At one point Lesley apologises for what she describes as a 'random set of encounters, not a detailed one,' but what she fails to realise is that this is the main factor for making her book on the Hebrides so tangible.

Her good natured arguing with locals, her impulsive guiding instinct and the seemingly random encounters she has are what makes this such an organic, rich tapestry of island cultures.

The book, which deliberately focuses on people, not facts and figures is so effective in its passion because it displays the exact qualities that equally frustrate Lesley and inflame her passion – the humble nature of the people as they quietly go about their everyday business and shrug off any suggestions that they are entitled to more.

But more than the analysis of a dying culture, more than the passionate embrace of a poignant race, Lesley's book succeeds on a far more base level – it's entertaining. Written with an exploring nature and letting the islander's turn of phrase inject the humour, the character of the book comes from the character of the islanders, and as we all know, that's unique, playful and always able to raise a chuckle. Provocative and inspired, 'Riddoch on the Outer Hebrides,' is a must read, especially for those that think they know the islands inside out. You won't find a more stimulating or relevant read around.