

Riddoch makes her own mark on well worn route

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If you insist upon cycling from Vatersay to the Lighthouse at the Butt of Lewis, you couldn't wish for a better companion than the writer and broadcaster Lesley Riddoch. Quite a few people have made this journey. One or two have written books about it. A problem faced by anybody authoring a top-to-toe travelogue of the Western Isles is that of instant comparison with Derek Cooper's magnificent "The Road to Mingulay". But there key differences. Cooper went north to south. Cooper most certainly did not cycle so much as a yard of the way. Cooper made his journey of exploration in the 1980s, and the islands have changed considerably in the last 20 years.

And just as Derek Cooper is easily identified as a man, Lesley Riddoch is notoriously not. Lesley is a woman and women see things differently from men. Again, she's far from being the first woman to write a book about the Hebrides. From Ada Goodrich-Freer and Amy Murray and their strange thing for Father Allan Macdonald of Eriskay a century ago, up through Margaret Fay Shaw (a Hebridean cyclist back in the 1920s), John Buchanan and many others , the islands have attracted and produced female authors. Romantic novelists in particular seem perennially drawn to our wild shores and towering storrs.

But Lesley Riddoch is not a novelist, and nor is her attachment to the Western Isles, notably romantic. Her approach is not descriptive. As listeners to the radio will know, she likes to ask questions. The book can be read as one long and colourful and intriguing interview with the modern Western Isles.

She hits gold on day one, with Calum Celland of the cycle shop in Castlebay. Calum tells her to circumnavigate Barra clockwise, because of the "terrible hill" to the east. Lesley points out she will still have to face the hill on her homewards stretch. Calum counters that it's easier that way - "at the end of the day it's not nearly as big."

"You find that?"

"I've never been on a bike in my life."

(There is plenty evidence that Barra people did talk that way before Compton Mackenzie arrived to immortalise their ironic banter. The modern visitor could be tempted to presume that Calum and his 21st century counterparts are simply living up to the tongue-in-cheek vernacular of a string of famously witty Barra priests. The historical evidence suggests that it is, in fact, something stored in their genes.)

Another advantage of rereading a woman writer is that women talk easily to other women. In South Uist, Riddoch gets a uniquely subversive perspective on a previously unadvertised function of long Hebridean patronymics. "It was just useful to know who your cousins were before you went...dancing shall we say?"

Having lamented the condition of Lochboisdale harbour, been kicked out of Angus Peter Campbell's Gaelic class for lack of serious attention and collected from the MacKillops in Berneray a recipe for the cure-all medicine derived from seal oil, Lesley transfers to the northern islands.

Lewis and Harris have so much to offer. Riddoch's account of a choral confrontation between New Age pagans ("We're shamanic astrologers from Louisiana") and a Free Church congregation at the Callanish Stones on a big moon night is worth an essay in itself - as well as being brilliantly reminiscent of the Cloggies cartoon strip.

Throughout her journey (and doubtless long before it), Lesley Riddoch has been aware of the vexed subject of wind turbines in the Western Isles. She meets and is charmed (naturally) by Dr Finlay MacLeod.

But not for one second does she accept Finlay's strangely New Age philosophy that there is something uniquely precious and inviolable about the moorlands of Lewis. Lesley Riddoch, as a sympathetic outsider, cannot believe the sums of regenerative capital that the anti-wind farm campaigners are spurning. "I am fast coming to the conclusion," she says, "that land [in the Hebrides] doesn't need more love. It needs more use."

This is a read-in-one-sitting book. Riddoch is fast, engaging, and funny. More importantly, she knows when her subjects are also engaging and funny, and is happy to hand the airtime over to them. It is a series of snapshots, a kind of holiday album. But it is an album compiled by a fascinated, assertive and intelligent visitor.

And perhaps this visitor's most perceptive piece of advice is that, from now on, the future of the Western Isles lies more than ever before in the hands of its inhabitants. They have the power, as well as the will, to make a better future.