



Carloway Broch Isle of Lewis

# Jim Richardson...from Great Plains to Tomb of the Eagles

by Katie MacLeod

“It was very exotic for me to be going to an island. I came from a small town on the Great Plains, and the biggest landmark you can see from 20 miles away is a grain elevator, because it’s flat, so it was exciting for me to be going to an island,” says photographer Jim Richardson of the first time he visited the Scottish islands.

“But I also found a lot there in the islands that was familiar eventually. I had been spending time photographing a small town in Kansas, and what I found was that the kinds of problems people face in those places that are far from the limelight are very much the same... If I went to a wedding dance in Cuba, Kansas, it was very much like going to a wedding dance in Orkney.”

Jim — who grew up on a farm in Kansas in the United States

— has spent more than 35 years working on environmental and travel assignments around the world for National Geographic Magazine and its sister publication, National Geographic Traveler, with a particular interest in Scotland.

His passion for photography started in childhood, when he played with the pawn-shop cameras his father brought back from drives to Texas as a trucker. At university he worked as a photographer at the student newspaper, and joined the Topeka Capital-Journal in the 1970s as a young photojournalist before moving on to the Denver Post.

Jim also began working on black-and-white documentary photography projects in rural towns, specifically in the town of Cuba — work which has won him national acclaim — and he eventually went freelance in 1985. His first story for National Geographic was published that year (while he was still at the Denver Post), and by 1989, he was working almost exclusively for the magazine.



Fingal's Cave, Isle of Staffa

Scotland would soon become a major focus of his photography. Jim had recently completed a story about the Ogallala Aquifer under the Great Plains for the magazine when the opportunity to travel across the Atlantic arose in 1995. “The director of photography there called me up one day and said ‘I know you’d like to do a story in England. I don’t have that, but I have a story on Scotland. Would you like to try that?’ And I said, ‘Yeah, sure!’”

That first Scotland assignment was for one of National Geographic’s country-focused stories, a multiple-page spread about the destination as a whole. “I took it on, like all stories, and started researching and buying guide books and digging for stuff,” Jim remembers. “It was really difficult for me because it’s so amorphous. Scotland is so big, there’s so much there, and you don’t want to do just the knee-jerk tourist thing of the obligatory kilts.

“Every day I had the feeling that I was failing. I would constantly be stopping at these little red phone booths, out in the countryside, and I would call my wife and tell her that I was failing, that they were going to discover that I didn’t know what I was doing, and this was going to be the end of my National Geographic career. As it turned out, I did pretty well!” he laughs.

He did do pretty well: that first story has been followed by many more over the last 28 years, taking him to almost every corner of the country, and of course, to many of the islands, including the Inner and Outer Hebrides, the Small Isles, St. Kilda, the Shiant Isles, Skye, Raasay, and Orkney.

Jim’s photos immediately transport the viewer to Scotland, and cover everything from landscapes and wildlife to



Georgina Kitching, Isle of Jura



*Georgina Kitching, Isle of Jura*



*Lobster fishing in Orkney*

culture, archaeology, and whisky. In recent years, his depictions of Scotland's dramatic landscapes have amassed hundreds of thousands of fans on Instagram, where he shares a "Scotland Fix of the Day," often with detailed historic and local context as well as personal anecdotes. But it's the people of Scotland Jim has met over his many visits that pepper his stories as we talk, from archeologists and lairds to farmers and tea-shop owners.

"Whenever you go out to the islands, you're going to a place where people have to be very intentional about living there. In general, you see that people wear many hats, they're busy all the time. I find it fascinating, and oddly familiar to what I see out in places like where I live — except we don't have nearly as many lighthouses!"

He mentions Dr. Kevin Woodbridge, a GP in North Ronaldsay in Orkney, who when they met also worked at the bird observatory, was a member of the school board, and helped repair the local walls. There was Nick Card, the archaeologist and director of the Ness of Brodgar dig, and Ronald Simison, the farmer who discovered — and unearthed — the Tomb of the Eagles in South Ronaldsay, after giving up on waiting for the professionals to arrive. "I think that's a perfect unexpected islands story," adds Jim.

In Jura, he met Georgina Kitching at the north end of the island, after coming across a sign by the sand advertising 'tea on the beach' and picking up the walkie-talkie next to it: "10 minutes later, Georgina is walking down from her kitchen, across the bridge, past the swans, and down to the little beach bringing tea and cake." And in Uig in Lewis, Jim joined Johnnie Buchanan on his boat as he ferried sheep from Valtos to Pabbay for summer grazing,



*Hauling cattle off Ensay*

"a strange experience, but really quite fun."

Jim speaks fondly, too, of the late Lawrence MacEwen, farmer and Laird of Muck, and the stories he regaled Jim with during his visit. "One of the highlights that really stand out to me is Lawrence MacEwen on Muck. He was a fascinating character," says Jim. "I knew when I was doing the Inner Hebrides story, if I could get out to Muck for a couple of days, I might get a good picture." The photo he ended up with is striking, captured at the top of Beinn Airein in a gale, brooding skies and Eigg in the distance, with Lawrence and his collie in the foreground, staring right at you through the lens. "It's probably one of the better portraits I've ever done in my life, because it had so much in it, and it was so linked to Lawrence."

"I think of what a rich part of my life all those island adventures and connections became, especially for somebody living out here in the American Midwest," says Jim of his enduring links with Scotland. "I suppose that seems unlikely, but it really became a central story in my



*Lawrence MacEwan on Beinn Airein, Isle of Muck*

life, those kinds of connections."

"The islands all have individual stories to be told, but they also all share certain commonalities. And whether it's a tiny town here in Kansas or a tiny island, I can feel at home and understand what's going on. Finding those people, and those connections, has been an incredibly rewarding part of my life. My thanks to all of them, mentioned or unmentioned."