

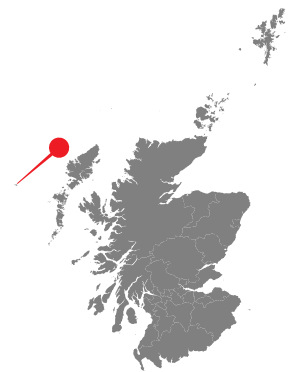


Author Karen Swan – and how St Kilda inspired her

By Katie Macleod

It was while reading the newspaper one weekend that Karen Swan – the Sunday Times bestselling author who's sold over one million books – came across a tiny newspaper article about the Hebridean island of St Kilda, an article which would become the spark of her 2022 novel, *The Last Summer*, and mark the start of a new five-book series.

"The thing that caught my eye was the headline, because it said '90 Years Since St Kilda Gave Up.' I thought, what do you mean, they gave up?" Alongside the article was a photo of who Karen now knows as the men of St Kilda, standing at their 'daily parliament' gathering and staring unflinchingly into the camera. "I just thought, gosh, they don't look like they'd give up!"





Intrigued, Karen dug deeper. She was already familiar with the Scottish crofting life — her father is from Fort William, and she grew up spending holidays in the Highlands and hearing stories about her great-grandmother herding cattle over the hills to Kinlochleven — but she was fascinated at how much more extreme the St Kildan way of life had been before the villagers finally chose to leave in 1930.

"I think what really caught my imagination about it was the fact that St Kilda is not like other islands; the only way for them to really stay alive was to scale these cliffs and live off the seabirds. They were effectively an island nation of craggers and mountaineers."

Although she was initially intimidated at the prospect of setting a novel in St Kilda, where the Gaelic-speaking community had effectively been living 50 years behind their mainland contemporaries, the idea stayed with her. She had dabbled in historical fiction with backstories in some of her previous novels (like *The Spanish Promise*, which is partially set during the Spanish Civil War), and enjoyed the research process the genre required.

Her idea for a story centred on the evacuation of St Kilda in 1930 would become the Wild Isle series, with each book following one of five young fictional women from the community. *The Last Summer*, the first in the series, was released in hardback in July 2022 (the paperback goes on sale in April 2023), and follows Effie Gillies as her quiet

island life is turned upside down with the arrival of Lord Sholto, the heir to the Earl of Dumfries.

Named the Best Historical Romance of 2022 by *The Independent*, *The Last Summer* is a book to get lost in, a tale full of romance, adventure, and mystery that moves from the edge of the Atlantic to the glamour of high society on the Scottish mainland. But what really draws the reader in is the sense that they, too, are on St Kilda, experiencing everything alongside Effie and her friends.

"I really wanted to convey the drama of the place, and the majesty, and the beauty. I wanted to show how wild it was, but also what a home it was," explains Karen. "It was inhabited for thousands of years, and was home to thousands of people over the course of that time. I hope that for those people who haven't been there, that they can see it enough [in the book] that they feel they can experience it, and can connect with it."

To transport her readers fully to the cliffs and community of St Kilda, Karen undertook an intense, almost academic research process that began with finding every book published about St Kilda. She spent months reading those books, combing through newspaper articles, and watching old video footage to get a feel for life on the island. "I really needed to understand their life before I could remotely start to then put characters in it," she says, with the end result being "an entirely fictitious story set



within very accurate, historical facts of daily life there.”

By the time she visited St Kilda in May 2021, Karen already knew the locations she would be using for certain scenes, and made her way around the island to experience them all first hand. “I needed to see how it felt walking along the street, and walking down to the beach, and how long did it take to get to the church? I needed to peer through the windows, and get the scale of the place and see how it all connected, so that once I had got my plot together and got my character backgrounds together, I could then just let the characters roam.”

After a failed attempt to return in May 2022, Karen was able to make a last-minute trip to St Kilda for *The Last Summer*’s publication day in July 2022. On-location research like this is important for Karen as an author, and something she does for every book. “I always need to know where my characters are moving. I need to be literally walking the streets or the hills with them, which is why I always go to the places I write about... You can’t write authentically for your characters, if you aren’t actually in that room, or in that space, with them. You have to be seeing through their eyes.”

As someone who writes and publishes two books a year – one in the summer, and another at Christmas – Karen writes daily to keep on schedule, but she’s not a writer who decides in advance what will happen on each page. “I tend to be fairly organic in how I write, in that I’ll have

an overriding narrative arc, and I will know roughly what my story is, but there’s still an element of letting the characters dictate the action to quite a large amount,” she says, adding that, “if you can think three or four or five steps ahead, then so can the reader.”

“I do try to make my books beautiful as well as entertaining, I’m always hoping and striving for both. Creatively and intellectually, I’m loving the process, I’m loving the challenge it’s providing,” says Karen of immersing herself in historical fiction, not to mention the intricacies of writing a story that stretches out over multiple novels.

The second instalment in the series, *The Stolen Hours*, is due out in July 2023, and will see the story shift between St. Kilda and the Isle of Harris as it focuses on the fortune of Mhairi Mackinnon, and the question of what really happened in the final hours before the evacuation. Future locations may include Canada, Paris, or London, but the series will always remain anchored in St Kilda, a place which Karen says she would happily return to every year for the rest of her life.

“I love it so much. You feel like you are stepping back in time, far beyond the 1930s – it feels prehistoric. You’re in the North Atlantic and then all of a sudden there’s this sort of crenellation of cliffs, and they’re so high, and you’ve got to master those in order to live there. It’s a wonderful and ever-changing place.”