

## Eilean Mòr: an eremitic retreat, a place of nature, a holy presence



Eilean Mòr, is one of the MacCormaig Isles. Its Gaelic name means 'big isle', which belies its diminutive 18 hectares, though it is the largest of the group. The isle lies low in the Sound of Jura, off mainland Knapdale. In the 1970s it was inherited by the Scottish Nationalist Party who placed the isle in a charitable trust. This works to conserve the isle's rich natural and historical heritage,

from squawk of summer breeding seabirds to the significant medieval ecclesial remains.

I visited in 2007 when I was left alone on the isle for an afternoon, and returned in 2012, this time leading a group of pilgrims.



The island hosts a chapel, with potential c.11<sup>th</sup> century origins, dedicated to the obscure c. 7<sup>th</sup> century St Cormac. It is set within a graveyard which contains the shaft of a once-ringed 10<sup>th</sup> century cross. Through time the chapel has been a domestic dwelling, housed an illicit still, and whilst people have long-moved away, a fine medieval effigy remains.

To the south of the isle a path leads to a cave, also dedicated to St Cormac. On both visits I felt drawn to the dank retreat. Lowering myself in, and allowing my eyes to adjust to the gloom, I could make out the retreat's two incised c.7<sup>th</sup> century crosses.



Standing in the eremitic cell, tracing the crosses with a finger, I found myself wondering who had chosen such self-isolation, what moved their heart, and how they found the bodily-austere, spiritually-rich time.



Heaving myself out of the cave, I ambled down to the isle's southern end, found a grassy slope overlooking a cove, sat down and relaxed. In May's warm sunshine, I watched as a quilt of eiders appeared, busying themselves, ducking and diving. Then I caught a glimpse of an arching in the water. Joy of joys, an otter, soon joined by a second, who played in the glinting light.

As I soaked in one of nature's joyful gifts of intimacy, a glow came over me, which felt a conflation of transcendence and immanence. For a moment in time, which felt an eternity, I experienced a deep and divine connection, and when the otters disappeared, peace pervaded.

In today's self-isolation lockdown world, many have noticed nature anew, and some may experience a Psalm 19 moment...

*The heavens are telling the glory of God: and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.*

... and perhaps like me on Eilean Mòr, others have added a prayer to nature's hymn of praise and sensed a deep well-being of peace.