

## PROLOGUE

*It was a dark and stormy night ...*

In July 1840 a terrible storm hit St Kilda. The 'island at the end of the world' rises out of the sea 110 miles off the west coast of Scotland. The four islands that form St Kilda boast the highest cliffs in Britain and some of the world's largest colonies of sea birds. This is one of the most unforgiving landscapes on earth and is battered by atrocious weather most of the year. No trees grow here and there is no shelter from the elements. Yet man lived here for over two thousand years, cut off from the outside world for the most part. People on the mainland paid little attention to this furthest outpost of the British Isles, and so the islanders were generally free to live as they chose, only very occasionally disturbed by outsiders.

St Kilda is so isolated that it was often suggested it should be used as a prison, though only one person ever was imprisoned there.<sup>1</sup> And Scotland's turbulent and violent history passed the islanders by – kings came and went, wars were fought, and the Jacobites were defeated at

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Culloden. Once, soldiers were sent to investigate rumours that Bonnie Prince Charlie was hiding out there, but they arrived and soon realized that the St Kildans did not even know who the Young Pretender was, let alone support his claim to the throne.

Most Hebridean islands have outlandish legends associated with them, and St Kilda is no exception. Until its evacuation in 1930, it was owned by Macleod of Macleod, chief of the Macleod clan. It is said that ownership had once been contested by both the islands of the Uists and Harris. This dispute was settled by a boat race to St Kilda from the two islands, with the first to lay hand on the shore the winner. As they neared their goal, the Uist men nosed in front of their rivals, but, sensing defeat for his Harris boat, Colla Macleod cut off his left hand and threw it ahead onto the beach, thus becoming the first to claim the island for his master. And ever since then, so the story goes, the Macleod coat of arms has featured a red hand.

The reality of life on St Kilda was no less unusual. The islanders had no leaders and would discuss everything at a daily meeting or parliament. They didn't vote or play any part in affairs on the mainland, nor did they pay any tax. In fact, they had no monetary system and gave rent to

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Macleod of Macleod in gull feathers and oil – the sea birds also being their primary source of food. The islanders scaled the cliffs and stacks with incredible agility, dexterously snaring the birds and collecting their eggs. But they were not the hardy seafarers and fishermen you'd expect to inhabit such a place (they were mostly happy for the gannets and puffins to feed on the fish). And so those men out at sea drowned when the great storm of 1840 hit, their boats swamped by the huge waves. A day or two later, the bodies of the dead started to wash up on the shore. Among them was a bedraggled creature, still alive. It was a Great Auk, a large flightless bird that is now extinct, and while no one knew it at the time, this would be the last sighting of one in the British Isles.

The Great Auk was an infrequent visitor to these shores, and the islanders would most likely never have seen anything like it before. Two men netted the bird and took it to the tiny community's church. There it was decided that this was a creature of ill omen who had brought the storm to the island. And so the last British Great Auk was put on trial, charged with being a witch, and found guilty. It was stoned to death on the shoreline where it had been washed up a few days before, by islanders whose own time there was running out.<sup>2</sup>

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These days seabirds have St Kilda to themselves.<sup>3</sup> What took place there is the usual story of tragedy striking a small community. Fear, anger and ignorance all combined as the islanders sought an explanation for the calamity that befell them. And, as tends to happen in these situations, an outsider – in this case, the Great Auk – is held responsible for the catastrophe and punished. It is one of mankind's oldest stories, and one of the saddest.

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Then there is the case of Easter Island, which is even more remote than St Kilda, over two thousand miles off the coast of Chile.

'Easter Island punched way above its weight; but it boxed alone, as if in a looking-glass, and we have been able to replay the moves by which it knocked itself out.' (Ronald Wright)

For hundreds of years it was left completely undisturbed by the outside world. The island was divided into 12 or so areas, which fanned outwards from the centre. Different tribes occupied each territory, erecting the giant stone

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heads (*moai*), for which Easter Island is so famous. These stood on platforms (*ahu*), facing inland, and honoured the islanders' gods and ancestors. Over time, the statues increased in size, suggesting an element of competitiveness, as the tribes strove to outdo each other. The average erected statue weighed 10 tons, but in one quarry there is an unfinished head that weighs in at 270 tons, which surely could never have been moved. In another crater 397 statues have been left. All had been carved out of the rock, then thrown over and abandoned. So why did the statues grow to such an unmanageable size, and why were they toppled?

The answer lies back with the struggle for survival in such a hostile environment. The island used to be heavily wooded; today it is not. From the moment of their arrival in around AD 900, the islanders steadily denuded the place of all its trees. The Easter palm, which once covered the island, was the largest tree of its species, serving many uses – as firewood for cooking and funeral pyres, for thatching and building houses, for making rafts and canoes, and, lastly, for transporting and erecting the giant stone statues.

Over the years, the islanders cleared thousands of trees and moved millions of rocks to create wind breaks and a sunken garden, all in a desperate bid to help certain plants

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grow. But the deforestation led to soil erosion and the crops duly suffered. Certain animal species gradually disappeared as their habitat was cut back. The land birds were hunted to excess and shellfish overexploited. Meanwhile, the tree clearing continued.

Eventually the day came when the last tree was felled. In *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive*, Jared Diamond asks the famous question: What was going through the mind of the islander the moment he cut down the last tree? (It is estimated that this happened some time between 1400 and 1600.) We shall never know, but from that moment on the islanders fought over every scrap of wood. They had no proper fuel, and stopped cremating bodies, mummifying them instead. They were unable to build canoes and so could not fish. Most importantly, they now were unable to escape from the island. Lastly, they could not build and erect the huge stone statues quite as freely as before. The result of all this was starvation, drastic population decline and, probably, cannibalism. As the severity of their situation became apparent, the islanders turned on each other, and fought and fought.

It is thought that the increase in the size of the statues was linked to the urgency of the islanders' plight, as they turned to their gods for help, building larger and larger

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figures. But no rescuers came. The statue cult gave way to disenchantment, and the angry islanders started to topple the stone heads they had built to honour their gods once they felt they had been deserted by them. We have to assume that the priests and leaders, who had appointed themselves as go-betweens with the divine, also came to grief as they were shown to be powerless to prevent this disaster.

In his excellent book, *A Short History of Progress*, Ronald Wright observes that the islanders 'carried out for us the experiment of permitting unrestricted population growth, profligate use of resources, destruction of the environment and boundless confidence in their religion to take care of the future. The result was an ecological disaster leading to a population crash.' He asks if we have to repeat the experiment on a larger scale and if the human personality is 'always the same as that of the person who felled the last tree'.<sup>4</sup>

When it comes to taking responsibility for things going wrong, the human personality has always been the same. Today, there is a resistance among the islanders to the idea that their ancestors brought about this calamity, for which several other explanations have been advanced. One modern scientist blames an influx of rats, others diseases

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brought by passing sailors, while some hold climate change responsible. But the island had survived so many of these phenomena already, that deforestation is left as the most likely explanation. What we don't know is if the islanders thought that technology and hard work would get them through the loss of all their trees. The island was small enough that they should have been aware of the impending disaster. Ultimately Easter Island lost all its trees and with them 90 per cent of its population (and we have to ask ourselves: if Easter Islanders can destroy their environment with such basic tools, how much more are we capable of today?).

This was an example of a pure ecological collapse, a disaster that took place in complete isolation. Uniquely, there were no outsiders to blame - no Jews, no Communists, no Catholics. With no scapegoat around, the island's leaders were unable to direct anger away from themselves, and the blame shifted upwards, through the leaders and priests, and towards the gods.