

## **REVIEW: A DIFFERENT COUNTRY**

*Fraser MacDonald*

Michael Russell, **A Different Country: The Photographs of Werner Kissling**, Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2002, 144pp, hb, £25.00, ISBN 1-84158-245-X

Within the last year, Scotland's place in the history of photography has received a renewed scholarly attention and, one may say, not before time. In the vanguard of this modest resurgence of interest is Sara Stevenson's masterly work, **The Personal Art of David Octavius Hill** (Yale University Press, 2002), which examines the formative partnership between Edinburgh-based artist D. O. Hill (1802-1870) and the young photographer Robert Adamson. Their collaboration, recently the subject of a major exhibition at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, produced a series of images that for the first time established Scotland and its people as a photographic subject of international significance. After Hill, the meaning of Scotland would never be the same again: the camera would become the apparatus that established the nation as a visual 'truth'.

The great American modernist photographer Paul Strand (1890-1976), whose Scottish portfolio **Tir a'Mhurain** was also republished last year, regarded Hill as the key progenitor of photography as art. On being asked his opinion as to how he might use a major exhibition to mark the history of photography, Strand replied that only the work of the four greats would suffice: the Scot David Octavius Hill; the Frenchman Eugene Atget (1856-1927); another American modernist, Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946); and, of course, Strand himself. Harboring little uncertainty about his own place within this select canon, Strand could be merciless when assessing the worth of other photographers. One wonders then what he would have made of the images of Werner Kissling (1895-1988), a German ethnologist, photographer and filmmaker of independent financial means who, like Strand, was devoted to picturing Hebridean subjects as representatives of an ancient and seemingly threatened culture.

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Unlike Strand, Kissling spent a great deal of time in the islands from the 1930s onwards, visits that were interrupted only by his internment as a German alien during the Second World War and by various military restrictions on access to the Western Isles. Visiting the Hebrides as an exile from McCarthyite America, Strand was also well acquainted with the unwelcome attention of the security services. Kissling and Strand would certainly have had much to talk about. Indeed, according to local accounts, both were seen having animated conversation in the bar of Lochboisdale Hotel, South Uist, sometime in the summer of 1954. They were, to be sure, very different personalities. For Strand, photography was about representing the totality of life: about people, relationships, things, ecology, love, death and, above all, political struggle. His aesthetic wedded high Modernism to revolutionary Marxism, which he put into practice through his obsessive technical mastery of photography as a medium. Kissling's intention may have been more narrowly ethnological in theory and less technical in character, but he nevertheless produced a body of work that merits critical attention by anyone interested in the photographic construction of the Scottish subject.

It is heartening, then, to come across Michael Russell's **A Different Country** which brings to prominence important new images from the archive of the School of Scottish Studies, together with three engaging commentaries, making it a substantial addition to his earlier work **A Poem of Remote Lives: The Enigma of Werner Kissling**. Russell's text consists of three essays: a new and expanded portrait of Kissling's life; a contextual piece on photography and the Hebrides; and a wide-ranging afterword which uses Kissling's images of rural Scotland as the starting point for critical reflections on the current state of the human landscape.

Russell's outline biography shows that Kissling had an extraordinarily diverse career. A member of the Prussian Guard and educated in elite European universities, he later became a German diplomat only to resign this post to pursue a life of independent ethnological research and travel in the UK. It is this period in which he produced most of his photographs, as well as his notable early film about Eriskay (1934/5) – the first ever film to support a Gaelic soundtrack. But he never settled in the islands, choosing instead to live in the Borders in the rather unlikely guise as Landlord of the Melrose Kings Arms Hotel. It was a venture that turned sour, leaving him to end his days in relatively straitened circumstances.

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The eighty or so finely printed photographs in the book – either from the Hebrides or from the Borders – give a good indication of Kissling's artistic and ethnological project. They invariably show a community at work: carrying peats, fishing, shearing, rope-making, spinning, dyeing, knitting, cooking and reaping. We are presented with a picture of endless industry, the personality of the human subjects often being subsumed by the intensity of their labours. One truly outstanding photograph is of an elderly woman bent double ('Picking Bog-myrtle, Garrynamonie, South Uist'). We can tell little about her. Her face is hidden; she is powerfully reduced to the barest of forms; her fingers are seen to close around a single leaf, marking the axis of a stunning symmetry between her body and the surrounding vegetation. Such an image reveals loftier ambitions than those of the folklorist.

But if Kissling seems somewhat over-invested in the meaning of active labour, then Paul Strand is the opposite. His subjects are pictured at rest from their work. They are given time to engage us straight, to be pictured looking at us, very much like we are looking at them. Kissling's technique, enabled by the versatility of a hand-held Leica, does not encourage such parity of terms. He is more opportunistic: we sense that his camera lay loaded and waiting in the background of his social life. The result is a series of intimate 'documentary' images that can never quite escape a vague tension between photographer and subject. It is as if the people were shyly submitting to his camera, conscious that in that moment of the falling shutter they were surrendering ownership of their own representation.

Russell's commentary could, at times, be more critical in this regard. His claim that Kissling 'does not impose himself or his preconceptions, but lets the image speak for itself' certainly swims against the tide of contemporary criticism. The photograph, like any text, never speaks for itself. Its meaning is never unproblematically transparent. The early positivist culture of photography – epitomised by Fox Talbot's description of the camera as 'the pencil of nature' – may have considered the imprint of light as irrefutable truth, but such a view did not survive modernist, far less postmodernist, scholarship. Even the very act of rendering the world picturable, using the frame to contain and objectify some things at the exclusion of others, is inevitably political.

The subjectivity of the photographer is as inseparable from the image as the crocheted dye from the Hebridean wool. The question, then, is how is this subjectivity manifest? Or, more specifically, how does Kissling's visual

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evidence structure the stories he tells? Kissling's version of the Hebrides is, to this viewer at least, a celebration of antiquity. Even in the 1950s he shows us no tractors or bicycles or new houses. And in that sense he was working within a familiar paradigm of Highland iconography that sets up the region as a receptacle of ancient and charismatic sites/sights.

It is not that Kissling or Strand visited the Hebrides and just happened to have their cameras handy. Rather, the Highlands had already been constructed as a place for observant travel ever since the early travellers like Thomas Pennant made it a key referent in the eighteenth century. One might argue therefore that vision not only has its own politics but also has its own geography, in which the Highlands and Islands become pre-eminent theatres of observation for the imagining of Scotland.

Russell is to be thoroughly commended for another fine book and for recognising the importance of Werner Kissling amid the wider portraiture of Scotland. But examining **A Different Country** makes me wonder if the title should itself become a question. What geographical or cultural difference can account for the disproportionate appearance of the Highlands and Islands in attempts to visualise the Scottish nation?

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