INTRODUCTION

WELCOME to this classic work of Scottish literature, which brings together in unique richness the earth sciences, social history, folklore and religious observance in the Hebridean Small Isles of the mid 19th Century. It has been rated most recently “as good a read today as it was then,” by Dr Neil Clark, Curator of Palaeontology at the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow.

These extracts have been gathered up to celebrate, and accompany the impending voyage in the Betsey’s wake aboard the Leader sailing vessel, 6th–12th September 2014. We, The Friends of Hugh Miller, are proud partners in the voyage with the Royal Scottish Geographical Society (RSGS) and we hope their members, and ours, and indeed all admirers of Hugh Miller’s work, will enjoy reading them.

I have chosen the passages to interest the general, rather than specialist readership. I am indebted to the edition introduced and annotated by Dr Michael A Taylor, National Museums of Scotland, NMS Publishing, Edinburgh 2003, which is now unfortunately out of print. I have attempted to put dates for the expedition which are not in the original texts. Any mistakes which have slipped through are my own. On the other hand, I have omitted many quotations from the novels of Miller’s hero Sir Walter Scott which would be obscure to modern readers. Nothing can or should replace the original, which is readily available in digital reprints and second-hand late Victorian editions. But I hope these “highlights” will serve to raise awareness and appreciation of the book, especially as the replica voyage progresses. I also hope the re-enactment will beget its own stories, and scientific understanding, and new expressions of the arts, which can then perhaps be interwoven with the original.

Note on texts: Translations and explanations are added between brackets ( ). Abridgements are identified between brackets [ ].
CHAPTER I

P1

Leaving The Witness office in the Royal Mile on the way to Mull by one of the newly introduced steamers for his annual holiday.

Monday, 14th July 1844

The pleasant month of July had again come round, and for full five weeks I was free. Chisels and hammers, and the bag for specimens, were taken from the corner in the dark closet, and packed up with half a stone weight of a fine soft Conservative Edinburgh newspaper.

Comment: Miller starts his tale with a gentle dig at a Conservative rival to his newspaper, The Witness, which mostly supported the Whigs.

My friend (the Rev John Swanson) now afloat in his Free Church yacht (the Betsey), had got a home on the sea beside his island charge, which, if not very secure when nights were dark and winds loud, and the little vessel tilted high to the long roll of the Atlantic, lay at least beyond the reach of man’s intolerance, and not beyond the protecting care of the Almighty.

Comment: Swanson was one of 474 ministers who left the Church of Scotland in the schism of 1843, known as the Disruption, to found the Free Church. They forfeited their churches, homes and livings in consequence, and for some time ministered to congregations from all sorts of outdoor locations, until they raised the funds to build new churches.

Bound copies of The Witness are held in the Free Church College on The Mound, which include this book as it first appeared in serialised articles (from 8 March, 1845).

P3/4

Western Highlands coastline observed

The disposition of land and water on this coast suggests the idea that the Western Highlands, from the line in the interior whence the rivers descend to the Atlantic, with the islands beyond to the Outer Hebrides, are all parts of one great mountainous plain, inclined slantways into the sea. First, the long withdrawing valleys of the main land, with their brown mossy streams, change their character as they dip beneath the sea-level, and become salt-water lochs. The line of hills that rise over them jut out as
promontories, till cut off by some transverse valley, lowered still more deeply into the brine, and that exists as a kyle, minch or sound, swept twice every tide by powerful currents. The sea deepens as the plain slopes downward; mountain chains stand up out of the water as larger islands, single mountains as smaller ones, lower eminences as mere groups of pointed rocks; till at length, as we pass outwards, all trace of the submerged land disappears, and the wide ocean stretches out and away in unfathomable depths.

Comment: Miller evokes the entire land and seascape of the West Coast and the Hebrides in 180 words! And you can see above and below water at the same time.

P5

At Oban

The Sound (of Kerrera) terminates in the beautiful bay of Oban, so quiet and sheltered, with its two island breakwaters in front, - its semi-circular sweep of hill behind, - its long white-walled village, bent like a bow, to conform to the inflection of the shore, - its mural precipices behind, tapestried with ivy, - its rich patches of green pasture, - its bosky dingles of shrub and tree, - and, perched on the seaward promontory, its old, time-eaten keep.

P6

In the incalculably remote period in which the conglomerate base of the Old Red Sandstone was formed, the clay slate of this district had been exactly the same sort of rock that it is now [...] Quarries might have been opened in this rock, as now, for roofing slate, had there been quarries to open them, or houses to roof over.

Comment: Miller has been introduced to the rock formations in the Oban vicinity by a Mr Colin Elder, who provided Reverend Swanson with a home at Isle Ornsay, Skye, when he lost his manse on Eigg at the Disruption.

Ps 10 -12

Tobermory, Isle of Mull

Tuesday, 16th July

We entered the Bay of Tobermory about midnight and cast anchor amid a group of little vessels. An exceedingly small boat shot out from the side of a yacht of rather diminutive proportions, but tautly rigged for her size, and bearing an outrigger astern. The water this evening was full of phosphoric matter, and it gleamed and sparkled round the little boat like a northern aurora around a dark cloudlet. There was just light enough to show that the oars were plied by a sailor-like man in a Guernsey frock, and that another sailor-like man, - the skipper, mayhap, - attired in a cap and pea-jacket, stood in the stern. The man in the Guernsey frock was John Stewart, sole mate and half the crew of the Free Church yacht Betsey; and the
skipper-like man in the pea-jacket was my friend the minister of the Protestants of Small Isles. In five minutes more I was sitting [....] beside the little iron stove in the cabin of the Betsey; and the minister, divested of his cap and jacket, but still looking the veritable skipper to admiration, was busied in making us a rather late tea.

The cabin, - my home for the greater part of the three following weeks, and that of my friend for the greater part of the previous twelvemonth, - I found to be an apartment about twice the size of a common bed, and just lofty enough under the beams to permit a man of five feet eleven to stand erect in his nightcap. A large table, lashed to the floor, furnished with tiers of drawers of all sorts and sizes, and bearing a writing desk bound to its top, occupied the middle space, leaving just room enough for a person to pass between its edges and the narrow coffin-like beds in the sides, and space enough at its fore-end for two seats in front of the stove. A jealously-barred skylight opened above; and there depended from it this evening a close lanthorn-looking lamp, sufficiently valuable, no doubt, in foul weather, but dreary and dim on the occasions when all one really wished from it was light. The peculiar furniture of the place gave evidence to the mixed nature of my friend’s employment. A well-thumbed chart of the Western Islands lay across an equally well-thumbed volume of Henry’s “Commentary” (on the Bible). There was a Polyglot (Bible in different languages) and a spy-glass in one corner, and a copy of Calvin’s “Institutes,” with the latest edition of “The Coaster’s Sailing Directions,” in another; while in an adjoining state room, nearly large enough to accommodate an armchair, if the chair could have contrived to get into it, I caught a glimpse of my friend’s printing press and his case of types, canopied overhead by the blue ancient (ensign or flag), bearing in stately six-inch letters of white bunting, the legend, “FREE CHURCH YACHT.” A door opened which communicated with the forecastle; and John Stewart, stooping very much to accommodate himself to the low-roofed passage, thrust in a plate of fresh herrings, splendidly toasted, to give substantiality and relish to our tea. The little rude forecastle, a considerably smaller apartment than the cabin, was all-aglow with the bright fire in the coppers, itself invisible....

*Comment:* In his introduction and notes to his edition, Dr Mike Taylor perceives that all of the minister’s documents “were means of navigation, maritime or spiritual.”

It must strike any reader how hardy the Rev John Swanson must have been, to carry out his ministry for a year in such cramped conditions, and how dedicated to his ministry with so many works of reference at hand. The printing press was for running off lessons in Gaelic so the islanders could learn to read and write. He also published tracts based on his fervent preachings. Swanson had learnt Gaelic especially for the purpose of conducting a Hebridean ministry, as well as teaching, doctoring and generally conversing. Miller’s account of the squeeze below deck is full of good humour, and some choice phrases – a favourite of mine is the toasted herrings, “which gave substantiality and relish to our tea,” eaten some time after midnight.
Off the Sound of Arisaig

We passed the Isle of Muck, with its one low hill; saw the pyramidal mountains of Rum looming tall in the offing; and then, running along the Isle of Eigg, with its colossal Scuir rising between us and the sky, as if it were a piece of Babylonian wall, or of the great wall of China, only vastly larger, set down upon the ridge of a mountain, we entered the channel which separates the island from one of its dependencies, Eilean Chaisteal, and cast anchor in the tideway about fifty yards from the rocks. We were now at home, - the only home which the proprietor of the island permits to the islanders’ minister [...]

Comment: This is Miller the travel-writer in his element, with his commanding metaphors for the Scuir; and this is his first powerful critique in this book of the landed landowners, many of whom refused the newly formed Free Church any sites on which they could build new churches for themselves, in this case forcing the Rev Swanson to minister to the congregation from the church’s “floating manse,” the Betsey. This was a blatant abuse of their power, since they owned all the land for miles around.

CHAPTER II

At anchor off Eilean Chathastail (OS), Isle of Eigg SE corner

Wednesday, 17th July

We had rich tea this morning. The minister was among his people; and our first evidence of the fact came in the agreeable form of three bottles of fresh cream from the shore. Then followed an ample baking of nice oaten cakes. The material out of which the cakes had been manufactured had been sent from the minister’s store aboard, - for oatmeal in Eigg is rather a scarce commodity in the middle of July; but they had borrowed a crispness and flavour from the island, that the meal, left to its own devices, could scarcely have communicated; and the golden-coloured cylinder of fresh butter which accompanied them was all the island’s own. There was an ample supply of eggs too [...] and with cream, butter, oaten cakes, eggs and tea, all of the best, and with sharp-set sea-air appetites, we fared sumptuously.

Comment: HM could have been a food critic too, if such creatures had existed then! He certainly makes the mouth water. Here is the first example of the very high affection and esteem in which the islanders held their minister, and the Editor of The Witness newspaper.
Among the various things brought aboard this morning, there was a pair of island shoes for the minister’s cabin use, that struck my fancy not a little. They were all around of a deep madder-red colour, soles, welts, and uppers; and [...] were sewed not unskilfully with thongs [...] They were altogether the production of Eigg, from the skin out of which they had been cut, with the lime that had prepared it for the tan, and the root by which the tan had been furnished, down to the last on which they had been moulded, and the artizan that had cast them off, a pair of finished shoes. There are few trees, and, of course, no bark to spare in the island; but the islanders find a substitute in the lobiferous root of the *Tormentilla erecta*, which they dig out for the purpose among the heath, at no inconsiderable expense of time and trouble. I was informed by John Stewart, an adept in all the multifarious arts of the island, from the tanning of leather to the tilling of land, to the building of a house or the working of a ship, that the infusion of root had to be thrice changed for every skin, and that it took a man nearly a day to gather roots enough for a single infusion. I was further informed that it was not unusual for the owner of a skin to give it to some neighbour to tan, and that, the process finished, it was divided equally between them.... I wished to call a pair of these primitive shoes my own, and no sooner was the wish expressed than straightway one islander furnished me with leather, and another set to work on the shoes. When I came to speak of remuneration, however, the islanders shook their heads. “No, no, not from the Witness: there are not many that take our part, and the Witness does.” I hold the shoes, therefore, as my first retainer, determined, on all occasions of just quarrel, to make common cause with the poor islanders.

Comment: This remarkable passage of social history tells you of the very wide range of skills the islanders required to sustain life, and of their natural generosity. The shoes were what Dr Taylor has described as “cultural fossils,” artefacts of a fast disappearing way of life, in which Miller was interested almost as much as he was the relics in stone.

Off Eilean Chathastail (modern OS)

One of the first things that struck me, as I got on deck this morning, was the extreme whiteness of the sand. I could see it gleaming bright through the transparent green of the sea, three fathoms below our keel, and, in a little bay directly opposite, it presented almost the appearance of pulverised chalk. A stronger contrast to the dingy trap-rocks (basaltic) around which it lies could scarcely be produced [...]

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P19/20

I found the origins of the rock interestingly exhibited. The hollows of the rock, a rough trachyte (fineground dark igneous rock, especially basalt), were filled with handfuls of broken shells thrown up by the surf from the sea-banks beyond;
fragments of echini (sea urchin), bits of the valves of razor-fish, the island cyprina (clam), mactridae (clam family), buccinidae (whelks), and fractured periwinkles, lay heaped together in vast abundance. [...] Beyond the inner edge of the shelf [...] lies the flat bay [...] filled to the depth of several feet, and to the extent of several hundred yards, with a pure shell-sand, the greater part of which had been thus washed ashore, and ground down by the blended agency of the trachyte and the surf.

P20

Landing under pitchstone on west coast,

We landed under the two pitchstone veins of Eigg [...] They occur in an earthy greenish-black amygdaloid, which forms a range of sea-cliffs varying in height from thirty to fifty feet, that [...] seem to absorb the light, while the veins themselves, bright and glistening, glitter in the sun, as if they were streams of water traversing the face of the rock [...] 

P21

I was lucky enough to detach a specimen, which, though scarce four inches across, exhibits the three colours characteristic of the vein, - its bar of olive green on the one side, of intense black on the other, and of blue, like that of imperfectly fused bottle-glass, in the centre.

P22

Uamh Fhraing cave

My friend the minister stopped short. “There,” he said, pointing to the hollow, “you will find such a bone-cave as you never saw before. Within that opening there lie the remains of an entire race, palpably destroyed [...] by one great catastrophe. That is the famous cave of Frances, in which the whole people of Eigg were smoked to death by the M’Leods.”

P23

It is covered over in its entire area by a stratum of earthy rubbish, which has fallen from the sides and ceiling in such abundance, that it covers up the straw beds of the perished islanders, which still exist beneath as a large mouldering felt, to the depth of from five to eight inches. Never yet was tragedy enacted on a gloomier theatre. An
uncertain twilight glimmers grey at the entrance, from the narrow vestibule; but all within, for full two hundred feet, is black as with Egyptian darkness.

P24

The floor, for about 100 feet inwards from the narrow vestibule, resembles that of a charnel-house. At almost every step, we came upon heaps of human bones grouped together [....] The skulls [...] have disappeared; the travellers in the Hebrides have of late years been numerous and curious; and many a museum, - that at Abbotsford among the rest, - exhibits, in a grinning skull, its memorial of the Massacre at Eigg. [...] Enough still remains to show [...] that the hapless islanders died under the walls in families, each little group separated by a few feet from the others.

Comment: Miller’s powers of observation and detailed recording, in this case deployed in almost total darkness, render a gruesome spectacle, decades after the event. Abbotsford was the mansion Sir Walter Scott built for himself at ruinous expense. His writings, rich in folklore, inspired Miller, and gained a worldwide readership.

P31

Views of An Sgurr (modern OS)

The Scuir of Eigg, then, is a veritable Giant’s Causeway, like that on the coast of Antrim, taken and magnified rather more than twenty times in height, and some five or six times in breadth, and then placed on the ridge of a hill nearly nine hundred feet high.[ ...] Viewed sideways, it assumes [...] the form of a perpendicular but ruinous rampart. Viewed endways, it resembles a tall, massy tower, - such a tower as my friend Mr D.O. Hill would delight to draw, and give delight by drawing [...] a tower three hundred feet in breadth by four hundred and seventy feet in height, perched on the apex of a pyramid, like a statue on a pedestal.

Comment: Miller attempts to capture the grandeur of the Scuir with an effective combination of dimensions and comparisons.

David Octavius Hill was, with partner Robert Adamson, an early proponent of Scottish photography in the early 1840s, promoted by Miller prophetically in The Witness as a new art form. When Miller wrote the above compliment in his paper, Hill would already have been working on his gigantic painting of The Disruption, returning the compliment by placing the Editor prominently in the foreground. The original hangs in the Free Church College, and a downsized copy is shown in the Hugh Miller Museum, Cromarty. Hill and Miller’s busts sit side by side in the Great Hall of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.
CHAPTER III

P33

Climbing the Sgurr

As we climbed the hill-side [...] we found it composed of various beds, each of which would make a Giant’s Causeway entire, piled over each other like storeys in a building. Innumerable polygonal fragments [...] lie scattered over the slope, composed, like almost the rest of the Scuir, of a peculiar and very beautiful pitchstone, a dark pitchstone porphyry, which, inclosing crystals of glassy feldspar, resembles in the hand specimen a mass of black sealing wax, with numerous pieces of white bugle stuck into it. Some of the detached polygons are of considerable size; few of them longer and bulkier, however, than a piece of column of this characteristic porphyry, about ten feet in length by two feet in diameter, which lies a full mile away from the others, in the line of the old burying ground, and distant from it only a few hundred yards.

Miller goes on to speculate that this material might have been carried to the site by the islanders for “marking some form of sepulture,” before their progress was arrested by the massacre.

P34

We had now reached the Scuir. There occur, intercalated with the columnar beds, a few bands of a buff-coloured non-columnar trap [...] which [...] has weathered so freely as to form horizontal grooves along the face of the rock from two to five yards in depth. One of these runs for several hundred feet along the base of the Scuir, just at the top of the talus, and greatly resembles a piazza lacking the outer pillars. It is from ten to twelve feet in height, by from fifteen to twenty in depth; the columns of the pitchstone immediately above it seem perilously hanging in mid-air.

P35

The dry and dusty floor (of the piazza) is richly fossiliferous.

Under the old foundations of this huge wall (the Scuir’s side), we find the remains of a pine-forest, that, long ere a single bed of the porphyry had burst from beneath, had sprung up and decayed on some hill and beside stream in some nameless land – had then been swept to the sea – had been entombed deep in the bottom in a grit of the Oolite, - been heaved up to the surface, and high over it, by volcanic agencies working from beneath, - and had finally been built upon, as moles are built upon piles, by the architect that had laid down the masonry of the gigantic Scuir in one fiery layer after another.
Comment: Miller sees a forest landscape preceding the volcanic upheaval, then sinking into the sea, only for its remains to rise again under renewed volcanic pressure. The architect is assumed to be the Divine Creator.

Our man who carried the pick-axe [...] now came up in hot haste to say that a Roman Catholic tacksman (chief tenant) in the neighbourhood [...] had peremptorily warned him that the Scuir of Eigg was the property of Dr M’Pherson of Aberdeen, not ours, and the Doctor would be very angry at any man who meddled with it. “That message,” said my friend (Rev Swanson), laughing, but looking just a little sad through the laugh, “would scarce have been sent us when I was minister of the Establishment here; but it seems allowable in the case of a poor Dissenter, and is no bad specimen of the thousand little ways in which the Roman Catholic population of the island try to annoy me, now that they see my back to the wall.”

Comment: The Roman Catholics played no part in the Disruption, but the Rev Swanson and Hugh Miller, in common with all the Free Churchmen, disliked Roman Catholicism intensely on theological grounds. Swanson was particularly aggressive, probably as a result of the Catholic proselytising on Eigg during the tenure of his neglectful predecessor, and repeated provoking of himself. Miller’s riposte to the unwelcome interruption is a savagely humorous send-up of the landowner’s petty restrictions of access.

I was tickled with the idea of a fossil preserve ...which coupled itself in my mind with the idea of a great fossil Act for the British empire, [...] and just wondering what sort of disreputable vagabonds geological poachers would become under its [...] influence, I laid hold of the pick-axe, and broke into the stonefast floor. And thence I succeeded in abstracting – feloniously, I dare say, though the crime has not yet got into the statute book- some six or eight pieces of the Pinites Eiggensis, amounting to about half a cubic foot of that very ancient wood, value unknown.

Comment: Miller carries on the satire, hoping fellow geologists would “assist me in feeing counsel” should he be prosecuted.

“There are more interests than mine at stake in this affair. If I be cast and committed, - I who have poached over only a few miserable districts of Scotland, - pray, what will become of [...] the Lyells, Bucklands, Murchisons, and Sedgwicks, - who have poached over whole continents?

Comment: Miller names the leading geologists of the day, knowing they might well read his Witness columns. He was an upfront opponent of landowners restricting
access to land, and thus one of the earliest champions of the right to roam, through such articles as Glen Tilt Tabooed (September 1st, 1847) (see Essays, Historical and Political, published posthumously). He held that people should not be deprived of the chance for physical and mental recreation.

P37, 38

We were successful in procuring several good specimens of the Eigg pine [...] Viewed through the microscope [...] we find the minutest cells, glands, fibres of the original wood uninjured [...] Every nicely organised speck [...] we find in as perfect a state of keeping in the incalculably ancient pile-work on which the gigantic Scuir is founded, as in the living pines that flourish green on our hillsides.

P43-46

The sea, spangled in the wake of the sun with quick glancing light, stretched out its blue plain around us; and we could see included in the wide prospect, on the one hand, at once the hill-chains of Morven and Kintail, with the many intervening lochs and bold jutting headlands [...] and on the other, the variously-complexioned Hebrides, from the Isle of Skye to Uist and Barra to Tiree and Mull. The contiguous Small Isles, Muck and Rum, lay moored immediately beside us, like vessels of the same convoy that in some secure roadstead drop anchor within hail of each other. I could willingly have lingered on the top of the Scuir until after sunset; but the minister reminded me [...] that this was the evening of his week-day discourse, and that we were more than a particularly rough mile from the place of meeting, and within half an hour of the time. I took one last look at the scene ere we commenced our descent. There in the middle of the ample parish glebe [...] rose the snug parish manse [...] and yonder lay the Betsey, looking wonderfully diminutive, but evidently a little thing of high spirit [...] and flaunting her triangular flag of blue in the sun.

Comment: This observation leads to Mr Swanson describing how he reluctantly (because of all he stood to lose) took part in the Disruption, and was denied permission by the aforementioned proprietor, Dr M’Pherson, to build a new home for himself, and new church, despite two petitions from his congregation.

P46 (cont’d)

I had frequent occasion to remark afterwards, that much of the wood used in the smaller and outer islands of the Hebrides must have drifted across the Atlantic, borne eastwards and northwards by the great gulf-stream.

Comment: Miller observes that these timbers could have come from “unfortunate” vessel (shipwrecks?) sailing from America, or swept to sea by the American rivers. Tropical nuts from the West Indies were also found.

The chapter closes with an account of their return to the Betsey to find a dead sheep, which, intended for their dinner, had managed to strangle itself in the boat’s
rìgging. It was one of a large flock which Swanson also lost, with his glebe and manse, in the Disruption.

CHAPTER IV

P50

Making for the Bay of Laig, Eigg west coast

Thursday, 18th July

In less than an hour we were descending on the Bay of Laig, a semi-circular indentation of the coast about a mile in length, and, where it opens to the main sea, nearly two miles in breadth; with the noble island of Rum rising high in front, like some vast breakwater; and a meniscus (crescent) of comparatively level land, walled in behind by a semi-circular rampart of continuous precipice, sweeping round its shores. There are few finer scenes in the Hebrides than that furnished by this island bay and its picturesque accompaniments, - none that break more unexpectedly on the traveller who descends upon it from the east.

Isle of Rum, seen from Bay of Laig

The island of Rum, with its abrupt sea-wall of rock, and its steep-pointed hills, that attain, immediately over the sea, an elevation of more than two thousand feet, loomed bold and high in the offing, some five miles away, but apparently much nearer. The four tall summits of the island rose clear against the sky, like a group of pyramids; its lower slopes and precipices, variegated and relieved by graceful alterations of light and shadow, and resting on their blue basement of sea, stood out with equal distinctness.

P51

Bay of Laig inland

There is no part of the island so thickly inhabited as this flat meniscus (crescent form). It is composed almost entirely of Oolitic rocks (granular limestone), and bears atop, especially where an ancient oyster bed of great depth forms the subsoil, a kindly and fertile mould. The cottages lie in groups, and, save where a few bogs [...] interpose their rough shag of dark green, the plain around them waves with corn.
“One of the few superstitions that still linger on the island,” said my friend the minister, “is associated with that wild hollow. It is believed that shortly before a death takes place among the inhabitants, a tall withered female may be seen in the twilight, just yonder where the rocks open, washing a shroud in the stream. John, there (John Stewart), will perhaps tell you how she was spoken to on one occasion, by an over-bold, over-inquisitive islander, curious to know whose shroud she was preparing; and how she more than satisfied his curiosity, by telling him it was his own. It is a not uninteresting fact,” added the minister, “that my poor people, since they have become more earnest about their religion, think very little about ghosts and spectres: their faith in the realities of the unseen world seems to have banished from their minds much of their old belief in its phantoms.”

Comment: Hugh Miller was himself fascinated by superstitions, despite his own strongly professed Christian faith. He purported to deplore superstition in the name of religion, but diligently collected scores of anecdotes like this one into his first published work, Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland. He was in fact among the first folk historians, following writers like Sir Walter Scott and James Hogg, to capture these once widely-credited tales before they vanished from community life. His wife, Lydia, deplored this trait in her husband, and even, and probably unjustly, blamed his nightmares just before his death on his mother’s stories related to him as a child.

P52

It (the oyster bed) is seen to most advantage...in some of the deeper cuttings in the fields..., and the shells may be picked out as entire as when they lay, ages before, in the mud, which we still see retaining around them its original colour [.... ] Few of the shells exceed an inch and a half in length, and the majority fall short of an inch. What they lack in bulk, however, they make up in number. They are massed as thickly together, to the depth of several feet, as shells on the heap at the door of a Newhaven fisherman, and extend over many acres.

Comment: Newhaven port, two miles north of Edinburgh, was for centuries a renowned oyster fishery. The fisherfolk were made famous for their distinctive attire and way of life by Miller's photographer friends, David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson. Their calotypes of Miller, and the Newhaven folk are held in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.

It is another interesting reflection of how human society relies on geology, that the fossil oyster-beds of the Jurassic rocks rendered the Bay of Laig the most fertile to farm on Eigg, and hence the most populous part of the island. The wall around the Roman Catholic church is built of stone rich in these fossils.
Leaving, however, these oysters of the Oolite, which never net inclosed nor drag disturbed, though they must have formed the food of many an extinct order of fish, - mayhap reptile – we pass on [...]

P58

**Singing Sands, Camas Sgiotaig (OS), Cleadale**

I was turning aside this sand of the Oolite, when I became aware of a peculiar sound that it yielded to the tread, as my companions paced over it. I struck it obliquely with my foot [...] and the sound elicited was a shrill sonorous note, somewhat resembling that produced by a waxed thread, when tightened between the teeth and the hand, and tipped by the nail of the forefinger. I walked over it, striking it obliquely at each step, and with every blow the shrill note was repeated. My companions joined me, and we performed a concert [...]

*Comment: Miller credits himself and his companions, John Swanson and John Stewart, as the first discoverers of the now famous “singing sands” of Eigg.*

*He goes on to discuss in detail two other then known instances of “musical sand” in Arabia and Afghanistan, and tries to explain the cause of the singing. He later (p66) compares the sound to that evoked from “a highly waxed floor.” Dr Taylor explains that such sand is today found in many places, while the causes are still being debated, “but they typically comprise quartz grains of uniform size made slightly sticky by a surface water-silica layer.”*

CHAPTER V

P69-70

It is comparatively easy to conceive that the inner Hebrides should have once existed as a broad ocean sound, bounded on one or either side by Oolitic islands, from which streams descended sweeping with them to the marine depths productions animal and vegetable, of the land. But it is less easy to conceive that in that sound, the area covered by the ocean one year should have been covered by a fresh-water lake in perhaps the next, and then again by the ocean a few years after. And yet among the Oolitic deposits of the Hebrides evidence seems to exist that changes of this nature took place.

Ps71-2

**Ru Stoir – Rubha Stoirr Sgailleidh, North Coast**

Rounding the promontory, we lose sight of the Bay of Laig, and find the narrow front of the island that now presents itself exhibiting the appearance of a huge bastion; [...]

and a noble wall of perpendicular rock, that towers over and beyond for at least four hundred feet more, forms the rampart [....] But the dizzy front of black basalt, dark as night, save where a broad belt of light-coloured sandstone traverses it in an angular direction, like a white sash across a funeral robe, - the fantastic peaks and turrets in which the rock terminates atop, - the masses of broken ruins, roughened with moss and lichen that have fallen from above and lie scattered at its base, - the extreme loneliness of the place, for we have left behind us every trace of the human family, - and the expanse of solitary sea which it commands, - all conspire to render the scene a profoundly imposing one. It is one of those scenes in which man feels he is little, and that nature is great.

Comment: Dr Taylor finds Ru to be not a good rendering of the original Gaelic place-name. Ruadh means red, and that is the rock's colour, but more likely is Rubha, which means headland, and Dr Taylor suggests this would be a more appropriate rendering, meaning Headland of the shadowed cliff. The name appears on OS map as Sgorr Sgalleach.

The writer here deploys a favourite and very telling trope, the building up of picture upon picture, leading to a short, simple yet profound conclusion.

P72

There is no precipice on the island on which the puffin so delights to build as among the dark pinnacles overhead, or around which the silence is so frequently broken by the harsh scream of the eagle.

The introduction of the potato has done much to put out the practice of climbing for the bird (puffin), except among a few young lads who find excitement in the work to pursue it for its own sake, as an amusement.

Comment: Here ‘puffin’ is used in the old sense of Manx Shearwaters, not the colourfully beaked Common Puffin. This is today a good place to see the magnificent sea eagle, hunted to extinction after Miller's time, then reintroduced to Scotland on Rum.

P73

The sinking sun shone brightly this evening; and the warm hues of the precipice, which bears the name of Ru-Stoir – the Red Head – strikingly contrasted with the pale and dark tints of the alternating basalts and sandstones in the taller cliffs behind. The ditch-like hollow, which seems to indicate the line of a fault, cuts off this red headland from all the other rocks of the island, from which it appears to differ as considerably in texture as in hue [.....]
The hard red beds of Ru-Stoir belong [...] not to the ages of Coccosteus and Pterichthys (Devonian), but to the far later ages of the Plesiosaurus and the fossil crocodile.

*Comment:* Dr Taylor observes that the red headland “is actually a sill of volcanic rock of Tertiary age (65.5 to 2.5 mya) intruded into Jurassic (200 to 145 mya).”

What first strikes the eye, in approaching the Ru-Stoir from the west, is the columnar character of the stone. The precipices rise immediately over the sea, in rude colonnades of from thirty to fifty feet in height; single pillars that have fallen from their places in the line [...] lie scattered below [...] And in several places where the waves have joined issue with the precipices [...] and swept away the supporting foundation, the colonnades open into roomy caverns, that resound to the dash of the sea.

Night was coming on, and the tide had risen on the beach; but I hammered lustily, and laid open in the dark red shale a vertebral joint, a rib, and a parallelogrammical fragment of solid bone, none of which could have belonged to any fish. It was an interesting moment for the curtain to drop over the promontory of Ru-Stoir; I had thus found in connection with it well nigh as many reptilian remains as had been found in all Scotland before [...]"

*Setting out for the Ru-Stoir again*"  

Friday, 19th or Saturday 20th July?

I found [...] no unmeet companion for my excursion than in his (Rev Swanson's) trusty mate John Stewart. John had not very much English and I had no Gaelic; but we contrived to understand one another wonderfully well; and ere evening I had taught him to be quite as expert in hunting crocodiles as myself. We reached the Ru-Stoir and set hard to work with hammer and chisel [...] The fragments of red shale were strewed thickly along the shore for at least three-quarters of a mile [...] but we could nowhere find (the bedrock) in situ.

We find reptilian bones in abundance – a thing new to Scottish geology, - and in a state of keeping peculiarly fine. They not a little puzzled John Stewart: he could not resist the evidence of his senses: they were bones, he said, real bones, - there could be
no doubt of that: there were the joints of a back-bone, with the hole the brain-
marrow had passed through; and there were shank-bones and ribs, and fishes’ teeth;
but how, he wondered had they all got into the very heart of the hard red stones?

P78

The more entire ribs I was lucky enough to disinter have, as in those of crocodileans,
double heads; and a part of a fibula [...] seems also to belong to this ancient family. A
large proportion of the other bones are evidently Plesiosaurian.

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FAST FORWARD

Comment: Professor John Hudson and co-author Ann Allwright in The Geology of
Eigg state that despite much searching, Miller’s successors have still not found the
red limestone bedrock near the Ru-Stoir.

But Miller did find the bedrock, with Plesiosaur remains in abundance embedded,
somewhere else, on a second visit to Eigg aboard the Betsey, the following year, in
June 1845. He said this visit had the sole geological purpose of locating the
bedrock. He describes the discovery in the concluding chapter of the book,
CHAPTER XIII (Supplementary) low on the beach a few miles north of Kildonan
on Eigg’s east coast, the other side of the island to Ru-Stoir.

P222:

Two km north of Kildonan

I found a bed coloured with a tinge of red [...]. It was in exactly such a rock I had
found, in the previous year, the reptile remains; and I now set myself with no little
eagerness to examine it. One of the first pieces I tore up contained a well-preserved
Plesiosaurian vertebra; a second contained a vertebra and a rib; and, shortly after, I
disinterred a large portion of pelvis. I had at length found, beyond doubt, the reptile
remains in situ.

Professor Hudson calls this “a remarkable achievement in so short a visit, as the
outcrop there is still not easy to find or interpret.” He adds that Plesiosaur bones
can still be found by searching the storm-beach on the north and east coasts for
blocks of the distinctive red limestone.

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P79
Skerries off Ru Stoir

It was in vain that [...] I set myself again and again to discover the bed from which they had been detached. The tide had fallen, and a range of skerries lay temptingly off, scarce a hundred yards from the water’s edge: the shale beds might be among them, with Plesiosauri and crocodiles stretching entire; and fain would I have swum off to them, as I had done oftener than once elsewhere, with my hammer in my teeth, and with shirt and drawers in my hat; but a tall brown forest of kelp and tangle, in which even a seal might drown, rose thick and perilous round both shore and skerries.

Comment: Miller was extremely fond of swimming and diving, sometimes just to bathe, but often to search for all sorts of marine curiosities. He gives an account in his autobiography (p26, My Schools and Schoolmasters, Edinburgh 1993) of searching the sea-bottom off Gairloch, weighing himself down “Indian method” with stones of 16 to 18 pounds weight.

P79-80

How strange, that the identical sea heaving around stack and skerry in this remote corner of the Hebrides should once have been thronged by reptile shapes more strange than poet ever imagined, - dragons, gorgons and chimeras! Perhaps of all reptiles, the Plesiosaurus was the most extraordinary. An English geologist (presumed to be Gideon Mantell) has described it, grotesquely enough, and yet most happily, as a snake threaded through a tortoise. And here, on this very spot, must these monstrous dragons have disported and fed; here must they have raised their little reptile heads and long swan-like necks over the surface, to watch an antagonist or select a victim: here must they have warred and wedded, and pursued all the various instincts of their unknown natures. A strange story, surely, considering it is a true one!

Comment: Here is Miller anticipating science fiction by a century or more, like many geologists of the time. While he, the practical geologist, dedicatedly extracts Jurassic remains, he lets his imagination loose to envisage the living creatures. Imagine the excitement of The Witness’s readers when they picked up this chapter of revelations “new to Scottish geology.” (October 18th, 1848).

Ps 80-85

Walking from the north along the east coast to the shieling at Rubha nan Tri Clach

Here follows a lengthy passage describing Miller and John Stewart's return to the boat which simply cannot be abridged or extracted. It is among the most evocative pieces of sustained descriptive writing in all his works, combining as it does, in a way unique to him, the close observation of landscape interspersed with a very precious piece of social history.
The day passed pleasantly enough in the work of exploration and discovery; the sun had already declined far in the west; and, bearing with us our better fossils, we set out, on our return, by the opposite route to that along the Bay of Laig, which we had now thrice walked over. The grassy talus (slope) so often mentioned continues to run on the eastern side of the island for about six miles, between the sea and the inaccessible ramparts of the precipice behind. It varies in breadth from about two to four hundred yards; the rampart rises over it from three to five hundred feet; and a noble expanse of sea, closed in the distance by a still nobler curtain of blue hills, spreads away from its base: and it was along this grassy talus that our homeward road lay. Let the Edinburgh reader imagine the fine walk under the Salisbury Crags lengthened some twenty times, - the line of precipices above heightened some five or six times, - the gravelly slope at the base not much increased in altitude (than the Crags walk), but developed transversely into a green undulating belt of hilly pasture, with here and there a sunny slope level enough for the plough, and here and there a rough wilderness of detached crags and broken banks; let him further imagine the sea sweeping around the base of this talus, with the nearest opposite land—bold, bare and undulating atop—some six or eight miles distant; and he will have no very inadequate idea of the peculiar and striking scenery through which, this evening, our homeward route lay. I have scarce ever walked a more solitary tract. The sea shuts it in on the one hand, and the rampart of rocks on the other; there occurs along its entire length no other human dwelling than a lonely summer shieling; for fully one-half the way we saw no trace of man; and the wildness of the few cattle which we occasionally startled in the hollows showed us that man was no very frequent visitor among them. About half an hour before sunset we reached the midway shieling. Rarely have I seen a more interesting spot, or one that, from its utter loneliness, so impressed the imagination. The shieling, a rude low-roofed erection of turf and stone, with a door in the centre some five feet in height or so, but with no window, rose on the grassy slope immediately in front of the vast continuous rampart. A slim pillar of smoke ascended from the roof, in the calm, faint and blue within the shadow of the precipice, but it caught the sunlight in its ascent, and blushed, ere it melted into the ether, a ruddy brown. A streamlet came pouring from above in a long white thread, that maintained its continuity unbroken for at least two-thirds of the way; and then, untwisting into a shower of detached drops, that pattered loud and vehemently in a rocky recess, it again gathered itself up into a lively little stream, and, sweeping past the shieling, expanded in front into a circular pond, at which a few milch cows were leisurely slaking their thirst. The whole grassy talus, with a strip mayhap a hundred yards wide of deep green sea, lay within the shadow of the tall rampart; but the red light fell, for many a mile beyond, on the grassy surface; and the distant Cuchullin Hills, so dark at other times, had all their prominent slopes and jutting precipices tipped with bronze; while here and there a mist streak, converted into bright flame, stretched along their peaks, or rested on their sides. Save for the lonely shieling, not a human dwelling was in sight. An island girl of eighteen, more than merely good-looking, though much embrowned by the sun, had come to the door to see who the unwonted visitors might be, and recognised in John Stewart an
old acquaintance. John informed her in her own language that I was Mr Swanson’s sworn friend, and not a Moderate, but one of their own people, and that I had fasted all day, and had come for a drink of milk. The name of her minister proved a strongly recommendatory one: I have not yet seen the true Celtic interjection of welcome, – the kindly “O o o,” – attempted on paper; but I had a very agreeable specimen of it on this occasion, *viva voce*. And as she set herself to prepare for us a rich bowl of mingled milk and cream, John and I entered the shieling. There was a turf fire at one end, at which sat two little girls, engaged in keeping up the blaze under a large pot, but sadly diverted from their work by our entrance; while the other end was occupied by a bed of dry straw, spread on the floor from wall to wall, and fenced off at the foot by a line of stones. The middle space was occupied by the utensils and produce of the diary, - flat wooden vessels of milk, a butter-churn, and a tub half-filled with curd; while a few cheeses, soft from the press, lay on a shelf above. The little girls were but occasional visitors, who had come, out of a juvenile frolic, to pass the night in the place; but I was informed by John that the shieling had two other inmates, young women, like the one so hospitably engaged on our behalf, who were out at the milking, and that they lived here all alone for several months every year, when the pasturage is at its best, employed in making butter and cheese for their master, worthy Mr M’Donald of Keill (ie Kildonan Farm). They must often feel lonely when night has closed darkly over mountain and sea, or in those dreary days of mist and rain so common in the Hebrides, where naught may be seen save a few shapeless crags that stud the nearer hillocks around them, and naught heard save the moaning of the wind on the wild beach below. And yet they would do ill to exchange their solitary life and rude shieling for the village dwellings and gregarious habits of the females who ply their rural labours in bands among the rich fields of the Lowlands, or for some unwholesome back-room and weary task-work of the city seamstresses. The sun-light was fading from the higher hill-tops of Skye and Glenelg, as we bade farewell to the lonely shieling and the hospitable island girl.

**Heading southward towards Kildonan**

The evening deepened as we hurried southwards along the scarce visible pathway, or paused for a few seconds to examine some shattered block, bulky as a Highland cottage, that had fallen from the precipice above. Now that the whole landscape lay equally in shadow, one of the more picturesque peculiarities of the continuous rampart came out more strongly as a feature of the scene than when a strip of shade rested against the face of the rock, imparting to it a retiring character, and all was sunshine beyond. A thick bed of white sandstone, as continuous as the rampart itself, runs nearly horizontally about midway in the precipice for mile after mile, and, standing out in strong contrast with the dark-coloured trap above and below, it reminds one of a belt of white hewn work in a basalt house-front, or rather – for there occurs above a second continuous strip, of an olive hue, the colour assumed, on weathering, by a bed of amygdaloid (*basalt with cavities*) - of a piece of dingy old-fashioned furniture, inlaid with one stringed belt of bleached holly, and another of faded green-wood. At some of the most accessible points I climbed to the line of
white belting, and found it to consist of the same soft quartz sandstone that in the Bay of Laig furnishes the musical sand. Lower down there occur, alternating with the trap, beds of shale and blue-clay, but they are lost mostly in the talus. Ill adapted to resist the frosts and rains of winter, their exposed edges have mouldered into a loose soil, now thickly covered over with herbage; and but for the circumstance that we occasionally find them laid bare by a water-course, we would scarce be aware of their existence at all. The shale exhibits everywhere, as on the opposite side of the Ru-Stoir, faint impressions of a minute shell resembling a Cyclas, and ill-preserved fragments of fish scales. The blue clay I found at one spot where the path had cut deeply into the hill-side, richly charged with bivalves of the species I had seen so abundant in the resembling clay of the Bay of Laig; but the closing twilight prevented me from ascertaining whether it also contained the characteristic univalves of the deposit, and whether its shells, - for they seem identical with those of the altered shales of the Ru-Stoir - might not be associated, like these, with reptilian remains. Night fell fast, and the streaks of mist that had mottled the hills at sunset began to spread gray over the heavens in a continuous curtain; but there was light enough left to show me that the trap became more columnar as we neared the journey’s end. One especial jutting in the rock presented in the gloom the appearance of an ancient portico, with pediment and cornice, such as the traveller sees on the hill-sides of Petraea in front of some old tomb; but it may possibly appear less architectural by day. At length, passing from under the line of rampart, just as the stars that had begun to twinkle over it were disappearing, one after one, in the thickening vapour, we reached the little bay of Kildonan, and found the boat waiting us on the beach. My friend the minister, as I entered the cabin, gathered up his notes from the table, and gave orders for the tea-kettle; and I spread out before him – a happy man – an array of fossils new to Scotch geology. No one not an enthusiastic geologist or a zealous Roman Catholic can really know how vast an interest may attach to a few old bones.

Comment: In this magnificently eloquent passage, we can discern many typical elements of Hugh Miller’s prose style, which can be both difficult for the modern reader, yet easy too, given a little effort. Difficult because of the long, unbroken paragraphs. There are only three paragraphs in the whole excerpt above, two of them well over fifty lines long. The sentences can be lengthy too, sometimes more than ten lines at a time, littered with colons and semi-colons to accommodate all the clauses. But once absorbed by Miller’s material, one is swept irresistibly along by the sheer power and beauty of it all. He can take you in minute detail through the layers of rock in the rampart, the descending streams, the shore-line terrain, to the smoke changing colour above the shieling, to the furniture inside it listed to the last stick.

Along with this, he gave most valuable witness to the way of life lived in the shieling. It is interesting in itself that the young, single women of the community were assigned to the summer tasks, alone except for their own company for months on end. Dr Taylor has suggested the girl’s “O-o-o” may not have been a Gaelic
expression at all, simply an uttering of shyness and surprise at the sudden appearance of a complete stranger.

Hugh’s “more than merely good-looking” admiration for her tells you he has an eye for physical beauty, just as he remarked on the handsomeness of John Stewart’s broad-shouldered assistant in an earlier chapter. Revealing too, that the girl’s tan is seen as detracting rather than adding to her comeliness. For Victorians the whitest of white skins was a key criterion of attractiveness.

Another facet of these pages is proof of Miller’s quite extraordinary physical energy. He has not eaten anything from rising to sunset, spends the whole day fossil-collecting, including Jurassic finds new to science, finishing with a long walk along the length of the island’s east coast, still examining the rocks as darkness falls. It is recorded elsewhere that he thought nothing of covering thirty miles in a day, with no more than a porridge-cake in his knapsack. I once made the walk from Kildonan to the sheiling and back with a party led by Professor Hudson, and I can testify, having made only a quarter of Miller’s journey, to its very tough walking, and its utter solitariness, to this day. Hugh and John Stewart appear to have circumnavigated the entire island in a single day, from the south east corner, north to the Bay of Laig, on further north to the precipices of Ru Stoir, and back to the boat down the length of the east coast, a colossal journey over rough ground, littered with big landslides, on foot. Here truly is scenery of both grandeur and ferocity, where geologists still hunt in Miller’s footsteps.

It is a pity that the author ended this superb chapter with another dig at despised Roman Catholicism, with its liking for old relics extended to the appropriation of fossils. It is actually a most entertaining tale in which he proposes “a geologists’ grateful bumper in honour of the (French) Revolutionary army”, which captured Maastricht in a siege of 1794, for carefully removing unharmed a giant fossil *Masaeosaurus* with “jaws four and a half feet long and bristling over with teeth.” It had been collected some years before by a renowned amateur local geologist, Johann Leonard Hoffmann. It still rests today in the Museum National d’Histoire Naturelle in Paris. But a key point of the tale is that the French rescued the fossil from a cleric who had claimed it as church property. No doubt the story titillated Miller’s Free Church readers no end.

CHAPTER VI

P 89

At Galmisdale

Sunday 20th July
It was Sabbath, but the morning rose like a hypochondriac wrapped up in his nightclothes – gray in fog, and sad with rain[...]. The entire scene suggested the idea of a land with which man had done for ever; - the vapour enveloped rocks, - the waste of ebb-uncovered sand, - the deserted harbour, - the ruinous house, - the melancholy rain-fretted tides eddying along the strip of brown tangle in the foreground, - and, dim over all, the thick slant lines of the beating shower.

We set out for the church a little after eleven, - the minister encased in his ample-skirted storm-jacket of oiled canvass, and protected atop by a genuine sou-wester, of which the broad posterior rim sloped half a yard down his back; and I closely wrapped up in my grey maud, which proved, however, a rather indifferent protection against the penetrating powers of a true Hebridean drizzle. The building in which the congregation meets is a low dingy cottage of turf and stone, situated nearly opposite the manse windows. It had been built by my friend, previous to the Disruption, at his own expense, for a Gaelic school, and it now serves as a place of worship for the people.

Comment: Some sou-wester! Miller’s plain grey “maud,” also known as a shepherd’s plaid, was his habitual outdoors wear from his youth as a stonemason onwards, and which he continued to wear in the Scottish capital, now he was the famed Editor of a national newspaper. He may even have worn it on public occasions, despite his wife’s disapproval. It appears, for example, adorning him at the first Free Church General Assembly, as painted by his friend D.O. Hill, although Hill may have added it to symbolically. It seems the maud was part of an image he cultivated as a “man of the people.”

The school-cum-church of turf and stone was clearly the mid—19th Century equivalent of a community centre. The building remains today as a sometimes bracken-covered circle of stone, its turf roof long gone, beside the main road on the way up to the central saddle of Eigg.

Remember the reference in Chapter I to Swanson’s printing press, and reference books, aboard the Betsey, obviously providing all the material at the school for teaching and church for worship.

PS 90-91

We found the congregation already gathered, and that the very bad morning had failed to lessen their numbers [...]. The islanders of Eigg are an active, middle-sized race, with well-developed heads, acute intellects, and singularly warm feelings [...]. Rarely have I seen human countenances so eloquently vocal with veneration and love.

Comment: Miller has already referred to a crowd of male parishioners rushing forward to shake Swanson’s hand. He passes on to detail Swanson’s many calls on
the congregation’s affection, such as the sacrifice of his manse, his principles, his services as “the sole medical man [...] without fee or reward,” his “new life of hardship and danger.” He praises the devout worshippers of all ages, some of whom had travelled on foot through the soaking drizzle from the further extremities of the island.

P 91

There was as little reverence of the externals in the place (the church) as can well be imagined: an uneven earthen floor, - turf walls on every side, and a turf roof above, - two little windows of four pane a-piece, adown which the rain-drops were coursing thick and fast, a pulpit grotesquely rude, that had never employed a bred carpenter, - and a few ranges of seats of undressed rude, - such were the mere materialisms of this lowly church of the people.

P91

My friend, at the conclusion of his discourse, gave a brief digest of its contents in English, for the benefit of his one Saxon auditor; and I found, as I had anticipated, that what had so moved the simple islanders was just the old wondrous story [......]

P92

On this occasion, as on many others, I had to regret my want of Gaelic. It was my misfortune to miss being born to this ancient language, by barely a mile of ferry. I first saw the light on the southern shore of the Frith of Cromarty [...] among an old established Lowland community [...] whereas had I been born on the northern shore, I would have been brought up among a Celtic tribe, and Gaelic would have been my earliest language.

Comment: “Saxon” in this instance means Scots Lowlander. Almost all of Cromarty’s inhabitants, including Miller’s ancestors on his father’s side, had migrated north over the generations. On the other hand, his mother, and her ancestors, were Gaels who lived on the northern shore (parish of Nigg), but, clearly, he was brought up speaking in the Lowland Scots tongue, and writing in English. Miller devoted quite a lot of writing to the different qualities good and bad of Lowlanders and Highlanders. In very general terms, he deemed the Lowlanders more hard-working, and the Highlanders better Christians.

P92-94

At Galmisdale

In returning to the Betsey during the mid-day interval in the service, we passed the ruinous two-gabled house beside the boat-harbour. During the incumbency of my friend’s predecessor, it had been the public-house of the island, and the parish minister was by far its best customer. He was in the practice of sitting in one of its dingy little rooms, day after day, imbibing whisky and peat-reek [...] Had not the
man got senselessly drunk [...] and staggered, of all places in the world, into the General Assembly, he would probably have died minister of Eigg. [...] Presbyterianism without the animating life is a poor shrunken thing [...] without the daily vitality of evangelism it is nothing [...] My friend laboured hard [...] to impart to Protestantism in the parish the animating life of the Reformation and, through the blessing of God, after years of anxious toil, he at length fully succeeded.

Comment: On the succeeding pages, Miller tells the edifying tale of how Swanson rescued a vagabond former freebooter, and sheep-stealer, originally from neighbouring Rum, who ended up on Eigg, “squatting on the beach in a wretched shed.” His own son, a miller, tried to stop him building a better shelter, until the good reverend intervened.

Some passages of praise for the minister and his parishioners probably overdo the piety for the modern reader; they nonetheless provide a very telling picture of the religious fervour of the times. More in the vein of heavy pathos follows (p98) with the reverend telling his little son, “you have no home now: your father is like the poor sheep-stealer whom you saw on the shore of Eigg.”

P98

IsleOrnsay, Kyle Rhea, Sound of Sleat

Monday, 23rd July

On the morning of Monday, we unloosed from our moorings, and set out with a light variable breeze for Isle Ornsay, in Skye, where the wife and family of Mr Swanson resided, and from which he had now been absent for a full month.

P99

Towards evening we entered the harbour of Isle Ornsay, a quiet well-sheltered bay, with a rocky islet for a breakwater on the one side, and the rudiments of a Highland village, containing a few good houses on the other. Half a dozen small vessels were riding at anchor, curtained round, half-mast high, with herring nets; and a fleet of herring-boats lay moored beside them a little nearer the shore. There had been a few tolerable takes for a few nights on the neighbouring sea, but the fish had again disappeared, and the fishermen, whose worn-out tackle gave such evidence of a long-continued run of ill luck, as I had learned to interpret on the east coast, looked gloomy and spiritless.

Comment: Hugh Miller had first made his name as a writer in 1829, with Letters on the Herring Fishing in the Moray Frith, published in the Inverness Courier, vividly reporting his own experiences out on the boats when the fish were abundant. At some point in the 1830s, the herring shoals, which once spread a silver surface
across the Cromarty Firth from shore to shore, disappeared completely, never to return.

From Isle Ornsay to the Point of Sleat, a distance of thirteen miles, gneiss is the prevailing deposit.

P100

“My wise brother is building a fine house... It is rather a pity for himself that he should be building it for himself on another man’s land.” The remark [...] at once arrested the progress of the work.

Comment: Miller says legend attributed this anecdote to an older brother of the MacDonalds of the Isles who forbade his younger brother’s project out of jealousy. Land-holding in bygone days was the prime mark of rank and esteem.

P100 - 101

Tuesday 23rd July?

The gneiss at Knock is exceedingly various in its composition, and many of its strata the geologist would fail to recognise as gneiss at all. We find along the precipices its two unequivocal varieties, the schistose and the granitic, passing, not infrequently, the former into a true mica schist, the latter into a pale feldspathose rock, thickly pervaded by needle-like crystals of tremolite, that [...] frequently furnishes specimens of great beauty.

P102

From Isle Ornsay to Broadford on foot, possibly along line of A851 today

Wednesday 24th – Thursday 25th July?

It had been an essential part of my plan to explore the splendid section of the Lower Oolite furnished by the line of sea-cliffs that, to the north of Portree, rise full seven hundred feet over the beach; and [...] I set out with this intention from Isle Ornsay, to join the mail gig at Broadford, and pass on to Portree, - a journey of rather more than thirty miles. I soon passed over the gneiss, and entered on a wide deposit, extending from side to side of the island, of what is generally laid down in our geological maps as Old Red Sandstone [...]?

Comment: Dr Taylor observes that this is Torridonian sandstone, much older than the Old Red, of Precambrian age (between 4.6 billion and 542 million years ago).

P102 - 103
To the tract of Red Sandstone there succeeds a tract of Lias (Lower Jurassic) [...] It occupies a flat, dingy valley, about six miles in length, and that varies from two to four miles in breadth. The dreary interior is covered with mosses, and studded with inky pools, in which the botanist finds a few rare plants, and which were dimpled, as I passed them this morning, with countless eddies, formed by myriads of quick glancing trout, that seemed busily engaged in fly-catching. The rock appears but rarely, - all is moss, marsh and pool; but in a few localities on the hill-sides [...] the shepherd finds shells of strange form strewn along the water-courses.

The valley, - evidently a dangerous one to the night traveller, from its bogs and tarns, - is said to be haunted by a spirit peculiar to itself, - a mischievous, eccentric, grotesque creature, not unworthy, from the monstrosity of its form, of being associated with the old monsters of the Lias. Luidag – for so the goblin is called – has but one leg, terminating, like an ancient satyr's, in a cloven foot; but it is furnished with two arms, bearing hard fists at the end of them, with which it has been known to strike the benighted traveller in the face, or to tumble him over into some dark pool. The spectre may be seen at the close of evening hopping vigorously among the distant bogs....; and when the mist lies thick in the hollows, an occasional glimpse may be caught of it even by day. But when I passed the way there was no fog: the light, though softened by a thin film of cloud, fell equally over the heath, revealing hill and hollow; and I was unlucky enough not to see this goblin of the Liasic valley.

Comment: Here we encounter Hugh Miller the avid collector of superstitions again, breaking description of a field trip of solid scientific purpose, with a highly colourful instance of local folklore. Is the “unlucky” a genuine regret, or ironic humour? You wonder where he picked up this tale; he may well have got it from Mrs Swanson (see p114).

Here also is more evidence of Miller’s remarkable physical capacities, taking on a walk alone of some nine miles from Isleornsay village to Broadford to catch a mail gig, over some of the wildest, most desolate tracts of Skye, a solitary trek which he finishes by exploring a “considerable range” of Broadford Bay. This is while he waits for the horse-drawn mail- gig to take him on a bumpy trip north of well over 20 miles, which will take all night.

P 104

Broadford to Portree

It was late this evening ere the post-gig arrived from the south, and the night and several hours of the following morning were spent in travelling to Portree [...] Morning broke dim and gray, while we were yet several miles from Portree; and I reached the inn in time to see from my bed-room windows the first rays of the rising sun gleaming on the hill-tops.
CHAPTER VII

P 105

Portree

The morning was ominously hot and breathless; and while the sea lay moveless in the calm as a floor of polished marble, mountain, and rock, and distant island seemed tremulous all over, through a wavy medium of thick rising vapour. I judged [...] my course was destined to terminate abruptly.

The long narrow island of Rasay (Raasay today) lies parallel to the coast of Skye, like a vessel laid along a wharf, but drawn out from it, as if to suffer another vessel of the same size to take the berth between.

P106

On the eastern shores of both Skye and Rasay we find the same Oolitic deposits tilted up at nearly the same angle.

P107

Loch Portree

A long line of trap-hills rises over it (a moory valley), in one of which [...] I recognised the Storr of Skye, famous among lovers of the picturesque for its strange group of mingled pinnacles and towers [...] Running southwards along its bottom is the noble sea-arm, Loch Portree, in which, as indicated by the name (the King’s Port) a Scottish king of the olden time, in his voyage round his dominions, cast anchor. The opening of the loch is singularly majestic; - the cliffs tower high on either side in graceful magnificence : but [...] all within [...] becomes tame and low.

I purposed pursuing it (my route) from Portree to Holm, a distance of about six miles, and then returning by the flat interior valley.

P108

The first fossiliferous deposit which gave me occasion this morning to use my hammer occurs near the opening of the loch, beside an old Celtic burying ground, in the form of a thick bed of hard sandstone, charged with Belemnites [...] a bottom, mayhap, of some extensive bay of the Oolite, resembling the Loch Portree of the present day [...] which swarmed as thickly with Cephalopoda (molluscs eg octopus, squid, ammonite and belemnite) as the loch swarmed this day with minute, purple-tinged Medusae (jelly-fish). I found on the shore, immediately below this bed, a piece of calcareous fissile sandstone, abounding in small sulcated (grooved) Terebratulae [...] A colony of this delicate Brachiopod must have once lain moored to this spot, like a fleet of long-prowed galleys at anchor [...].
For a full mile after rounding the northern boundary of the loch we find the immense escarpment composed from top to bottom exclusively of trap; but then the Oolite again begins to appear, and about two miles further on the section becomes truly magnificent, - one of the finest sections of this formation exhibited anywhere in Britain, perhaps in the world.

P109

In the shale we find numerous minute Ammonites, sorely weathered; in the sandstone, Belemnites, some of them of great size; and dark carbonaceous markings, passing not infrequently into a glossy cubical coal.

I had now come full in view of the rocky island of Holm [....] We had been thirsty in the hot sun, and had found the springs few and scanty; but the boy (his guide) now assured me, in very broken English, that we were to get a great deal more water than would be good for us, and that it might be advisable to get out of its way.

P110

We were both particularly wet ere we reached Portree.

In exploring our Scotch formations, I have had frequent occasion, in Ross, Sutherland, Caithness, and now once more in Skye, to pass over ground described by Sir R. Murchison; and in every instance have I found myself immensely his debtor. His descriptions possess the merit of being true [....] His section of this part of the coast, for example, strikes from the extreme northern part of Skye to the island of Holm, thence to Scrapidale in Rasay, thence along part of the coast of Scalpa, thence direct through the middle of Pabba, and thence to the shore of the Bay of Laig. The line thus taken includes, in regular sequence in the descending order, the whole Oolitic deposits of the Herbrides.

Comment: Hugh Miller dedicated his first book of geology, The Old Red Sandstone (1841), to Murchison, in homage to his forerunning researches into the formation. Sir Roderick Impey Murchison was a “gentleman” geologist born, like Miller, on the Black Isle, at Tarradale House, Muir of Ord, but unlike Miller, into wealth, which enabled him to travel extensively. He geologised in England, Scotland, parts of Europe, and Russia, becoming known as “King of the Silurian.” He was a founder of the Royal Geographical Society, and a director-general of the Geological Survey.

P111-112

The inn at Portree

The three Edinburgh gentlemen whom I had met at breakfast were still at the inn. The evening passed pleasantly; and I can now recommend from experience, to the hapless traveller who gets thoroughly wet thirty miles from a change of dress, that
some of the best things he can resort to in the circumstances are, a warm room, a warm glass, and agreeable companions.

Comment: Miller admitted he initially completely mistook the gentlemen for “high Tories,” having found in subsequent conversation that they were Whigs, with Celtic blood in their veins, like him, and thus that he was “decidedly guilty ... of the crime of judging men by their looks.”

P114

John Swanson’s home, Isleornsay

Evening of Thursday, 24th July

Mrs Swanson ... I found deeply versed in the legendary lore of the Highlands. The minister showed me a fine specimen of Pterichthys which I had disinterred for him, one of my first discovered fossiliferous deposits of the Old Red Sandstone, exactly thirteen years before, and full seven years ere I had introduced the creature to the notice of Agassiz. And the minister’s daughter, a little chubby girl of three summers, taking part in the general entertainment, strove to make her Gaelic sound as like English as she could, in my especial behalf. I remembered, as I listened to the unintelligible prattle of the little thing, unprovided with a word of English, that just eighteen years before, her father had had no Gaelic; and wondered what he would have thought, could he have been told, when he first sat down to study it, of the story of his island charge in Eigg, and his Free Church yacht the Betsey.

Comment: A delightful domestic scene of happy reminiscence, notable in that the little girl’s only language is the Gaelic her father had taught himself. Miller goes on to recall how he and Swanson competed in their early twenties to collect the best ammonites and belemnites at Eathie. He pays tribute to his friend for subsequently leading him towards “theological truth.”

John Swanson would remain another three years minister to the Small Isles, before transferring to another Gaelic-speaking parish, that of Nigg, on the Fearn peninsula. He had earlier taught there, and would remain its minister until his death in 1874. He is buried in the Nigg Old Churchyard under an obelisk. This kirk is well worth a visit for its famous Pictish standing stone and excellent historical interpretation displays, including Miller’s own ancestry and writings on the parish.

The discovery of the Pterichthys (now Pterichthyodes Milleri) in the summer of 1831, and the other Devonian age fishes, in the Cromarty deposits, first set Miller on the road to fame as a geologist. He sent his finds for evaluation to the great Swiss-born naturalist Louis Agassiz in 1838 as Agassiz was then held to be the world’s leading expert on fossil fish.

P115
Sailing from South Skye to Rum

Friday 26\textsuperscript{th} July

Next day at noon we weighed anchor, and stood out for Rum, a run of about twenty-five miles. A kind friend had, we found, sent aboard in our behalf two pieces or rare antiquity, - rare anywhere, but especially rare in the lockers of the Betsey, - in the agreeable form of two bottles of semi-fossil Madeira, - Madeira that had actually existed in the grape exactly half a century before, at the time when Robespierre was startling Paris from its propriety, by mutilating at the neck the busts of other people, and multiplying casts and medals of his own; and we found it, explored in moderation, no bad study for geologists, especially in coarse weather, when they had got wet and somewhat fatigued. It...had exchanged its distinctive flavour as Madeira for a better one, and filled the cabin with fragrance every time the cork was drawn.

Comment: Let no one say Miller lacked a sense of humour, here at work on Robespierre’s guillotine. He was normally very averse to strong drink, describing how he had been put off whisky for life, from being incapacitated by two drams after his first day's toil as a jobbing stonemason (see p 151, My Schools and Schoolmasters, , Edinburgh 1993).

P116

Saturday, 27\textsuperscript{th} July

There fell a dead calm. I tried fishing with the yacht’s set of lines, but there were no fish to bite, - got into the boat, but there were no neighbouring islands to visit, - and sent half a dozen pistol-bullets after a shoal of porpoises, which, coming from the Free Church yacht, must have astonished the flat sleek fellows pretty considerably, but did them, I am afraid, no serious damage.

Comment: Important to remember that whaling was by the mid-19\textsuperscript{th} Century an international industry. For Miller, pot-shotting at porpoises was an idle sport. In the same waters a century later, Gavin Maxwell would make them run with gore with his basking-shark fishery, thankfully short-lived.

P116

The calm was evidently not to be a calm long; and the minister issued orders that the gaff top-sail should be taken down; and that we should lower our topmast, and have all tight and ready for a smart gale a-head.

P117

The gale, thickened with rain, came down, shrieking like a maniac, from off the peaked hills of Rum, striking away the tops of the long rangy billows that had risen in
the calm to indicate its approach, and then carrying them in sheets of spray aslant
the furrowed surface, like snow-drift hurried across a frozen field. But the Betsey,
with her storm-jib set, and her mainsail reefed to the cross, kept her weather bow
bravely to the blast, and gained on it with every tack. She had been the pleasure
yacht, in her day, of a man of fortune, who had used to encounter [...] the swell of the
Bay of Biscay; and she still kept true to her old character, with but this drawback,
that she had now [...] rather more water in a heavy sea than her one little pump could
conveniently keep under.

P118

Loch Scresort. Isle of Rum east coast

Like a staunch Free Churchwoman, the lowlier she bent, the more steadfastly did she
hold her head to the storm. The strength of the opposition served but to speed her on
all the more surely to her desired haven. At five o’clock in the morning we cast
anchor in Loch Scresort [...] having, with the exception of the minister, gained no
loss in the gale. He, luckless man, had parted from him his excellent sou-wester; a
sudden gust had seized it by the flap, and hurried it away far to the lee.

Comment: Miller’s excellent sailing yarn of the gallant yacht concludes with an
appeal to anyone picking up the sou-wester anywhere in the Atlantic, to donate its
value to the Free Church’s funds.

Ps 118-119

Sunday 28th July

The gale still blew in fierce gusts from the hills, and the rain pattered like small shot
on the deck. Loch Scresort [...] looked particularly dismal this morning [...] Along
the slopes of the sandstone ridge I could discern, through the haze, numerous green
patches, that had once supported a dense population, long since “cleared off” to the
backwoods of America. While [...] on the other side (of the valley) I could see several
groups of turf cottages, with here and there a minute speck of raw-looking corn
beside them, that, judging from its colour, seemed to have but a slight chance of
ripening [...] Ever and anon [...] a heavier shower came sweeping down on the wind
[...] and all was fog and rime to the water’s edge. Bad as the morning was, however,
we could see the people wending their way, in threes and fours, to the place of
worship, - a black turf hovel, like the meeting-house in Eigg. The appearance of the
Betsey in the loch had been the gathering signal; and the Free Church islanders –
three fourths of the entire population – had all come out to meet their minister.

Comment: The heroic qualities of Swanson, and the yacht, which he personally
piloted through a raging storm all night, and the steadfastness of the Gaels turning
up for worship in a hovel in the gale, again bear out not only the minister and his
congregation’s devotion, but their courage too. No wonder Swanson was
prostrated by exhaustion after the service.
CHAPTER VIII
Ps 120 – 133

The geology of the island of Rum is simple, but curious.

Comment: The opening pages of Chapter VIII present difficulties for the modern general interest reader on several counts. The first problem lies in the first sentence above. Dr Taylor states plainly that the geology of Rum is not simple, but complex. He goes on: “Miller, by any standards, made a bad lapse when he explicitly described Rum as a microcosm of Scottish geology, with the Old Red Sandstone a coastal fringe ‘framing’ the rocks of the interior. He was, for Rum and the whole of northern Scotland, equating the Torridonian sandstone of the West of Scotland (which occurs on Rum) with the much younger Old Red Sandstone of eastern Scotland (which does not occur on Rum). “ Miller preferred to examine fossiliferous rocks, and the Torridonian is fossil-less, as he himself noted.

Dr Simon Cuthbert of Glasgow University thinks he “rather perversely, largely ignored the now famous layered igneous complexes” inland of Loch Scresort, in favour of examining the heliotropes and bloodstone-rich lavas in the west of the island. But of course the fame of the igneous complexes was not yet manifest in his day.

For the second part, these pages are probably the most densely technical in the whole book in their scientific terminology. The discussion on the impact of the Ice Age, over whether this was due to glaciations, or perhaps a deep marine indentation laden with icebergs, will interest the historian of the science.

When an islander slashes a lizard believed poisonous, there is a lengthy, and somewhat gruesome discourse on what happens to various creatures when killed, starting with the lizard, and going on to review the death agonies of the ray, the earthworm, the frog, the polypus (cuttlefish), the salmon and the rabbit.

This chapter is most valued for its blistering denunciation of the cruelty of the Clearances, one of the most ferocious in all the literature on the subject. Here, with one or two sentences highlighted in bold, it is:

P133 – 136

Clearances on Rum, 1826

The island, eighteen years before, had been divested of its inhabitants, amounting at the time to rather more than four hundred souls, to make way for one sheep farmer and eight thousand sheep. All the aborigines of Rum crossed the Atlantic; and at the close of 1828, the entire population consisted of but the sheep-farmer, and a few shepherds, his servants: the island of Rum reckoned up scarce a single family at this
period for every five square miles of area which it contained. But depopulation on so extreme a scale was found inconvenient; the place had been rendered too thoroughly a desert for the comfort of the occupant: and on the occasion of a clearing which took place shortly after in Skye, he accommodated some ten or twelve of the ejected families with sites for cottages, and pasturages for a few cows, on the bit of morass beside Loch Scresort, on which I had seen their humble dwellings. But the whole of the once peopled interior remains a wilderness, without inhabitant [....] Along a distant hill-side there ran what seems the ruins of a gray-stone fence, erected, says tradition, in a remote age, to facilitate the hunting of the deer; there were fields on which the heath and moss of the surrounding moorlands were fast encroaching that had borne many a successive harvest; and prostrate cottages, that had been the scenes of christenings, and bridals, and blithe new-year’s days [.....] I do not much like extermination carried out so thoroughly and on system; - it seems bad policy; and I have not succeeded in thinking any the better of it though assured by the economists that there are more than enough people in Scotland still. There are, I believe, more than enough in our workhouses, - more than enough on our pauper rolls, more than enough huddled up, disreputable, useless and unhappy, in the miasmatic alleys and typhoid courts of our large towns; but I have yet to learn how arguments for local depopulation are to be drawn from facts such as these. A brave and hardy people, favourably placed for all that is excellent in human nature, form the glory and strength of a country; - a people sunk into an abyss of degradation and misery, and in which it is the whole tendency of external circumstances to sink them yet deeper, constitute its weakness and its shame [.....] It did not seem as if the depopulation of Rum had been much to anyone’s advantage. The single sheep-farmer who had occupied the holdings of so many had been unfortunate in his speculations, and had left the island: the proprietor, his landlord, seemed to have been as little fortunate as the tenant, for the island itself was in the market; and a report went current at the time that it was on the eve of being purchased by some wealthy Englishman, who purposed converting it into a deer-forest. How strange a cycle! Uninhabited originally save by wild animals, it became at an early period a home of men, who, as the gray wall on the hill-side testified, derived, in part at least, their sustenance form the chase. They broke in from the waste the furrowed patches on the slopes of the valleys, - they reared herds of cattle and flocks of sheep, - they enjoyed the average happiness of human creatures in the present imperfect state of being, - they contributed their portion of hardy and vigorous manhood to the armies of the country, - and a few of their more adventurous spirits, impatient of the narrow bounds which confined them, and a course of life little varied by incident, emigrated to America. Then came the change of system so general in the Highlands; and the island lost all its original inhabitants, on a wool and mutton speculation, - inhabitants, the descendants of men who had chased the deer on its hills five hundred years before, and who, though they recognised some wild island lord as their superior, and did him service, had regarded the place as indisputably their own. And now yet another change was on the eve of
ensuing, and the island was to return to its original state, as a home of wild animals, where a few hunters from the mainland might enjoy the chase for a month or two every twelvemonth, but which could form no permanent place for human abode. Once more, a strange and most melancholy cycle!

Comment: The rumour Miller heard was borne out to the letter: An English lord, the Marquess of Salisbury, bought the estate and turned it into a game park in 1845, and the island remains the preserve of wild animals and precious few people nearly 170 years later. Much of it is now run as a Scottish National Nature Reserve by Scottish Natural Heritage, principally to enable earth scientists to study its remarkable geology.

Rum has been renowned for over a century for Kinloch Castle, probably the most grotesquely grandiose monument to Victorian landowners’ hubris in the whole of Scotland. Built as a grand hunting lodge by Sir George Bullough at a cost of some £15 million in today’s money with his family’s fortune in textile machinery, it boasted the most extravagant amenities imaginable. It was completed in 1903, but had a short-lived Edwardian heyday. The First World War carried off most of its posh clientele, and many of its own staff. Its size and extravagance and subsequent dilapidation make it extremely difficult, and expensive to conserve.

Debate has developed round Miller’s ferocious polemics on the Clearances. He had preceded his denunciation of the “extermination” on Rum, with a still-famous essay, Sutherland as it Was and Is (The Witness, 1843, reprinted in Essays, 1862) on the outcasting of the peasant population by the Countess of Sutherland. Dr Taylor has questioned whether Miller was the radical some historians have assumed. He did on occasion actually commend lairds who used their lands and powers over tenants responsibly. Mike Taylor and others have suggested he might have downgraded the coverage in The Witness by the late 1840s because rival publications took a lead on the issue, and in case the criticisms could alienate his Lowland readers.

My reading of the above passage tells me Miller was certainly aware of the theories driving the Age of Improvement, and showed in the most dramatic prose possible, how, while “Improvement” could achieve needed change, it could also result in both economic folly and social collapse. Did he need to say much more, given that others had taken up the cause? Land ownership and use remains as controversial to this day, as it was then. Much of Highlands and Islands land remains in the hands of a very few owners. There have been some welcome community buy-outs, such as on Assynt. That on Eigg ended a long, and latterly much troubled period of private ownership.

P137

Monday, 29th July?
There was light enough left, as we reached the upper part of Loch Scresort, to show us a shoal of small silver-coated trout, leaping by scores at the effluence of the little stream along which we had set out in the morning on our expedition. There was a net stretched across where the play was thickest; and we learned that the haul of the previous tide had amounted to several hundreds. On reaching the Betsey we found a pail and basket laid against the companion-head – the basket containing about two dozen small trout, - the minister’s unsolicited teind (Scots for tithe) of the morning draught; the pail filled with razor-fish of great size. The people of my friend are far from wealthy; and the cottars in Eigg contrive barely enough to earn at the harvest in the Lowlands, money sufficient to clear with their landlord at rent-day. We found the supply of both, - especially as provisions were beginning to run short in the lockers of the Betsey, - quite deserving of our gratitude.

Comment: More valuable evidence of the bare subsistence existence of the islanders, and their vulnerability to bad harvests, and the rent-rises which were among the landowners’ principal instruments for enforcing the Clearances.

John Stewart gave an account of how the pre-Clearance islanders of Rum used to catch trout by laying bundles of heath across the stream. They would then beat down the banks and pools, driving the trout into the mouth of the miniature dam formed by the stripped branches of heath.

Glenelg, Kyle Rhea, Wester Ross

Tuesday, 30th July?

Morning broke as we cast anchor in the Bay of Glenelg. At ten o’clock the steamer heaved in to the bay to land a few passengers, and the minister went on board, leaving me in charge of the Betsey, to follow him, when the tide set in, through the Kyles of Skye.

CHAPTER IX

P139

Navigating Kyle Rhea

Wednesday 31st July?

No sailing vessel attempts threading the Kyles of Skye from the south in the face of an adverse tide. The currents of Kyle Rhea care little for the wind-filled sail, and battle at times, on scarce unequal terms, with the steam-propelled paddle. The Toward Castle this morning had such a struggle to force her way inwards as may be
seen maintained at the door of...a public meeting, when a disappointed crowd press eagerly from without [.....]

P140-141

We weighed anchor about noon, and entered the opening of Kyle Rhea [...] and now we found ourselves the component of a little fleet, with some five or six vessels sweeping up the Kyle before us, and some three or four driving on behind. Never, except perhaps in a Highland river big in flood, have I seen such a tide. It danced and wheeled, and came boiling in huge masses from the bottom; and now our bows heaved abruptly round in one direction, and now they jerked as suddenly round in another.

P141

At one point the Kyle is little more than a quarter of a mile in breadth; and here, in the powerful eddie which ran along the shore, we saw a group of small fishing boats pursuing a shoal of sillocks (young coalfish) [...] For a few seconds rods would be cast thick and fast...and then the take would cease, and the play rise elsewhere, and oars would flash out amain, as the little fleet dashed into the heart of the shoal. As the Kyle widened, the force of the current diminished, and sail and helm again became things of positive importance [...] And the Betsey [...] began to show her paces. First she passed one bulky vessel, then another: she lay closer to the wind than any of her fellows, glided more quickly through the water [...]; and ere we had reached Kyle Akin, the fleet in the middle of which we had started were toiling far behind us.

P142

Making for Broadford Bay

A few vessels attempted following us, but, after an inefficient tack or two, they fell back on the anchoring ground, leaving the Betsey to buffet the currents alone. Tack followed tack sharp and quick in the narrows, with an iron-bound coast on either hand. We had frequent and delicate turning : now we lost fifty yards, now we gained a hundred. John Stewart held the helm; and as none of us had ever sailed the way before, I had the vessel’s chart spread out on the companion-head before me, and told him when to wear and when to hold away, - at what places we might run up almost to the rock edge, and at what places it was safest to give the land a good offing! Hurrah for the Free Church yacht Betsey! And hurrah once more ! We cleared the Kyle, leaving a whole fleet tide-bound behind us; and, stretching out at one long tack into the open sea, bore, at the next (tack) right into the bay at Broadford, where we cast anchor for the night within two hundred yards of the shore [...] The steam-boat passed southwards next morning, and I was joined by my friend the minister a little before breakfast.
Comment: No greater joy could there be for yachtsmen than to tack faultlessly against a fast-running tide in a narrow sound, and leave behind every other vessel in your wake! Miller is justly exhilarated at the Betsey’s seaworthiness, and the helmsman John Stewart’s, and his own navigating prowess. This is yet another example of Miller’s exceptionally lively travel-writing.

In the late 1830s, Miller and his new wife Lydia had sailed round the Sutors of Cromarty in his own little yawl, but there is no other record of him sailing. Swanson must have had great trust in the mate, John Stewart, and Miller as chart-reader, to let them take on such a tricky passage, in a boat not his own, but belonging to the Free Church then desperately needing funds.

Pabba (Pabay), isle off South-East Skye

Thursday 1st, or Friday, 2nd August

The island of Pabba lies somewhat like a long green steam-boat at anchor. (On its coast) there is (an) indentation, known as the Bay or Cove of Lucy. The central space in the cove is soft and gravelly; but on both its sides it is flanked by low rocks, that stretch out into the sea in long rectilinear lines, like the foundations of dry-stone fences. On the south side the rocks are red; on the north they are of a bluish-gray colour; their hues are as distinct as those of coloured patches on a map; and they belong to geological periods that lie widely apart. The red rocks we find laid down in most of our maps as Old Red, though I am disposed to regard them as of a much higher antiquity than even that ancient system; while the bluish-gray rock is decidedly Liasic […] the oldest Liasic rocks anywhere seen in Scotland […] We see in passing, near a picturesque little cottage, - the only one on the shores of the bay, - a crag of singularly rough appearance, that projects mole-like from the sward upon the beach, and then descending abruptly […] runs out in a long ragged line into the sea. The stratum from two to three feet in thickness […] seems wholly built up of irregularly formed rubbly concretions […]; and we find […] that every seeming concretion in the bed is a perfectly formed coral of the genus Astrea. We have arrived at an entire bed of corals, all of one species. Their surfaces, wherever they have been washed by the sea, are of great beauty.

Comment: Bay of Lucy appears as Ob Lusa on the Ordnance Survey today. Miller was right this time to identify the red rock as much older (ie Torridonian). A cottage is still on the same spot, as is the coral bed.

P145

We find them (the corals) fretted over with polygons, like those of a honeycomb […] and the centre of every polygon contains its many-rayed star.
Comment: There follows detailed comparisons between fossil corals found in different locations, for example Oolitic corals at Helmsdale, which were of much greater size.

P146

For miles together, - we know not how many – the bottom of a clear shallow sea was paved with living Astreae: every irregular rock-like coral, formed a separate colony of polypora (polyps) that, when in motion, presented the appearance of continuous masses of many-coloured life, and, when at rest, the places they occupied were more thickly studded with the living florets than the richest and most flowery piece of pasture the reader ever saw, with its violets or its daisies. And mile beyond mile this scene of beauty stretched on through the shallow depths of the Liasic sea [....]

P146-7

The Liasic bed of Astraeae existed long enough here to attain a thickness of from two to three feet. Mass rose over mass, - the living upon the dead, - till at length, by a deposit of mingled mud and sand, - the effect, mayhap, of some change of currents [...] the innumerable polyps of the living surface were buried up and killed, and then, for many yards, layer after layer of a calciferous grit was piled over them.

P147-8

I found no corals in its higher beds [....] In not a few of the middle strata, composed of a mud-coloured fissile sandstone, the gryphites lie as thickly as currants in a Christmas cake.

Comment: Gryphaea are fossil oysters of many varieties, some of them popularly known as devil’s toenails.

P148

In a fragment of the dark sandstone, six inches by seven, I reckon no fewer than twenty-two gryphites, and it forms but an average specimen. By far the most abundant species is [...] the gryphaea incurva. We find detached specimens scattered over the beach by hundreds, mixed up with the remains of recent shells, as if the gryphaea incurva were a recent shell too.

P148-9

The Lias of Sky has its three distinct groups of fossils, in which the Astrea described is most abundant; its middle group, in which the Gryphoea incurva occurs by millions; and its upper group, abounding in Ammonites, Nautili, Pinnae (fanshells, a group of bivalve molluscs) and Serpulae (tubeworms in limestone).
He would be a happy geologist, who ... could call Pabba his own. It contains less than a square mile of surface; and a walk of little more than three miles and a half long [...] brings the traveller back to his starting point; and yet [...] the petrifactions of its shores might of themselves fill a museum. They rise by thousands and tens of thousands on the exposed plane of its sea-washed strata, standing out in bold relief, like sculpturings on ancient tombstones, at once mummies and monuments, - the dead and the carved memorials of the dead. Every rock is a tablet of hieroglyphics with its ascertained alphabet; every rolled pebble a casket, with old pictorial records locked up within. Trap-dykes ... stand up like fences over the sedimentary strata or run out like moles far into the sea. The entire island, too, so green, rich and level, is itself a specimen illustrator of the effect of geological formation on scenery.

Comment: Miller also says that the trap-dykes were “beyond comparison finer” than those in the Water of Leith, which helped James Hutton found his theory of the earth.

P150

The only piece of smooth, level England, contained in the entire landscape, is the fossil-mottled island of Pabba.

Comment: Miller has earlier in the book envisaged Pabba (Pabay) as resembling an English landscape, remarkably at variance with its mountainous Hebridean setting, but actually calling it a piece of England is passing strange.

We were first struck, on landing this morning, by the great number of Pinnae embedded in the strata, shells varying from five to ten inches in length, - one species of the common flat type [...] and another nearly quadrangular.

An old French naturalist, the Abbe le Pluche, tells us that “the Pinna with its fleshy tongue” (foot) “spins such threads as are more valuable than silk itself, and with which the most beautiful stuffs that ever were seen have been made by the Sicilian weavers.” Gloves made of the byssus of recent Pinnae may be seen in the British Museum.

P151

The gryphae are also abundant, occurring in extensive beds; and Belemnites of various species lie so thickly scattered over the rock as if they had been the spindles of a whole kingdom thrown aside [...]. We find specimens of nautilus sufficiently perfect to show the peculiarities of the shell, and numerous Ammonites project in relief from almost every weathered slope of the strata.

Comment: Here ends Hugh’s account of his fossil-hunting field trips in the Inner Hebrides in 1844. He continues to the “cloven tower,” an ancient keep, which is still “the central object of the vista” at Kyle Akin.

P152 – 3
Moored at Kyle Akin

Weekend of 3rd/4th August

It was high time for us to be home. The dinner hour came: but [...] not the dinner. We had been in a cold Moderate district, where there came no half-dozens of eggs, or whole dozens of trout, or pailfuls of razor-fish, and in which hard cabin biscuit cost us sixpence per pound.

Comment: Miller is heaping spleen on the meanness of the Moderate wing who had remained within the established Church of Scotland at the Disruption.

P153

And now our stores were exhausted, and we had dined as best we could, on our last half-ounce of tea, sweetened by our last quarter pound of sugar. I had marked, however, a dried thornback (ray with spines on back and tail) hanging among the rigging. It had been there nearly three weeks before, when I first came aboard, and no one seemed to know for how many weeks previous [...] But necessity sharpens the discerning faculty [...] It was straightway taken down, skinned, roasted and eaten; and though rather rich in ammonia [...] we came deliberately to the opinion, that, on the whole, we could scarce have dined so well on one of Major Bellenden’s jack-boots.

Comment: Major Bellenden, in Walter Scott’s novel, Old Mortality, under siege by Covenanters, swears not to surrender until the garrison have eaten his old boots. A great jest among the diners, consuming the most disgusting meal imaginable!

P154 – 5

Kyle Rhea narrows.

Immediately at the water edge, under a tall, dark hill, there were two smouldering fires, that now shot up a sudden tongue of bright flame, and now dimmed into blood-red specks, and sent thick strongly-scented trails of smoke athwart the surface of the Kyle. We could hear, in the calm, voices beside them apparently those of children; and learned that they indicated the places of two kelp-furnaces, - things which have now become comparatively rare along the coasts of the Hebrides. There was a low rush of tides all around, and the distant voices from the shore, but no other sounds; and, dim in the moonshine, we could see behind us several spectral-looking sails threading their silent way through the narrows, like twilight ghosts traversing some haunted corridor.

Comment: Many Highlanders and Islanders Cleared off their ancestral lands had been encourage, or given no other option, from about the mid-18th Century to make an alternative living on the coasts burning kelp for soap and glass-making. It became a vital industry with international markets, but suddenly collapsed when import duties on Spanish barilla were first cut in 1822 then scrapped. This plunged
many communities into abject poverty, and speeded up emigration as a result. Seaweed is still used as a fertiliser on the islands.

It was late ere we reached the opening of Isle Ornsay; and as it was still a dead calm, we had to tug in the Betsey to the anchoring ground with a pair of long sweeps. The minister pointed to a low-lying rock on the left-hand side of the opening, - a favourite haunt of the seal.

Comment: John Swanson proceeds to tell a hair-raising story (ps 155-6) of how, in the previous winter, the yacht got stuck fast on a skerry on a pitch-dark night, and began to take in water. He got his wife, daughter and a maid ashore. Mrs Swanson waved a lamp towards the windows of their nearby house, but the relative at home thought it was a Will o’ the Wisp, and ignored it. Swanson and crew succeeded in kedging the boat astern with a view to her sinking rather than foundering on the rock. But on going down into the cabin he saw that the leak had mysteriously stopped. They discovered that the elastic oak planks had yielded to the pressure of the rock, admitting the water into “wide yawning seams.” But no sooner had the pressure stopped than the planks sprung back into their places, and a carpenter had no more to do than minor repairs. Another tribute to the boat’s build, and its skipper’s seamanship.

CHAPTER X

P 159

Return to Pabba, then Kyleakin

Monday, 4th August

On Monday I spent several hours in re-exploring the Lias of Lucy Bay and its neighbourhood, and then walked on to Kyle–Akin, where I parted from my friend Mr Swanson and took boat for Loch Carron.

Comment: On this rather anti-climactic note, having paid one more tribute to the “sailor minister” for a stirring sermon, Miller takes his leave of the reverend and the Inner Hebrides, to finished the rest of his holiday from the Editor’s Chair, waking over his old haunts on the east coast.

For the purposes of the 2014 voyage in the Betsey’s wake, we must leave him there, as fascinating as his east coast exploits were, and rejoin him, for the supplementary Chapter XIII in which he revisits Eigg a year later, in the summer of 1845, to find the Plesiosaur in its bedrock.

Chapter XIII

P 211
Isle Ornsay anchorage,

Wednesday, 11th June, 1845?

We found the Betsey riding in the anchoring ground at Isle Ornsay, in her foul-weather dishabille, with her topmast struck and in the yard, and her cordage and sides exhibiting in their weathered aspect the influence of the bleaching rains and winds of the previous winter. She was at once in an undress and getting old [...]. We lay storm-bound for three days at Isle Ornsay, watching from the windows of Mr Swanson’s dwelling the incessant showers sweeping down the loch.

Saturday 15th June

On the morning of Saturday, the gale, though still blowing right ahead, had moderated.

Comment: Rev Swanson and Hugh were both anxious to reach Eigg after the delay, and got under way in spite of the gale.

P212

When we were nearly abreast of the rocky point of Sleat, and about half-way advanced in our voyage, it had died into a calm; and for full twenty hours thereafter there was no more sailing for the Betsey. We saw the sun set, and the clouds gather, and the pelting rain come down, and night fall, and morning break, and the noon-tide hour pass by, and still were we floating idly in the calm.

Comment: Miller passes the evening catching and minutely examining jelly-fish, with their “long stinging tails, of which I have sometimes borne from my swimming excursions the nettle-like smart for hours.” Typical Hugh! As a boy he had learnt at his Uncle Sandy’s elbow the habits of analytical observation on the Cromarty seashore – “making a right use of his eyes” – to quote his own advice to young people urging them to follow his example.

P214

Point of Sleat

Sunday, June 16th

A little before noon we were surrounded for miles by an immense but thinly-spread shoal of porpoises, passing in pairs to the south, to prosecute [...] the herring fishing in Lochfine or the Gareloch; and for a full hour the whole sea, otherwise so silent, became vocal with long-breathed blowings, as if all the steam-tenders of all the railways in Britain were careering round us; and we could see slender jets of spray rising in the air on every side, and glossy black backs and pointed fins [...] wheeling heavily along the surface.

P214-215
Return to Eigg

We could now hear in the stillness the measured sound of oars, drawn vigorously against the gunwale in the direction of Eigg, still about five miles distant, though the boat from which they rose had not yet come in sight. “Some of my poor people,” said the minister, “coming to tug us ashore.” We were boarded in rather more than half an hour after [...] by four active young men, who seemed wonderfully glad to see their pastor; and then, amid the thickening showers [...] they set themselves to tow us into the harbour. The poor fellows had a long and fatiguing pull, and were thoroughly drenched ere, about six o’clock of the evening we had got up to our anchoring ground, and moored, as usual, in the open tide-way between Eilan Chasteil and the main island. There was still time enough for an evening discourse, and the minister, getting out of his damp clothes, went ashore and preached.

Comment: It was only in 2004 that a new pier enabled the Small Isles ferries to land on the island. Until then, all vessels of any size had to moor, like the Betsey, in the open water, and transfer their passengers and cargo ashore by “flitboats,” and it could be a perilous undertaking in bad weather.

P215

Monday, June 17th

The evening of Sunday closed in fog and rain, and in fog and rain the morning of Monday arose. The ceaseless patter made dull music on deck and skylight above, and the slower drip, drip, through the leaky beams, drearily beat time within [...]. I was now a full week from Edinburgh, and had seen and done nothing [...]. In the course of the afternoon, however, the weather unexpectedly cleared up, and we set out somewhat impatiently through the wet grass [...].

P216

Cave west of Uamh Fhraing

The cavern we had come to examine, we found to be a noble arched opening in a dingy-coloured precipice of augitic trap – a cave roomy and lofty as a cathedral, and ever resounding to the dash of the sea: but though it could have accommodated a congregation of at least five hundred, we found the way far too long and difficult for at least the weak and the elderly, and in some places inaccessible at full flood.

Comment: Swanson and Miller were looking for an alternative site for worship, in case the minister and congregation were evicted from the cottage then in use. They passed on and had another look at the “bone-cave” on their way.

P216

Galmisdale
On our return to the Betsey, we passed through a straggling group of cottages on the hill-side, one of which, the most dilapidated and smallest of the number, the minister entered, to visit a poor old woman, who had been bed-ridden for ten years. Scarcely ever before have I seen so miserable a hovel. It was hardly larger than the cabin of the Betsey, and a thousand times less comfortable. The walls and roof, formed of damp grass-grown turf, with a few layers of unconnected stone in the basement tiers, seemed to constitute one continuous hillock [...]

The low chinky door opened direct into one wretched apartment of the hovel, which we found lighted chiefly from the holes in the roof. The back of the woman's bed [...] now presented merely a naked rickety frame to the current of cold air from without. Within a foot of the old woman's bed, which was, we saw, usually filled with a bundle of rags, but which lay open as we entered, and which furnished a downward peep of sea and shore, and the rocky Eilan Chasteil, with the minister's yacht riding in the channel hard by. The little hole in the wall had formed the poor creature's only communication with the face of the external world for ten weary years. She lay under a dingy coverlet, which, whatever is original hue, had come to differ nothing in colour from the graveyard earth, which must so soon supply its place. What perhaps first struck the eye was the strange flatness of the bed clothes, considering that a human body lay below: there seemed scarce bulk enough under them for a human skeleton. The light of the opening fell on the corpse-like features of the woman, - sallow, sharp, bearing at once the stamp of disease and of famine; and yet it was evident, notwithstanding, that they had once been agreeable, - not unlike those of her daughter, a good-looking girl of eighteen, who, as we wentered, was sitting beside the fire.

Commentary: A more harrowing depiction of extreme poverty and sickness can hardly be found anywhere else in literature. Given the girl's age, the woman may not have been much past 40. Swanson prays beside her and leaves her some alms.

I learned that not during the ten years in which she had been bed-ridden had she received a single farthing from the proprietor, nor, indeed, had any of the poor of the island, and that the parish had no session-funds. I saw her husband a few days after, - an old worn-out man, with famine written legibly in his hollow cheek and eye, and on the shrivelled frame, that seemed lost in his tattered dress [...] He had once [...] two fine boys, both sailors, who had helped them; but the one had perished in a storm off the Mull of Cantyre (Kintyre), and the other had died of fever when on a West India voyage; and though their poor girl was very dutiful and staid (stayed) in their crazy hut to take care of them, what else could she do in a place like Eigg than just share with them their sufferings?
Comment: Thus the tale gets ever sadder. Miller, having demonstrated the laird’s gross neglect, goes on to protest that the ‘British Parliament’ had just legislated to exclude paupers from the courts where they could claim a pittance for support. Dr Taylor notes there was a lot of controversy around poor relief at the time; Presbyterians regarded statutory relief as a moral evil, preferring voluntary charity organised at parish level for the (morally) “deserving.” Such charity was often very unevenly offered. A Poor Law system was set up in Scotland in 1845, but that too proved very uneven in dispensing relief.

P 219

Tuesday, 24th June?

After a week’s weary waiting, settled weather came at last; and the morning of Tuesday rose bright and fair.

Commentary: Miller sets out alone to retrace his steps along the east coast, Swanson being away at the Free Church General Assembly, and John Stewart “still engaged with his potato crop.”

P 219-220

North of Kildonan

I descended to the bottom of the cliffs, along the pathway which runs between Keill and the solitary midway shieling formerly described (see Chapter V, ps 79-83), and found that the basaltic columns overhead, which had seemed so picturesque in the twilight, lost none of their beauty when viewed by day. They occur in forms the most beautiful and fantastic; here grouped beside some blind opening in the precipice, like pillars cut round the opening of a tomb, on some rock-front in Petraea; there running into long colonnades, or rising into tall porticos; yonder radiating in straight lines from some common centre, resembling huge pieces of fan-work, or bending out in bold curves over some shaded chasm, like rows of crooked oaks projecting from the steep sides of some dark ravine.

P 220 -221

I now [...] reached a part of the beach where the Oolitic beds are laid bare in thin party-coloured strata, and at once found something to engage me. Organisms in vast abundance, chiefly shells and fragmentary portions of fished, lie closely packed in their folds. One limestone bed, occurring in a dark shale, seems almost entirely composed of a species of small oyster; and some two or three other thin beds, of what appears to be either a species of Mytilus (mussel) or Avicula (bivalve), mixed up with a few shells resembling large Paludina (freshwater snail), and a few more of the gaper family, so closely resembling existing species, that John Stewart and Alister at once challenged them as smurslin, the Hebridean name for a well-known shell in these parts, - the *Mya truncata* (the Blunt Gaper, a clamlike mollusc). The remains
of fishes, - chiefly Ganoid scales and the teeth of Placoids, - lie scattered among the shells in amazing abundance.

Comment: It is interesting that the islanders “challenge” the fossils as if they were not real fossils, just as John Stewart had found the reptilian remains at Ru Stoir almost incredible. They had come face to face with the new science. Dr Taylor explains that Ganoid and Placoid are classifications that were soon superseded. Ganoid scales were often large, bony, often interlocking, enamelled and shiny, Placoid scales were plate-like, detached from each other, and commonly bearing tubercles on their skin.

Following the beds downward along the beach, I found that one of the lowest which the tide permitted me to examine, - a bed coloured with a tinge of red, was formed of a denser limestone than any of the others, and composed chiefly of vast numbers of small univalves resembling Neritae (gastropods). It was in exactly such a rock I had found, in the previous year, the reptile remains; and I now set myself with no little eagerness to examine it. One of the first pieces I tore up contained a well-preserved Plesiosaurian vertebra; a second contained a vertebra and a rib; and, shortly after, I disinterred a large portion of a pelvis. I had at length found, beyond doubt, the reptile remains in situ. The bed in which they occur is laid bare for several hundred feet along the beach, jutting out at a low angle among boulders and gravel, and the reptile remains we find embedded chiefly in its underside. It lies low in the Oolite [...] The reptile-bed occurs deep in the base of the (Lower Oolite) system [...] I found it nowhere rising to the level of the high-water mark. It forms one of the foundation tiers of the island [...] Even at the close of the Oolitic period (Middle and Upper Jurassic, c166 – 145 mya) this sepulchral stratum must have been a profoundly ancient one.

Comment: Little wonder that the Plesiosaur remains were, and remain, hard to find, in this very remote location, and generally accessible only at the lowest tides. Regarding their age, Miller remarked that none of characteristic shells of the Jurassic system, ammonites, belemnites, oysters or nautili, were present in the deposit.

I explored the shores of the island on the Ru Stoir, and thence to the Bay of Laig.

Comment: He again found reptile remains occurring in abundance at Ru-stoir, but not the bedrock. He again experimented with the musical sands at Laig, but still could not identify the cause of the sound.
Wednesday, 25th June, 1845

I remained ten days in the island, but succeeded in making no further discoveries.

On the morning of Wednesday, we set sail for Isle Ornsay, with a smart breeze from the north-west.

*Comment:* Miller now remarked on “parasitic” stationary clouds on the mountain tops, while all the other clouds sped before the wind.

### Making north for Isle Ornsay in a gale.

The gale meanwhile freshened and freshened yet more; and the Betsey leaned over until her lee chain-plate lay along the water. There was the usual combination of sounds beneath me, - the mixture of guggle, clunk, and splash, - of low, continuous rush, and bluff, loud blow, which forms in such circumstances the voyager’s concert.

I soon became aware, however, of yet another species of sound, which I did not like half so well, - a sound as of the washing of a shallow current over a rough surface; and, on the minister coming below, I asked him, tolerably well prepared for his answer, what it might mean. “It means,” he said, “that we have sprung a leak, and rather a bad one; but we are only some six or eight miles from the Point of Sleat, and must soon catch the land.” [....] Presently, however, the rush became greatly louder; some other weak patch in the Betsey’s upper works had given way, and anon the water came washing up from the lee side along the edge of the cabin floor [....] But the gale had so increased, that, notwithstanding our diminished breadth of sail, the Betsey, straining hard in the rough sea, still lay into the gunwale; and the water, pouring in through a hundred opening chinks in the upper works, rose [...] high over plank, and beam, and cabin-floor, and went dashing against beds and lockers. She was evidently filling, and bade fair to terminate all her voyaging by a short trip to the bottom.

*Comment:* It is at this point that old seaman Alister related the tale of a sloop which had “instantaneously” floundered at the same spot thirty years before!

There are, I am convinced, few deaths less painful than some of those untimely and violent ones at which we are most disposed to shudder. We wrought so hard at pail and pump [...] that I was conscious, during the whole time, of an exhilaration of
spirits rather pleasurable than otherwise [...]. When matters were at their worst with us, we got under the lee of the point of Sleat.

Point of Sleat

The promontory interposed between us and the roll of the sea; the wind gradually took off; and after having seen the water gaining fast and steadily on us for considerably more than an hour, we, in turn, began to gain on the water. It came ebbing out of drawers and beds, and sunk downwards along panels and table-legs – a second retiring deluge; and we entered Isle Ornsay with the cabin-floor all visible, and less than two feet water in the hold.

Friday 27th June – Saturday 28th June

On the following morning, taking leave of my friend the minister, I set off, on my return homewards, by the Skye steamer, and reached Edinburgh on the evening of Saturday.

Conclusion: A near-drowning was surely a suitably dramatic climax to this tremendous classic of Scottish travel literature. The gallant Betsey, in such poor shape, did not long survive in the Free Church’s service, and was succeeded by another vessel, the Breadalbane. John Swanson’s health was also failing (he is said to have suffered migraines on top of all the other hardships), and two years later he took up the ministry at Nigg, as earlier explained. The Witness articles, published between 1845 and 1849, did not appear in book form until 1858, two years after Hugh’s death in 1856. His widow, Lydia Fraser, collated the texts, and an Anglican rector and amateur geologist, Rev William Symonds, edited them for publication.

It remains only to marvel somewhat at the extent of Miller’s output for The Witness. Each chapter in this book, originally published as a single article, works out at well over 5,000 words, the whole amounting to about 70,000 in total, all of course hand-written. They were put together amidst the production of a twice-weekly national newspaper. And the Cruise of the Betsey was followed by another book of roughly the same size, Rambles of a Geologist, or Ten Thousand Miles over the Fossiliferous Deposits of Scotland, the two volumes always being published under one cover, as they are in Dr Taylor’s authoritative 2003 edition. It surely deserves a reprint.