



The dogs take the biscuit

My husband asked me if I wanted to go to St Kilda and I said no. He laughed at my decisiveness. I felt guilty then, tried to give it some more thought. Having done so my decision remains the same. I have no desire to go to St. Kilda, although I have no doubt it is beautiful, dramatic, awesome in it's landscape - I can see that from his films.

I have no romantic or sentimental feelings towards the island. It seems to me that life there was harsh, cruel - but I do not imagine I would have liked the St. Kildans at all. I find it hard to feel sorry for them. It seems to me they were a dirty brood, sitting on their own doorsteps - didn't anyone ever tell them you are not supposed to do that? I am told it was their custom to smear their new born babes with bird crap. Were they mad?

When I think about the St. Kildans I am reminded of the Trobriand Islanders back in the 1920's. I learned about them when I was studying Anthropology at Goldsmiths and I'm afraid I held similarly negative views of their behaviour - selling their women for yams and such like. My tutor accused me of ethnocentricity. "It's not true" I protested - "I just think it's an abominable way to behave whoever you are. I know the Europeans were even worse - I don't like them either, the men anyway."

Anyway, as usual, who knows what is true, it has been said that the Trobriand men told Malinowski all sorts of rubbish because they didn't like it when he called them savages and slept with their women.

My Anthropology tutor, Suzanna, studied Mexican peasants. She told me they used to spit into the stew as they cooked it. "Are you sure they didn't just do that when you were there?" I asked. "No" she said, looking sheepish, "I'm not sure." - "Didn't they like you?" I asked her and she shook her head, "I don't think so."

That made me feel sad because I liked Suzanna a lot, she was one of my favourite tutors and it's only because of her that I stuck with anthropology for the whole year - but who would like an anthropologist? How would we feel if a Trobriand Islander came waltzing into our kitchen one day to watch us cook up some macaroni cheese and chips? Wouldn't we be tempted to spit in their dinner and claim it as ancient tradition?

So who knows what really went on in St Kilda, perhaps they were a picture of health and hygiene before the Christians came along. Probably not though - they were probably mingers - and apparently they killed all their dogs when they left for the mainland. Well that takes the biscuit as far as I'm concerned. I'm not one of those people that prefers animals to humans, but I do love dogs. Call me ethnocentric if you like, but I can't forgive them for the dogs.

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