

# Book Review – The Unreliable Death of Lady Grange

St Kilda is a remote archipelago in the North Atlantic. For centuries its people lived a very basic life, farming Soay sheep and existing on a diet of seabirds and their eggs, salted mutton, oats and barley.

In 1914 a nurse posted to the island wrote;

*'life here is imprisonment to any who has led an active life.'*

The islanders were, she said, lacking in basic hygiene, subject to many diseases, and often malnourished. They spoke only Gaelic.



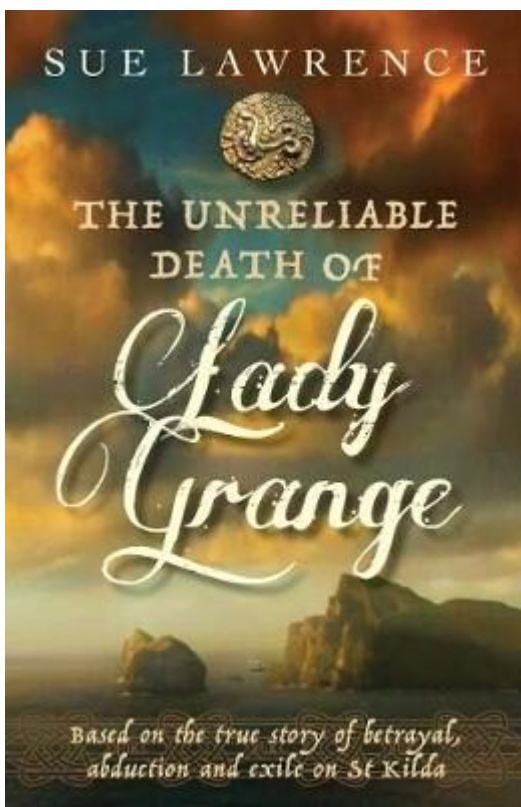
Women on St Kilda

In 1930 the residents of the settlement petitioned the Secretary of State for Scotland for their evacuation. Life had become untenable; many of the able-bodied men had either died or left, and those that remained were insufficient to look

after the women and the livestock.

The St Kildans did not think they could survive another winter. Tourists to the islands had also given them a glimpse of a better way of life. In August of that year, the evacuation took place.

Yet two hundred years earlier, in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, Rachel, Lady Grange, a woman used to Edinburgh society and the luxuries of the aristocracy, had been abducted and taken to St Kilda, where she lived out her days until she was taken to her final home on Skye. In *The Unreliable Death of Lady Grange*, Edinburgh author Sue Lawrence tells the fictionalised story of Rachel's strange and terrifying life.



The story begins in 1732 with Rachel's funeral. Present are her bereaved husband, James Erskine, Lord Grange, pillar of the Kirk and Lord Justice Clerk of Scotland, his sister Jean, and his five surviving children. The oldest, Mary, however, is suspicious – not only was her mother extremely healthy, but how have both she and her waiting woman suddenly disappeared in the dead of night? No-one listens to Mary, but years later

she will act on her suspicions and finally discover some of the truth.

In the meantime, the story is told through the narratives of Rachel herself, James, Rachel's servant Annie and several other key characters.

This is a most effective way to lead us through the plot, with each writer having a different version of the story to tell, and their own ideas about what has happened.

Rachel is writing from exile, and begins by explaining the background to her marriage – for her own family had suffered a major scandal in her youth, with her father being hanged for murdering a judge, and so tainted is the family name that James's interest in her is both unexpected and wonderful. James, aware of her background, is so taken with Rachel that he is prepared to overlook it, and the first years of their marriage go well. Unfortunately it becomes increasingly clear that James wants, above all, a male heir; when Rachel miscarries their first baby, James's true nature starts to appear, although when a healthy son arrives a year later things resume their happy state for some time.



Rachel, Lady Grange

Rachel, though, is not the subservient wife that James had anticipated – she is headstrong, outspoken, temperamental, and an increasingly heavy drinker. Whilst James is not exactly teetotal himself, different rules apply to women, and it is not long before problems emerge in the marriage.



James Erskine, Lord Grange

Like most men of his status at that time, James has a mistress, Fanny Lindsay. Rachel is at first unaware of this, though she still tells Mary, before her own wedding to Lord Kintore, that;

*“There are certain duties you must assume as a wife but then, once...you’ve produced heirs for the Earl, you can simply enjoy being a countess...and leave him and his urges to*

*mistresses or courtesans.”*

*‘I could hardly believe I was repeating the trope that a wife must look away when a husband took a mistress, but I said only what my mother had said to me and hers before her.’*

As James gets more and more fed up with his strong-minded wife, he wants only to be rid of her. He alleges, and indeed persuades himself, that Rachel is mad;

*‘The daughter had inherited his (her father’s) madness and temper.’*

*‘I was being both lenient and kind. She is a danger to herself, and to the good name of the family.’*

Yet it is Rachel who has suffered so much at James’ hands – his insistence that her children are wet-nursed has led to the deaths of two of them from diseases acquired in the women’s insanitary homes, he has had no sympathy for her bereavements and has simply told her to get on with having more babies.

He has banned her from going into Edinburgh from their home at Preston House in East Lothian, and as time goes on he insists on a separation and takes most of the children to live with him – the mother having no rights in those days, no matter how high her social standing may be.

But Rachel is tough, and when James is away she is straight into the city and to James’s town house in Niddry’s Wynd. She wants to find out, in particular, what James is up to with Simon Fraser, Lord Lovat, a dissolute, brutish Highland chief;

*‘with his family’s unfortunate political leanings and loyalty to the old Papist ways.’*

and it is on one such visit that she discovers a secret about her husband and his activities – one so explosive that it has the potential to ruin him and his family.

Once James realises what Rachel now knows, her fate is set. And once James shares the information with Lovat there is no going back – complain as James might of how he never meant his wife any real harm, Lovat's thugs are soon unleashed, Lovat devises a wicked plan to fool the family into believing in her death, and before long Rachel has been violently kidnapped and taken, bound and gagged, on horseback, first to Balquidder in Perthshire and then to the Monach Isles (Heisker).



Lord Lovat

The story of Rachel's appalling boat journey to the Isles, of the people who live there and her gradual acceptance of her new way of life, is fascinating. She is accommodated in the former home of the land agent, who has left the islands in mysterious and (at first) unexplained circumstances, and looked after by one young girl who can speak only Gaelic;

their food consists of bannocks, oatmeal porridge and seabirds. Nevertheless Rachel does adapt, and comes to like the island and its people, though she still longs to get back to her children;

*“I have never seen such loveliness; this place is truly magical. I thought I was an educated woman, but I had never heard of the machair. In the city we are ignorant of so much of the wild beauty of the Highlands.”*

When she meets the one other English-speaker on the Isles, Reverend William Fleming, she has found someone with whom she can talk about what has happened to her, and even discuss books and poetry.

Yet Rachel's ordeals are far from over. Fleming turns out not to be the person she initially thinks he is, Mary's sister Fannie inadvertently tells James that Mary has found out where her mother is, and when, as a result, Lovat has Rachel moved to St Kilda, her former life on the Monach Isles soon seems like luxury in comparison with the harsh struggle for existence on the archipelago.

The plot races along in this excellent book; Sue Lawrence's prose is just right for the period – we know we are in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but she does not cram every sentence with unnecessary historic detail; the story flows perfectly, nothing jars. Lawrence's ear for dialogue is as good here as in her previous historical novel *Down to the Sea*; so many books are spoiled by clunky, unconvincing, speech – in fact I got so cross with this in another recent read that I found myself making a list of all the things that country vicars would never have said – but Lawrence's characters' conversations have an admirable immediacy and accuracy.

*The Unreliable Death of Lady Grange* is a superlative page-turner, but it is also a clear-sighted look at the treatment



of women, a treatment which unfortunately often continues, though in other forms, today.

For all her status, Rachel is powerless, the men in her life hold every card and do as they wish, and they believe that to do so is their birthright. Yes, Rachel drinks and shouts – but why shouldn't she? The terrible price she pays for refusing to submit to the double standards of her time is laid bare in this shocking, frightening, and revealing story.



*The Unreliable Death of Lady Grange* and *Down to the Sea*, both by Sue Lawrence, are published by [Saraband](#).