

On Bute

Mischa Haller

Voyages and Natural Wonders

Island life is a state of mind. It doesn't really matter whether an island is almost lost in the Pacific Ocean, adrift in the Venetian Lagoon or sitting off the coast of Scotland, visible from the mainland. Normal conditions of life are suspended and all prevailing customs bend a little in the sea air.

This is not to say that islands are always easy. Their fragile, claustrophobic economies can test a population to destruction. But their sense of distance from mainstream life stimulates the imagination. Around the coast of Britain and Ireland, islands such as Sark, Arran, the Hebrides, Orkney, Shetland, St Kilda, Iona and Bute all conjure up different worlds. They are all on the edge of a civilisation and each reflects that fact in their own way. Iona, for instance, has functioned as a spiritual retreat – offering an alternative mental space that its inhabitants have cultivated over centuries. Orkney, too, has a spiritual dimension but one stretching back even further to the building of Maes Howe and the Ring of Brodgar, while the island's population grafts Norse culture onto its British and Scottish roots in a wild mix. Floating on the fringes of mainland history, each of the islands surrounding Britain has retained traces of life that has vanished elsewhere.

It is this peculiar cultural hybridity that Misha Haller documents in his series of photographs, *On Bute*. The book opens with images of arrival and ends with images of departure but throughout the sequence there is a persistent return to the life of the island dwellers. This is appropriate as Bute has several histories, some tied to ephemeral pleasures, others rooted in long term commitments. Rothesay, the main town on the island, was once a Victorian seaside resort, one of the many dotted along the coasts of England and Scotland. These towns arose in parallel with the development of the railways and the growth of large, industrial populations pursuing pleasure and escape. In a world of tightening social codes, the seaside resort evolved as a carnivalesque retreat, an ambiguous, liminal space where the rules were relaxed and people could experiment with the new concept of leisure. These looser boundaries were encapsulated in songs of the period such as 'You can do a lot of things at the seaside' by Mark Sheridan, a music hall performer, who hints at the pleasures to be found in coastal retreats:

Have you ever noticed when you're going by the sea,
The things that people do with impunity?
If they did the same things when they're up in town,
Moral Mrs. Grundy on her face would wear a frown...
Mother takes her stockings off upon the sandy shore,
And shows a lot of linen that she's never shown before.
You can do a lot of things at the seaside
that you can't do in town....

Perhaps it's extreme to attribute such bacchanalian dimensions to Rothesay, though in its heyday the town drew vast crowds of daytrippers from Glasgow arriving by train and steamer. While some of Mischa Haller's photographs document the declining activity of the harbour, others record a certain wildness in the teenage life on the island. There is a tension in the body of the boy holding a Dr Pepper and confrontation in the eyes of the teenage boy staring out a window, both full of unreleased energy. A portrait of a young couple in a poolroom makes this tension explicit. While the couple look searchingly in each others' eyes, their friends lean backwards as if this radioactive relationship was about to explode. The candied colours of the pool table and the white ball poised surreally on the back of a player's hand increase the disorienting effect of this image, suggesting that a relationship here is unlikely to unfold at a normal pace. A later photograph of teenagers on the night streets seems to confirm the dizziness of this life and implies that the carnivalesque has not entirely receded.

Such images provide more of an adrenalin rush after the introductory images of a sedate life filled with small children and older adults who quietly inhabit the vestiges of good times gone by. In that sequence of photographs an almost empty esplanade appears exotic and ignored by the world while, elsewhere, old folk pose with a parasol in well tended public gardens. The thrilling world of seaside fast food – chips, ice-cream cones and ninety-nines – seems tamed by the **drowsy** pace of Rothesay life today. If the carnivalesque survives at all here, it is in the ubiquitous surreality of each scene. Young girls dressed in orange highland tartans wait in a room filled with orange chairs, a chip shop counter echoes the blue of a child's tee-shirt while outside, adults consume their chips behind deep blue railings above a dark blue sea. In the distance we can see blue mountains under a blue sky. Colours conspire in these images to intensify the experience of otherwise mundane scenes. The almost hallucinogenic quality of the images is a recurring element throughout *On Bute*, with differing significance depending on the context of the pictures.

In the photographs of Rothesay, for instance, Haller's use of colour emphasises an intensity of experience that we normally associate with memory, particularly in relation to seaside landscapes. Childhood memories often have such vivid, exaggerated weather scenes – days always seem sunnier, the skies are always infinitely blue and recollections of flavourings on ice cream are impossibly red. Resorts have known this secret from the start – our brief time in the liminal zone is lived in brighter colours and even the postcards sold as souvenirs come in lurid blues and yellows.

Bute, though, is more than a seaside resort. Divided by the Highland Boundary Faultline, the island is also characterised by its division between town and country. At first, Haller's record of the more rural northern landscape sits in sharp contrast to Rothesay life. In the opening images of this section men and their livestock are rooted in serene expanses of farmland unbroken by hedges. Colour in the photographs appears more natural, muted even. Classical notions of beauty and the highland landscape seep into the images and lull the viewer into expectations of a traditional exposition of rural life. But, as John Szarkowski observed of William Eggleston's photographs, 'The simplicity of these pictures is not so simple.' Haller has drawn back with his camera, presenting us with wide shots that make it difficult to state what

exactly is the subject of some of these photographs – the landscape, the people or the animals? Gradually, the broad sweep of these particular pictures makes us realise just how inseparable are the lives of people and livestock from their surrounding environment. Two images in particular – a man washing a horse in the street and a dog jumping up at his owner – drive home the symbiotic relationship between man and animal on Bute. There is an excitable energy in these beasts, some hype-awareness of their owners in their eyes that tells us something about the volatile, claustrophobic tension that binds everything together on the island.

When Haller does close in on life in the countryside, there is a new ambiguity in the world he records. As in the images of Rothesay, colour begins to play an important role. In this case, it is man-made objects – tools and toys – that glow with an almost supernatural intensity: a farmer's quad-bike shimmers amid a herd of sleek black cattle; a girl sits encompassed by the wheel of an uncannily defined green and yellow tractor; and a psychedelized bouncy castle blooms in the garden of a monochrome cottage. However, this is not a simple juxtaposition of consumer goods against a natural backdrop. Often the objects are practical, helpful or a part of innocent childhood pleasures. Their radiance seems to be a quiet celebration of human daily life - the ephemeral, shining in a landscape that measures time in terms of tectonic shifts. All the same, we recognise the industrialised origins of the colours and the complexity of the civilisation that produced them. We are made conscious of the vast, invisible networks of commerce and production that underpin life even in a remote corner of Scotland. In one image of a luminous pink kids' tricycle, these ambiguities are manifest. It is an epic picture, taken from grass eye-level to allow the bike to soar, monumentally, into the blue sky above. In its' stillness, there is an evocation of childhood memory again – the toy abandoned after play on an endless summer's day – but in the display of fluorescent pinks against the highland background there is a brash contrast between the artificial and the natural.

In 1959, the American photographer Walker Evans called colour photography vulgar and, although he himself revised his opinion, there has always been a trace of this attitude in the general perception of the medium. It could even be argued that its best exponents have recognised this criticism to some degree and worked with the aesthetic uneasiness it implies. William Eggleston, the first acknowledged master of colour photography, used heightened colours to document rural America coming to terms with the bright, plastic, promise of consumer society in the 1960s and 70s. His perceptions of a vulgar new world and its' tawdry décor carried a darker charge, at times morbid and funereal, occasionally lyrical. The influence of his colour photography can be seen in more recent photographers like Martin Parr who has also explored the medium's potential to simultaneously celebrate and damn contemporary culture.

On Bute pays homage to both Parr's *The Last Resort* (1986), a brutal survey of New Brighton in the north of England, and William Eggleston's *Guide*, published for his celebrated 1976 exhibition at Moma in New York. The image of the pink tricycle, in particular, echoes the famous cover of Eggleston's *Guide* with its own monumental tricycle photographed in Memphis. The comparison with these photographers, though, throws up as many differences

as similarities. One startling transformation since these landmark works by Eggleston and Parr, for instance, lies in the public perception of photography as a medium that can provide evidence or reliable documentation. There has always been a tension between this role and the parallel history of manipulation of the photographic print. With the advent of digital imaging, however, this division has become almost impossible to maintain. Where William Eggleston may have heightened the colour in his prints through the chemical process in the darkroom, today Mischa Haller can intensify his colours with Adobe Photoshop. Such software though is designed to enable practitioners to do much more – to alter images and recombine them with imported elements, swapping colours and effects effortlessly within the parameters of the programme. The conventional relationship which a photographic image had to the subject it represented is now extremely tenuous. Digitisation introduces a new indeterminacy into the old equation, making both the photographer and the viewer aware of the open-endedness of the contemporary photographic process.

In a world where camera phones, photoblogs and online photosharing sites like Flickr undermine the continued existence of the print as a mass phenomenon, Haller's use of Photoshop to intensify colours in his images is a measured step. Within the context of Bute, with its layered histories, seaside derangements and island hybridities it gains added significance. It is a location where indeterminacy has, since Victorian times, been the source of the economy. And, as an island, its' mongrel mix of cultures and traditions is the ideal breeding ground for the ambiguities of contemporary digital image making.

In Mischa Haller's first book of photographs, *Off Chance*, the images were driven by the impulse to record an instant in daily life. Haller talks of two kinds of photographs in his artistic practice. The first is an impulsive shot, taken intuitively. The second is a photograph taken, perhaps, just after that first image but with a moment's pause. In that brief hiatus, Haller says, all kinds of information floods in, changing the balance of the situation. What changes is not just the awareness of the subject being photographed but that of the photographer too. An instantaneous relationship develops. It does not seem to be a coincidence that Haller concentrated on selecting more of these 'second' shots for his Bute sequence. On that island, context transforms everything and in a moment's pause a torrent of ambiguous information can enrich and complicate the simplest image.

© Francis McKee
Mount Stuart 2005