

# St Kilda sisterhood among first to take up right to vote

Research for play about Hebridean suffragists finds island housewives were among those who registered in 1918

Julia Horton

They were – arguably unfairly – derided as primitive islanders disconnected from British politics. In fact, the Scottish archipelago of St Kilda, in the Outer Hebrides, was considered so remote that, in 1913, at the height of the women's suffrage movement, critics suggested that jailed suffragettes on hunger strike should be banished there.

It has emerged, however, that several housewives on St Kilda registered for the 1918 election, when women in Britain were allowed to vote for the first time.

The discovery by playwright Toria Banks during research for a new play that tells the forgotten story of Hebridean

suffrage, suggests St Kildans were more politically engaged than previously thought. While sifting through electoral records, Banks found that two widows and two others thought to be wives of island men, were listed to vote in 1918.

It is not clear if any braved the potentially perilous sea voyage to the nearest polling station – about 50 miles away on the Isle of Harris – but it does suggest that, contrary to popular belief, St Kildans were political, and women on the island supported the efforts of the suffragettes.

“Five years before the 1918 vote it was suggested in parliament that hunger-striking suffragette prisoners be exiled to St Kilda, where they could do no harm. So, when I found a page of women from St Kilda who were registered to vote it was extraordinary,” said Banks.

Her play premieres next month in Lewis, on the centenary of the 1918 Representation of the People Act, which extended voting rights to millions of women in Britain.

Records of who voted in 1918 are not kept, as ballots are secret, but Banks

believes it is “quite possible” that the islanders took part in the historic election.

Rising infant deaths from tetanus, which was wrongly blamed on an island custom of daubing newborn's umbilical cords in seabird oil, plus better transport connections after St Kilda became a First World War naval signal station made such journeys more common.

Banks also thinks the women may have gone to “quite extraordinary lengths” to vote, as life on St Kilda became increasingly unsustainable.

The Highland Archive Centre in Inverness confirmed that it has the electoral register for 1918-19, listing four St Kildan women.

Dr Alison Rosie, registrar of the National Register of Archives for Scotland, said the Highland electoral document was a “fascinating” find.

She questioned whether the women would have actually voted, however, as the election took place in December when the sea was commonly too rough to cross. She was also unaware of any newspaper articles from the time record-

ing what would have been seen as a momentous event.

Banks's play, directed by Muriel Ann Macleod of Rural Nations, a Hebridean production company, focuses on the long-forgotten Stornoway Women's Suffrage Society on Lewis – the most westerly such group in Britain.

It was founded in 1911 after a visit to Lewis by Mancunian suffragist Alice Crompton, who reported that nowhere on her Hebridean tour had women shown more enthusiasm for suffrage.

The society's secretary, Bella Mackinnon, had come to Lewis from New Zealand, where Kate Sheppard, who also had Hebridean links, led the fight that saw New Zealand women become the first in the world to get the vote, in 1893.

The play also features Lewis trainee medic, Helen MacDougall, who joined Edinburgh doctor Elsie Inglis's Scottish Women's Hospital in Serbia in 1914, and militant herring girl Christine Morrison, who threatened strike action over pay.

*Deeds Not Words is at An Lanntair arts centre in Stornoway from February 15-17*



A group of women and girls from St Kilda, the remotest part of Britain

## Isis bride held at Heathrow as influx expected

Dipesh Gadhler

A jihadist bride who gave birth to a son under Isis in Syria has returned to the UK with her child in the first known case of its kind.

The 27-year-old Briton was arrested at Heathrow under terrorism laws, while the boy, who is aged under two and whose nationality is unclear, has been taken into care.

The woman flew into the UK from Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital, nine days ago, in an apparent attempt to cover her tracks.

However, officers from Scotland Yard's counter-terrorism unit were waiting when she landed. She was released on bail while police inquiries continue.

The case emerged as the authorities implement a series of measures to tackle a potential influx of Isis brides and children after the terrorist group was routed in its Syrian and Iraqi strongholds last year.

Aqsa Mahmood, 22, a suspected Isis recruiter from Glasgow, has been stripped of her British citizenship to prevent her returning to the UK. A similar order has been made against another British woman who fled Syria at the end of 2016 after her husband, a prominent British figure in Isis, died in battle.

The woman, who cannot be named for legal reasons, gave birth to two children, now aged one and three, in the war zone, which means they have no nationality. All three are stranded in Turkey.

The Home Office argues that the woman and Mahmood have not been made “stateless” because they are eligible to apply for citizenship in the countries where their parents were born. In Mahmood's case, this would be Pakistan.

Social services departments have been drawing up plans to take into care British children known to have travelled to Syria and Iraq with their families should their parents bring them back home.

Khadijah Dare, 26, a Muslim convert from Lewisham, south London, is believed to have joined Isis in 2012, heading to Syria with her infant son, Isa. The child later appeared in an Isis execution video, earning him the nickname “Jihadi Junior”.

Dare married a jihadist from Sweden, with whom she had a second child, before he was killed in fighting. Lewisham council has said it takes Dare's actions “very seriously”, adding: “If she returned to the borough, we would take immediate measures to ensure the safety of her children.”

Last year The Sunday Times revealed how Joya Choudhury, 33, a former student from London, married an Isis chief from America called John Georgelas.

Choudhury fled Syria with



Choudhury: fled Syria with three children

their three sons and while pregnant. Despite rejecting Isis and divorcing Georgelas, her in-laws in Texas were handed partial custody of the children, with Choudhury given only limited access.

Last week the TV presenter Piers Morgan angrily terminated an interview with Choudhury on ITV's Good Morning Britain show when she admitted she still loved Georgelas and claimed he “has a good side”.

More than 100 British women are thought to have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join jihadist groups.

The most notorious, Sally Jones, from Kent, was killed by a US drone strike last year. The fate of her son, Jojo, now 13, remains unclear. @dipeshgadhler

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