

ROBERT MOYES ADAM

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From an early age, Adam had a deep attachment to nature and wildlife, which was to permeate every aspect of his life. He began taking photographs at the age of 14, using a quarter-plate camera, but he went to work as a gardener and then illustrator at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. His flair with a camera soon led to photography being used as a method of botanical recording alongside the traditional drawing and painting. By this time Adam was using a half-plate field camera made by Watson & Son, which had the extending bellows necessary for close-up work.

Quality was always an over-riding concern. For the pioneering photographers of the early 20th Century, there was no short cut - the convenience of 35 mm film was not yet available. Heavy equipment and fragile glass plates had to be lugged into position. Waiting for the right light was imperative. Furthermore, if Adam considered any or all of his dozen plates from a shoot to be less than perfect, he destroyed them.

The prints shown today are not, of course, those made by Adam himself, who closely controlled the printing process to manipulate the image to produce the effect he was after. Adam kept meticulous notes of his exposures, which allows modern printers to approximate his interpretation, but, nevertheless, the power of his images shines through.

Adam is chiefly remembered now for his Scottish landscape work and documentation of rural life. In 1958, in an interview with Jeremy Bruce-Watt, he revealed something of his motivation:

"Suppose I catalogued (Scotland's) wildlife and its topography as a permanent record against the industrial and other changes of the future. Suppose I were to preserve for my own botanical interest the land as I see it in my lifetime..."

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that he began this work in the nick of time. For example, only 3 years after he photographed the 130-strong community of Mingulay in 1905, the island's entire population had been evacuated to Vatersay. This was because of the authorities' concern for the primitive and precarious subsistence lifestyle with its total dependence on fishing and agriculture. For modern social historians, this series of plates represents a priceless social document.

The University of St Andrews Library holds approximately 15,000 Adam negatives (mostly half or quarter plate glass). This comprehensive collection is being scanned and digitised as part of a pilot project which aims to complete a computerised database of the entire Library photographic collection (more than 300,000 images) for the Millennium. This will allow many more users to access the collections for research or interest without the originals being exposed to the risks of handling. Further information can be obtained from the University of St Andrews Library, North Street, St Andrews, Fife, KY16 9TR.

Another exhibition of Adam's work, focusing on the Western Isles, is being mounted in association with the University by Museum nan Eilean in Stornoway, beginning on 18 November. It is hoped that the exhibition will then travel to Benbecula and Barra in spring 1997. Further information can be obtained from Richard Langhorne, Museum nan Eilean, Francis Street, Stornoway HS1 2NF.



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*Above: Loch Coruisk and
the Cuillin Hills
Right: detail from
"Harris woman at window"
taken in Tarbert in 1937.*

