

# Farewell, St Kilda

Éric Bulliard

Novel

French



In his first novel, journalist Éric Bulliard takes the reader on a journey to the remote Scottish archipelago of St Kilda, known primarily for the evacuation of its inhabitants in 1930. Life in this desperately difficult outpost of the British Isles, with its harsh environment and poverty, had become so hard for the islanders that they pleaded to be taken to the mainland. The evacuation signified the end of nearly 4000 years of human habitation. Bulliard interweaves the story of the St Kildans with the account of his own visit to these faraway islands, blurring journalistic fact with narrative fiction.

*“And who really remembers St Kilda and its inhabitants?”*

## Title

L'adieu à Saint-Kilda

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## Author

Éric Bulliard was born in Fribourg in 1970. He studied French Literature and History of Art at the University of Fribourg and works as a journalist and literary critic for the Swiss newspaper *La Gruyère*. *Farewell, St Kilda* is his first work of fiction, for which he received the Prix Édouard Rod in 2017. The publisher Hèbe also commissioned the non-fiction collection *Naissance d'un classique (Birth of a Classic)*, based on Bulliard's regular features for the Culture section of *La Gruyère*.

Photo: Antoine Vullioud, *La Gruyère*

## Translator

Rebecca DeWald is an editor and translator of English, German, French and Spanish with a PhD in Translation Studies from the University of Glasgow. She co-edits the *Glasgow Review of Books* and contributes to *PEN Translates*, *New Books in German* and *The SALSA collective*. Some of her literary translations have been published by the Free Word Centre, *No Man's Land* and *12 Swiss Books*.

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French original (p. 13-17)

« Ce n'est plus possible. »

Cette phrase dans sa tête, comme une antienne, qui tourne, virevolte, revient encore. Même quand elle croit penser à autre chose, à la pluie qui approche, là-bas, derrière Dùn, au mouton qui boite vilainement depuis ce matin et qu'on va laisser ici, aux chiens qu'il faudra noyer. Au pasteur Munro, sa pâleur, hier, à l'heure de l'homélie. Comme si, déjà, était venue sa dernière homélie.

« Ce n'est plus possible. »

Une phrase douloureuse, qui devrait lui faire honte alors qu'elle la rassure. Une phrase pour se justifier, demander pardon aux ancêtres. Eux n'ont jamais renoncé. Eux n'ont jamais craint la faim, compagne de leurs hivers autant que la pluie et le vent, eux n'ont jamais reculé devant la fatigue, ni la perspective d'un avenir à jamais semblable au passé, au leur comme à celui de leurs pères, de leurs grands-pères, de tant d'autres avant eux. Qu'auraient-ils pensé aujourd'hui, ces ancêtres, à l'heure de ce renoncement aux allures de reddition ? Auraient-ils fini par comprendre, au fond, eux aussi, à défaut d'accepter ? Ou se seraient-ils contentés de ce sourire énigmatique que les vieux aiment esquisser en pensant afficher la sagesse des ans, là où elle, la vieille Campbell qui ne sourit jamais, ne voit que doux mépris et incapacité à comprendre celui qui ose penser différemment. Même s'ils sont rares, ici, à penser autrement. Même si, depuis quelques années, ils ne restent plus sur l'île : penser autrement ou, parfois, seulement penser, c'est déjà partir un peu.

Sûr : les ancêtres auraient eu cette ombre de sourire qui impose le silence et fait baisser les têtes. Comme celui qu'elle a vu aux lèvres des vieux Gillies, Ferguson, MacKinnon, MacDonald, MacLeod, MacQueen, l'autre jour, quand tout le village s'est réuni dans l'église de bois humide pour la discussion la plus importante de son histoire. Quand il a fallu se décider et qu'ils rechi-gnaient, parce qu'ils ne savent pas ce que signifie avoir le choix, parce que les hivers finissent par s'adoucir,

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Excerpt translated by Rebecca DeWald

"It's no longer possible."

Like an old song, this sentence spins, turns and turns again in her head. Even when she believes she is thinking of something else – of the rain as it rolls in down below, behind Dùn, of the sheep that started limping badly this morning and which they'll have to leave behind, of the dogs they'll be forced to drown. Of Pastor Munro and his pale face yesterday during the sermon. As if it had already been his last.

"It's no longer possible."

A painful sentence to make her feel ashamed, but also to reassure her. A sentence to vindicate herself, to beg their ancestors for forgiveness. They never gave up. They were never afraid of hunger, their constant winter companion, along with the rain and the wind. They never gave up in the face of exhaustion, nor at the prospect of a future forever the same as the past, their own past, their fathers', their grandfathers', and of all those before them. What would they think today, these ancestors, of their descendants as they give up, of their retreat with every appearance of total surrender? Would they have eventually understood the decision, deep down, even if they couldn't accept it? Or would they have settled for that mysterious smile that the elderly like to put on, thinking it displays the wisdom of age? Though old Mrs Campbell, who never smiles, would see this as mild contempt and the inability to understand those who dare to think differently. Even if, here, those who think differently are rare. Even though, for a while now, they had begun to stray away from the island: thinking differently, or sometimes just thinking, already meant partial departure.

To be sure: these ancestors would have worn this shadow of a smile which demands silence and the bowing of heads. Like the smile she saw the other day on the lips of the older family members of the Gillies, the Fergusons, the MacKinnons, the MacDonalds, the MacLeods, the MacQueens, when the whole village got together in the damp wooden church for the most important

toujours. Parce qu'il n'y a pas de raison de changer et que nous ne voulons pas être les derniers, pas maintenant, pas déjà, pensez à ce qu'auraient dit vos grands-parents... Nous pouvons y arriver encore, nous y sommes toujours arrivés. Nous n'avons jamais vu un hiver comme celui-ci ? Cela signifie que nous n'en verrons jamais d'aussi terrible, le prochain sera plus clément, c'est sûr et tout recommencera comme toujours, nous rirons de cette étrange idée, vous aussi, Miss Barclay. Évacuer Hirta, franchement, vous y avez vraiment cru ?

Miss Barclay écoutait, ne souriait pas, ne baissait pas les yeux. Elle a repris la parole, sans l'élever, et elle a parlé, longtemps, patiemment. À l'évidence, la délicate infirmière s'était préparée en secret, répétant les mots qui allaient toucher les cœurs de ces hommes asséchés par des siècles d'habitudes. Au début, pas sûr qu'ils l'aient comprise, quand elle racontait cette autre vie possible. Encore moins quand elle a expliqué que personne ne devrait être obligé de rester ici, parce que personne n'est obligé de souffrir pour vivre, ni même pour manger et faire manger les siens. Comment ça ? N'est-ce pas ce que dit la Bible, la sueur de ton front, l'enfantement dans la douleur ? interrogeaient les regards tournés vers le pasteur Munro. On l'a vu rougir, on ne l'a pas entendu répondre.

Une vie sans souffrance... Comment imaginer ça, ici ?

Après, même le vieux Gillies a fini par écouter Miss Barclay et sa voix, douce comme la cendre tiède du matin. Ceux qui se trouvaient à ses côtés ont vu le sourire du patriarche s'effacer, ses yeux briller, une larme glisser vers sa barbe jaunie par les vents salés, son doigt râpeux l'essuyer brusquement, vaguement agacé. Lui qui n'a jamais pleuré quand ses enfants ne passaient pas la première semaine. Combien en a-t-il perdu ainsi, après quelques jours de souffrance ? Mais c'était Son dessein, que voulez-vous. Le Seigneur décide de la vie, de la mort, de tout. Pleurer chaque fois qu'il reprend un enfant, pour des raisons que Lui seul connaît, mais qui Lui sont forcément légitimes, pleurer parce qu'il faut faire un nouveau trou et y placer ce petit

discussion in its history. When it was time to decide, they took exception, because they'd never known what it meant to have a choice, because winter eventually softened into spring, always. Because there was no reason to change, and we don't want to be the last ones, not now, not ever, think what your grandparents would have said: we'll get through, we always did. We've never seen a winter like this? That means we won't ever see one this terrible again, the next one is bound to be milder, and everything will start again, as it always has, we'll laugh about this odd idea, you will too, Miss Barclay. Abandon Hirta, honestly, did you ever really believe that would happen?

Miss Barclay listened, didn't smile, didn't lower her gaze. She spoke again without raising her voice, and at length, calmly. Clearly the gentle nurse had secretly rehearsed, repeating the words that would tug at the heartstrings of these men, dried up by centuries of tradition. At first, they were unsure if they had understood her when she described this other, possible life. Even less so, when she explained that no one was obliged to stay here, because no one is obliged to suffer to survive, not even to eat and provide for their family. How could this be? Didn't the Bible say just that? The sweat of your brow, the pain of childbirth? They turned for an answer to Pastor Munro. But he only blushed, no one heard him respond.

A life without suffering... How can we imagine that here?

Later, even old Mr Gillies finally listened to Miss Barclay, to her voice, as soft as the warm ashes of the morning. Those sitting next to him saw the patriarch's smile fade, his eyes glisten, a tear running down towards his beard yellowed from the salty winds, his rough finger quickly wiping it off, slightly flustered. He who had never cried even when his own children did not survive their first week. How many children had he lost that way, after just days of suffering? But that was His will, no questions asked. The Lord decides over life and death, over everything. Why cry every time He takes back a child, for reasons known only to Him, but that are

corps que nous n'avons pas eu le temps de connaître, pleurer alors que ça arrive si souvent et que même les femmes ne versent plus de larmes pour cette douleur si banale, préférant attendre, pour lui confectionner des habits, que le petit ait passé sa première semaine et évité la « maladie des huit jours »... C'est le temps qu'il faut au Seigneur pour décider si vraiment le gosse a sa place ici, sur cette île qu'il semble parfois avoir oubliée, même si personne n'oserait le formuler ainsi. Pleurer un enfant mort reviendrait à contester Sa toute-puissance. Pas un, ici, ne songerait même à commencer de l'imaginer.

certainly the right ones in His view? Why cry because we need to dig another hole to bury the little body we never got to know, because this happened so often that not even the women shed tears anymore over the banality of this pain, preferring instead to wait and make clothes for the little one, in case the baby survived its first week and avoided the "eight-day fever" ... For that is how long it takes the Lord to decide if the child is really meant to live here, on this island, an island He sometimes seems to have forgotten, even though no one dares say it like that. Crying over a dead child would be akin to disputing His omnipotence. No one here could even begin to imagine that.