The ruins of Erskine Beveridge

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This is a narrative essay, the animating purpose of which is stylistic as much as analytic. It is a story; and, unusually for academic geography, the story is primary. The essay has no deferred object; it is not ‘about’ something more academic but nor does it abrogate the work of analysis. It narrates the story of the Scottish archaeologist Erskine Beveridge and his family, as told through a prolonged encounter with the ruins of his house situated on the Hebridean island of North Uist. A discussion of ruins, archives and fieldwork runs parallel with, but always subsidiary to, the main narrative.

Key words narrative essay; story; ruins; family; archaeology; historical geography

We know by instinct that outsize buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction before them. (Sebald 2001, 23)

It was odd, on this occasion, to find the big house empty. Iain MacPhail would regularly follow the ebbing tide over to Vallay, an intertidal island off North Uist in Scotland’s Outer Hebrides. That George Beveridge was a middle-aged laird and Iain the teenage son of a shepherd did not seem to matter. They had an easy rapport and would exchange observations about local birds and, less often, about local people. Sometimes Iain would borrow a book from George’s extensive library, the frontispiece of each volume adorned with a bespoke bookplate featuring Dunfermline Abbey and the name ‘Erskine Beveridge’.1 The Beveridges were a family for whom place and property mattered.

George, for his part, enjoyed the company. Having grown up in a large household he had learned late in life, and through no choice of his own, that a mansion built for a score of occupants feels quiet with one. The MacPhails were his ‘neighbours’, albeit separated by a mile and a half of intertidal sea, and George would often drop in at Ford Cottage on his way to or from the island. Only the previous night he had stopped off for a dram and a chat before rowing back to Vallay at high tide. It was a journey that he had made hundreds, if not thousands, of times before. The boat would be hauled up on the shore below the big house.

George’s father had built the ‘Taigh Mòr’ (big house) in 1905 as a summer retreat (Plate 1). An antiquarian and an industrialist, Erskine Beveridge (1851–1920) was not quite a household name but he nevertheless cut a distinguished figure in Scottish society. He was rich, though by no means entirely self-made, having turned early privilege into further profit by producing the finest Damask linen (Walker 1991). The family name was synonymous with the quality tableware that Erskine Beveridge & Co. Ltd exported to bourgeois households the world over. This wealth allowed its owner to travel, to write and to indulge an expensive hobby as a pioneer of landscape photography (Beveridge 1922; Ferguson 2009).

In his home town of Dunfermline, Erskine Beveridge was little given to civic duties and local politics. He was moved instead by antiquarian pursuits that would take him and his family on summer tours of the Western Highlands and islands – walking, fishing and pouring over the vestiges of lives and communities long gone. It was a private and often a solitary passion. Of particular interest to him were the ‘Duns’ – ancient forts that, he felt, had been neglected by antiquaries and cartographers (Beveridge 1902, 4). These he mapped and surveyed, conducting extensive fieldwork on the Hebridean islands of Coll and Tiree, and North Uist, each the subject of a lavishly illustrated and privately published monograph (Beveridge 1902 1911). But it was North Uist that most held his attention, not least for the prevalence of what he called ‘Earth-houses’, a variant of Dun now called Atlantic ‘wheel-houses’ (Armit 1996; Beveridge 1911 1931a 1931b). And here amid the Earth-houses, in a landscape littered with prehistoric remains, Erskine Beveridge built his own mansion on the remote island of Vallay.

Taigh Mòr was a world away from the clamour and stress of running a textile business. The boundedness of the island was important. Erskine Beveridge vividly remembered ‘the impression conveyed by Grimsay and Vallay when viewed across their … fords, giving the idea that these places were apart, habitable only by the most adventurous of mankind’ (Beveridge 1911, iv).
Getting to Vallay can indeed be something of an adventure. It is an intertidal island: a low ebb enables fleeting access on foot or hoof across the mile and a half of pristine white sand.

There is a footnote in Erksine Beveridge’s classic book *North Uist: its archaeology and topography with notes about the early history of the Outer Hebrides* warning that Vallay Strand is ‘dangerous in misty weather or on a dark night’ (Beveridge 1911, 98). All of this, of course, would have been second nature to George. He had spent most of his life on this island. A dram or two would scarcely have dulled his attunement to landscape and seascape.

Having seen George the previous night, Iain expected to find him at home. But a smokeless chimney on this November morning in 1944 was an ominous sign. Taigh Mòr lay deserted. Vallay is a small bare island – just two miles long and half a mile across – and Iain did not have to search very far to find him. George lay high on the shoreline, not far below the house. He was 52.

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Taigh Mòr is a big house – even, one might say, a Big House (Johnson 1996) – but it otherwise holds no great importance. Built over two levels with a circular entrance hall, it has crow-stepped gables in the Scots baronial style, but with the self-consciously modern touch of an occasional porthole window. It has 16 rooms downstairs and had a few less upstairs, with plenty of ancillary accommodation nearby for domestic staff and farm servants. This ample provision should be understood in the context of its remoteness: every brick and beam needed to be brought in by steamer and, depending on tides, offloaded on the shore for its final journey by horse and cart to the house site. Even the soil for the garden was imported by boat.

These materials, once so carefully selected, transported and arranged, are now subject to the same decay that buried Beveridge’s cherished Earth-houses. Taigh Mòr is a ruin. Its ruination continues with every passing year, bringing down a few more bricks, rafters, floor boards and roof-tiles. And it is this ruin that lies at the centre of my story.

I hesitate to say that this essay is ‘about’ ruins and ruination; I have no single object of enquiry. My primary commitment is to the story of the house and its inhabitants and then, along the way, a series of more analytic themes – the ruin as allegory; the spaces of scientific and antiquarian knowledge; the personal geographies of a bourgeois family – run parallel with, but are always subsidiary to, the overall narrative. This approach, where the characters and their worlds take precedence, is aligned with some important disciplinary movements that have seen geographers take up biography and, indeed, ‘bio-geo-graphy’ (e.g. Daniels and Nash 2004; Lorimer 2003 unpublished; Lorimer and Withers 2007; Thomas 2004; Withers 2007).

The use of story has long been part of geography’s repertoire. Lately, however, there has been sufficient resurgence for Hayden Lorimer to observe that ‘geographers can make some reasonable claim to having re-discovered the power of the story’ (Lorimer 2009, 268; Daniels and Lorimer 2012; see also Lorimer 2012; DeSilvey 2012). While the category of ‘story’ should not be taken for granted, I do not intend to dwell on this, far less to develop ‘geographies of storytelling’ (Cameron 2012). I prefer to tell a story than abstract from it, though even to say this is already self-defeating.

It seems to me that this newfound interest in storytelling has prompted relatively little by way of a challenge to the genres of geography. The ordinary conventions of writing ‘papers’ in ‘journals’ – all legacies of imperial science – have been stretched rather than overhauled. There are some early signs of a literary renewal in the discipline (Lorimer and Wylie 2010; White 2004; Wylie 2009), but we have some way to go before matters of form and style receive the same sort of attention currently given to methodology.

Writing matters. The need to engage a readership, expert or not, should animate our scholarship. ‘What difference would it make’, asks John Law ‘if we were to apply the criteria we usually apply to novels … to academic writing?’ And again: ‘if we were to write our academic pieces … as if every word counted, how would we write differently?’ (Law 2004, 12).

To clarify, then, my intention here is less to make use of narrative form in writing historical geography than to maintain a primary commitment to storytelling as an exemplar of geographical writing. It is an important distinction. I am telling a story. The essay has no deferred object; it is not ‘about’ something more academic, but nor does it abrogate analysis. I should stress that I do not see narrative and analysis as discrete projects, stories being subject to a detached and instrumental interpretation. Analysis does not always declare itself as such. It can find expression in allegory and be tucked away in the shadows of significant narrative detail.
There is a sense in which the ‘work’ of analysis is allied to, and runs parallel with, ruination itself – in the Aristotelian guise of a loosening, a disentangling or the breaking of a whole into its constituent elements (Byrne 1997, 12).

The story I wish to tell is a way of apprehending the mysteries of character and landscape and, in that sense, my style here sometimes echoes other works of creative non-fiction concerned with ruins and other outlying spaces (Farley and Roberts 2011; Wright 1991 1995). I make no claim to a distinctive literary voice. As is all too obvious, my storytelling is already prefaced with the sort of academic throat-clearing that these other writers would disdain. In playing with geography’s genre, however, I hope also to bring some historiographical rigour to narrative non-fiction.

I am not writing fiction. The provenance of this story matters to its telling. And it is for this reason that I retain a commitment to fine-grained scholarship that can both disclose its evidence and locate its analysis within a disciplinary context. It is a story grounded in the archival traditions of historical geography and one that draws from recent inventive reconsiderations of what constitutes an archive in the first place.

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It is just about possible, even now, to see that the interior of every room in Taigh Mòr was differently painted (though all of them, at least on the ground floor, now have a unifying carpet of manure). There is other evidence, too, of what would have been the latest Edwardian fashion: a brightly coloured tiled fireplace in every room. But the colours are not now always easy to discern. Rich reds have since given way to bright algal greens. In places the roof has usefully opened to shed light on the occasional fragment of patterned wallpaper.

The building has been too closely stripped to reveal much on an initial inspection. Winter gales, nesting birds, sheltering livestock and light-fingered visitors have all taken their toll. Taigh Mòr has had much of its past removed. For over 15 years I have examined this place from up close and from afar. I have tramped around Vallay, picking over its beaches, the machair grassland, the shell of an eighteenth-century farm-house, the sheds and byres and cottages. I have sifted through the abject and unsettling remains of a bourgeois family and its habitat, more often arriving at Taigh Mòr with new stories than leaving having acquired them on site. Yet there is an agency at work in the emptiness. There were times when it felt as if I was feeding the house – returning to it a knowledge that had somehow become displaced. This is, I recognise, a kind of conceit. But even when the house yielded nothing, this nothing was manifest as a kind of demand, or at least as a persistent question.

‘Ruin’ is an evocative term. One thinks, of course, of a collapsed building (though this need not necessarily be a ruin). It hints too at a more expansive abduction, a catastrophic loss – of meaning, reputation, greatness, splendour, completeness or integrity. As noun or verb, ‘ruin’ might also signal a traumatic depletion of wealth, sanity or social standing. All of these disparate associations are at work here, the ruins of Taigh Mòr leaving traces that extend much further afield than Vallay (see Navaro-Yashin 2009).

‘Ruins are not just found’, argues Ann Laura Stoler, ‘they are made’ (Stoler 2008, 201). They are storehouses of memory; they are brought into being by the range of our responses to them – at turns affecting, curious, melancholic, nostalgic, regretful and unsettling. They can offer comforts too. Passing time in the ruins of Taigh Mòr is to make glancing contact with the lives of those who have occupied this mansion. Materials can discharge stories. For Caitlin DeSilvey, ‘the disarticulation of the object may lead to the articulation of other histories and other geographies’ (2006, 324).

Walter Benjamin, our great philosopher of the ruin, has proved to be an unobtrusive guide in my peregrinations around Vallay and its hinterland – an urbane mentor for such a rural setting. But his conception of the ruin as an allegory for the restlessness of capitalism and its epic force for construction and destruction, applies equally well here (Benjamin 1977). The life of this house, like that of the Parisian Arcades, is a barometer of success and failure in the marketplace. Benjamin is certainly an old hand at reading bourgeois interiors (Coles 1999). And I’m happy to follow his purpose ‘to create history with the very detritus of history’, as he once scribbled in the Arcades project (Benjamin 1999, S543).

There can be no systematic use of Benjamin. He is a theorist of fragments for a disaggregated archive. In this guise, he has also animated the work of other geographers who have also been busy grubbing through ruins, remains, rubbish and ephemera (DeLysyer 1999; DeSilvey 2006 2007a 2007b; Edensor 2002 2005 2007; Lorimer 2009; Lorimer and MacDonald 2002; Swanton 2012; Till 2001). My writing shares some common ground with these approaches, the explorations of Caitlin DeSilvey and Hayden Lorimer offering particularly instructive parallels. Like these two writers, the particularity of my research becomes a distinguishing attribute. The story is the outcome of a long-term, detailed enquiry into specific, situated lives and their unfolding in the landscape. It is, one might say, a geography (see Lorimer and Wylie 2010).

So what is a ruin good for? In what sense can it be enrolled in the telling as well as being the scene for the tale? Taigh Mòr is itself an archive of sorts. Architecture is so often highly personal; form says something about function; elements of a story can be imagined and re-played. It doesn’t take a geographer to recognise that space evokes the social life from which it is
constituted. Or, as Caitlin DeSilvey has shown, that meaning can be salvaged from material objects even if they are always ‘teeter[ing] on the brink of intelligibility’ (DeSilvey 2006, 336).

Ruins are also good for stories. Reports of my visiting Taigh Mòr invariably became the catalyst for older people on North Uist to offer their own recollections. Often a specific detail would act as an aide-mémoire. The sheer emptiness of the house – the absence of material effects – was, for some islanders, a space that could be filled only with stories. In many cases, my relationships with these informants were built up over a decade. This is how stories are entrusted; and because they are entrusted as stories, there is an ethic to preserving this form.

There is an elusive dividend familiar to many historical geographers, that comes from what Lorimer has identified as the ‘staggered or shuttling movements … between sites conveniently … demarcated as “archive” and “field”’ (Lorimer 2009, 257). My to-ing-and-fro-ing over many years took untold stories from disparate mainland archives back to Vallay. In many cases, this meant juxtaposing archival sources with local accounts or seeing what archival sources might do to local accounts. This back-and-forth meant reaching across the boundaries of family, community, business and scholarship – boundaries that the Beveridges had hitherto kept discrete. Stories may be untold for good reasons. Perhaps as a consequence, I find it hard to shake the discomfort that my movements against and across this bourgeois quietude have served to rend the emptiness of the house – the absence of material effects – was, for some islanders, a space that could be filled only with stories. This is not, in other words, a story that would have been commissioned by Erskine Beveridge. Some might say that I am a ruiner of reputations, though this is not my intent.

There is a well-known quote from Jacques Derrida’s meandering meditation on psychoanalysis, Archive fever, about the relation between archives and houses:

> The meaning of ‘archive’, its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek arkhéion: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the archons, those who commanded […]. It is thus in this domiciliation, in this house arrest, that archives take place […]. With such a status, the documents which are not always discursive writings, are only kept and classified under the title of the archive by virtue of a privileged topology. They inhabit this uncommon place where law and singularity intersect in privilege. (Derrida 1996, 2–3; original emphasis)

I reproduce the quotation here in recognition of privilege in ruins – a parallel undoing of arkhéion and archive. But to talk of an archive almost seems premature in this case. I have had to fashion an archive out of the debris scattered and half-buried both within and beyond Taigh Mòr. I improvise collected fragments for assemblage into a narrative whole (see Lorimer and Philo 2010). In many ways, this is business-as-usual for historical geography. Beveridge himself often performed an analogous task with Iron Age potsherds, each one carefully organised and catalogued within the glass cabinets of Taigh Mòr. My inventory is less visually appealing but no less enigmatic. In addition to the house itself, it consists of: obituaries; press cuttings; corporate records and accounts; published books and scholarly articles; a diary for 1926; archaeological collections; a few family letters; family photographs; community photographs; Beveridge’s plate-glass negatives; oral histories from North Uist and from the Beveridge extended family; Sherriff Court records; High Court records; declassified hospital casenotes; and an auction ledger. All of these items had to be flushed out and tracked down. At the risk of labouring the point, this took some time.

A cautionary note: a few years ago, when I was able to recognise that my interest in Vallay could reasonably be called ‘research’, it occurred to me that Erskine Beveridge was the progenitor of this work as much as its subject. From opposite ends of the long twentieth century, we alike have spent our time walking, exploring, digging, reading and interviewing; we have synthesised published sources; interpreted material remains in the landscape; and triangulated observations against other archives. My enquiries have followed his. I too have paced around his morning room; I have hovered at the upper windows with a wary eye on the tide. In academic terms, this behaviour is often admitted to the research process under the rubric of ‘performance’ (see Lorimer 2009, 261; Pearson 2006; Pearson and Shanks 2001). I see no intellectual grounds to bridle at this term and yet it also seems disingenuous to make it my own. It feels too determinate and too self-conscious to adequately explain my episodic impulses to keep coming back. For the reasons I have already outlined, I can see that my time on Vallay was well spent. But I’m not sure that I thought of myself as doing ‘fieldwork’, at least not in the beginning, far less do I want to retrospectively burden this presence with ‘performance’. I simply wanted to know what took place here and hoped, often forlornly, that the house might tell me.

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The problem with Vallay was that it lacked water. This at least was the reason given by the Government’s Congested Districts Board when it refused an appeal from landless cottars to purchase the island for crofting. Land ownership had become a sensitive matter across the Highlands and islands and nowhere more so than the neighbouring district of Sollas. Within sight of Vallay, the people of Sollas could remember all too clearly the blood that was spilt during the violent Clearances of 1849 when over 600 people had been evicted (Craig 1990; Hunter 1976, 189). And here, in this first spring of the twentieth century, the land was being sold for fieldsports. Beveridge bought all that was
available – Vallay, together with adjacent farms on North Uist, at Griminish, Scolpaig and Balelone.

It is not surprising, then, that the most remarkable feature of Taigh Mòr – the one thing that no islander failed to mention to me – was that it had fresh water on tap. It was this more than anything else that became the measure of Beveridge’s wealth. North Uist is not, on the whole, a place in want of water; there would have been no shortage of house sites with water aplenty. So I can only assume that Beveridge was unmoved by Vallay’s drawback. It was expensive to fix, admittedly, but after an 1890s expansion of the linen business, money was not in short supply.

A relative once complained of Erskine Beveridge’s father that he ‘did not find it easy to part with his new wealth’. This caution was put down to ‘the weakness of the middle-class when first it becomes rich’ (Beveridge 1947, 379). Beveridge’s mother, by contrast, happily ‘splashed the cash’ in her widowhood and young Erskine was clearly adept at spending money where it counted (Beveridge 1947, 379). But it is in keeping with his character that this, the most extravagant feature of Taigh Mòr, lay entirely out of sight, the fresh water coming across Vallay Strand in a lead pipe buried beneath the sands. A celebrated piece of local lore holds that the cost of laying this pipe was greater than all other building costs combined. A modest triumph of engineering, it is now marked only by a few corroding fragments. It takes me an afternoon of searching and scraping to find them. Inside the house, the bath taps are gone but the pipes to which they were once attached still stand proud.

All the islanders report that the house was built to an extraordinary standard of finish, though this is not now obvious from what remains. While the contractors – a company called Bain – came from the mainland, a local craftsman was recruited to make the staircase, complete with a carved pineapple finial at the bottom of the banister. The entrance hall, warmed by the peat fire, was generous and welcoming. The rooms were almost all of a good size and had extensive views. There was reputed to have been one window pane for every day of the year (Plate 2). I also get the impression that the house was full of things and, in summer at least, full of people.

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I feel sure that this was a family house – a house for family – but the grounds for this claim are difficult to specify. It was said that the windows had the initials of the Beveridge children carved inside the frames, but I searched in vain for this detail. Another report suggested that a stained glass window in the vestibule had the children’s names set into the glass. It was evidence of the family that most animated my quest and it was always this that proved elusive. My belief persists that Taigh Mòr was built by Erskine Beveridge as a distraction both for, and from, family life.

When the house was completed in 1905, almost all of his children were grown up. He had been a young man of 21 when he married Mary Owst, and the couple had six sons and one daughter. By the time of Taigh Mòr, the oldest boy, Erskine or ‘Errie’ was 32; John, 31; Mary, 26; James, 25; David, 18; George, 14; and Frederick or ‘Fred’, the youngest, was just 9. This much I can glean from Burke’s Peerage. And yet my picture of the family is still rather opaque. Of their everyday life in these early years, I know all too little. But I know enough to see that while all families have their share of joys and sorrows, this privileged household had ill fortune aplenty.

The nickname ‘Errie’ is surely recognition that three generations named ‘Erskine Beveridge’ can carry an unreasonable burden of expectation. The investment in Errie – in the very idea of Errie – would have been immense; in ordinary circumstances, his succession to the family firm would have been assumed. Unlike his brothers, however, at no point can I find him listed as a director or as a shareholder of the business. Errie’s absence from Taigh Mòr is striking. Was his name also engraved on the vestibule window? All I know is that I never heard it mentioned in North Uist. His very existence may have become unspeakable sometime before he was involuntarily committed to the Crichton Royal Asylum in Dumfries on 3 September 1898. I have a copy of his admission form, filled out in what I immediately recognise as his father’s open handwriting. The documentation was co-signed by the surgeon of the SS. Dunolly Castle, a passenger ship that had – for reasons I don’t understand – taken Errie from Grahamstown Asylum in South Africa. Errie’s clinical casenotes provide a pitiless record of human life:

Facts indicating insanity: hears ‘voices’ & has insane delusions viz. that a voice prompted him to shave, & another to shoot someone.
Suicidal/Dangerous: Believe yes.

Mr Turner, the 4th officer on this ship, informs me that Mr Beveridge [Errie] imagines he can see someone who always asks him to drink. This is an insane delusion.3

The doctor’s entry for the following day reads:

He talks quickly and impulsively begins a sentence and before finishing it passes on to another subject. Every so often he says ‘I must shoot somebody’ or else I must be punished for my sins’ … ‘let us clear up the whole affair and shoot those people who have interfered with me’.4

I have no evidence to suggest that the family maintained contact with Errie and some to suggest that they didn’t.5 It makes me wonder whether Taigh Mòr was built as a retreat from the sheer excess of feeling about Errie.

The house was to contain, and perhaps even ameliorate, other losses. Erskine Beveridge’s vision of summer rest and familial ease fostered from the outset when his wife, Mrs Mary Beveridge, died on the 21 February 1904 without ever seeing Taigh Mòr completed. For the children – especially George, now aged 14, and Fred, aged 9 – their first summer would have been spent under a weight of grief. And in such circumstances, Vallay may have provided a space of consolation.6 Further distraction could be found in their father’s newfound passion for archaeological excavation as opposed to mere surface measurement. Then there was the excitement of identifying and shooting the island wildlife, though not always in that order.

In the aftermath of one of my visits to Taigh Mòr, an anecdote was told to me by an elderly crofter who in turn had heard it from one of the maids at the house.7 The intent of the story was to illustrate both how beautiful and how complete the house had been. I heard that when the house was still new, Beveridge had enjoyed a wager with his sons, George and Fred. He would give them a penny if they could think of anything, any object of utility, that the house lacked. They racked their brains. The house must have something missing. They pestered the maids but to no avail. So accomplished was the building, so comprehensive and refined was its furnishing, that the children went unrewarded. Something in this story fits. Amid the senselessness of bereavement, George and Fred are challenged to test the wholeness and purpose of their material world. Their father’s guarantee that everything is complete is itself insured with an offer of compensation. The unacknowledged truth, however, is that the house lacked their mother – a notion of completeness that marked a devastating loss.

I sense that Beveridge’s daughter, Mary, who was 25 when her mother died, became a key force in the household, both at home in Dunfermline and during the summers at Vallay. Her name still has a local resonance even if there is no one now who can recall anything very specific. One wonders how she and her brothers responded to the news that their father, not far off 60 years old, would marry again, this time to Margaret (Meg) Scott Inglis (1872–1958), whom he had met through the unlikely means of an ‘introductions agency’.8 The marriage in January 1908 was described by the Dunfermline Press with admirable economy of sentiment. It was, the reporter said, an ‘interesting and fashionable’ wedding, at which ‘the presents were numerous and valuable’.9 Meg’s immediate pregnancy would have been quite an adjustment for Erskine – not to mention the other children – 35 years after the birth of Errie. And it would have been a shared tragedy when this cherished son, Francis, died of meningitis the following year, just six months old. Meg was inconsolable.

In the spring of 1910, Meg gave birth to another son, Charles – the last of Erskine’s family of eight boys and one girl, whose births span four decades. Later that year Miss Mary Beveridge – perhaps released from family obligations by the re-marriage of her father – wedded Alexander Berowald Innes, an Aberdeenshire engineer of aristocratic stock. Of the other family, I can find less trace. John was clearly what Errie ‘should’ have been. As a hard-working director of the family firm, he shouldered much of the responsibility for sorting out unfinished family business – posthumously publishing two volumes of his father’s photographs (Beveridge 1922); and, in the end, closing the door on the family’s occupation of Taigh Mòr. The next son, James, is scarcely visible – a sign, I am convinced, that something has gone wrong. Clearly listed in corporate records as a director and shareholder of the firm, his name – like that of Errie – mostly draws a blank in North Uist. One elderly crofter could remember only that ‘he had to be sent away because he had done something at the table’. There is a hint of a scene, or of the obscene. Another story from Fife suggests that James had to be physically removed, drunk, from a board meeting. I eventually find evidence of him in the Royal Asylum of Montrose, where he was admitted on 13 January 1913 and where he died in 1924.10 His clinical records remain closed.

As with most families in Europe, the war changed everything. Those free to fight – David, George, Fred and Mary’s husband, Alexander – all signed up, though George and Fred had the good fortune to land in reserve regiments that never left home shores. The others were not so lucky. In June 1915, Alexander was killed in the aftermath of the Battle of Festubert in France. And in September, David Beveridge died from dysentery at Gallipoli. That such tragedy was typical of its era, an experience shared by the linen workers of Dunfermline and the crofters of North Uist, would not

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have made it easier to bear. Amid the ruins of warring empires, the house remained as a pristine retreat for the broken hearted. George and Fred returned whenever they could.11

It is frustrating that the bare details of births, deaths and marriages do so little to animate the life of Taigh Mòr. I have searched with limited success for anything that would open up its rhythms and activities. I know so little of the bustle and hum of a household where the needs of the family were met by a small retinue of servants. But I am confident that hospitality was an important aspect of summers there. One such visitor, in August 1919, was Sir William Beveridge (1879–1963), a cousin of Erskine’s who would later find fame with an eponymous report that established the Welfare State (Beveridge 1942). George met him off the ferry at Lochmaddy and took him for a late night dram or two while they waited for the tide to change.12 The visitor was tickled that his worldly cousins should ignore British Summer Time – then a recent innovation – in favour of solar time that governed the all-important tide. The days proved restful; so much so that Sir William did not, as he had hoped, finish writing his inaugural lecture as the newly appointed Director of the London School of Economics.13

A single surviving photograph records the occasion (Plate 3). It shows George Beveridge in his plus fours, blazer and regimental ‘Balmoral’; Rab Fraser, a nephew of Meg’s; Will, relaxed in his contemporary tweed morning suit; Charles Beveridge, Erskine and Meg’s younger son; Erskine himself in more sombre Victorian fashions; and Meg, holding what looks like her husband’s plate camera. On seeing this image, it enforced on me an obvious truth: that these people are gone and that bare traces are an inadequate guide to the character of their living. I imagine Erskine Beveridge felt similarly when handling potsherds and bone tools.

Most of what I have learned about the activities of the house relates to the earnest acquisition of scientific and antiquarian knowledge. To use Bruno Latour’s well-worn phrase, Taigh Mòr was a ‘centre of calculation’ (Latour 1988). It was when living here that Erskine Beveridge discovered archaeological excavation offered new insights into prehistoric remains. Some of his antiquities were within shouting distance from Taigh Mòr and he would need its space for collecting, organising and systematising the artefacts that he unearthed. The Earth-house at Foshigarry alone yielded 950 objects (Callander 1931). In his upstairs museum, pins, needles, bone tools, awls, combs, spearheads and pottery could be catalogued, displayed and organised according to type (see Beveridge 1931a 1931b).

The logic of collecting, like the logic of archaeology itself, is founded on a paradox. On the one hand it is a bid for preservation – a salvage of the past (see MacDonald 2011). On the other hand, collecting and excavation are also forms of destruction, permanently displacing objects from their contexts. And this displacement presents a problem. Contemporary archaeologists re-examining Beveridge’s sites now face the difficulty of distinguishing between his excavations and the stratigraphic sequences of antiquity (Campbell 1991; Dunwell et al. 2003). Ian Armit, one of the most distinguished archaeologists of the region, noted that Beveridge’s excavations were ‘disappointingly thorough’ (Armit 1998). This should not, of course, qualify the significance of Beveridge’s work – not for no reason does a present map of known wheelhouses still show a cluster around Taigh Mòr (see Levine 1986). From the proximity of the house, he effectively un-earthed the Atlantic Iron Age.

For 14 years, Erskine Beveridge used Taigh Mòr as a base for his explorations. He excavated dozens of sites including seven Earth-houses, all within a few miles of Vallay (Hothersall and Tye 2000). The house exerted a centripetal pull. If I could trace the trajectories of every excavated object, they would appear like the spokes of a wheel, lines disappearing into the vanishing point of Taigh Mòr’s museum. And yet for all its monumental- ity, the house is not once mentioned in Beveridge’s greatest work, the lavishly illustrated 350-page North Uist. He says only that a ‘small portion, at the extreme north west of the parish [was] … acquired by the author of the present volume’ (Beveridge 1911, 331). That the truth of this sentence underwrites the entire endeavour of the book is left undeclared.

Taigh Mòr should not be regarded as just a container for archaeological research – for storage, display and analysis – or as merely the home of its practitioner. The house itself authorised Beveridge’s research. Derrida’sPlate 3 A family gathering in the lee of Taigh Mòr, 1919
Source: Robert Beveridge

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point about the *arkhein* (‘the residence of the superior magistrate’) is a reminder of Beveridge’s social standing as a Justice of the Peace, a man of means and of learning. It was an authority that enabled him to undertake activities – dig up the dead, as it were – that might otherwise be considered taboo. The local tradition-bearers that Beveridge had employed to assist in his work may have possessed knowledge but they lacked authority. His social status, by contrast, gave his insights free entry into the annals of antiquarian knowledge. It is hard not to notice that those thanked in the preface to *North Uist* have, almost without exception, either learning or land (Beveridge 1911, xvii).

In the airy rooms of Taigh Mòr, a measure of knowledge and authority was also transmitted to the children – George and Fred in particular. More than any of their siblings, they grew up with the house and were inducted into its rites of fieldwork. Here they honed their skills of observation, identification, collection and analysis, though mostly applied to the realm of ornithology rather than archaeology. The fruits of their research, which span a 20-year period, are first manifest in some wartime notes made by Fred on the behaviour of Golden Plovers – the first of 30 or so submissions, mostly by George, to the journal *The Scottish Naturalist* (Beveridge F 1916 1918a 1918b; Beveridge G 1925 1927 1932 1934 1937). These contributions almost all concern Vallay and are alive with sporting excitement – of finding a species ‘new’ to the locality that required it to be shot, stuffed and mounted (e.g. Beveridge F 1918b; Beveridge G 1927).

Any difficulties in identification in the field could be overcome by some well-aimed leadshot and a despatch to Edinburgh:

A small wader, identified at the Royal Scottish Museum as a Wood Sandpiper, was shot by me [George] on the shore … near Vallay on 19th October 1925. (Beveridge 1925, 179)

As this ordinary example illustrates, their shooting skill even extended to picking off the smallest birds from a Little Stint to a Crossbill (Beveridge F 1918a; Beveridge G 1927). Many would be given a new lease of life, or an approximation of it, by the art of taxidermy. And it is here that we can again see the imprinting psychology of the collector, gathering together objects for careful study. George was certainly his father’s son. One former maid could recall a cabinet of drawers with eggs organised by size, with small birds at the top while the bottom drawer held the prized egg of a Golden Eagle. The development of this collection and the allied possession of a gun and telescope were important means of establishing George as a credible observer, validating the reports that he submitted to *The Scottish Naturalist* (see Allen 1998). Taigh Mòr functioned in part as a bird observatory, its many windows offering air superiority over the island’s flight paths.

I am struck by how, even in these nature notes, George conveys a strong sense of the propriety of the house, its walls separating the ecological contingency of the island from the orderliness of the museum. He records with satisfaction the increase in populations of Corncrake, Eider duck, Lesser Tern and Dunlin, but notes that breeding success of the Starling is rather less welcome:

As I write there are close on a thousand Starlings roosting in a reed-bed a few hundred yards from where I write, and at daybreak they swarm to the house and cause endless annoyance by overbalancing themselves and so falling down the chimney. (Beveridge 1934)

Now, the house is almost entirely given over to Starlings and Rock Doves, though other species also find a home. One elderly woman, whose great uncle had assisted Erskine Beveridge in his excavations, took mainland friends to visit the house in the early 1980s. ‘I went upstairs and opened a bedroom door’ she told me ‘and there in a cupboard opposite me … was a fulmar sitting on a nest among the shelves’. I had noticed the nest in my own visits but feigned some wordless surprise, ‘Yes! Oh, I felt dreadful and I said ‘I’ll never come back here again’. And I didn’t go back. I felt so sad to think that it had come to that’. Cupboards, as the philosopher Gaston Bachelard once observed, are spaces that avert domestic disorder (Bachelard 1992, 72). For a seabird to set up home in this most intimate corner of a household, not least one founded on the sale of soft furnishings, is evidence of a profound inversion.

The unwinding of a family and its estate is a slow business. It seems to me that there are forces at work in this disaggregation that precede the house, belonging instead to the matrix of social life in which it was first conceived. The rise and fall of Taigh Mòr does not present a simple arc from wholeness to ruination. Rather, the ruin is always present – if only as a fate forestalled.

It was midsummer of 1911. Erskine Beveridge had a healthy newborn son, Charles; his only daughter Mary had just got married; the linen business was booming; and he had finally published his greatest literary testament. To celebrate the coronation of George V, and perhaps more besides, Beveridge held a large party at Vallay. A massive bonfire was created as a worthy spectacle. The machair on which this fire was set is a fragile habitat, a venerable of vegetation overlying an otherwise mobile amalgam of bicarbonate shell sand and fine postglacial deposits (Ritchie 1968). The intense heat would have readily burnt through the peat to expose the sand beneath but, for reasons unknown, this hole in the fabric of the machair went unrepaired until, after successive blowouts, it became irreparable.

Even now, the machair on Vallay remains persistently
The ruins of Erskine Beveridge

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unstable and, while this erosion has many causes, the fire of 1911 shoulders some of the blame.17

The family too had its instabilities. Errie’s hospital (Crichton Royal Asylum) may have had the royal charter but he probably was not joining in the corona-

tion festivities. He was, said his doctors, ‘noisy & vituperative … full of delusions of persecution, hears and answers voices in the most extraordin-

ary way’.18 He was also:

full of threats and plans – plans of the most extraordinary and most impossible nature. And … [not] for a moment does he doubt that someday he will ‘lead the charge that will turn the country into a Republic’.19

Errie was convinced he had to act and then ‘swing for it’. When asked what would make him happy he would say ‘plenty of whisky’;20 he was ‘always asking for cigarettes or whisky and soda’21 and ‘forever scolding at his mother in a most profane way’.22 Madness is by definition transgressive; these, at least, were its accredited symptoms in the son of a Conservative, Unionist, Episcopalian captain of industry for whom drink was the scourge of the working classes.23

At the end of the First World War, a generation of young volunteers returned to the islands to discover that the traumas of the trenches had brought them no closer to realising Lloyd George’s promise of ‘homes fit for heroes’. They remained, for the most part, as landless as before. The Beveridges were not always the most sensitive to these everyday struggles. ‘The inhabitants of North Uist’ reflected Fred in 1918 ‘are a most agreeable people’, who ‘have helped me in every possible way by observing new arrivals or rarities’.

I find but one fault of any magnitude, and that is a great passion for collecting birds’ eggs during the nesting season. During the early summer their women folk scour the foreshore in veritable hosts … to return at dusk laden, not with cockles but with hundreds of wild birds’ eggs. No wonder that this trait does not appeal to one, but rather kindles in the onlooker the same spirit as that shown by our bovine friend at the sight of the proverbial red rag.24

If such foraging may have been necessary to sustain basic human nutrition then this was a factor deemed inappropriate for the pages of The Scottish Naturalist.

The return of the young men was a boon for Erskine Beveridge. He had suspended his excavations during wartime for want of workers but in the summer of 1919 he was able to direct the massive excavation of an Earth-house at Bae Mhic Connain, just a short distance west of Taigh Mòr. In a letter home, Sir William joked that he ‘had assisted – i.e. stood by – in the excavation of an Earth House’, whose ancient inhabitants ‘were most untidy’.25 Erskine Beveridge’s careful photographs of the site show his own immaculate house and steadings in the background. There is a knowing set of contrasts pictured here: past and present; primitive and modern; brokenness and functionality; abandonment and occupancy. How different the scene is today. Vallay was then a picture of activity, with the harvest arranged in haystacks. And back in Dunfermline, the linen business was at its height of profitability.

One year later, on 10 August 1920, Erskine Beveridge was dead. The funeral brought out the great and the good from Fife and surrounds, the coffin being borne by John, George and Fred along with other family members including Sir William, whom Erskine had hosted at Taigh Mòr the previous summer (Beveridge S 1923, 148). Four sons were absent: David and Francis were dead; Errie and James were sad, bad or mad. I can see from Beveridge’s will that he had taken care to attend to the particular needs of his widow and his many children.26

George inherited the North Uist estates. His ties there had always been strong. His father may have seen in George, with his Cambridge education and his feel for island life, the ‘scholar-laird’ that he himself had aspired to be in later years. The running of the linen business was left to John and Fred, though international competition and changing fashions left the company balance sheet increasingly threadbare through the 1920s. Erskine Beveridge & Co. Ltd finally entered voluntary liquidation in 1931, though continuing to trade under the same name.27

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A sense of beleaguering seemed to descend after the death of Erskine Beveridge. The difficulties materialised as a form of haunting – as the return of the dispossessed. Five months after the death of his father, George received a letter from seven Sollas men. Addressing him as ‘Dear Sir Comrade’ and bearing ‘no ill-will’, they complained that, with their present land holdings ‘not sufficient to sustain ourselves and our families’, and having failed to obtain ‘satisfactory results’ from the Board of Agriculture Scotland (BOAS), they were intending to stage a land raid on Vallay at 3pm on 31 January 1921.28 Tensions had been rising for some time. Only the previous month had seen a large land raid elsewhere on North Uist, the rapid dispatch of eviction orders doing little to intimidate the war veterans. ‘We don’t care a damn for the Sheriff’ shrugged one, ‘we are soldiers’ (Hunter 1976, 202).

It looks as if George reluctantly acceded to the demands of the raiders. He may have had little option. His diary for 1926 – alas, the only year that exists – certainly suggests an ongoing conflict: ‘wrote the Raiders that I will be at no expense re Callernish drain and that they can do it themselves’.29 The huffiness of March became outright indignation in April: ‘the brands of agitation wrote me re Vallay and [I] have written them giving them blazes’.30 A few days later, another entry – ‘wired the BOAS that I gave them a
forthnight to make up their mind if they intend to buy this place—suggested that once again there had been a petition to get the Board of Agricultural Scotland to use Vallay for crofting. Though it is not clear why, the island was in the end never turned into croft land; the agitation, at least in this case, appears unproductive.

Trouble from the lower orders also plagued the linen business. In 1923, Erskine Beveridge & Co. Ltd, under the leadership of John and Fred, was prosecuted by the Ministry of Labour for failing to pay workers the minimum wage.

With falling profits and militant labour, the 1920s must have seemed like a different age. It would have been tempting to believe, then, that the established order of things might still be sustained through marriage. In 1927, Fred set off for the south of France in the hope of finding a wealthy wife. As I was told by a distant relative, he there met and married Margaret Beauchamp Thomas, an Australian who had travelled from Melbourne to the south of France in order to secure a rich husband. They settled in Dunfermline—a far cry from Melbourne or Montpellier—and had a daughter, Jennifer Jane Beveridge, born on 1 December 1928. It is perhaps not surprising that the advent of financial difficulties should tarnish the optimism of their meeting and marriage. Faced with impending bankruptcy, Fred suggested that his wife and daughter should move to Melbourne to live with Margaret’s mother for one year. This she did, in 1933, and for many years begged to be allowed to return to Scotland. Fred did not accede to these requests. Nor did he keep promises to remit three pounds per week for the maintenance and education of their daughter in Australia. Margaret eventually filed for divorce in 1942 on the grounds of ‘wilful desertion’. Fred soldiered on as a hired hand in the linen business and eventually died, aged 68, on the birthday of his only child. All of this happened far away from Taigh Mòr. It is a sad story and although court records can yield the rudimentary details, I don’t really understand what happened. This feeling holds true for the remaining family history.

George, too, had intended to marry. In the last year of his father’s life, he became engaged to Eva Flora MacDonal of Balranald, a North Uist woman of his own class. ‘I like Eva so very much,’ wrote Mary to cousin Will, ‘I think George is extremely lucky’. This is not how it turned out. It is said that Eva’s brother, Raghnall Mòr, forbade the union on account of George’s alleged fondness for alcohol. Some have suggested to me that George’s drinking was a symptom of this heartache as much as its cause. Neither party ever married in the end. I notice that the first of George’s regular written submissions to The Scottish Naturalist dates from the end of this engagement. Not for the first time in this house, the production of scholarly knowledge was the balm for much domestic unhappiness.

In Fife I heard that Fred also enjoyed a drink. That could mean anything and it could mean nothing. It strikes me that I have no stories of George being drunk, only that he liked to drink. There are suggestions that Errie and James had a similar affinity; then again, they may have had demons all of their own.

The ruination of Taigh Mòr is inseparable from the matter of drinking. It was George’s ruin, or so I was told. Whatever the true relationship, these things are at least woven together in local accounts. What can be said with certainty is that George fell upon hard times. Unable to maintain his farmworkers, he gradually sold the other parts of the estate and by the late 1930s he was renting out the house to shooting parties for the summer. One tenant was the novelist Naomi Mitchison who took Vallay during the summers of 1936 and 1937 (Mitchison 1973). She left with Lachlan Maclean, George’s farm-servant, who she installed as a hired hand on her own Highland estate and as a rustic muse for her columns in the New Statesman (Benton 1990, 110). Even this summer rental income failed to plug the holes. There are stories of the servants having to be paid with furniture; latterly George had only a house-keeper, and her eventual departure is thought to have marked the beginning of the end. Without fires being regularly lit throughout the house it was impossible to keep the damp at bay. Its victory is now decisive.

I find it hard to know what to believe about George Beveridge. Stories of steep personal decline sometimes have a momentum all of their own. I heard at times he was so hard up that in the absence of tobacco he would smoke silverweed (Argentina egedii) collected from the machair. It does seem that he spent his last years living alone, more or less in one room, be-kilted and surrounded by his taxidermic collections. There he remained a welcoming host to any visitors, hospitality that was made a little more convivial by a bequest from his sister, Mary, who died in 1942. Like his father before him, George was well liked and a warmly remembered presence in many Sollas households. He was known at times to very finely judge—some might say misjudge—the state of the tide. One crofter recalled George wading the ford chest deep, a feat locally attributed to his being ‘hardy’. It was a hardiness borne of the landscape itself. As a child his father had trained him to race the horse and trap as it crossed the sands. George knew this environment intimately.
The ruins of Erskine Beveridge

When I find George’s gravestone in the Clachan Sands cemetery in North Uist, I can see that it bears the family motto *Dum Spiro Spero* (‘while I breathe, I hope’). It is a bleak epitaph for a drowned man. Eva Flora MacDonald reputedly laid flowers at the grave until such time as she took her place beside him. Ever the responsible older brother, John Beveridge arranged for a memorial to be built on Vallay, from which one can look over the site of Bac Mhic Connain towards Taigh Mòr. He also enacted the terms of George’s will, in which locals, alongside his siblings, were the principal beneficiaries. Furniture, guns, books, fishing rods, a telescope, paintings, maps – the home disgorge its contents into its hinterland.36

In the face of its deterioration, subsequent owners of Taigh Mòr have been unwilling or unable to slow its decline. Just as the fire of 1911 ripped a hole in the machair, wholesale ransacking and vandalism have opened up Taigh Mòr to the scrutiny of the elements. This ruination is in some ways a sad story but not, I think, a tragedy. To be sure, worse things happened in November 1944 than the drowning of a middle-aged laird. Weeks earlier hundreds of thousands were killed in the Warsaw Uprising. Europe itself was in ruins. So while my walks around Taigh Mòr have tended towards the melancholy, I make no lament for the condition of the house. On the contrary, I take comfort in the waning of feudal power to which the ruin testifies. Still, to stand now amid such brokenness – glass and plaster underfoot; walls leaning precariously; an opening roof – is to keep in mind the unremarkable sorrows of mental illness, loneliness, addiction, divorce and grief. Truly, this is the debris of the interior; a ruin as an expansive field of troubled relations.

Vallay, of course, had other families. No doubt each had their own accounts of human profit and loss. But they remain untold or unknown for want of a mansion to mark them. Taigh Mòr, by contrast, stands as an indiscrete witness to Erskine Beveridge and his family; it demands attention – that, after all, is the function of monumental architecture. And that is how stories come to be told.

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**Notes**

1. See Ferguson (2009, 8).
2. Erskine Beveridge once employed an historian to write the history of the Dunfermline Beveridges (Hallen 1890).
3. Dumfries and Galloway Libraries (DGL); Crichton Royal Institution Sheriffs’ Warrants [Ref. Accn. 1898.634], 1898.
4. DGL Crichton Royal Institution Male Case Book (Chronic), Vol. 13 [Ref. Accn. 1898.149], 8/7/1898–11/9/1903.
5. The only traceable descendants – grandsons of Erskine Beveridge – did not know that their Uncle Errie had ever existed. They think that their father, Charles, a much younger half-brother of Errie, had never been told.
6. For a discussion of grief and its geographies, see Willis (2009).
7. Source: Murdo MacCuish, Malacleit.
8. Personal communication with Robert Beveridge, 12 August 2011.
10. His clinical file is THB 23/4/1, archives of Sunnyside Asylum, Dundee University Archives.
11. See correspondence to The Scottish Naturalist (e.g. Beveridge 1917).
12. Letter from William Beveridge to AB, 30 August 1919; Beveridge Papers 2/A/65, London School of Economics Archives.
13. Letter from William Beveridge to AB, 30 August 1919; Beveridge Papers 2/A/65, London School of Economics Archives; see also Harris (1977, 267).
17. Source: Archie Morrison, Malacleit. Rabbits are perhaps a more likely agent of erosion (see Beveridge 1932).
23. Erskine Beveridge refused permission for a public house for use by his own workers (see Morgan 1986, 312).
24. Fred Beveridge (1918b, 247).
25. Letter WB to ABJ, 30 August 1919; Beveridge Papers 2/A/65, London School of Economics Archives.
26. Erskine Beveridge: Extract registered trust deposition for use by his own workers (see Morgan 1986, 312).
27. This decline is evident in the Erskine Beveridge & Co. Ltd paperwork at the Scottish Archives: BT2/2449.

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