John Stuart to Thomas Pennant: description of Oransay and Colonsay

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Oransa

Oransa is separated by a narrow sound from the island of Colonsay only at high water. It is computed to be two miles long and one broad. It contains 610 Acres, 1 R. and 148. of arable ground, no meadow or green pasture, 256. Acres of meadow or green pasture., 256. Acres of rocky green pasture, no moss, 122 Acres. of mountainous ground. — It is all at present in the hands of M$^{r.}$ M^{c} Niel, Brother to the late M^{c} Niel of Colonsay. He pays but 30£ Ster. of annual Rent for it. He sows every year about 20 bolls of bear, & plants 10 bolls of potatoes. — uses dung or shell-sand for manure — maintains [illegible] milk-cows, with their followers; eight or ten horses; a dozen of goats and 60 Irish sheep, valued at [illegible] shillings each — exports to market every year from 60 to 80 head of black-cattle ——— His number of servants, as it the case in all the principal farms in the W. isles, is very great. He has one principal labouring servant, who has 50 shillings p$^{r.}$ year for his wages, and a stone of meal p$^{r.}$ week for his maintenance; a principal hand or overseer of his Cattle, whose wages are grass for two milk-cows and meal for the maintenance of his family; a cow-herd; wages 12 Sh$^{s.}$ p$^{r.}$ half-year with shoes; another cow-herd, wages [illegible] or 9 shillings p$^{r.}$ half-year; a Calf-hand, wages five shillings; a maid for keeping his house, wages 3 £ p$^{r.}$ year; principal dairy-maid, wages 12 marks Scots p$^{r.}$ half-year; five other women servants, wages of each five marks Scots p$^{r.}$ half-year ——— Besides these servants there are two other men, called by their occupation aoireannan, who have the charge of labouring so much ground, and taking care of the cattle it mantains; and have for their trouble grass for two milk-cows, and six sheep, the tenth sheaf of the produce of the ground and as many potatoes as they choose to plant ———

The most numerous wild animals in this island are rabbits — There are likewise rats and mice — The weesel is but seldom seen. ———

Colonsay

Though the islands of Colonsay and Oronsay do not probably derive their names from any words in the Galic language, yet most of the farms and places in them evidently do, as Garv-alt i.e. the rough or rocky rivulet, Macharabeg i.e. the small field, Ballyvory i.e. S^{t} Mary's town or hamlet, Karra-more i.e. the great stone, Kill-Oran i.e. the church or burying place of S$^{t.}$ Ouran &c. —

The island of Colonsay contains 1969 Acres, 2 R. & 16 P. of arable ground; 236 Acres 13 R., 24 P. of meadow and green pasture; 1693 Acres, 1 R. and 80 P. of rocky green pasture, 191 Acres and 1 R. of moss; and 3421 Acres and 2 R. of mountainous ground. ———

Oats, bear and potatoes are almost the only crops reared — The sowing of oats begins about the middle of April. The common increase is that of three boles and a half of oats for each boll that is sown; of bear, eight ———

At an average 220 head of black-cattle are exported annually out of this island ———

There are about 40 or 50 tun of Kelp exported every year, each tun of which is sold at 3£ 10 sh. or 4£ Sterling. — It is cut down about the middle of April, and exported about the beginning of August ———

There are 467 examinable persons in Colonsay. The inhabitants here, as well as in most of the other Western isles, very prolifick having frequently twins at a birth. They are subject to few diseases. Ninty years is the greatest age to which they commonly arrive. The small-pox is said to visit them once in the six or seven years. The Civans likewise sometimes prevails among them ———[1]

The Cornish Chough and Stirlings are frequent in this island — wood-cocks are said to visit it ——— The Eider-Duck has been said to frequent it's coast, and that of Oransa, for these thirty years past ———

Killin Dec$^{r.}$ 4$^{th.}$ 1773

Dear Sir

In my last letter I proposed to send you some account of some round towers found in the inland parts of the Highlands; where the Danes certainly never penetrated. But as you express an anxiety for having the remainder of the notes I happened to get down during your Voyage to the W. isles sent you soon, I shall proceed to give you some more of them, and waive the other subject at present ———

Staffa, I am informed, has received many visits this last summer from motives of curiosity — MacQuary of Ulva, the Proprietor of it, is much involved in his circumstances, but he now hopes that some virtuoso will give him such a price for the island of Staffa, as will enable him to retrieve his fortune, though two years ago I dare say he would chearfully sell it to any man for a few pounds Sterling ———

D$^{r.}$ Samuel Johnson, accompanied by James Boswel Esq., has lately it seems, made a long excursion to the North of Scotland and the W. isles. They had the misfortune of meeting at last with very bad weather. They were storm-stayed in the island of Coll for near a fortnight, and were all the time obliged to feed upon oat-meal — The D$^{r.}$, it is said, intends to publish *his tour*; but even if he does, I suppose it will interfere very little with your plan.

I remain
Dear Sir
with great regard
your obliged and
humble Servant

John Stuart

M^{r} Stuart on oransay & Collonsay

Dec^{r} 4th 1773.

Editorial Notes

[1] Sibbens, also rendered 'sivvens', 'civvens', or here, 'civans', was a skin disease often associated with the poor of Scotland in the eighteenth century. It was described by Pennant in an appendix to his *Tour in Scotland 1772 Part II (1776)*: ‘A Loathsome and very infectious disease of the venereal kind, called the *Sivvens*, has long afflicted the inhabitants of the Highlands, and from thence some parts of the Lowlands in *Scotland*, even as far as the border of *England*. Tradition says that it was introduced by the soldiers of *Cromwell* garrisoned in the Highlands.’p.447.