

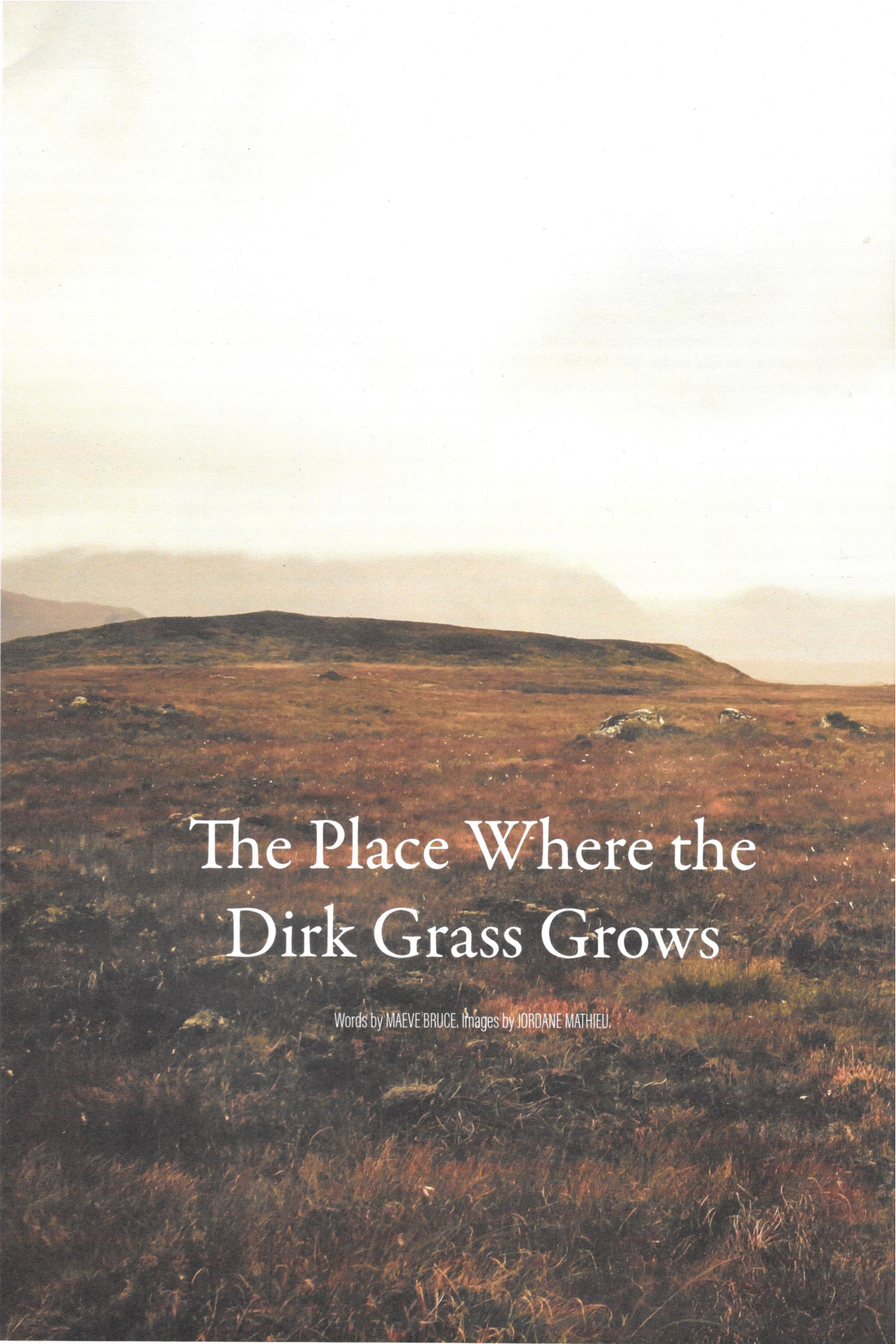
Issue 8, Autumn/Winter 2019.

# CREATIVE COUNTRYSIDE

Stories. Nature. Folklore. Adventure.

*ember*





# The Place Where the Dirk Grass Grows

Words by MAEVE BRUCE. Images by JORDANE MATHIEU.

RIASG BUIDHE, THE ISLE OF COLONSAY, INNER HEBRIDES

For a mile or so over Colonsay's scrubby moorland, we pick our way through deep heather and thick sedge. The ground gives to soft bog beneath our boots as we walk on towards the abandoned village of Riasg Buidhe on the east coast. It is well-named in Gaelic - Yellow Marsh, or the place where the dirk-grass grows. The wind is blowing in hard from the sea and above us, gannets struggle to hold their course.

A hundred years ago, on this gentle hill that slopes to a rocky cove, a small fishing community left their homes. A row of eight stone cottages and a handful of outlying buildings stand in ruins, open to the elements, rooves long gone. In this remote place, no-one has come to take the stones away, to build again walls for fields, farms, crofts, as is the Hebridean way. The stones stay where they have fallen, blurring the outlines of the dwellings they once enclosed. Piles of grey slate and sandstone lie lichen-mottled in the cotton grass and bog myrtle, slowly returning to the earth.

In 1918, the villagers moved to new houses in Glassard, less than a mile along the coast. The population of Riags Buidhe had slowly dwindled since the first census in 1841, when 68 residents were recorded. Eighty years later, when they closed their doors for the last time, there were only 25 people left.

I stand in the first house at the western end of the row, before an old fireplace. Long memories and descendants at Glassard have put names to the stones. The last person to live here was Gilleasbuig MacNeill, the Bard of Colonsay. Born in Riasg Buidhe in 1843, he was raised in this fishing community before he joined the Merchant Navy. After many years away at sea, he returned to his village, where he lived until his seventies. I imagine him here, warming his hands against the hearth.

The chimney of his house and the one next door, were added by a modernising laird, but the rest of the inhabitants didn't take to them, I'm told. They preferred the old way where the fire was laid in the centre of the building and the smoke found its own way out through the thatch or the open door.

Beyond 'the street' to the south is the site of an old chapel on a rocky knoll, barely discernible. Beside it is evidence of a burial ground. Headstones are hidden in the dry bracken and recumbent flags lie beneath a blanket of moss. If there were any inscriptions,

they have been erased over time. Nobody is sure how old these graves are, how long the chapel stood, but in the 1880s the laird removed a carved stone from here, that now stands in the garden at Colonsay House. Depicting a man with a fish tail on one side and a phallus on the other, the stone dates from the 5th to the 7th century - suggesting there was a settlement at Riasg Buidhe for at least fifteen hundred years.

Close by is a hand-cut knocking stone where barley was shucked and ground, and on the slope down to the sea are the remains of the medieval rig and furrow system, rich now with dog violets. Sixty-three Scots acres were still being farmed in this communal way at Riasg Buidhe when Gilleasbuig MacNeill lived here, though it was not enough to sustain the inhabitants. The markets for cattle and kelp had declined and potato crops had failed. Most people were obliged to supplement their living by working for the laird, often a condition of tenancy.

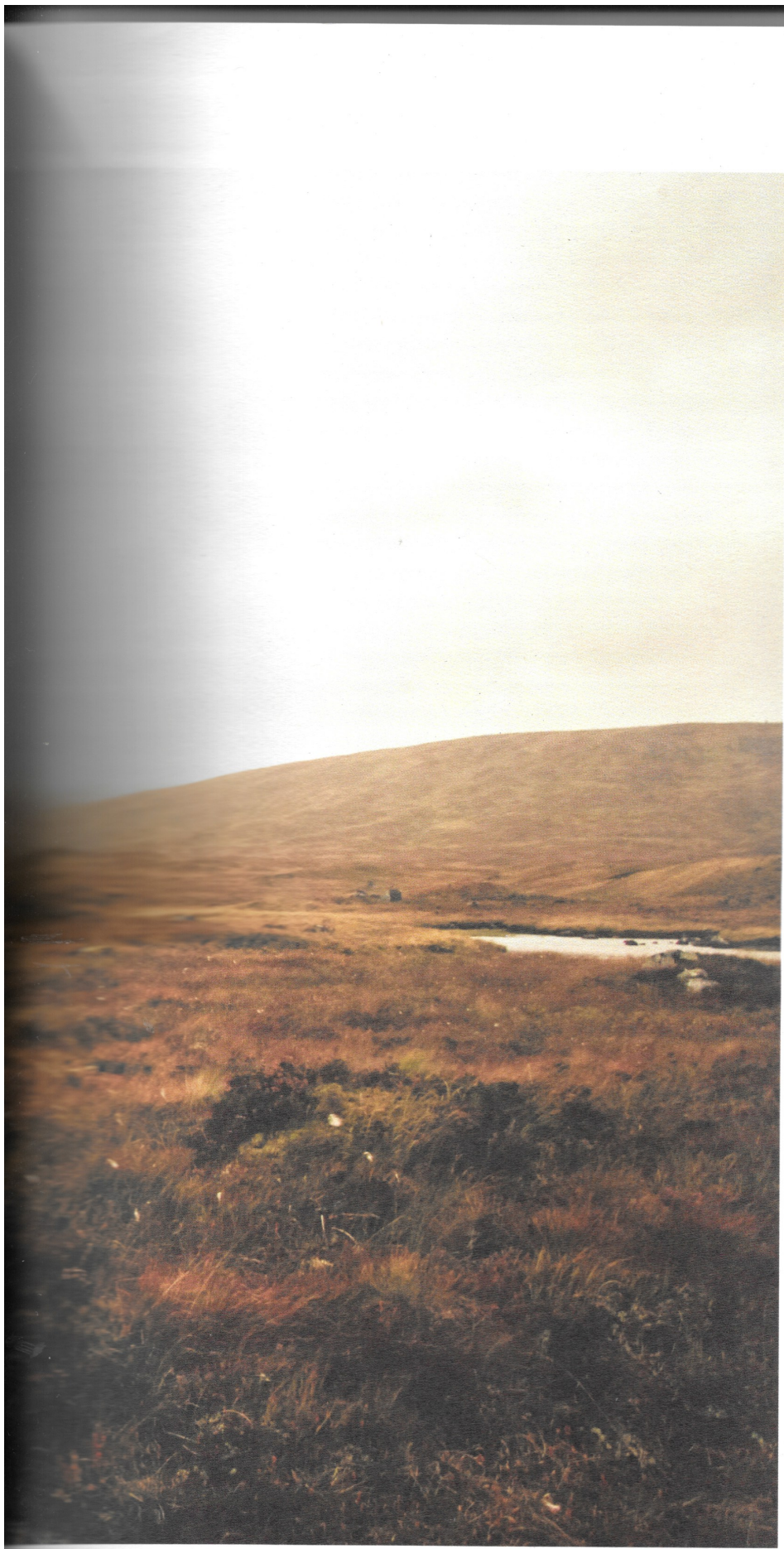
They fished for mackerel and herring in the waters off Colonsay, going back and forth to Islay and camping in caves on the coast of Jura, before returning to sell the catch. However, when steam trawlers arrived, the Riasg Buidhe fishermen in their small skiffs could not compete and stocks dwindled. They existed on lobster and winkles from their home shores, salting whatever fish they caught for the winter months.

By the turn of the last century, the inhabitants of Riasg Buidhe were bound not only by hardship, but by kinship. Nearly one hundred years of parish registers reveal the names and necronyms of the families who lived, loved and lost here - MacNeills and McAllisters, McFadyens and MacMillans, Darrochs and Blues - and hint at other stories.

Unmarried, Rebecca lived in the village with her four children. Their father had another son with a woman from Islay. Bryan and Peggy baptised three children on the same day. Coll and Kirsty lost a son and a daughter. John and Marion had a boy and got married two years later. Little Flora didn't make her first birthday. Malcolm and Ann moved in from Jura and while Hugh was at sea, his wife and two daughters passed away. John was a widower. Hector lived alone.

Their fates and fortunes and families were entwined, and ebbed and flowed like the tide that licks the shore. But time was running out. Even the Bard, Gilleasbuig MacNeill, knew that progress was waiting for them to catch up.





### The Glassard Song

<i>Theid thu null leam, a ruin</i>	Come over with me my love,
<i>Bidh tigh ur again s'a Ghlais-aird</i>	And we'll have a new house in Glassard
<i>'S bhon than a h'aiteridh cho mor</i>	And since the dwelling is so big
<i>Gheibh sin orann 'san dol seachad</i>	We'll get a song as we go by.
<i>Chi thu fhein gu behil iad riombach</i>	You will see for yourself that they are splendid,
<i>Air an gniomb le aol 's clachan</i>	Built with lime and stone
<i>Sgleatan tana Bhaile-chaolais</i>	Thin slates from Ballachulish
<i>Tha gan dion bho gaoith 's fhrasan</i>	Protecting them from wind and rain.

(The Bard of Colonsay, Gilleasbuig MacNeill, c. 1918)

The wind whips through these ruins, open to the sky, blowing the last of those lives here out to sea. For a while we watch the gannets with their ink-tipped wings plunging into the waves and then walk on, towards Glassard. There are oyster catchers on the sands and a pink plastic bag flaps against a discarded oil tank on the rocks. Looking back to Riasg Buidhe, I can just see a cluster of daffodils bright against the walls of the crumbling clachan.

Maeve Bruce is a professional storyteller who writes about our relationship with place and what it means to belong. She is inspired by landscape, nature, history, folklore and the Unseen.

*“The wind whips through  
these ruins, open to the sky,  
blowing the last of those lives  
here out to sea...”*