

Sheila Roderick

From the Intelligence Corps of the British Army to the battle grounds of Middle Earth, Sheila Roderick has led a life as varied and as colourful as the unique tweeds and linens that she weaves from her home on the island of Scalpay, in the Outer Hebrides. Readers unfamiliar with Scalpay Linen, the company that Sheila established with her husband in 1997, will no doubt have seen their products modelled on stage and screen by artists such as K T Tunstall, and most recently by Sir Ian McKellan, in the first instalment of Peter Jackson's epic trilogy, 'The Hobbit.' I meet with Sheila to discuss the inspiration for her designs, dart boards, Dallas, and the unexpected journey that led her to leave London and become one of the most successful independent weavers working today.

It's a cold, crisp morning in November and I'm sitting in the upstairs room at Sheila's home at Outend, Scalpay. Even at this time of year, when most businesses tend to quieten down, Sheila and her husband are still working around the clock to complete orders placed with Scalpay Linen in the summer. As a result, Sheila is sitting with a fleece in her lap picking the wool into a bag at her side. A spinning wheel is in a corner of the room next to the television together with an open box set of the TV show Dallas.

Sheila's connection with Scalpay began when her parents decided to sell their home in Ilford, Essex and move to somewhere more affordable:

'At that time in the 70's the housing prices were starting to go up in London and my father wanted to retire early and move somewhere that was more scenic and affordable than the city. They saw a cottage in Scalpay advertised in The Sunday Times and really liked the look of the place, and so that was that. I was coming to the end of my service with the Women's Royal Army Corps, and since I'd had enough of the lifestyle and the work I was doing, I decided that I wouldn't pursue it any further. As soon as I came up to visit my parents there was something about the island that appealed to me, and I decided to stay, even though I didn't know exactly what kind of work I would do.'

As with many people leaving urban environments to come to the islands, Sheila found the scenery and the way of life here a welcome alternative to the city:

'I was never particularly happy in London or in a city atmosphere, I'd always felt rather intimidated growing up and living there. I've suffered with depression all of my life, even as a child, and so much of my early life in London was clouded by the fact that I had depression which was effectively treated only around ten years ago. I certainly felt much more comfortable living up here than I ever had back home.'

At the time that Sheila arrived on Scalpay the island's primary industry and the source of its wealth was in herring fishing. According to local history, there were so many fishing vessels moored in the North Harbour at any one time that it was possible for a person to walk from one side to the other simply by walking from deck to deck. However, by the mid-1970's

there was a serious decline in herring stocks, prompting one local man, Donald Macleod (Donald Mor), to encourage people to take up Harris Tweed weaving to help fuel the economy. Among the first of those to take up the shuttle was Sheila's future husband, John Finlay Ferguson:

'Personally, I hadn't really thought about weaving until after I'd met John Finlay,' Sheila explains. 'When we first came up here, Donald Mor asked if I wanted to learn and get a loom, but I decided that I didn't want to do that! I was going to go down the knitting route, making Harris wool socks on a circular bed knitting machine, which I did for a couple of years in partnership with my mother. We worked together, I did the knitting and she did the finishing – the washing and the pressing and we sold them through the Scalpay Isle Knitwear Knitters' Co-operative.

The experience that Sheila gained knitting prompted her to move to the Isle of Lewis at the end of the 70's to working as secretary for an ailing knitwear company in Stornoway. This was to be the first of a series of moves and career changes that would take her to Glasgow and eventually back to London, where she worked for the Scottish Tourist Information Board in Trafalgar Square.

'The knitwear company wasn't doing very well and it collapsed after a while. I was unemployed for a while (the Job Centre gave me a job for a few weeks!) and then I was offered a job in the electrical department on the Buchan Alpha oil rig conversion at Arnish, in Lewis. When this finished I started with Marathon Oil as document controller while they constructed flare booms and accommodation modules for the Brae A rig, also at the Arnish yard. While I was there I had quite a lot of access to computers and so I thought it would be a good idea to do a six month training course in Glasgow to become a computer programmer. I did that, which was great fun, and then moved to London, because that's where a lot of the computing jobs were. The person at the job centre in London told me to forget about it and go back to being a secretary. He actually told me 'You're wasting your time; computers are not going to take off!' I'm sure he's eating his words now!' she laughs.

'I worked on the information desk at the Scottish Tourist Information Board in Trafalgar Square, which was quite fun, although it involved commuting to central London on the Underground, which I hated. That's when I taught myself hand-spinning in my spare time, which started the process that led to where I am now.'

Eager to leave the crowded and oppressive atmosphere of London behind, Sheila became a house-keeper at a country mansion in Buckinghamshire.

'My boss had a really large house out there in the countryside that was beautiful, with large grounds and a swimming pool. He had a recording studio in a wing of the house and played in a rock band in his spare time. The kitchen was often full of well-known bands drinking tea and chatting. The job involved quite a lot of entertaining at the house. The family company

supplied bomb disposal robots and other items to overseas buyers and my boss had an alarmed cupboard full of various odd looking weapons that I was told to keep right away from' she says with a chuckle. 'On the plus side, he worked in London every day and so that gave me plenty of time to perfect my spinning technique.'

Eventually Sheila decided to return to Scalpay, where she helped manage the knitter's co-operative. It was also during this time that a couple from the mainland bought the keeper's accommodation at Eilean Glas Lighthouse and turned it into self-catering accommodation for tourists. Originally built by Robert Louis Stevenson's grandfather, the earlier Eilean Glas lighthouse was one of the first to be built in the United Kingdom, and though the cottages are currently no longer being used, the lighthouse continues to be a tourist attraction to this day.

'I worked for a while doing the weekly housekeeping turnaround at the cottages – no-one else wanted to walk over the moor to get to them!'

In addition to providing Sheila with an income and an interesting place to work, the job at the Eilean Glas lighthouse also made it possible for her to meet John Finlay Ferguson, who was living at the end of the island nearest to the start of the path to the lighthouse. Sheila tells me details of the romantic, though unusual circumstances of their first encounter:

'The way I first met him was quite funny. I used to have a little white Fiat Panda car and I would take it up and park it at the old M.O.D. beacon which was as far as you could get by vehicle, and then walk across the moor to the lighthouse. One evening I came back and one of my tyres was flat. I tried to inflate the tyre but was a bit concerned about it. So I knocked at the door of the nearest house to ask for help. It was John Finlay who answered the door, and it was John Finlay that helped me change my tyre. I know that sounds a bit cheesy, but that was how we first met. Anyway, I still maintain that he was the one who had let the air out of my tyre in the first place, though he denies it furiously!'

Sheila discovered that John Finlay was a weaver, working for the mills in addition to being a fisherman. Since Sheila already had an interest in textiles, and was looking for a way to contribute financially to their relationship, she enrolled in a weaving course at Lews Castle College that she had seen advertised in the Stornoway Gazette. Despite being turned away after her first interview, she was determined to take part in the course, and was eventually accepted. 'At that time there was no bridge so I had to leave my car at the Kyles Scalpay ferry jetty and drive up to Stornoway each day – not arriving back until the evening.'

'At the end of the course I got my union card and started working as a seasonal worker for the mill,' Sheila explains. 'I'd been trained to a high standard; I could warp, I could weave with up to six shuttles and I could work out patterns. The mill started sending me these very dull, very boring pieces of work to do and it was not an inspiring way to pass the days so,

because John Finlay was also weaving and he was given more complicated patterns, he used to give me his tweeds to weave while he did all my tweeds for the mill.'

Six months after Sheila completed the course, the Harris Tweed industry suffered a massive down turn, and both Sheila and John Finlay stopped receiving work from the Kenneth Mackenzie Mill in Stornoway. The couple had already built themselves a loom shed on the croft beside their house to house one of the new Bonas Griffiths looms that John Finlay had just bought and this had attracted a lot of attention from visitors eager to see the work they were doing inside.

'It was quite frustrating,' Sheila says, 'because we had been demonstrating the techniques and the tweeds that we were weaving to people visiting us, yet we had nothing to sell them at the end of it.'

Though they were unable to sell any of the tweeds they were making in the loom shed because they were made on contract to the mill, the public interest in their work awakened Sheila to a potential business opportunity:

'I found out that Highlands and Islands Enterprise were running an EC funded project to encourage women in rural areas to start up their own businesses. Along with a group of ladies from North Uist and Harris, I studied for an SVQ in Business Planning from Lews Castle College and constructed a business plan for my own venture at the same time. Since there was already a public interest in what I was doing, combined with the fact that we weren't getting any work from the mills, I thought it was a great idea.'

One year later, having completed the course and developed her own business plan, Sheila went about establishing Scalpay Linen in 1997. Speaking about the process of setting up Scalpay Linen, Sheila says:

'It was an excellent way to start a business with a minimum risk. The project paid for me to go over to Northern Ireland to have a look at the linen industry there. I located a spinner there who was in the process of closing down and he supplied me with a lot of yarn to start off with, which was fabulous. There wasn't really a problem of finding much capital to start; we'd got the building and we'd got the loom, and so we just did it. We were registered as a loom shed anyway and so we didn't need to get planning permission from the local council; they said that we could open it as a workshop, but not as a retail shop, and as long as we weren't causing any obstructions on the road then they were happy for us to operate.'

From the outset, Sheila had no problems whatsoever in creating an individual identity for herself and her products, which was due in part to the fact that she is one of very few people weaving with linen:

'I like working with linen because it is quite unusual but, because I'd been trained to weave tweeds, all my linens came out looking like tweeds. That was quite interesting, because

again nobody else was doing that. As for the tweeds, I've tried to develop a signature of my own with the tweeds that I do, so that they're not the same as anybody else's. I try not to do plain, traditional tweed patterns and colour combinations, as there are already plenty of people doing that kind of thing.'

Sheila's unique colour combinations and patterns for her tweeds and linens came about as a result of having to experiment with whatever colours were available from the mills, often resulting in unusual combinations that helped to distinguish her styles from those of other weavers:

'In the early days my inspiration for my tweeds and for my linens came from the yarns that I could get. Although the Harris Tweed mills can produce a large and wonderful collection of colours, when we wanted woollen yarn in the early days they weren't producing them all at the same time, so the chances of being able to go in to the yarn store and find what I wanted was fairly limited, so I'd go in and see what they had and then decide what I was going to weave. This was good discipline, because if I have a lot of colour choice it's quite difficult to know where to start, but if there are only a few colours available you quickly learn how to use them in a way that's distinctive.'

The success of Scalpay Linen is such that Sheila and John Finlay are struggling to cope with the demand for their products:

'We are looking for bigger premises. I outgrew the loomshed several years ago after adding a warping mill to my equipment, and really I need to take on someone to work for me, because I have far too much to do, and there's the potential for more. I can't do that where I am now, because my loom shed simply isn't Health and Safety compliant for an employee,' Sheila explains.

In addition to the need for bigger premises, Sheila is also keen to take on an apprentice in order to pass on her invaluable skills and experience, and to ensure that Scalpay Linen continues to function into the future:

'I've got a lot of hard-won knowledge that does need to be passed on. I'm not getting any younger, and while the government tells me that I'm going to be about 90 by the time I retire,' she says, laughing, 'there are physical aspects of the work that I'm not going to be able to do forever, and it would just be so nice to have someone else to do it. I would love to get an apprentice to help with the business and eventually pass it on to them, because it would be such a shame to see all the work I've put into Scalpay Linen go to waste. This is an established business and though it's never broken any records, it's alive and I think it should carry on.'

Though she has yet to train an apprentice of her own, Sheila has already been instrumental in securing the future of Hattersley Loom weaving in the Outer Hebrides. By taking part in the weaving courses organised by Joan Cumming of Harris Development Ltd, Sheila has

been responsible for training nine students in the tradition of single-width weaving. In addition to passing on the skills she had been taught in college, Sheila also passed on the skills that she had learned through trial and experimentation over the years:

'I've passed on a lot of things I'd learned through experience, rather than just the things that I'd been taught, so it means the trainees won't have to go through the same experimental process themselves. Hopefully it puts them that extra step forward when it comes to starting their own businesses,' she explains.

Of the nine trainees enrolled in the course, nearly all of them have since gone on to become successful independent weavers in their own right:

'It's good for the craft and for the industry as a whole,' Sheila says. 'When I was learning to weave nearly twenty years ago I was the tenth weaver just on Scalpay, and others had already retired by that point, so that gives you some indication of the way in which things have changed. People sometimes say to me, 'Oh, you don't want too many weavers on the island because you'll be in competition but actually I don't think any of us will be in competition with each other because we're all doing different things and we all get our orders and inspirations from different sources.'

Sheila, along with other independent weavers such as Donald John Mackay from Luskentyre, who secured the contract with Nike, and Iain Finlay Macleod from Breanish Tweed, has attracted international interest in her fabrics, with the most recent success being contracted to supply linen to the costume department for Peter Jackson's film 'The Hobbit'. When I ask how Sheila sees the changes in the tweed industry in her own lifetime, and the future of the brand and the craft, she tells me that a great deal of the progress made in recent years would not have been possible without help from the Scottish Textiles Association:

'The Scottish Textiles Association has been very helpful to small businesses. They set up a few years ago and we were all invited to join. A lot of people didn't at that time, and I think that's because they thought it was only for the big textiles producers, but I joined. There's a lot of funding going into the Scottish textiles industry as a whole that is available for people. For instance, twice a year we have a consultant who comes to Stornoway and runs Future Trends workshops. This gives us an idea of colour and fashion trends - useful because prior to that, I would select new colours by sticking a shade card to the wall, and throwing darts at it wearing a blindfold!

'Now we get a useful little booklet with suggested trends and that forms a basis for deciding what to make. You can look forward to trends coming up in spring, summer or winter of the coming year, so we are always working ahead by about 18 months. This is good for me because I can start bringing out colours and patterns that may catch people's eyes for use as accessories or whatever. That way, at least I stand a chance of getting a colour that would be popular, whereas before there was simply no way of knowing. It's not just colours, its

textures, weights of cloth, and all that type of thing. And fashion, as well. I'm not really heavily into the fashion side of things at the moment, but it is worth bearing in mind that something I design and make can end up being used in some way in the fashion industry.'

Speaking to Sheila, it's impossible not to be swayed by the sheer enthusiasm and passion she has not only for her own weaving, but for the tradition and the craft of weaving as a whole. Having already been instrumental in the passing on of skills that might otherwise have been forgotten, the wealth of Sheila's knowledge is matched by her genuine desire to bestow new generations with access to the skills and techniques it has taken her decades to acquire:

'I'm not precious when it comes to sharing my knowledge,' Sheila says. 'If anybody wants to become a linen weaver and they come to me (Not that anybody has! 'She adds, laughing) 'I'm more than happy to help them as much as I possibly can on the basis that there is enough work for everyone and there's enough demand out there.'

With the ever increasing popularity of Harris Tweed as an international brand, and with the industry currently experiencing a time of unprecedented growth, it looks as though the skills, knowledge and passion of weavers like Sheila will be in constant demand from future generations, and it would be well worth remembering that without the dedication, the passion and the willingness to transfer that knowledge, Harris Tweed may not have gotten this far at all.

