



Island of Dreams: A Personal History of a Remarkable Place

Dan Boothby

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Dan Boothby had been drifting for more than twenty years, without the pontoons of family, friends or a steady occupation. He was looking for but never finding the perfect place to land. Finally, unexpectedly, an opportunity presented itself. After a lifelong obsession with Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water* trilogy, Boothby was given the chance to move to Maxwell's former home, a tiny island on the western seaboard of the Highlands of Scotland.

Island of Dreams is about Boothby's time living there, and about the natural and human history that surrounded him; it's about the people he meets and the stories they tell, and about his engagement with this remote landscape, including the otters that inhabit it. Interspersed with Boothby's own story is a quest to better understand the mysterious Gavin Maxwell.

Beautifully written and frequently leavened with a dry wit, *Island of Dreams* is a charming celebration of the particularities of place.

Island of Dreams: A Personal History of a Remarkable Place Details

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Thebooktrail says

Opportunity comes in the form of a tiny island in the Scottish Highlands

Dan Boothby had been searching for the perfect place for years. He had no ties, family or possessions to speak of but just wanted the perfect place to land. The only thing he did feel connected to in a way was the book Ring of Bright Water Trilogy by Gavin Maxwell. When he got the chance to move to Maxwell's former home on the tiny island in the Kyle of Lochalsh, he jumps at the chance.

He sets up home in the Kyleakin Lighthouse, the last home of the author and then he sets about creating his own story as he attempts to better understand the mysterious Gavin Maxwell.

Following the sites of your favourite author's book? Going to see where he lived and wrote? Sounds like a booktrailer to us. But going to live in the lighthouse where the author last lived? Now that is dedication.

This is the landscape of Gavin Maxwell and his ghosts but also a personal literary pilgrimage to Dan Boothby's own story and a homage of love and devotion he gives to the very special island in his heart.

We spoke to Dan on the booktrail blog -<https://thebooktrail.wordpress.com/20...>

John Fulton says

Island of Dreams is an account of Dan Boothby's time as an unpaid volunteer warden on Kyleakin Lighthouse Island, a former home of the famous writer Gavin Maxwell, author of Ring of Bright Water and other books.

The lighthouse is no longer a lighthouse, and the island is barely an island – it serves as a foot of the Skye Bridge between Kyleakin and Kyle of Lochalsh. Boothby has been fascinated by the life and works of Gavin Maxwell since he was young, so when he was given the chance to live on the island, he couldn't resist the opportunity to walk in the man's footsteps, but at times reading this book you get the feeling that the footsteps are faint and the trail is cold.

There is a tremendous sense of melancholy throughout the book, aided in part by the depiction of the almost constant Inner Hebridean rain, but mostly coming from Boothby's attempts to connect with the past while living in a run-down, derelict present. The spectre of death hangs over the book, to the extent that the depiction of a funeral about half-way through fits in with the tone of the book as a whole.

He weaves accounts of Maxwell's life through the book, tying in his growing understanding of this complicated and infuriating man as he spends more and more time on the island. These accounts are fascinating, but if you want a complete biography of Maxwell, look elsewhere.

But I have to admit, I've never been particularly interested in Maxwell anyway. Probably unlike most people, that's not why I picked up this book.

I grew up on Skye, just a few miles from where Boothby worked. I've never seen the Skye Bridge – when I lived there in the 80s, you still had to get the ferry from Kyle of Lochalsh to Kyleakin. The memory of the rain sticks with me, even after all these years – I went to my first day at Portree High School wearing one of my Dad's bright yellow oilskin jackets. I remember climbing the hills behind the town in borrowed hiking boots and returning them with pints of rainwater in them.

So all of Boothby's descriptions of the weather and the scenery brought back memories. His encounter with a vole that bit the pad of his finger made me laugh out loud – the exact same thing happened to me, and yes, I had to shake the little bugger to get it off me! I bore the tiny vole tooth scar for years.

When Boothby runs down his categories of members of a Highland community, from Natives through Locals, Incomers, Tourists to Second Home Owners (the lowest of the low) I pondered what category I belonged to when I lived there. Not a Native, for sure, but probably somewhere in between Local and Incomer. By the time I left Skye, I'd lived there for about a third of my life, and leaving it was an enormous wrench. I've lived in Leicester for over two decades now, nearly half my life, but I felt more at home on Skye than I do in the East Midlands. There are places on this planet that touch you deeply, and Skye is one of those.

When Boothby writes about his leaving the island, I felt his pain in a physical way.

Nostalgic for me, too, was his writing about the lighthouse and the keepers who lived on the little island, back when it was still an island. My Dad was a lightkeeper on Skye – not on Kyleakin Island, which was automated in the 60s, long before we lived there, but at Neist Point, on the high-cliffed west coast of the island.

My Dad was one of the last lightkeepers, spending the last few years of his service travelling from lighthouse to lighthouse, wherever he was needed, running ahead of the relentless pace of automation.

Reading about Boothby's life, I wondered if he was born just too late; a few decades earlier, in my Dad's generation rather than mine, and he might have found great pleasure in becoming a lightkeeper – his passion for solitude, the sea, the weather, and the flora and fauna of Scotland would have been nourished by the life of a keeper, and would certainly have inspired his writing.

A short note about the cover, by Sarah Drummond – I'm a sucker for pictures of lighthouses, of course, but this is particularly beautiful, with strong, simple colours making a striking image of the island with an impertinent-looking otter in the foreground.

It's a book that I'd recommend without hesitation to anyone interested in Gavin Maxwell; more broadly to anyone interested in Highland life; but most of all to anyone who enjoys simple, beautiful writing.

Kirsty says

I purchased Dan Boothby's *Island of Dreams* with great delight, as I adore books about remote island communities. This sounded lovely; in it, the author follows in the footsteps of Gavin Maxwell on the Isle of Skye, a man and author whom I must admit I wasn't familiar with before beginning the tome.

On the whole, *Island of Dreams* has been well written, but there was a feeling about it which I couldn't shake. The whole was oddly impersonal, and I found myself struggling to like Boothby at all. There is far more in here about him and his own life than there is about Maxwell, which seemed to me to defeat the object of following in the footsteps of an admired author. The balance didn't seem quite right, unfortunately.

Whilst I can thank Boothby for bringing Maxwell to my attention, the pacing and exploration here were not executed as well as I thought they would be, and the ending was rather abrupt. A little disappointing.

Michelle says

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. Dan recounts his life on the island where Gavin Maxwell lived just before his death. We learn a little bit more about Maxwell, a bit about island life and about the inhabitants of the highlands and islands.

I would recommend this book for anyone interested in Gavin Maxwell, otters, wildlife or island life in general.

Kate says

I'm usually a fan of true-life nature and travel writing but I struggled to enjoy this book.

Although the book gives an insight into island life and the backstory of Gavin Maxwell, I found that the two did not intertwine as much as I had expected. There seemed to be very little time dedicated to getting to know any of the islanders who were introduced and I failed to connect with the author.

It took a while to read and I don't feel like I gained much from the experience, except perhaps a passing interest in Gavin Maxwell and the possibility of picking up one of his books in the future.

Duncan M Simpson says

An enjoyable read. I have always loved Gavin Maxwell's books and the north west of Scotland (probably the first led to the second) so this book about Maxwell and one of the places where he lived was a natural for me and would be for anyone else who shares those interests. The writing is good with flashes of humour but let down a little by never being clear what the point of the book is. A good edit might have helped removed this weakness and made the book more than a series of recollections but I'd look forward to more books by Dan Boothby.

Phil Altimas says

Dan boothby seems to have been a drifted with an obsession with Gavin Maxwell's Ring of Bright Water trilogy, he gets the chance to walk in Maxwells foot steps

he lives in maxwells house in scotland and even does tourist tours about maxwell and his otters

a good read,

Lesley says

Dan Boothby thank you for such an excellent read. 'Island of Dreams' filled me with nostalgia, gave new perspectives and a connection. It's beautifully written and gives an evocative reminder of what it feels like when entering the myth of Gavin Maxwell as warden of the island, with all of its secrets, treasures and foibles. It will always be a treasured book and memento of an incredibly special place, people and time. I keep it always at the end of my bed.

Melanie Jane Devine says

I'm not sure what I was expecting with this book, but at the end I felt faintly disappointed. While I was in no way wanting to re-read Ring of Bright Water, or to hear anew the life of Gavin Maxwell, I found this book somewhat disjointed as if the author was not sure what he was writing - travelogue, biography, autobiography ... I read the outlines of all three, together with some nature notes, some brief sketches of personalities along the way, but all in all I felt that the volume lacked cohesion.

Niall Sclater says

Interesting book about the island under the Skye Bridge and the lifelong fascination that the author has had with the complex character of Gavin Maxwell.

Jo says

Dan's story, as he traces the steps of Gavin Maxwell and lives for a couple of years on the island of Eilean Ban in the Kyle of Lochalsh, is insightful, poignant and entertaining. He writes with sensitivity and self-deprecating humour, weaving the present with the past so that many worlds seem to exist at once. A wonderfully reflective and enjoyable piece of writing, in many ways reminiscent of Maxwell himself.

[Read my full review on The Hazel Tree](#)

Paul says

For two decades Boothby had been a perennial drifter. Always looking for that right place to settle, but never finding it meant that he moved from job to job and here there and everywhere. Then he was presented with a chance to live on the tiny island of Kyleakin, just off of Skye. Not only was this a unique opportunity, it was also the former home of Gavin Maxwell, author of Ring of Bright Water, and one of Boothby's literary heroes.

He is asked to help the volunteers there with various tasks and running some of the tours round the island and lighthouse. Being an incomer it takes a while to gain the trust of those around him, but slowly those friendships are built. The island is a fantastic place for wildlife, there are basking sharks just off the shore, eagles soar the skies, seals zip through the waters and of course there are the otters. And as he settles in he starts to try and uncover and understand the mysterious man that was Maxwell. He meets people that knew him, and hears the rumours and stories from the locals of what they thought was going on at the time.

This book is as much about the place as it is the personality of Gavin Maxwell. Where it is situated on the West Coast of Scotland means that it can be subject to the most brutal of winter storms. Boothby writes about the place with a genuine warmth. He likes the solitude that it can offer, whilst enjoying the company of others at other times. The writing is full of melancholy, as he uses the time there to reflect on his past, not with regret, just contemplation. I think that he appreciated the time that he spent there, and the freedom that he got. Worth reading in my opinion.

Michael Craig says

Being familiar with several books by Gavin Maxwell, having visited Sandaig many times, having had a conducted tour of Eilean Ban and having an interest in the culture, history and language of the Island of Skye, there was little new information that I gleaned from the book. However, I did enjoy his descriptions of the places he visited and of the wild life and the weather patterns. However, I was less comfortable with his opinion of the people of the island. I was disappointed that he did not take time to try and understand the culture, history and language of the Highlands and the area.. Perhaps if he had, he might have found it easier to relate to the people living there.

Victoria Sigsworth says

Every so often, when I am out shopping, I find something that really excites me. One such occasion, back in 1990, I found a CD I didn't know about, Donny Osmond's 'Eye's Don't Lie'. I remember feeling giddy and my heart pounding and that CD gave the information I was looking for which re connected me to him and to his fan base.

Now I know you will be asking, what has this got to do with this review for the above-mentioned book?

Many years ago when I was about 11, we watched a film at school and it was Ring Of Bright Water. I loved this film and it is still my favourite to date. This led me to discover the book of the film and the beginning of my love for Otters.

I then went onto read 3 of his other books. I didn't read the others because they were not subjects that I particularly wanted to read about and still don't. I often thought to myself that I would like to visit this place as it is part of the United Kingdom and therefore doable.

However time, as it does, moves on, and I find myself earlier in the year, in a bookshop on a day off. As a rule, I try not to buy many books as I am a library assistant but once again, I discovered a book that made my heart skip several beats...Island of Dreams. I saw the cover and it was that that attracted my attention, a lighthouse and an otter. I picked it up and read the back of it and gasped and instantly bought it!

This is a book which told of another person's fascination with the author and his visits and opportunities to live and work on the Island. It tells where it is which is a real help to me.

I have to say my favourite aspects of the book are the descriptions of the island and the wildlife. For me, it comes right off the page and is such a clear vision in my head.

I acknowledge there are sad and lonely parts of the book which I suppose is the reality . I have to say most reviews of this book aren't sparkling but then, everyone has an opinion.

I really enjoyed this book and look forward to other books he might write. At the moment it is a serious contender for my book of the year.I want to thank him for writing this book.

Penny says

3.5

Island of Dreams is about Dan Boothby's time working as a warden on the tiny Kyleakin Lighthouse Island in the Highlands of Scotland.

Boothby confesses he is a drifter and a dreamer. Brought up by his mother on a commune he has always had difficulty fitting in. At a young age he retreated into books, in particular the works of Gavin Maxwell famous for Ring of Bright Water.

Maxwell's last home was on the island, therefore to live there was a dream come true.

The whole book is shot through with a sense of sadness and loneliness.

Boothby admits that 'in his imaginings' Maxwell had become the surrogate father he longed for.

I think it was a hard lesson for him to learn (or maybe accept as I suspect he always knew) that Maxwell's works were 'all a mirage', and his genius was 'to create a semblance of honesty'. The truth was that Maxwell wrote for money and resented having to do so!

Boothby writes really well and I would love to know what happened and where he went when he left the island.
