

The Lighthouse Keepers of Eilean Mor

By Fairweather Lewis



he Flannan Isles are a group of seven uninhabited islands, part of the Outer Hebrides chain off the coast of Scotland. The largest of the seven—also called the Seven Hunters—is called Eilean Mor, which in Scots Gaelic means, simply, “Big Island.” It is not so very big; it covers a grand total of 37 acres.

There is no particular ghost story attached to Eilean Mor, but it is the site of a classic unsolved mystery. Three lighthouse keepers vanished from the island in December 1900, and no one has ever explained why or how.

The sea around the Flannans has always been exceptionally dangerous. So many ships have been lost there in heavy weather that, in 1895, a lighthouse was commissioned on Eilean Mor. The same heavy seas that caused so many shipwrecks also made the transportation of construction materials difficult, and the lighthouse was not completed until 1899.

It had been in operation a little over a year when, on the night of December 15, 1900, a Captain Holman, skipper of a freighter, *SS Archer*, saw that the light was dark. He reported this fact by Morse code to the nearest shore station.

There were at the time three keepers stationed at the Eilean Mor lighthouse: James Ducat, keeper; Thomas Marshall, first assistant; and Donald McArthur, second assistant. One of the three was due to be replaced by Joseph Moore, and supplies were due to be landed at the same time, but, because the weather

was so severe, it was not until December 26 that Moore, aboard *SS Hesperus*, was able to land on the island. Under ordinary circumstances, the man whom he would replace on duty would be waiting at the east landing, on the lee of the island. No one was waiting for Moore when he came ashore.

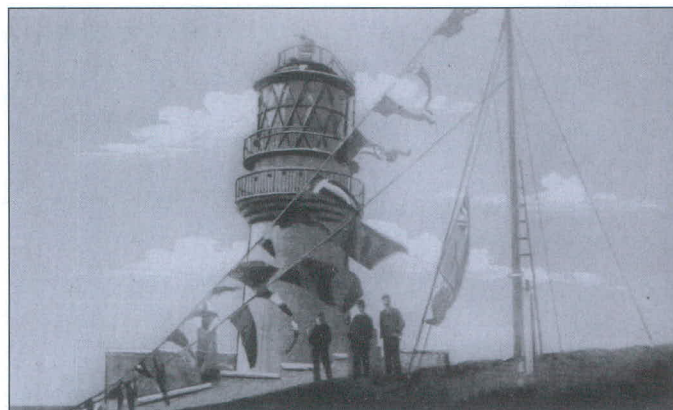
Worried, Moore ran to the lighthouse. There, he found the living quarters and storehouse empty, the clock stopped, and the fireplace ashes cold.

He reported back to *Hesperus*, and, in company with three seamen from the ship, made a more thorough search. This search confirmed that the men were not in the lighthouse or any of its outbuildings, and that the oilskins (the heavy-weather gear the keepers wore while working outdoors) and boots of all three were missing.

Outside, they found that, on the west (windward) side of the island, the landing stage had suffered severe damage; the iron staircase that led down the slope to the landing was twisted, and ropes and jibs on the crane platform, where supplies were landed from that side, were scattered about.

The last official entry in the head keeper's logbook was dated December 13; on a slate

nearby, written in chalk, there was data recorded at 9 a.m. on Saturday, December 15, with barometric pressure and temperature recorded. Whatever happened to the three keepers happened therefore between 9 a.m. and midnight, when Captain Holman of the *SS Archer* reported that the light was out.



Flannan Isle Lighthouse circa 1900. USLHS archives.

A full-scale official investigation concluded, based on the missing oilskins and the knowledge that the 10 days between the light going dark and the discovery that the men were missing had been exceptionally stormy, that the men had most probably gone to check the extent of storm damage on the west landing and been swept away by a rogue wave. This possibility was confirmed in later years when, in a heavy sea, one huge wave rose 70 feet up the side of the island and completely swamped the platform.

The three men who vanished that stormy December day in 1900 have not returned as ghosts. There have been whispers, though, that they might have been lured to their deaths by spirits—the spirits of the hundreds of fishermen and freightermen lost to the sea off the shores of the Flannans. These whispers say that the keepers might have heard the voices of those long dead, calling for help, and while responding to those calls, died themselves.

Among the way-out-there versions of what might have happened, there's also a story about a ghostly Viking longboat that supposedly haunted the area (Vikings once settled on some of the islands of the Outer Hebrides) and how the ghosts of the raiders may have come ashore and dragged the three away. That one was too much even for me, inveterate lover of ghost stories though I am, to stomach.

The only ones who know for sure are long gone. The poet Wilifrid Wilson Gibson wrote their epitaph in his poem “Flannan Isle”:





FLANNAN ISLE

by: Wilfrid Wilson Gibson



THOUGH three men dwell on
Flannan Isle
To keep the lamp alight,
As we steer'd under the lee, we caught
No glimmer through the night!

A passing ship at dawn had brought
The news; and quickly we set sail,
To find out what strange thing might all
The keepers of the deep-sea light.

The winter day broke blue and bright,
With glancing sun and glancing spray,
As o'er the swell our boat made way,
As gallant as a gull in flight.

But, as we near'd the lonely Isle;
And look'd up at the naked height;
And saw the lighthouse towering white,
With blinded lantern, that all night
Had never shot a spark
Of comfort through the dark,
So ghastly in the cold sunlight
It seem'd, that we were struck the while
With wonder all too dread for words.

And, as into the tiny creek
We stole beneath the hanging crag,
We saw three queer, black, ugly birds--
Too big, by far, in my belief,
For guillemot or shag--
Like seamen sitting bold upright
Upon a half-tide reef:
But, as we near'd, they plunged from sight,
Without a sound, or spurt of white.

And still too mazed to speak,
We landed; and made fast the boat;
And climb'd the track in single file,
Each wishing he was safe afloat,
On any sea, however far,
So it be far from Flannan Isle:
And still we seem'd to climb, and climb,
As though we'd lost all count of time,
And so must climb for evermore.
Yet, all too soon, we reached the door--
The black, sun-blister'd lighthouse door,
That gaped for us ajar.

As, on the threshold, for a spell,
We paused, we seem'd to breathe the
smell
Of limewash and of tar,
Familiar as our daily breath,
As though 'twere some strange scent of
death:
And so, yet wondering, side by side,
We stood a moment, still tongue-tied:
And each with black foreboding eyed
The door, ere we should fling it wide,
To leave the sunlight for the gloom:
Till, plucking courage up, at last,
Hard on each other's heels we pass'd
Into the living-room.

Yet, as we crowded through the door,
We only saw a table, spread
For dinner, meat and cheese and bread;
But all untouch'd; and no one there:
As though, when they sat down to eat,
Ere they could even taste,
Alarm had come; and they in haste
Had risen and left the bread and meat:
For on the table-head a chair
Lay tumbled on the floor.
We listen'd; but we only heard
The feeble cheeping of a bird
That starved upon its perch:
And, listening still, without a word,
We set about our hopeless search.

We hunted high, we hunted low,
And soon ransack'd the empty
house;
Then o'er the Island, to and fro,
We ranged, to listen and to look
In every cranny, cleft or nook
That might have hid a bird or mouse:
But, though we searched from shore to shore,
We found no sign in any place:
And soon again stood face to face
Before the gaping door:
And stole into the room once more
As frighten'd children steal.

Aye: though we hunted high and low,
And hunted everywhere,

Of the three men's fate we found no trace
Of any kind in any place,
But a door ajar, and an untouch'd meal,
And an overtoppled chair.

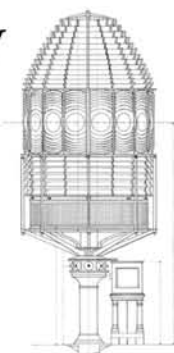
And, as we listen'd in the gloom
Of that forsaken living-room--
O chill clutch on our breath--
We thought how ill-chance came to all
Who kept the Flannan Light:
And how the rock had been the death
Of many a likely lad:
How six had come to a sudden end
And three had gone stark mad:
And one whom we'd all known as friend
Had leapt from the lantern one still night,
And fallen dead by the lighthouse wall:
And long we thought
On the three we sought,
And of what might yet befall.

Like curs a glance has brought to heel,
We listen'd, flinching there:
And look'd, and look'd, on the untouch'd
meal
And the overtoppled chair.

We seem'd to stand for an endless
while,
Though still no word was said,
Three men alive on Flannan Isle,
Who thought on three men dead.



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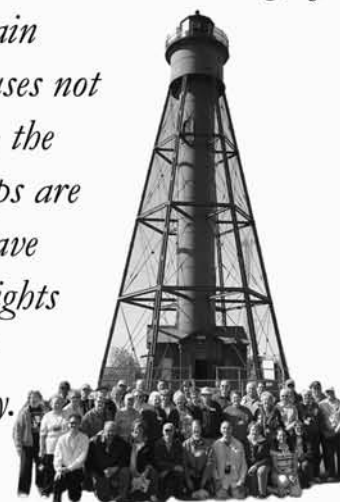
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