

Book Review
Charles Hunter, Oban

TO THE ISLANDS by Steven Mithen: pub. 2010 by tworavenspress.com.
£15.99

This is an enthralling account of twenty-five years of archaeological research, mostly in the Inner Hebrides, in a search for the Mesolithic hunter-gatherers, or even earlier inhabitants. It is enthralling not only for his discoveries but for the details of all the planning, grant applications, the team building and personalities involved, and the research and publication of the finds. The parallel account is of his family life and his own progress up the academic ladder from PhD at Cambridge in 1988 to Professor of Early Prehistory at The University of Reading, Dean and now a Pro Vice-Chancellor there and Fellow of the British Academy.

From the early days Steven found it difficult to accept that the extensive shell-middens on the tiny island of Oronsay and Risga had no hinterland. He believed that the hunter-gatherers in the Inner Hebridean islands must have roamed widely in a territory from Islay to Skye, and over the years he has followed their path with his own research, starting on Colonsay, then on Islay, Coll, Tiree, and north-west Mull, finishing with a reconnaissance, thinly disguised as a family holiday, in which he managed, by meticulous planning, to visit in a week all four of the Small Isles, and to stay overnight on all of them. Anyone who knows the schedule of the *Loch Nevis* from Mallaig will know that this is no mean achievement in itself !

Although the research is ongoing, his discoveries have pushed back the earliest dates of human activity on some of the islands to about 9,000 years BP and not all the new sites are coastal.

If there is one fault I can find it is that, though some of his expeditions necessarily passed through Oban on their way, Steven dismisses in a few words the possibility that our bay could have been the 'Gateway to the Islands' even then. One day we may learn what Clive Bonsall of the University of Edinburgh discovered at Lon Mhor open-air site during the Oban Archaeological Project of c. 1991-95.

A number of our members participated in the OAP as volunteer trowellers and wet-sievers and know how meticulously the recording of the fieldwork was carried out on site. I vividly remember seeing a beautiful plano-convex flint knife of Bronze Age date uncovered at Carding Mill Bay and there were many lithic artefacts found at Lon Mhor which could be contemporary with Steven Mithen's sites

For his part, Steven declares that he intends to pursue his search for the earliest Hebridean hunter-gatherers for at least the next two decades, in parallel with other archaeologists known to our society.

Address for correspondence: Charles Hunter, Summit, Pulpit Hill, Oban, PA34 4IX