

Daniell's sketch of the old road down to Loch Ainort is "a perfect gem"

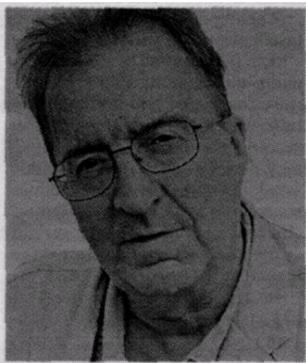
# New volume highlighting the genius of Daniell's prints

Throughout the July and August of 1815 a handsome middle-aged Englishman could be seen making pencil sketches of the Skye and Raasay coastlines.

From the sea and from different vantage points on land, William Daniell drew in his notebooks detailed outlines of striking geographical and man-made features from Loch Slapin to Duntulm. Then he took them home and turned them into aquatints.

## ROGER HUTCHINSON

on books



Daniell's series of 308 portraits of the entire coastline of Great Britain 200 years ago is now justly famous. But their celebrity is a recent thing. Only 40 years ago, in 1969, the Invernessian John Garvey found in McAvoy's furniture shop by the Station Hotel in Academy Street a cardboard box full of Daniell originals, going for £1 10s 0p each (if you're under 50 years old, that's £1.50).

Garvey invested three quid in two of them (one of the Cuillins, one of Edinburgh) and a lifelong fascination had begun, which has culminated in his deeply-researched book of Daniell's time in Skye and Raasay.

Daniell finally published 15

aquatints of Skye and Raasay. But he made many more sketches, several of which survive and have been included in Garvey's book. At least one of them is a perfect gem. It shows the old road down to Loch Ainort from above Luib, with Glamaig in the background. The loch is busy with small boats and the broad turnpike itself — which had recently been improved — is scattered with locals moving to and fro on foot and on horseback.

Daniell was impressed by those locals of Skye and Raasay. They were, he said, "an active, intelligent and industrious race, orderly in their habits, and well bred in their demeanour. When enquiries are made of them, they comprehend readily, and answer explicitly..."

Which is more, he may have realised, than William Daniell would have been able to do if the situation had been reversed and he was asked to answer questions in a Sgiathanach's native language.

John Garvey draws heavily on Daniell's own accounts of his visit to these islands. He fills out the journey cleverly with extracts from the writings of contemporaries such as Thomas Pennant, Johnson and Boswell and John MacCulloch, who were in Skye shortly before and after Daniell.

But the triumph of Garvey's work is the attention given to his first love, the pictures themselves. He includes a number of modern photographs of the scenes etched by Daniell, to illustrate exactly how the great engraver foreshortened perspective, exaggerated mountains and generally toyed around with nature to create art.

"William Daniell's Isle of Skye and Raasay" also includes a good number of those pencil sketches made by Daniell as he was tossed around in a small boat or clung to a precipitous hillside. These are the wellsprings of the artist's work: the first drafts of history; the impressions gained by his brilliant mind as he breathed the Hebridean air.

Some of the sketches — such as the one above Luib — are new to us. Others, such as the series made of Dunvegan Castle and of the kyle of Lochalsh, show how much trouble Daniell took to arrive at his finished product. They are

all wonderful in their own right.

Not quite so wonderful, of course, as the final aquatints. John Garvey highlights the genius of these prints — probably the finest visual depictions ever made of Skye and Raasay — in a novel way. He pulls out and blows up infinitesimal and often disregarded details from the portraits.

This effect is miraculous. In Daniell's aquatint of Armadale Castle (famously imagined, because in 1815 the castle had not yet been built, so Daniell worked from the architect's drawings and showed a massive edifice more like Harlech or Carcassonne than the modest finished seat of the Macdonalds) the sea in Armadale bay is alive with shipping.

Daniell was at his very best when depicting the sea and life on the sea. It is easy to take that for granted, until you see a close-up detail of a small fragment of his work. Here Garvey presents us with a blow-up of a three-sailed skiff with one man at the tiller and another scrambling aboard from a tender. In the foreground two men in a small boat have unshipped oars and are busying themselves in the bilges. Another sgoth

drifts lazily across the calm, reflective sea towards the wooded shore of southern Sleat.

That is a square inch or two in Daniell's full aquatint. But isolated and magnified, it shows us a whole world at work. It shows us those Skymen who were not that summer engaged in the Battle of Waterloo, pursuing the way of life that would lead them through the Pax Britannica and into the 20th century. It shows us most of all that the coastline of Britain did not and does not consist only of stately homes and astonishing scenery. It involves "active, intelligent and industrious" ordinary people making a living in the land of their birth.

"William Daniell's Isle of Skye and Raasay" is an unexpected joy. It is simply an absorbing, original and beautiful book. It is self-published, which helps to explain the steep cover price, but surely deserves the future attention of a commercial publishing house.

"William Daniell's Isle of Skye and Raasay", by John Garvey; Matador, £20

