

## KRISTJÁN H. MAGNÚSSON: A FORGOTTEN LUNDY ARTIST

by

ANDRÉ COUTANCHE

14 Queens Road, Bishopsworth, Bristol, BS13 8LB

*e-mail: acoutanche@googlemail.com*

### ABSTRACT

Kristján H. Magnússon (1903-1937) was an Icelandic artist who studied in the U.S.A. and worked in Iceland, the U.S. and the U.K. In spring 1931 he lived and painted on Lundy at the invitation of Martin Coles Harman, the then owner of the island. The circumstances which led to this are described and some historical and artistic context is sketched out. Some of his paintings are illustrated, and the whereabouts of his Lundy pictures are discussed.

Keywords: *Kristján Magnússon, Lundy, Iceland, art history*

### BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

In 2012 a small working group of Lundy Field Society members was planning a book on Lundy during the Harman era to mark the ninetieth birthday of Diana Pennington Keast, the younger daughter and only surviving child of Martin Coles Harman (MCH), who bought Lundy in 1925. Among the unique archives of papers and photographs which Diana brought to the meetings as possible topics for the book was a folder containing material about Kristján Magnússon. In the event, there was no room for that particular subject in the final book (*The Harman Family's Lundy 1925-1969*), but it attracted me as an intriguing topic for further research, especially since Magnússon seemed to be barely heard of in Lundy circles and not documented at all.

### METHODS AND MATERIALS

Diana Keast's archive consisted of a photograph of Magnússon at his easel (Plate 1); an exchange of typewritten letters dated September 1946 between MCH and Björn Björnsson, an Iclander living in London who was interested in acquiring some of Magnússon's paintings; and a postcard signed by Magnússon to MCH. Diana also had some anecdotes and memories of Magnússon which had come through her family, though she herself never met the artist (Diana was eight years old when he was on Lundy but their paths never crossed). Diana later lent me her father's notebooks which documented the paintings which he had bought from Magnússon and their initial whereabouts.

Further research has been largely on the internet, and, while much more about the artist himself could be discovered in Iceland (and in Icelandic), enough has been found to put his work on Lundy into context.

### KRISTJÁN HELGI MAGNÚSSON: A BRIEF CURRICULUM VITAE

Born on 6 March 1903 at Ísafjörður in north-west Iceland (see the map on page 111). Went to the U.S. in 1919, aged 16, to live with his brother in Boston. From 1921 to 1926 studied at the Massachusetts School of Art in Boston, Mass., under John Sharman

(1879-1971). First one-man exhibition at the Copely Gallery in Boston, Mass., in 1927. Exhibition at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art in 1928. Exhibitions in Reykjavík and Ísafjörður in 1930. In 1930 became engaged to and married Klara Helgadóttir, who took the surname Magnússon (see 'A Note about Icelandic Personal Names'): one son, Magnús Kristjánsson, born 26 April 1934. Exhibition at the Alpine Club, London, in September 1930. Contacted by Martin Coles Harman. Painted on Lundy from March 1931: 32 pictures, mostly oils, some water-colours. Exhibition, including the Lundy paintings, at the Fine Art Society, London, in November 1931. Exhibition in Stockholm in 1932. Exhibitions in Worcester, Mass., and New York in 1933. Returned to live at Ísafjörður and worked in Iceland. Died aged 34 on 22 April 1937 at Ísafjörður, probably of an intestinal blockage, after returning from a painting expedition to Borgarfjörður.

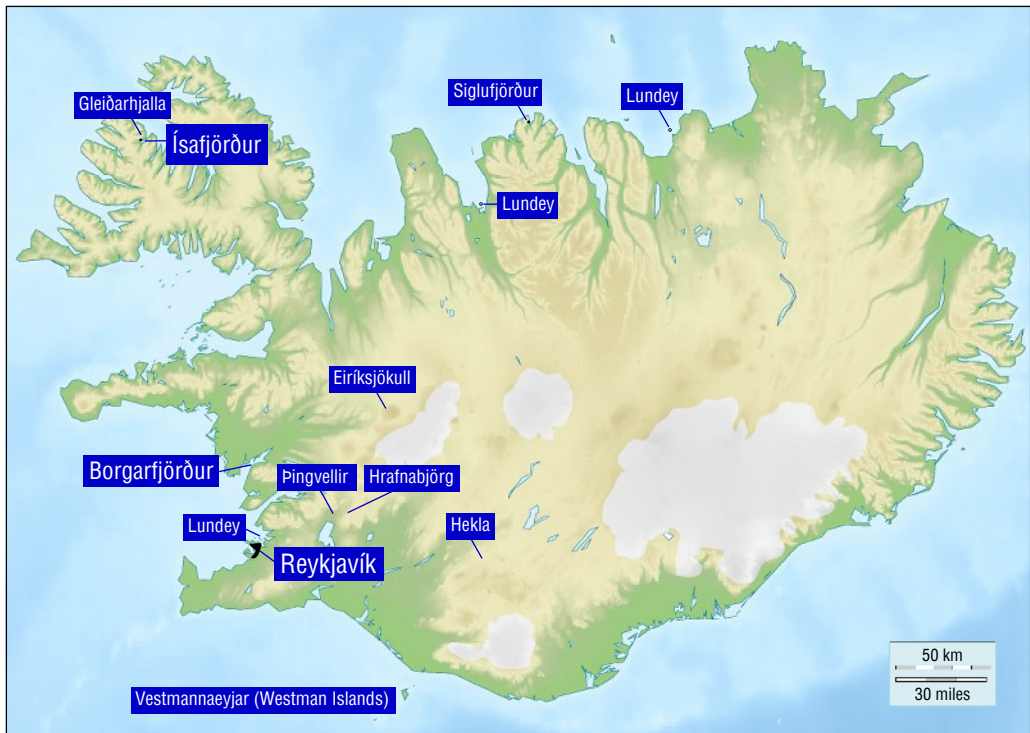
*Sources: [www.geni.com](http://www.geni.com); 'Paintings of Iceland by Kristján H. Magnússon'; Icelandic newspaper archives*



**Plate 1:**

Kristján Magnússon at his easel. It is not known where the photo was taken but the view resembles paintings of Mount Hekla done by Magnússon and other Icelandic artists.

Courtesy of Diana Keast



**Figure 1:** Map of Iceland showing places referred to in the text

## ICELAND IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Iceland was first settled in the ninth century. In 1262-1264, Iceland came under Norwegian rule and passed to ultimate Danish control through the unification of the kingdoms of Norway, Sweden and Denmark (the Kalmar Union) in 1397. In the nineteenth century, Iceland was a dependency of the Danish crown, but romantic nationalist ideas which were developing in Europe gave rise to an increasing national consciousness, and an Icelandic independence movement began in the 1850s. In 1874, Denmark granted Iceland a constitution and limited home rule. This was expanded in 1904, with a Minister for Iceland in the Danish cabinet.

The Danish-Icelandic Act of Union was signed on 1 December 1918 and recognised Iceland as a sovereign state in a personal union with Denmark. The Government of Iceland established an embassy in Copenhagen and requested Denmark to handle Icelandic foreign policy. Danish embassies around the world consequently displayed two coats of arms and two flags: those of the Kingdom of Denmark and those of the Kingdom of Iceland.

Kristján Magnússon was therefore brought up in a society and a culture which was very aware of its unique national identity and keen to project that identity to the outside world.

Iceland was a traditional society but not an introverted one. Farming was a corner stone of the economy and the way of life, but people, especially younger people, moved around as workers on other farms before inheriting or buying their own. Fishermen were used to voyaging long distances, but farmers and townspeople were also aware of and interested in news and developments from abroad.

Deteriorating climatic conditions in the nineteenth century put pressure on farming and encouraged emigration, especially to Canada and the United States. As the final decade of the nineteenth century approached, 27 out of every thousand Icelanders were leaving each year for North America. Shipping connections to the outside world had been few and *ad hoc*, but a trade in livestock to Scotland from the 1870s brought about more regular links, both to the U.K. and to North America.

It was not unusual, therefore, that Magnússon had relatives in the Boston area. What was then unprecedented was that a young Icelandic who wanted to study art should do so in the U.S. and not northern Europe.

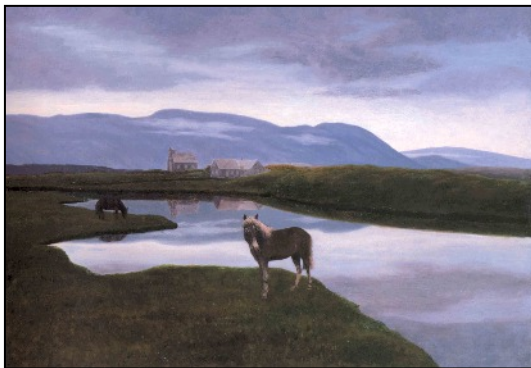
*Sources: Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, 2010, especially chapter 4, 'The Lure of the New World'; Wikipedia*

## EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY ICELANDIC ART

The roll-call of Icelandic artists who were active when Kristján Magnússon was growing up – Þórarinn Þorláksson (1867-1924), Ásgrímur Jónsson (1876-1958), Jóhannes Kjarval (1885-1972), Jón Stefánsson (1881-1962) and others – shows that they all studied in Copenhagen, and perhaps Oslo. It was those who were born after World War I who did their studies in Paris and America rather than Scandinavia.

It is not surprising that there was a strong tradition of landscape painting in Icelandic art; both the dramatic topography and nationalistic sentiment encouraged this. Some examples of Icelandic painting at the time Magnússon was growing up are shown below, with the years in which they were painted. (The places depicted are marked on the map).

*Sources: Sigurður A. Magnússon, 1977; Wikipedia*



**Plate 2** (above left): 'Þingvellir' by Þórarinn Þorláksson (1900)

**Plate 3** (above right): 'Eiríksjökull' by Jón Stefánsson (1920)



**Plate 4** (left): 'Hekla úr Laugardal' by Þórarinn Þorláksson (1922)

### A NOTE ABOUT ICELANDIC PERSONAL NAMES

Icelandic personal names consist of a given name followed by a 'surname' which is a patronymic or, optionally, a matronymic. 'Surnames' which descend through a family tree do not exist, except in a few cases for specific reasons. Someone called Kristján Magnússon did not come from a line of Magnússons; he was given the name Kristján and his father's given name was Magnús; he is 'Kristján, Magnús's son'. That father's full name would have been, for example, Magnús Jónsson if his father's given name had been Jón. A woman's 'surname' adds '-dóttir' (daughter) to her father's given name. Both women and men can choose to use a matronymic if preferred; so if Kristján's mother's name was Bryndís, he could choose to be called Kristján Bryndísarson, and if he had a sister called Katrín, she could be called either Katrín Magnúsdóttir or Katrín Bryndísardóttir.

It follows that there can be no equivalent of the formal addressing of someone as 'Mister so-and-so'. The formal and informal way of addressing Kristján Magnússon would be 'Kristján'. If the context was ambiguous (more than one Kristján in the room, for example), he could be identified as Kristján Magnússon. Calling him 'Magnússon' in this paper is the British way and would be meaningless in an Icelandic context.

It also follows that women do not take their husband's 'surname' on marriage – in the Icelandic context they would be calling themselves the 'son' of someone who was not their father. For Klara to adopt the married name of Magnússon in the European or American way was a striking statement of commitment and devotion to her husband – and, perhaps, a way to simplify travelling abroad, where immigration officials unfamiliar with the traditional Icelandic system would expect married couples to have the same name on their papers.

Names are regulated in Iceland and have to comply with the grammatical rules of the Icelandic language. Given names cannot use letters which do not exist in Icelandic (the letter 'c', for example), and they must be capable of being conjugated to give the genitive form which is used in patronymics and matronymics (the Bryndísarson in the above example). There is a 'Personal Names Committee' which rules on these matters and which has given rise to some controversial and contested decisions. Successive Names Acts from 1925, 1991 and 1997 have tightened the rules, and it would now not be legal for Klara Magnússon to have adopted her husband's name.

*Sources: Website of the Icelandic Ministry of the Interior; Wikipedia*

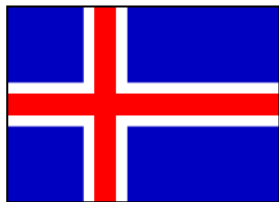
### THE LUNDY-ICELAND CONNECTION

Magnússon had graduated from the Massachusetts School of Art in 1926 and had had exhibitions in Boston and Pennsylvania. It is not known why he came to London in 1930, but his exhibition at the Alpine Club in September 1930 attracted the attention of the owner of Lundy, Martin Coles Harman.

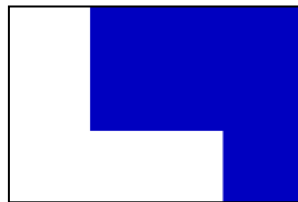
MCH was interested in and sympathetic to Iceland. It is tempting to speculate that he saw in its nationalistic feelings and increasing demands for total independence a reflection of his own attitude to the U.K. government and authorities. The derivation of the name of Lundy is from the Norse, 'Lund' (puffin) and '-ey' (island), and MCH may have been



aware that there are several islands off Iceland called Lunday, meaning precisely ‘Puffin Island’ (see map). It is known that an Icelandic flag was flown on Lundy later on, before and after World War II. In 1953, the year before he died, MCH agreed to become Patron of ‘The Most Excellent Order of the Black Raven’, the eccentric product of the enthusiasm of one man (a Mr J.S. King) for the Scandinavian period of British history.



**Figure 2:** The flags of Iceland (left) and Lundy (right). This design of the Lundy flag was the last of a series of designs adopted by Martin Coles Harman and has recently been revived by the Landmark Trust



*Sources: Langham, 1990; Members of the Lundy Field Society, 2013*

### MAGNÚSSON'S PAINTINGS

Four of Kristján Magnússon's paintings are shown below. Landscapes of Iceland were a recurring subject, but not exclusively so. ‘Blaðadrengrur’ is illustrated as an example of Magnússon's non-landscape work, and other portraits appeared at his first London exhibition. His exhibition at Worcester Art Museum, Mass., in 1933 included a portrait of his wife – ‘Mrs. K. H. Magnusson’ – along with works entitled ‘Portrait Sketch’ and ‘Country Girl’.



**Plate 5:** Gleiðarhjallar (1930)



**Plate 6:** Mount Hrafnabjörg (c.1934)



**Plate 7:** Siglufjörður (1935)



**Plate 8:** Blaðadrengrur (1927)

**THE ALPINE CLUB EXHIBITION (September 1930)**

It is unclear how many paintings appeared in Magnússon's first British exhibition at the Alpine Club in London in September 1930. Martin Coles Harman maintained notebooks of the pictures he bought and how he disposed of them (several are noted as 'Returned to Mr Magnusson'). Plate 9 shows the exterior of the two notebooks and Plate 10 shows a typical page from the 'twin' notebook MCH maintained for the later Lundy pictures. A total of 53 pictures is listed in the 'Iceland' notebook, but the later exhibition of the Lundy paintings also included paintings of Iceland, so we cannot allocate a given picture to either exhibition.

Many of the titles of the pictures in the 1930 exhibition which were mentioned in the press are place names in Iceland; others are more general but also suggest landscape views – 'Surf Landing', 'The Cliff' etc. The 'Iceland' notebook includes titles which are presumably portraits – 'Young Fisherman', 'Young Boy', 'Johanna' – and these must have been in the 1930 exhibition otherwise MCH would have included them in the 'Lundy' notebook. (Regrettably there seem to have been no portraits from Lundy).

The exhibition was well received. Favourable reviews were reported in the *Observer*, *The Times* and the *Morning Post*. Regional newspapers also covered the exhibition well. 'Our London Correspondent' in *The Western Morning News* of 26 September 1930 said:

'The exhibition at the Alpine Club Galleries by Mr Kristjan Magnusson, a young Icelandic artist, should attract all Englishmen [...] An excellent "After the Storm", which has been purchased by the Government of Iceland, show[s] a genuine skill in design and colour. It is evident, too, that the great French painters of the last century have influenced at least one from the kingdom of the Arctic Circle.'

The London Correspondent of *The Western Morning News* went on to describe the consequence of the exhibition on 10 October 1930:

'... among those who visited the Alpine Club ... was Mr. Martin Coles Harman, the owner of Lundy Island. Mr. Harman had visited Iceland and been much struck with the beauty of its scenery. Mr. Magnusson's interpretation of it pleased him enormously. The result was first an invitation to dinner at Grosvenor House and the theatre, and then the purchase of Mr. Magnusson's exhibition almost en bloc. Mr. Harman is wise, for the exhibition contained some very striking pictures of more than topographical interest, but it is not his only link with Iceland. Every Devon man does not realize that Lundy is a Scandinavian name. It means "puffin" and is still used in Icelandic.'

On 3 February 1931, 'Our London Correspondent' continued the story:

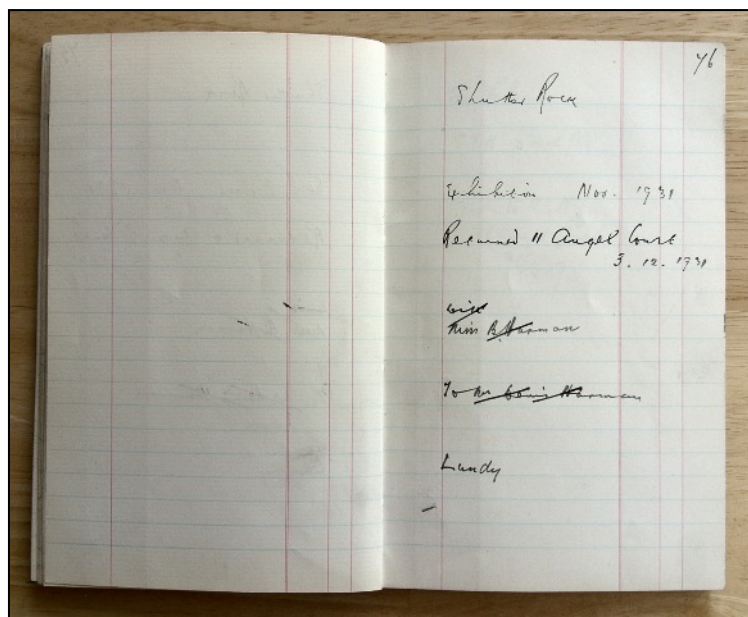
'One of the most interesting but least noticed exhibitions of the autumn was that of Mr. Kristjan Magnusson's oils and water-colours of Iceland, most of which were purchased by Mr. Martin Coles Harman, the proprietor of Lundy Island. Mr. Harman's patronage of this young Icelandic artist did not end there, and I am told that he has invited Mr Magnusson down to Lundy. [...] Mr Magnusson goes down to Lundy next month, and is planning to spend a busy spring painting there. Later on he will perhaps visit other parts of the West, painting as he goes. The results will be shown in London next November or December.'

*Sources: British Newspaper Archive; Harman notebooks*



**Plate 9:** The notebooks kept by Martin Coles Harman with details of the paintings of Iceland and of Lundy which he had bought from Kristján Magnússon

**Plate 10:** A typical entry from the 'Lundy' notebook



## MAGNÚSSON'S VISIT TO LUNDY

The first source which historians of Lundy during the Harman ownership turn to is *My Life on Lundy* by Felix W. Gade, edited from the author's typescripts by Myrtle Langham (now Ternstrom) and the late Tony Walker and privately published in 1978. Felix Gade was Harman's resident agent on Lundy from 1926 until the island was sold to the National Trust in 1969 (apart from a break of a few years after World War II). Mr and Mrs Magnússon's stay on Lundy in spring 1931 is not mentioned in 'Gade', which is very regrettable for the purposes of this study. Other research has shown that, while Mr Gade is an extremely reliable source, and is open when he is unsure of an exact date or



when information came to him second-hand, he does not attempt to chronicle everything that happened during 43 years – indeed, how could he? However, one might have thought that an Icelandic artist living and painting on Lundy, at the behest of his employer, Martin Coles Harman, was sufficiently out of the ordinary to deserve notice. Perhaps Mr Gade or his editors regarded the Magnússon story as peripheral to their main interests.

Diana Keast believes that the Magnússons lived in Millcombe. They were hospitable and regularly invited Mr and Mrs Gade for meals; these were always Icelandic pancakes, which amused Mrs Gade, who was an excellent cook.

It is not known exactly how long the Magnússons stayed on Lundy. We know from the ‘Lundy’ notebook that 32 pictures were produced, but Magnússon was a prolific artist and this number of paintings may not have taken more than a couple of months.

*Sources: Diana Keast – pers. comm.; Harman notebooks*

### **THE FINE ART SOCIETY EXHIBITION (November 1931)**

The *Yorkshire Post* of 4 November 1931 said:

‘There are several grounds for visiting Mr. Kristjan Magnusson’s exhibition of Icelandic paintings at the Fine Art Gallery. Mr. Magnusson is an able and intelligent landscape painter, and Iceland, especially the unknown Iceland of winter months, is a very paintable country. [...] But – and here he shows his skill and sensibility – he prevents his pictures from becoming pretty by utilising the strong lines and triangular shapes of Iceland’s peculiar volcanic landscape.’

The *Hull Daily Mail* was also complimentary on 15 January 1932:

‘The Icelandic paintings of Kristjan H. Magnusson have one theme, one tone: the cold tints of those remote mountains, the empty air, the haunting sense of isolation. There is a sameness, a deliberate sameness, about the 35 pictures’.

Neither newspaper mentioned that the exhibition also included pictures of Lundy, which is perhaps not surprising for regional papers in the north of England. The Art Critic of the *Western Morning News*, on 9 November 1931, equally unsurprisingly, gave more emphasis to the Lundy pictures than the Icelandic but did report both:

‘Last year the artist Herr [sic] Kristjan Magnusson, of Reykjawik [sic], held a small exhibition of Icelandic paintings at the Alpine Gallery. The exhibition fortunately came to the notice of Mr. Martin Coles Harman, the proprietor of Lundy, who was interested in Iceland and things Scandinavian through the name of his island. He was so taken with the pictures that he invited Herr Magnusson to come back to England and paint Lundy for him.

#### **TWENTY CANVASES.**

That invitation was gratefully accepted. Herr Magnusson and his wife were the guests of Mr. Harman on Lundy Island during the spring and early summer; and the results of the visit are twenty oils and water-colours of Lundy, which form part of Herr Magnusson’s second London exhibition.

Herr Magnusson, who is at present in London, tells me that he enjoyed his unusual stay in the West very much. [...]

### STRONG DESIGN.

His paintings cover every aspect of Lundy's constricted space and every mood of its surrounding sea, and, like the rest of his work, they are prevented from being commonplace or pretty by a successful search for strong design, as in "St. James's Stone" or "Shutter Rock," the best of his cliff studies. Larger paintings such as "West Coast" or "Jenny's Cove" bring in a wider sweep of Lundy landscape, and are distinguished by a selective simplicity of line and colour which binds them together remarkably well.

Herr Magnusson is equally successful in his Lundy water-colours. "Old Man's Cave" is a clever attack on a difficult problem, and so is "Gannets Rock" with its sharp colours of stone and sea and its cliff-top angle of vision. [...]

Herr Magnusson's paintings of Iceland in winter snow and summer sun have most of them a high decorative and pictorial quality and a total difference in atmosphere, which shows how sensitive he is, as all good landscape painters must be, to the spirit of different landscape. His portraits, too (particularly the charcoal head entitled "Klara"), prove that his ability is versatile and his intelligence active. All of them show determination to present much more than a surface view.'

The coda is touching, given that Magnússon was to die, suddenly and young, less than six years later:

'I should add that Herr Magnusson is still on the young side of 30, and that his new paintings are consistently better than those in his last London exhibition. He should become one of the best painters that Scandinavia and his own remarkable country have produced.'

*Source: British Newspaper Archive*

### THE NOTEBOOKS

As with the first exhibition at the Alpine Club in 1930, it is unclear how many pictures were on show at the Fine Art Society in 1931. The *Hull Daily Mail* refers to 35 pictures, but the implication is that these are Iceland canvasses. The *Western Morning News* specifically reports that there were 'twenty oils and water-colours of Lundy', but the 'Lundy' notebook maintained by Martin Coles Harman lists 32 Lundy pictures. It seems that not all the Lundy pictures were exhibited, and this is borne out by the entries in the notebook (see Appendix). Only nineteen of the Lundy pictures have the entry 'Exhibition Nov. 1931'. This is not quite the twenty paintings reported in the *Western Morning News*, and a further ambiguity arises because the type-written sheet cross-referencing the exhibition catalogue number with MCH's numbering system lists only 17 Lundy pictures (Plate 11). The highest catalogue number in that list is 59, which is similar but not identical to the 35 'Iceland' pictures implied in the *Hull Daily Mail* plus the 20 'Lundy' pictures reported in the *Western Morning News*.

Mr Harman in the notebook did not distinguish between oils and water-colours, but it may be significant that the two water-colours specifically referred to in the *Western Morning News* – 'Old Man's Cave' and 'Gannets Rock' – are shown on the type-written sheet with the pencil annotation 'glass'. So is 'Gannets Bay', and as these three pictures are numbered consecutively (70, 71 and 72) in MCH's notebook, it may be that 'Gannets Bay' was also a water-colour.

**Plate 11:** Typewritten sheet cross-referencing the serial numbers in the 'Lundy' notebook with the catalogue numbers at the 1931 exhibition. Not all the pictures in the notebook are referenced. There are also pencil annotations

<i>Serial Number</i>	<i>Cat. Number</i>	
No. 1.	75.	West Coast, The Chimney.
2.	72.	Gannets Bay. <i>gloss</i>
3.	61.	The Cove, Evening.
5.	76.	Shutter Rock.
7.	79.	Early Morning - South End. <i>Not S.</i>
8.	81.	Jenny's Cove.
48.	54.	Rocks.
49.	59.	Peam. <i>Section 2 large rocks</i>
50.	60.	Evening - W. Coast.
51.	80.	Lundy Harbour. <i>(with Lewis)</i>
53.	68.	Wild Garden - East Coast.
54.	65.	South Point.
55.	67.	Rhododendrons.
56.	65.	Early Morning - Lundy Shale.
57.	75.	Shutter Rock.
58.	71.	Gannets Rock. <i>gloss</i>
59.	70.	Old Man's Cave. <i>gloss</i>

The 'contractual' arrangement between Magnússon and MCH is unknown, but presumably all the artist's output during his stay on Lundy became Harman's property. Whereas several of the paintings of Iceland which MCH bought at the first exhibition at the Alpine Club were later recorded as 'Returned to Mr Magnusson', 30 of the 32 Lundy pictures in the notebook are shown as disposed of to friends or family members or as being at Harman's business premises in London or sent to Lundy. The other two pictures are shown as sold at the exhibition, with no details of purchaser or price. However, a pencil entry on the flyleaf of the notebook, before the individual pages referring to each picture separately, says 'One Picture Mr Birmingham', and, on a second line, 'One Picture to Major N Clarke'. These might have been the two buyers, though a Mr Birmingham was the representative at Ilfracombe for the steamer company, P. & A. Campbell, and Major Noel Clarke was a frequent visitor to Lundy with Martin Coles Harman, so they may equally have been recipients of paintings from MCH.

The entries in the 'Lundy' notebook contain references which require explanation: '11 Angel Court' was Harman's business premises in London, E.C.; 'Burrland' was the family home in Sussex; 'S.T.H.' was MCH's elder brother, Sargent Terry Harman (known as 'Terry'); 'Miss B. Harman' was MCH's sister, Beryl; 'Ruth' was MCH's elder daughter; 'Mr Badley' was John Haden Badley, the founder and Headmaster of Bedales School, where the Harman children were educated.

Thirteen of the Lundy pictures are shown as going to Terry Harman in March 1934 and many of the Iceland paintings also have this entry. This may be connected with

Martin Coles Harman's conviction for conspiracy to defraud investors in one of the companies he ran (the Chosen Corporation) in November 1933 and his subsequent imprisonment. (Harman's defence was that the transfers of money between companies which he controlled which he and his fellow directors arranged was forced on them by problems arising from the 1929 Stock Market Crash and that none of his shareholders was worse off).

At first glance, the notebook seems to show where all the Lundy paintings went, but the trails run cold. Apart from the 'job lot' which went to Terry Harman in March 1934, there are few dates to show when a picture was given away, and those that there are are in the 1930s (the one exception is an entry showing a painting given to a Mr W.F. Tinker [the writing is unclear] in December 1951; it may be that he was an employee, because the Iceland notebook has entries signed 'W.F.T.'). For five of the pictures, the last (undated) entry shows them being sent to Lundy. We have evidence for some paintings still being on Lundy after the Second World War from the exchange of letters with Björn Björnsson.

*Sources: British Newspaper Archive; Harman notebooks; Diana Keast – pers. comm.*

### THE BJÖRN BJÖRNSSON LETTERS

Diana Keast's archive contains a letter dated 26 September 1946 to Martin Coles Harman from a Mr Björn Björnsson. It is on a letterhead with the address of Imperial House, 15-19 Kingsway, London, W.C.2. The letter reads:

'Dear Mr. Harman,

I was both delighted and impressed by the report Major Jonsson gave me of his visit to you the day before yesterday.

Being an Icelandic national permanently resident [sic] in this country, I am desirous of enriching my home with pictures by Icelandic artists, and I am particularly keen on the works by Kristjan H. Magnússon, of whom I know well.

I shall be very pleased to meet you one of the next days to have a look at what you have got, and discuss details with you as regards purchases.

Therefore, will you have the goodness to give me a ring so that we may arrange time and place for our meeting. I have my own car and can drive you to any destination within a reasonable radius of Central London.

I return herewith the catalogues with many thanks, and looking forward to seeing you, I am,

Yours sincerely,

[signed]

Bjorn Bjornsson'

It is not known who Major Jonsson was, though the name is probably Icelandic. Björn Björnsson ran a trading company (he was recorded as being declared bankrupt in 1956). The catalogues he was returning with his letter were presumably those from Magnússon's two London exhibitions which MCH had sent to him via Major Jonsson. Björnsson was writing nearly ten years after Magnússon's early death, and the artist was obviously still remembered and appreciated, at least by some of his own countrymen.

Diana Keast's archive also has a carbon copy of Harman's reply, dated the following day. He writes:

'Dear Mr. Björnsson,

I am much obliged by your letter of the 26th September.

It will be a great pleasure to meet you and show you some of the pictures. I say some because the majority are distributed throughout the family and immediate friends to whom I have given them from time to time as Christmas presents etcetera. But I can show you about twelve of Iceland and about five or six of Magnusson's Lundy pictures.

An important question arises. The pictures have not during the War been treated with the respect which was their due and are badly in need of cleaning. Should I have them cleaned before you see them or will you see them in their present condition and then let me have them cleaned? I assume that you will probably wish to see them just as they are and will not be depressed by a little dirt and grime.

I confirm our arrangement that you will be good enough to come to this address at three o'clock on Wednesday October 2nd. The pictures that I have here will be laid out for your inspection. At 5.30. my elder brother Terry and I will get into your car and you will drive us to Terry's home which is Holmwood, near Dorking, Surrey, about 28 miles. There I will show you the remainder of the pictures that we can immediately discuss.

The pictures that are on Lundy are of course, for the moment out of reach. That would be a matter of a separate expedition or of getting them sent over.

Yours sincerely,

[signed]

MARTIN COLES HARMAN'

'This address', to which Björnsson had sent his original letter and from which MCH was replying, was 65 Broad Street Avenue, London, E.C.2, the business premises to which Harman had moved. He obviously still had some of Magnússon's paintings at his offices, as he had had at Angel Court in the 1930s, though whether on display or in storage we cannot say. It is unclear from the letter how many paintings were at the offices and how many at Terry's house and where the Lundy pictures were. 'Five or six' Lundy paintings were at one or the other address, and an unspecified number on Lundy. At the time of the correspondence, the steamer services to Lundy had not restarted (they were suspended during the war and began again in June 1949), though Harman could have got paintings sent from Lundy to London had Björnsson been seriously interested and had Harman been willing to sell them. One might expect that Björnsson would have been more interested in the paintings of Iceland than of Lundy, and the 'Iceland' notebook does not record any Iceland paintings being sent to the island, so probably the option of sending for pictures from Lundy was not taken up.

The letters, like the notebooks, are a fascinating piece of evidence for the paintings' provenance, but again the information dries up. We do not know which specific



paintings Harman showed to Björnsson, and we have no further correspondence, so we do not know whether Björnsson bought any paintings, and, if so, whether they were paintings of Iceland, of Lundy, or both.

*Source: Björn Björnsson letters*

## **MAGNÚSSON'S LEGACY: THE ART**

We have seen that Björn Björnsson knew and appreciated Magnússon's work ten years after his death. Presumably because Björnsson was resident in the U.K. he was not influenced by the bad treatment Magnússon had received from the artistic establishment in Iceland. At the time he was starting his career a leading critic was very disparaging about him – it is believed that this was at least partly because he did his training in the U.S. rather than Scandinavia.

His death in 1937 brought at least one admiring article in the Icelandic press: Jónas Jónsson, in *Nýja Dagblaðið* on 3 April 1938, wrote at the end of a long piece: 'But his paintings will live a long time, both in Iceland and in distant lands. In the world of Icelandic art Kristján Magnússon is a young Viking who fell after the first battle.' [Google translation from the Icelandic].

Nevertheless, he remained largely neglected in Iceland for many years. In 1994 there was a retrospective exhibition of his work in Reykjavík, and the newspaper *Morgunblaðið* had an article about him on the 100th anniversary of his birth, in 2003. However, even today, the website of his native town, Ísafjörður, does not mention him.

In the U.K. and the U.S. Magnússon had excellent reviews. The catalogue for his exhibition at the Worcester Art Museum (Mass.) in 1933 was fulsome:

'It is indeed refreshing in this day of super-intellectual art to find a young painter with the courage and sensitiveness to paint what he sees. Kristjan H. Magnusson has not only been faithful to the beauties of his native island but has interpreted with a broad sympathy the poetry of changing skies upon the bleak rock and ice formations of the Icelandic landscape.

He brings us a completely new and unsophisticated appreciation of nature, untroubled by the limitations of school or fashion. One feels that he has been too busy with painting to subject himself to the inevitable introspective scrutiny which challenges the artist of our larger European and American communities [...]

In the two exhibitions in London at the Alpine Club, 1930, and at the Fine Arts Society, 1931, his work received the spontaneous acclaim of the Press which was echoed again in his exhibition in Stockholm in 1932.'

Indeed, Magnússon was and is seen as much as an American artist as an Icelandic one. His death in 1937 was reported in a local U.S. paper, the *Winchester Star* (Mass.), which recalled his art training locally and summarised his successful exhibitions in the U.S., London and Stockholm.

*Sources: Icelandic newspaper archives; Ísafjörður website; 'Paintings of Iceland by Kristjan H. Magnusson'; Vollmer, 1953-62; Hastings Falk (ed.), 1985; Internet Archive*

## MAGNÚSSON'S LEGACY: LUNDY

Magnússon was remembered as a 'personality' in the West two years after his visit to Lundy. The *Western Morning News* on 14 March 1933, in 'Our London Letter', had a piece headed 'Lundy Pictures Recalled.'

'Mr. Kristjan Magnusson, the young Icelandic artist, who painted a remarkable series of pictures of Lundy Island two years ago, arrived in London at the week-end en route for America. His wife, who is with him, and whom many people in North Devon and on Lundy will remember, was recently woman tennis champion of her country.

Mr. Magnusson tells me that he had a remarkable voyage. Stormy weather kept his liner from Reykjavik, first in the Westmann Islands and then in harbour at Thorshavn, in the Faroes. The voyage took eight instead of four days, and Mr. and Mrs. Magnusson missed the Aquitania ...'

As we have seen, many of the Lundy paintings were distributed around friends and family, while some were at MCH's offices and some were on Lundy. Apart from the painting given to W.F. Tinker [?] in 1951, we have a gap in the record between 1946 and the sale of Lundy to the National Trust in 1969.

There are two of Magnússon's oil paintings on Lundy today, and semi-publicly on view – they are in Millcombe House, the largest and finest of the properties available for holiday rental. Plate 12 shows the picture which hangs in the dining room and Plate 13 shows the one in the lounge. They are both signed 'Magnusson' with the date shown as '31'. (Magnússon did not put the diacritical mark on the 'u' of his name when he signed a painting). The one in the lounge also includes 'Lundy' in the signature. These two paintings belonged to Ruth Harman Jones and her husband, Peter. (Ruth Pennington Harman was the elder daughter of Martin Coles Harman and sister of Diana Keast; she and her husband, Peter Hywel Jones, took the surname 'Harman Jones' when they married). Ruth Harman Jones died in 2006 and Peter Harman Jones kindly donated the two pictures to the Landmark Trust who manage Lundy on behalf of its owners, the National Trust. The pictures have been very well cleaned.

MCH's 'Lundy' notebook shows one picture as 'Given to Ruth from 11 Angel Court 24/4/37', but that picture was of the Cheeses, on Lundy's west coast, and not either of these. Indeed, it is not at all clear which of the paintings in the notebook these two are. The view in Plate 12 is from the Landing Beach and includes the Sentinels (rocks) and a part of Rat Island. The fact that MCH has added a pencil annotation of 'Rat I.' to the typewritten sheet (Plate 11) against painting no. 79 ('Early Morning – South End') makes this a likely candidate, but it could also be no. 58 ('South End'), 63 ('South End') or one of the more generically titled 54 ('Rocks'), 84 ('Early Morning South East'), or 85 ('Early Morning – Lundy Shale). No. 80 ('Lundy Harbour') is ruled out because Mr Harman has added 'with Lerina' in pencil on the type-written sheet (the 'Lerina' was the supply vessel which Harman bought when he bought the island).

The view in Plate 13 is also difficult to assign to a known title. The subject is Shutter Rock, and there are two paintings in the notebook with this title, nos. 75 and 76. However, the generically titled no. 54 ('Rocks') cannot be ruled out, and nor can the three paintings referring to Evening and the West Coast (nos. 50, 60 and 62).

*Sources: British Newspaper Archive; Diana Keast – pers. comm.*



**Plate 12** (above):  
Painting signed  
'Magnusson '31'  
which hangs in the  
dining room of  
Millcombe House.  
Photo © Alan Rowland



**Plate 13** (right):  
Painting signed  
'Magnusson Lundy  
'31' which hangs in  
the lounge of  
Millcombe House.  
Photo © Alan Rowland

## CONCLUSIONS

Much – but not all – of the story of Kristján and Klara Magnússon's Lundy adventure is known, but only two of Magnússon's 32 paintings of Lundy are definitively accounted for. Further research might be possible by contacting the artist's descendents, who are in principle traceable (the internet searching which has provided many of the sources for this paper has also raised some possibilities here). However, many of the Lundy pictures are almost certainly in the U.K., in the Harman extended family or one step removed, having been given to friends. Diana Keast remembers where at least some of them have been. We know that two were sold at the Fine Art Society exhibition in 1931 and could now be anywhere.

Kristján H. Magnússon was a significant artist who had an interesting career and played a unique part in Lundy's history. He deserves to be recorded and appreciated, and, if any of his paintings of Lundy are offered for sale in future, they should be acquired and given a permanent home on the island which he and his wife so much enjoyed.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Diana Keast inspired this research with her archive of Magnússon material. I thank her for that, and for the loan of her father's notebooks. She also read through a draft of this paper and made helpful comments and clarifications. Alan Rowland took the photographs of the Magnússon paintings which are now in Millcombe House.

## REFERENCES

- Notebooks maintained by Martin Coles Harman (Diana Keast archive)  
 Letters from and to Björn Björnsson (Diana Keast archive)  
<http://www.geni.com/people/Kristján-Helgi-Magnússon/6000000003805606041>  
 Wikipedia entry on Iceland at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iceland>  
*Wasteland with Words: A Social History of Iceland*, Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, Reaktion Books, London, 2010, ISBN 978 1 86189 661 2  
*Northern Sphinx: Iceland and the Icelanders from the Settlement to the Present*, Sigurður A. Magnússon, C. Hurst & Co., London, 1977, ISBN 0 903983 59 1  
*Künstler-Lexikon des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts*, Hans Vollmer, Seemann-Verlag, Leipzig, 1953-62  
*Who Was Who in American Art*, Peter Hastings Falk (ed.), Sound View Press, 1985, ISBN 0 932087 00 0  
 'Paintings of Iceland by Kristjan H. Magnusson' – catalogue of exhibition at Worcester Art Museum (Mass., U.S.A.), 15 April-15 May 1933 at <http://archive.org/details/paintingsoficela00worc>.  
 'The Flags and Flagpoles of Lundy' in *Lundy Field Society Newsletter* no. 20, January 1990  
*The Harman Family's Lundy 1925-1969*, Members of the Lundy Field Society, Lundy Field Society, 2013, ISBN 978 0 9530532 4 7  
 'Information on Icelandic Surnames' from the website of the Icelandic Ministry of the Interior (in English) at <http://eng.innanrikisraduneyti.is/information/nr/125>

British Newspaper Archive (subscription) at <http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>

Internet Archive at <https://archive.org>

Icelandic newspaper archives at the National and University Library of Iceland at  
<http://timarit.is>

Ísafjörður website at <http://www.isafjordur.is>



**APPENDIX:** Table of entries in the 'Lundy' notebook

'Our Number' 1-53 are the Iceland paintings in the other notebook; the 'Lundy' notebook starts at no. 54. Some entries are crossed out to indicate when a painting has 'moved on'. Some titles have crossed out and revised entries. Four of the pages have crosses in pencil on the right-hand side of the page.

'Our Number'	'Catalogue Number'	Title of Painting in notebook	Notes in notebook
54	48	Rock formations (Rocks)	Exhibition Nov. 1931 Returned 11 Angel Court, 3.12.1931 <del>With Miss B. Harrison</del> <del>To Miss B. Harrison</del> Lundy
55	[not shown on list]	Lundy Village	STH2 Angel Court
56	[not shown on list]	West Coast	[No notes]
57	[not shown on list]	Black Rock	S.T.H. March 1934  Given to Mrs Mandly by M.C.H. Nov. 1937 X
58	[not shown on list]	South End	S.T.H. March 1934 Returned + sent to Lundy (Blake) Sept. 1935
59	49	Foam	Exhibition Nov. 1931 Returned 11 Angel Court 3.12.1931 S.T.H. March /34 X
60	50	Evening, West Coast	<del>(Burraland)</del> Returned to 11 Angel Court Exhibition Nov. 1931 Returned 11 Angel Court 3.12.1931 S.T.H. March /34
61	3	The Cove, Evening	Exhibition Nov. 1931 Returned 11 Angel Court 3.12.1931
62	[not shown on list]	West Coast, Evening	Exhibition Nov. 1931 Returned 11 Angel Court 3.12.1931 Given to W.F. Tinker [?] 4.12.51
63	[not shown on list]	South End	Exhibition Nov. 1931 Returned 11 Angel Court 3.12.1931 S.T.H. March /34
64	[not shown on list]	Evening Lights	Given to Mr Bratby
65	[54? - but titled 'Rocks']	<del>Evening</del> Lundy Heath	Angel Court
66	[not shown on list]	The Villa (Mill Combe)	<del>Burraland</del> <del>Taken to Deans Place (S.T.H.)</del> Returned 11 Angel Court S.T.H. March /34
67	55	Rhododendrons	Exhibition Nov. 1931 Fine Art Society Returned 11 Angel Court 3.12.1931 Given to Miss B. Harman
68	53 - but titled 'Wild Garden - East Coast'	East Coast + Flowers	<del>Burraland</del> Returned to 11 Angel Court Exhibition Nov 1931 Returned 11 Angel Court 3.12.1931 <del>With Miss B. Harman</del> <del>To Mrs Florence Harman</del> Lundy
69	[not shown on list]	Bit of East Coast	<del>S.T.H. March 1934</del>  Given Miss K Joyce August 1937 X

'Our Number'	'Catalogue Number'	Title of Painting in notebook	Notes in notebook
70	59	Old Man's Cave	Exhibition Nov. 1931 Returned 11 Angel Court 3.12.1931 S.T.H. March /34
71	58	Gannet's Rock	Exhibition Nov. 1931 Returned 11 Angel Court 3.12.1931 S.T.H. March 1934
72	2 - but titled 'Gannets Bay'	Surf, West Coast	Given Mr Badley
73	[not shown on list but probably 1*]	West Coast, The Chimney	Returned 11 Angel Court [E.C. ?] <del>With Miss B. Harman</del> <del>To Mrs Lewin</del> Lundy
74	[not shown on list]	Gannett's Bay	Exhibition Nov. 1931 Returned 11 Angel Court 3.12.1931 S.T.H. March 1934
75†	57	Shutter Rock	Exhibition Nov. 1931 Returned 11 Angel Court 3.12.1931 <del>With Miss B. Harman</del> <del>To Mr Lewis Harman</del> Lundy
76†	5	Shutter Rock	Exhibition Nov. 1931 Returned 11 Angel Court 3.12.1931 <del>With Miss B. Harman</del> <del>To Mr Lewis Harman</del> Lundy
77	[not shown on list]	The Cheeses	S.T.H. March /34 Given to Ruth from 11 Angel Court 24/4/37 X
78	[not shown on list]	St James' Stone	Exhibition Nov. 1931 Sold at Exhibition Fine Art Society <u>Nov. 31</u> £
79	7	Early Morning <del>South Coast</del> South End	<del>Burrall and</del> Returned to 11 Angel Ct Exhibition Nov. 1931 Returned 11 Angel Court 3.12.1931 S.T.H. March /34
80	[not shown on list]	Lundy Harbour	<del>Burrall and</del> Returned to 11 Angel Ct Exhibition Nov. 1931 Returned to 11 Angel Court 3.12.1931 S.T.H. March 1934
81	8	Jenny's Cove	Exhibition Nov. 1931 Returned to 11 Angel Court 3.12.1931 With Miss B. Harman <del>To Mrs Cole</del> [?]
82	[not shown on list]	West Coast	Exhibition Nov. 1931 Sold at Exhibition Fine Art Society <u>Nov. 31</u> £
83	[not shown on list]	The Cove	[No notes]
84	[not shown on list]	Early Morning South East	Given Miss B. Harman
85	56	<del>Rock Formation</del> Early Morning, Lundy Shale	Exhibition Nov. 1931 Returned 11 Angel Court 3.12.1931 Given to Miss Mason

\* Notebook no. 73 is probably Catalogue no. 1 because the titles are identical, and the number 75 allocated to Exhibition no. 1 is repeated in the type-written list against a different painting

† Entries 75 and 76 are identical but are probably correct because there were two paintings called 'Shutter Rock' in the Exhibition which are shown with two different corresponding Catalogue numbers