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An Island Reclaimed

Island Farm. By F. Fraser Darling. (Bell, 15s.)

By H. E. BATES

The island of Tanera lies off the extreme north-western corner of Ross and Cromarty, and is the largest of the Summer Isles. William Daniell's print of it shows the harbour, long ago, lying smooth and prosperous in the light of a golden day: idle sailors dreaming on the neat quay, trim sails on anchored craft, sun on sea and mountains, all giving the impression of some warm and flourishing anchorage west of Falmouth rather than north of Skye. When Dr. Fraser Darling bought the island in 1939, he found nothing but a wreck of that serene prosperity, the quay storm-wrecked, the house and buildings in ruins, the little pasture choked with rushes. "Island Farm" is the story of its reclamation.

In five years Dr. Darling and his wife, working generally alone but occasionally with the help of war-tired friends, got the island back to somewhere near the ideal of Daniell's print. They repaired house and quay with their own hands, ploughed with an auto-tractor the derelict pasture, planted poplars, blackcurrant, rambler roses, alpinas, and even apricots, grew potatoes, roots, green vegetables, oats and even sweet peas, bred their own lambs and cattle. Their mangolds yielded 45 tons to the acre, their swedes 25 tons; two cows gave yields of 845 and 650 gallons. Living on their own produce—mainly eggs, milk, cream, butter, green vegetables, fish, and fruit—they were remote from the dehydrated standards of our vitamin-injected civilisation. All this was not accomplished without hard work, frustration, some heart-searching, and even sometimes with the grimness of two novices doing penance in solitude. Now there is "a home where there is a fair standard of comfort. A good boat lies inside a safe quay. Those bare summer acres which provided only a bite of summer grazing are now wintering six head of cattle and so far feeding three people that their weekly outgoings for food do not amount to more than four shillings a week in cash. There is also a surplus to export. . . . Not much money has been spent."

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In short, the experiment has been a personal success. But such experiments, as Dr. Fraser Darling is only too well aware, are only of value if they can be universally applied. Is there any future for the Western Isles? Can they support a population that now depends too largely on tinned milk, oatmeal, soda scones, and wrapped bread from Glasgow? Dr. Darling thinks so; he hopes so. He has no illusions about the obstinacy of country folk anywhere, or of official departments everywhere. He is not blind to the fact that, though the mean winter temperatures of the Western Highlands are two degrees higher than in a large part of England, and that the average range of mean temperature is ten degrees less than it is in Kent, only an infinitesimal fraction of the population, Scots or English, have the slightest desire to live there. This natural but lamentable fact is no reflection on him. It is simply, as they say, one of those things. His honest realisation of it—he is a scientist too—gives to his book a certain chastened sadness of tone which does not at all detract from its truth, its value, or its charm.