The Early Inhabitants of the Island of Lewis

In the course of history, the Island of Lewis was apparently inhabited by successive waves of settlers. It is not clear who were the earliest inhabitants in the area, but the experts claim that the first evidence of permanent settled communities in the Western Isles comes with the appearance of the Neolithic (New Stone Age) farmers and herdsmen around 6,000 years ago. The Callanish Stones are dated around 2,000 or even 3,000 B.C.

The Island of Lewis lies off the north west coast of Scotland in a group of Islands known as The Outer Hebrides or the Western Isles. Lewis is the largest and most northerly of these Islands. There are also the Inner Hebrides, which are closer to the mainland of Scotland. The Island of Skye is the largest of the Inner Hebrides.

It is accepted that the Picts were in the Western Isles long before the Norse. It is generally accepted that the Picts built the 'duns' or 'brochs' and they are mostly dated from about 400 B.C. to about A.D. 200. There is a dun known as Dun-bàn at Cromore, a few miles from Calbost, which indicates that the Calbost/Cromore area was inhabited very early. Duns are defensive structures.

The ruins of the Cromore dun may still be seen on an Islet in a brackish loch in the middle of Cromore village. The size of the Cromore dun indicates that there were a lot of people in the area when the dun was built. An early description of the dun states that:

> It was oval in plan with an axis of 52 feet and 44½ feet. The walls varied from 7 feet to 10 feet 9 inches in thickness. It was connected to the shore by a causeway, which is still visible under water. The walls of the dun rose to a great height. A two-foot wide gallery in the southern wall had a stair of 17 steps leading to a third gallery, and underneath them a similar stair leading down to a gallery, but with no exit.

The Celtic people began to arrive in Britain from the European continent about 600 B.C. However, the Roman conquest of southern Britain resulted in the Roman culture gradually replacing the Celtic culture in the south, but the Gaelic language and culture survived in Ireland and eventually spread to Scotland when Irish Gaelic-speaking Gaels landed in the west of Scotland about 500 A.D. and named the Argyll area of Scotland which they occupied Dalriada, otherwise Earra-Ghaidheal, the coast of the Gael.

Gradually Dalriada enlarged its boundaries and its influence over the Picts, until eventually in 843 A.D., Kenneth MacAlpine, King of Dalriada also became King of the Picts and united our divided land under one King, and gave it their own name of Scot-land. They claimed descent from ancestors called Gael Gras and Queen Scotia. The Picts are thought to be a branch of the same people as the Gaels.

The Gaels had become Christians some time before they came to Scotland, and the Picts were converted to Christianity by St. Colm and his monks, another Gaelic missionary from Ireland, who landed on Iona, an Island on the west coast of Scotland, in A.D. 563. St. Colm was the head of a very successful missionary effort that eventually evangelised the whole of Scotland. His Celtic Church was our National Church for a time, a branch of which was at one time active in St. Colm Cille Island in Loch Erisort in the Park peninsula.

Of the various settlers in the Western Isles from time to time, only the Gaels survived to the present day and retained their identity, culture and language. Who are the Gaels and where did they come from? The Gaels are Gaelic speaking Celtic people who came from Central Europe. The Galatians of Scripture were said to be Celts. It is said that the Celtic people had an advanced culture some 1,000 years B.C. The Gaelic language is said to derive from the Indo-European family of languages, it is therefore an old language.

One of the most distinctive features of the Western Isles today is the prevalence and influence of the Gaelic language. More than anywhere else, the Western Isles remains the stronghold of the ancient Scottish Gaelic, despite hundreds of years of suppression, official neglect and even condemnation. Gaelic is still in everyday use as the first language of the vast majority of the people of the Western Isles. It is still vibrant and strong.

In recent times Gaelic literature, music, arts, drama, social studies, Gaelic teaching through the formal education system has gone a long way to reversing the decline in the language through the death of the older generation. A great many people both within and outwith the Highlands and Islands of Scotland are learning Scottish Gaelic nowadays, both children and adults. The dramatic revival of the language of the Gael has come about because of the richness of the language and culture. Nevertheless, the language is still not out of danger.

That, I hope, helps to illustrate part of the background of our history.

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