



[The Gaels and the Early Church]

The Celtic Gaelic-speaking Gaels were another group of early settlers in the Western Isles. It is said that the Celtic people began to arrive in Britain from Europe 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 of the Celts survived in Ireland and eventually spread to Scotland when the Irish Gaels landed in the west of Scotland about 500 A.D. and named the Argyll area which they occupied 'Dalriada'.

Gradually the Gael Kingdom of Dalriada enlarged its boundaries and its influence over the Picts, until eventually in 843 A.D., Kenneth McAlpine, King of Dalriada also became King of the Picts and united our divided land 'Alba' under one King and gave it their own name of 'Scotland'. They claimed descent from ancestors called Gael Gras and Queen Scota.

These Gaelic Gaels promoted their own Gaelic culture and language in Scotland and it is still the first language of many people in the Western Isles, including the writer. Scottish Gaelic is said to derive from the Indo-European family of languages and it is therefore a very old language. It is said that the Celtic people had an advanced culture by upwards of a thousand years B.C.

More than anywhere else the Western Isles remains the stronghold of the ancient Gaelic language. Despite hundreds of years of suppression, official neglect and condemnation, Gaelic is still in everyday use as the first language of the vast majority of the people of the Western Isles. It remains vibrant and strong.

In recent times Gaelic literature, songs, music, drama, art, social studies and Gaelic teaching, through the formal educational system, has gone a long way towards reversing the decline in the language. A large number of people both within and outwith the Highlands and Islands are learning Gaelic nowadays, both children and adults. Probably Gaelic is the fastest growing language in Europe today.

Religion

The Gaels had become Christians some time before they came to Scotland, and St Columba and his monks, another Gaelic speaking Celtic missionary, converted the Picts to Christianity from Ireland.

St Columba was born in Ireland in 521 and died in Iona Scotland in 597 A.D. He influenced the life of Scotland profoundly both politically and religiously. He sailed from Derry in Ireland in 563 A.D. in a frail coracle and landed in Iona, a small Island off the coast of Argyllshire in Scotland on 12th May 563 A.D., aged 42 years.

His Celtic Church evangelised the whole of Scotland and it was the official Church in Scotland for many years. The influence of the Celtic Church spread to the Western Isles before 800 A.D. and among the places a Celtic Church building was erected was the small Island of St. Colm in Loch Erisort in the Parish of Lochs, near the village of Cromore. An entry in the records of the Royal Commission of Ancient Monuments of Scotland states that:

This church stands in a graveyard on the southern shores of 'Eilean Challum Cille' (St Colm Island) in Loch Erisort. It is oblong in plan and measures internally 29ft 6inches by 13ft 6inches. It was orientated almost due east and west. The door is in the middle of the north wall. A wide splayed window with a rounded top and built up externally opens in the south wall 2ft 6inches from the east end. No other windows can be traced.

In 1703 Martin Martin listed the church at St Colm Cille in the Island of that name in Lochs as one of the 20 or 30 pre-Reformation Churches in Lewis. The cemetery in St Colm Island was still used on occasion until the 20th century.

At the Reformation there were two Priors in the Western Isles, namely the Priory of Ui about 3 miles from Stornoway situated on the shores of Broad Bay in the district of Point, and the Priory of Rodel in Harris. The Chapel of Ui is said to have been founded by one of the Clan Macleod chiefs in honour of St Catan. It is said to have been the cell of St Catan himself, who died at the end of the 6th century.

Experts maintain that the chapel of Ui shows several periods of building. W.C. Mackenzie, the historian, states that there are 19 'Siol Thorcuil' Macleods buried at Ui. Major Duncan Matheson, one time Proprietor of Lewis, refurbished the chapel of Ui. But the sea has seriously eroded the foundations of the building and unless urgent

remedial work is carried out to remedy this important ancient monument it may soon be lost. A local group of people has formed a trust for the monument in order to carry out repairs soon.

There are quite a number of prominent people buried at Ui cemetery. Margaret Macleod of Bayble, wife of Calum Nicolson was the last person buried inside the chapel of Ui in 1900. She was well over 100 years of age. Nobody can state for certain what right she had to that honour. When digging her grave they came across a bundle of papers which crumbled into dust before the people concerned realised that they might be valuable manuscripts.

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