



## St Colm Isle

How many of us realise that the Isle of St Colm in Loch Erisort was an important centre of religion at one time. Did we ever stop to think who was living there, what were they doing or where did they come from? St Columba influenced the life of Scotland profoundly both religiously and politically and perhaps history as it is taught in our schools is not giving him his proper place.

### Celtic church

He was at the head of a very successful missionary effort that evangelised the whole of Scotland and his Celtic Church which was after the Presbyterian fashion and said to be very Scriptural in Doctrine, prevailed as the National Church for 150 years. Our own present Presbyterian Churches claim direct descendency from the Celtic Church, a branch of which was at one time planted in St Colm in Loch Erisort.

### One kingdom

Likewise the ancient Gaelic-Speaking Celts of Dalriada built on the work of Columba and subsequently united our divided land under one King and gave it their own name, Scot-land. It is therefore an entirely appropriate thing for the Historical Society of Pairc to take St Colm Island this year as their theme village, because it is high time we all visited this hallowed place.

### Apostle of the Western Highlands

St Columba, sometimes known as the Apostle of the Western Highlands was born in Ireland in 521 AD and died in Iona in 597. He and 12 Disciples sailed from Derry in Ireland in 563 AD in a frail Coracle made of branches and covered with fresh hides which were lashed to the Gunwale with leather throngs. They landed in the small green Island of Iona on 12th May 563 AD and at the age of 42 years he began his life's main work of Evangelising Scotland. In time his followers penetrated through to the North of Scotland, and Applecross on the Minch Coast became the Iona of the North. At sometime before 800 AD the influence of the Celtic Church spread to Lewis.

### The influence of the Celtic church waned

Then as now the outward trappings of religion was sometimes more important in the eyes of some people than the substance of Religion and an argument arose between the Roman Catholic Church and the Celtic Church over the correct date of Easter and the correct way to shave the heads of the Clergy. Eventually the stronger Roman Catholic Church prevailed and the influence of the Celtic Church on the Mainland of Scotland waned.

### St Colm Isle worthy of a visit

Eilean Challum Cille is worthy of a visit in order to see the ruins of the old place of Worship that is still visible there and to reflect on the branch of the Celtic Church that functioned there upwards of 1,200 years ago and probably for hundreds of years thereafter. It is however difficult to pin-point a date at which the Celtic Church ceased to exist at Eilean Challum Cille. It is more likely that seeing it was in a remote place, it continued to function as before, long after the Mother Church at Iona ceased to function. The first valuable account we have of Lewis is from the pen of Sir Donald Munro who had been Rector of St Colm at Eye and as Archdeacon of the Isles came to inspect and report on the religious houses of the area in 1549. His reference to St Colm Island in Loch Erisort was, "Within this Isle Macleod of Lewis has ane faire orchard, and he that is gardener has that Isle free, guid in Mayne land for come, and grassing and fishing, pertaining to Macleod of Lewis".

According to Sir Donald Munro the Isle of St Colm seems to be in the possession of the gardener and he does not mention the Church. Does that mean that the Church had ceased to function before then? (Which was shortly before the Reformation.) In 1695 Martin Martin listed the Church of St Calm Cille in the Island of that name in Lochs as one of the 20 or 30 pre-reformation Churches in Lewis. Reference is made by Rev Robert Finlayson, Church of Scotland minister at Keose in his statistical return in 1833, about the ruin of a place of Worship on St Colm Island in Loch Erisort, which he says was erected in the days of 'Mac mhic Mhurchaidh', 'Mac mhic Mhurchaidh' was the first Factor of Seaforth in Lewis and Seaforth came in 1610. Obviously Rev Robert Finlayson who had only arrived in Keose shortly before that was misinformed. The more likely thing is that Seaforth in the post Reformation period repaired the pre-Reformation Celtic Church of St Colm. There is little doubt that the ruins we still see in Eilean Challum Cille is the ruins of the original Church of the followers of St Colm. An entry in the records of the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments of Scotland, states that:

This church stands in a graveyard on the South-eastern shore of Eilean Challum Cille in Loch Erisort. It is oblong in plan and measures internally 29 feet 6 inches by 13 feet 3 inches. The walls, still standing to an average height of 6 feet and measuring 2 feet 6 inches thick. It is

orientated almost due East and West. The door is about the middle of the North wall. A widely splayed window with rounded top and built up externally, opens in the South wall 2 feet 6 inches from the East end. No other window can now be traced.

#### **Priest's residence**

The agile among us might resolve to explore the secrets and mysteries of Eilean Chillum Chille on our outing there next summer. To that end we would put forward some points raised by Donald Mackay Kershader in the Gazette some years ago, as strong evidence pointing to the probability that the ecclesiastical foundation at St Colm Island extended across to the mainland of Crobeg and Cromore at one time. He quoted a 94 year old lady from Cromore who maintained always that the ruins of buildings on the seashore near 'Buala Fherinish', which is a beautiful green sward across 'Caolais-an-Eilean' on the mainland of Crobeg was the site of the residence of the Priest of St Colm. Some of the local people however maintained that the more likely place for the residence of the Priest was the buildings in a secluded spot beside the seashore near, 'Meall-an-Eoin' on the Crobeg mainland.

#### **Buala Fherinish gardens**

Mr Mackay also raised the likelihood that the stretches of tumble down walls, adjoining 'Buala Therinish', evidently enclosed extensive Gardens at one time. It is tantalising to think that holy men of old tenderly attended to fruit trees and flowers and vegetables on the shores of Loch Erisort where the warm currents of the Gulf stream produced results comparable to the Inverewe Gardens on the other side of the Minch.

#### **Leis-an-Theambull**

In the middle of Cromore there are long stretches of arable land and on Croft No 5 there was a walled garden known traditionally as 'Leis-an-Theambull', The Garden of the Temple. Unfortunately the stones of that Garden Wall were removed about the end of the 19th century but the location is familiar to everyone in the village. As there is no local tradition of a Temple near by we feel it is reasonable to conclude that this garden pertained to the Temple on the Isle of St Colm.

#### **Self-sufficient community**

The Columban Monks obviously introduced various things to the areas they settled in because they were self-sufficient. They would obviously be very good Agriculturalists and Horticulturalists and would introduce all manner of fruit trees, Gardens plants, advanced agricultural methods etc etc. Probably they used the old Norwegian type Mill on the stream at Torostay. It is the nearest sizeable stream to St Colm's Island. Probably they would have a resident miller there. We must remember that the population of Lewis at that time was only in the region of 4,000 person's and there would not be the same pressure for living space as there was later.

#### **Rod fishing**

Loch Erisort would be teeming with fish at that time yet the Monks introduced grey mullet 'Geadas' to a fresh water loch to the east of Cromore, 'Loch-na-Bodach'. They must have been fond of sport or relaxation. That fish is still there.

#### **Suppliers to Stornoway Castle**

When we consider the observation of Doctor MacDonald in his book, 'Tales and Traditions of the Lewis', that because of the fertility of the soil of Eilean Chillum Chille, Macleod of Lewis used it as an orchard market garden and granary. Probably the whole area of St Colm, Crobeg, Cromore and even Torostay was included in a farm and Macleod of Lewis was only continuing the work of the Monks in the area. The Macleod's held Lewis for a few hundred years before Seaforth Mackenzie came in 1610. It would be very convenient for Macleod to transport the produce from St Colm's farm to the old Castle in Stornoway Bay, by sea, direct to the door.

#### **The first Lochs parish church**

The Scottish Reformation took place in 1560 and the laudable aim of the Reformers was to establish a Church and School in every Parish. It was some time before the Presbyterian Parish Church came to Lochs and when it did it was a thatched Church and Manse built at 'Tob Shuardail' near Keose on the shores of Loch Erisort in 1724. Later on, the Parish Church was moved into Keose on to the site of the seaweed factory in 1796.

#### **Cemetery at St Colm Island**

Many of us look forward to visiting this old cemetery which was still in use in the late 19th century and we think on occasion during the early part of this century. Probably we all have ancestors buried here. The Crossbost, Gravir and Laxay Cemeteries are comparatively recent and it was the St Colm Cemetery that was the main cemetery in Lochs before then. The oldest of the above three cemeteries was not established until sometime after the disruption in 1843 when the whole of the Lochs Parish congregation at Keose went into the new Free Church at Crossbost. Certainly there was an older cemetery at Crossbost on the North side of the main road. Rev Robert Finlayson in his Statistical Report in 1833 states that the ground surrounding the Church ruin at St Colm is the only place of interment in the Parish of Lochs.

#### **Tacksmen**

We read about the first Seaforth Factor in Lewis as being 'Mac Mhic Mhurchaidh' and that he lived in St Colm, Loch Erisort. We also read about 'Macneill an Eilean' who was also a Seaforth Factor at St Colm. It was his son Captain MacNeill that commanded the vessel that was built at Cuireasal at Kebbock Head in the Race across the Atlantic. In

the Rental for 1718 the name of Alex MacKenzie appears as Tacksman at St Colm. Mr Gillanders the Lewis Estate Factor held St Colm from 1776 to 1795 in the same way as he did various other places in Lewis. He probably sub-let them to others. Mr Gillanders left Lewis a rich man and he bought an Estate for himself on the mainland and developed into a fully fledged Highland Laird. When in Lewis he had a monopoly of the trade in Black Cattle and the fisheries etc.

### **Crobeg**

In time Crobeg became the centre of the Tack and Allan 'Ruadh' Ross born about 1730 is the first Crobeg Tacksman that we know about. He was married to a sister of Evander Maciver The Tacksman at Gress. Allan Ruadh was followed by his son Roderick born about 1758 and we know about a family of two sons and two daughters. Ishbel Ross was the mother of Matilda that married Tormod og Calbost in romantic circumstances. Kenneth Ross 1800 - 1862 was a highly respected lay preacher at Carloway. Allan Ross 1803 - 1870 was a school teacher at the Parish school in Lochs. Catriona was married to Mr Macfarlane. There were several other Tacksmen down to the present day when the family of Charles Macleod, Steinish farmed the place.

[ends]

**AN ARCHIVE RECORD FROM THE ANGUS MACLEOD ARCHIVE [www.angusmacleodarchive.org.uk](http://www.angusmacleodarchive.org.uk)**

Author: Angus Macleod

Date:

Original document title: St Colm Isle Loch Erisort

Location in physical archive: Series H, File 15

NRAS reference: NRAS 4336/1/8/15

© Angus Macleod Archive