



[The Boat-builders of Cuiriseal]

Cuiriseal was a small crofting settlement on the Kebbock coast between Gravir and Lemreway where at least five families lived at one time. It is best remembered in local tradition for the boat building activity that was taking place there.

The boat builders were Smiths by name and successive generations of them followed that vocation until the present century. The last of them to do so was Alexander Smith, 1831-1922, who had moved to Leurbost, 'Alastair Mac Mhurchaidh Mhic Alastair ic Mhurchaidh ic Mhurchaidh'. Incidentally the above Alastair had a brother Donald who was the father of Rev. Murdo Smith who was born in Leurbost in 1880, and has a place in Bàrdachd Leodhuis as a well-known Bàrd. Among his compositions are 'Te Bhàn, te Bhàn, te Buidhe Bhàn, te Bhàn a rinn mo Bhuaireadh', and 'Fògradh ar Gaidheal'. The first four of twenty-four verses follows:

Mo shoraidh leis na fuar-bheannaidh
 'S na glinn 's an robh mi buachailleachd
 Is duilich leam mar dh'fhuadaicheadh
 An sluagh bha annta còmhnuidh

Tha sliochd nan sinn a dh'aiticheadh
 Na glinn ud a chaidh fhàsachadh
 An diugh mar Ghoill gun Gaidhlig ac
 Air sràidibh bhailtean mora

B'eigin doibh an cùl a cur
 Ri sleibh is glinn an duthchais
 Airson gu'm biodh na stucanna
 'N an lùchairt charrach mhora.

Tha na sleibh a dh'àraicheadh
 An treud a ghleusadh stailinnean
 An diugh fo fhèidh nam fàsaichean
 'S fo chaoraich bhana bhoidheach

Murchadh ic Mhurchaidh is thought to have been the first of this succession of boat builders to live at Cuiriseal, and the 'leac' of natural smooth sloping slab of rock on which the boat builders launched their finished boats is known to this day as 'Leac Murchadh Mhic Mhurchaidh'. It is said that the keels of the boats when launched there, wore a groove in the rock. Donald Angus Matheson, 27 Gravir and Manor Park, Stornoway, a professional shipwright, told us that the declivity of the launching 'leac' at Cuiriseal was exactly the same declivity as the shipyards at Glasgow, ½ inch to the foot.

The most noteworthy ocean going craft that was built at Cuiriseal, as far as is now known, was the one known as 'Brig Mhic Nèill an Eilean'. It was built for 'MacNeill an Eilean', Donald MacNeill, and he was known as such because he lived on 'Eilean Chalum Chille' in Loch Erisort. Colin Mackenzie known as 'Cailean Dearg' became Chamberlain of Lewis in 1739. He had an only child, a daughter, who married the above Donald MacNeill of Ardinish in Gigha, and he used his influence to get a tack or lease on very favourable terms of the whole of Park area for his sister-in-law, the lease coming to an end in 1773. Murdo Smith held the tenancy of Cuiriseal from Donald MacNeill.

The famous brig launched at the Leac was built by Alasdair MacMhurchaidh Mhic Mhurchaidh, probably together with his father. Its Captain was Donald MacNeill's son Malcolm, who was a shipmaster at Stornoway, and engaged in the emigration trade.

There is a reference to him and his brig in the Library of Congress in Washington, U.S.A. This brig in its day was said to have held the record for the fastest crossing of the Atlantic, aided by a favourable wind, on a voyage from Quebec to Loch Shell in Lewis.

I wrote to the Library of Congress in Washington, U.S.A., but they were unable to trace the reference to Captain MacNeill or his brig. The information about the Library of Congress came from Professor Matheson of Edinburgh University.

Local tradition also says that it was one of the Smith boat builders of Leurbost that came to Calbost to build the 'Penguin SY22', the 1899 boat of the Smiths at 5 Calbost. Kenneth D. Smith of Leurbost and Tong, Lewis, now living on the Scottish mainland, is a descendant of the Smiths of Cuiriseal.

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