

II.

At the close of the last Session, some letters communicated by the Hon. Lord Murray, relating to Iona, were laid before the Council, with the view of the Society interesting itself in the preservation of the monuments and buildings in that island.¹ As the subject had previously been brought under the notice of the Society by Mr Laing, he was requested to report on these communications to the first ordinary meeting; and he now stated, that he had done so in the form of a letter addressed to Lord Murray as Vice-President; as follows:—

ON THE PRESENT STATE OF THE RUINS OF IONA, AND THEIR
PRESERVATION.

IN A LETTER TO THE HON. LORD MURRAY, VICE-PRESIDENT.
BY DAVID LAING, Esq., F.S.A. SCOT.

MY LORD,—The communications relating to Iona, including a proposed address to the Society of Antiquaries from SIR JAMES STUART MENTEATH, and a private letter in reply from the DUKE OF ARGYLL to your Lordship, which you transmitted to the Secretary, were entrusted to me for the purpose of being brought under the notice of the Society. I therefore avail myself of the earliest opportunity to do so; and that it may not seem presumptuous on my part, I beg to remind your Lordship that five years ago I made a detailed communication to the Society on this subject, and expressed an intention of resuming it at some suitable opportunity. With the sanction of the Society, I now beg leave to trouble your Lordship with a few remarks in reference to your Lordship's communications, and in the hope that they may conduce towards some efforts being made for the more effectual preservation of the existing ruins in an island hallowed by so many interesting associations.

There are two objects to be accomplished. The first and most important is the preservation of the ruined walls of the three principal buildings on the island, *viz.*, the Cathedral or Abbey Church, the Chapel of St Oran, and the

¹ The accompanying view of Iona, reduced from a drawing by the late Mr Sivright of South-house and Meggetland, F.S.A. Scot., was copied from a sketch by his friend the late John Westgarth, Esq., taken probably about the end of the last century.



MONASTERY OF ICOLMKILL.

Schenck & M^r Farlane Lith^{rs} Edinburgh

Nunnery. To propose that a subscription should be set on foot for this purpose, might justly be regarded as an insult to the noble proprietor. If the tower of the cathedral were once roofed in, a small sum annually expended under the direction of a skilful journeyman-mason might suffice to uphold these buildings for a long time to come. Considering their exposed situation, and the high winds which prevail during the winter months, their actual state is somewhat marvellous, and is chiefly owing to the nature of the materials used in constructing the cathedral.

The Rev. Dr Walker, in his "Natural History of the Island of Icolumbkil," composed about the year 1768, says, "It is extremely remarkable for the materials of which it is constructed. It is built of the red antique Egyptian granite; the very same stone which the Romans brought from the East, and with which they erected their most superb monuments. There are rocks of it in Icolumbkil, but that of which the cathedral is built has been mostly brought from the adjacent coast of the Isle of Mull. . . . The cement of the building, like that of other ancient structures, is so strong, that it is easier to break the stones than to force them asunder. It is of lime that has been calcined from sea-shells, and formed into a very gross mortar with coarse gravel, in a large proportion, and a great quantity of the fragments of white coral, which abounds upon the shores of the island."¹ Notwithstanding such durable materials, portions of the buildings have been blown down within these few years, and still greater damage seems inevitable, unless some effective steps shall be taken speedily to avert it.

Should the Duke of Argyll, as proprietor, be disinclined to incur the necessary expense of upholding these buildings, there is no reason to doubt, that if his Grace presented a memorial on the subject to the Chief Commissioner of Woods and Forests, either a sum for their preservation might be obtained, or authority given to have this accomplished under the inspection of the Board of Works in this place, by whom some competent person would be employed to examine and report on the state of the buildings. To secure such a grant would at one time have required, what I presume the Duke might not have readily acceded to, that the buildings should actually be transferred to the Crown; but now, I understand that such a condition is no longer indispensable. At all events, it does not come within the ordinary sphere of the Society's operations to engage in such an undertaking.

The other matter concerns the old sculptured monuments. In this the Society of Antiquaries might appropriately volunteer their services, both by raising a

¹ From the original manuscript in my possession: from which it was printed in the posthumous volume of Professor Walker's "Essays on Natural History."

subscription, and by requesting three or four of their members as a committee to take a personal superintendence of whatever arrangements might be adopted.

The first thing required to be done, would be either to remove from the open churchyard the large sculptured slabs, and place them within the walls of the Abbey Church or the Chapel of St Oran, or to raise them two or three feet from the ground, as the best mode of preserving them. Notwithstanding all the care and the injunctions of the guides, no one can witness the arrival of a crowd of visitors, averaging, I should suppose, nearly thirty persons, twice a-week during the summer months, and followed by bands of ragged children, offering small pebbles and shells for sale, without being sensible how much these early and interesting monuments are liable to be defaced when trampled upon, and the figures and inscriptions to be obliterated; insomuch, that in a few years these representations of armed Chieftains and Lords of the Isles, with the legends commemorating Abbots and Prioresses who flourished in this "Sainted Isle," will be numbered among the things which have been.

Now, my Lord, in connection with the above proposal, it is very important to call attention to the fact, that the present position of many of these monumental stones does not indicate the places where such personages were actually interred. I am sorry to think that a Society (now dormant), called THE IONA CLUB, of which I was a member, undertook what has proved to have been a very injudicious operation. Some twenty years ago, arrangements were made for holding a meeting on the island, not, like that of the alleged Reformed Synod of Argyll, to cast down and deface its monuments, but to have them disinterred. Having obtained permission from George William Duke of Argyll, President of the Club, to make such excavations as were deemed necessary, the work of exploration was commenced; and "the result of these operations was, that a considerable number of finely carved tomb-stones was brought to view, which none of the inhabitants had ever before seen. *These have now been placed on the surface of the cemetery.* Several of them bear inscriptions, which, although not at present very legible, may ultimately be decyphered, and give some useful information."¹

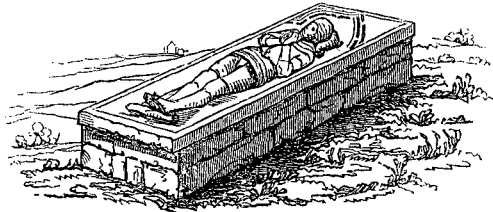
Besides the injuries to which these monuments are now exposed from the curiosity of strangers hurrying over the ground, during the brief hour allowed by the steamer, and the occasional depredations of specimen-collectors or relique-hunters, another source of damage is chargeable upon the inhabitants, and ought to be strictly prohibited. A correspondent, long resident on the island,

¹ Transactions of the Iona Club, p. 5.

and author of a most important volume on the Antiquities of Iona, in a letter to myself says, "The people of the country are still in the habit of burying underneath these stones (though there is plenty of room within the inclosure for them to inter their dead, without disturbing these), which also breaks and destroys them very considerably."

Having informed one of our members of the present state of these monuments, and requested him, from his practical experience in such matters, to furnish any suggestions as to the best mode of securing them from injury, I have been favoured with the following communication :—

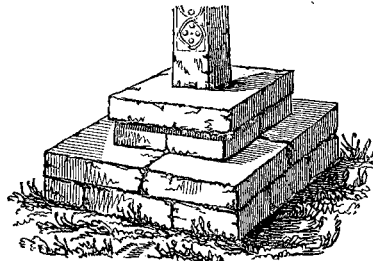
"The greater number of the stones appear to be copestones, originally covering graves or altar tombs, and a few incised slabs—all of which could best be arranged for preservation, and facility of access for examination, in the nave and choir of the church. They should be



placed in one row on each side, with the heads to the wall, leaving a space of three and a half feet clear round each stone, and raised two feet from the ground, measuring to the top of the flat part of the stone. The supports should be of dry rubble masonry, the stones squared with the hammer, and built three inches within the edge of the monument to be supported.

"This could be done by a neat-handed labourer, and would give the appearance of having been arranged for preservation; whereas finer building might lead some to suppose that the monuments were in their original places, and occasionally cause the removal of some of them to dispel the doubt.

"The crosses and flat sculptures which are weak or broken would require to be fixed against the wall with small iron batts or cramps, and raised upon a rough stone block or pedestal. The batts or cramps should be heated to a red heat, and quenched in linseed oil before being used.



"The stronger crosses and sculptures could be placed in such situations about the building as may be selected, and raised upon rough pedestals, in the same manner as MacLean's Cross; or the pedestals may be formed of fragments,

sculptured on one side, built with the sculptured sides exposed, and by this means preserve the smaller sculptures, which may be lost sight of. These pedestals should be built with Arden cement, and the top stone, where a cross is to be fixed into, should be of large size, varying according to the dimensions of the cross to be fixed therein. The manner of fixing is by cutting a hole in the top stone six inches deep, and as near the size of the shaft as possible; and when it is inserted, the small openings round the shaft to be run up with Arden cement, and, if necessary, wedged with small flints.

“ If suitable stones are found near the spot, the cost of arranging these monuments, as described, would not exceed five shillings each, if a number were done at the same time.

“ When the arrangement is completed, the area of the apartment where the monuments are placed should be levelled, and a person appointed to clear away the weeds, &c., which will be much sheltered in their growth around the monuments.”

In my former communication to the Society on the subject of Iona, I mentioned some grounds for believing that the statements so frequently and confidently repeated by later writers, from the time of Sacheverel in 1688, of the number of 360 stone crosses having existed in the Island, should be considered as very apocryphal, and their alleged destruction by the Reformers as at best a vague tradition. If the Monastery and other buildings were destroyed and suppressed in 1560, as alleged, this might more safely be attributed to other causes than zeal on the part of either Presbytery or Synod in the diocese of Argyll and the Isles, which, in those districts, so far as I can discover from existing records, lacked very much of true Presbyterian fervour. In regard to the monuments, at least, these statements are all to be traced to one individual, John Frazer, styled Dean of the Isles, who was appointed minister or parson of Terec and Coll, about the year 1676. He was ejected from his ministry at the Revolution, and died in 1702. That several stone crosses were actually cast down and mutilated, need not be called in question, as some are visible at this day. That a few others have been transported from the Island, is also probable, although such articles are not easily carried off. That, for instance, in the town of Inveraray, is alleged to have been brought from Iona; the inscription on which commemorates a family with the somewhat unpronounceable name of M'Eiehgyllichomgan. The still finer cross at Campbelton, as Gordon in 1727 says he was informed, had also been removed from the same island. But we may confidently hope that several other remains of this class would be discovered, in the course of any operations which the Society, under the Duke of

Argyll's authority, might undertake; and a few such crosses would amply indemnify any trouble or expense to be incurred.

But, to draw this matter to a close:—I need scarcely say, that nothing can or ought to be attempted without the full concurrence of the Duke of Argyll. If this were obtained, a public subscription might be commenced, to defray the expenses incident to such operations. This, of course, need not be confined to the members of the Society, nor even to our own countrymen; and a public appeal countenanced by your Lordship, would, I am confident, be responded to, as, among the wealthy, learned, and intelligent persons in England and Ireland who have visited the island, many would no doubt gladly contribute towards such an object.

I would therefore venture to suggest that the Society's exertions should be restricted, in a great measure, to the following specific objects:—

1. The removal from the open churchyard of the large horizontal flag stones, with sculptured figures or inscriptions, to such places where they would be least exposed to injury.

2. The excavating in the likeliest spots to discover any crosses, or other monumental stones, that remain concealed under the accumulated soil of three centuries, or beneath the mass of rubbish occasioned by the injuries which the buildings have sustained in the course of time, or by wilful destruction; the said stone crosses, when broken, to be repaired, and restored to their original upright position.

3. And also (as the site can be identified) the restoring, as nearly as possible, according to the older descriptions, what was known as "the Tomb of the Kings."

Should there be any surplus of the proposed subscription, after such objects have been accomplished, it might be applied to making casts of some of the more interesting monuments for the Society's Museum. I have the honour to be, my Lord, your Lordship's obliged humble servant,

DAVID LAING.