

IV.

NOTICE OF A BEEHIVE HOUSE IN THE ISLAND OF ST KILDA. BY
MR THOMAS S. MUIR. WITH ADDITIONAL NOTES BY CAPTAIN
F. W. L. THOMAS, R.N.

The two little round stones which are herewith sent to be presented to the Society, were brought by me from St Kilda in July last.

Regarding their meaning and age, I venture not to speculate, though I should think on these points antiquaries cannot be altogether in the dark, as I am told that objects of the same type, and fashioned out of the same soapy-like material, are common in many of the outlying districts of the country, and it strikes me I have met with them more than once before, now and then, among the remoter Hebrides.

In the place, however, of aught I could willingly say anent these St Kilda specimens, I may mention, as probably next interesting, that the spot where they were dug up is the floor of a small, low, dry-stone building, occupying the eastern acclivity of a deep valley in the middle of the island, called the "Female Warrior's Glen." The house itself, or "dairy," as Macaulay terms it, is, though broken a little here and there outside, on the whole entire, and in all likelihood not much, if at all, altered in any of its features from what it was in Martin's time. To the latter's account of it (see "Voyage to Saint Kilda, the remotest of

all the Hebrides, printed in the year 1698") I do not know if I could add anything of importance, unless it were the following sketch, which, although by no means intended to be taken as exact, will serve to convey a notion of the ground-plan.

Externally, the building is very rude and lumpish, of irregular oval shape, and somewhere about 6 or 7 feet in height, except in the rear elevation, which, as abutting on the steep slope of the hill, rises little more than a foot or two above the ground.

The internal aspect of the cell is also extremely rude, and has no detail that can be considered peculiar or interesting. The walls are of great thickness, and lean in a kind of curve inwardly towards each other, but do not turn round into a complete vault, the actual roof being formed of heavy slabs laid across the narrow open space at the summit. There is a square aperture on the ground at the west end, but so narrow as hardly deserving the name of a doorway; and there is another through the middle of the roof of somewhat more ample dimensions, which has all the appearance of a chimney. On the west side of the doorway is a short rough pillar (as marked in the plan), and there are three square-set niches, or "beds," in the thickness of the walls, two near to each other on the west side, and one directly opposite to the doorway in the east end.

At a little distance from the Amazon's dwelling, and between it and the Camper or Crooked Bay, is the most celebrated of the three consecrated wells in St Kilda, called *Tobirnimbuaadh*, sheltered under a little cell of heavy masonry, with a flat stone roof.

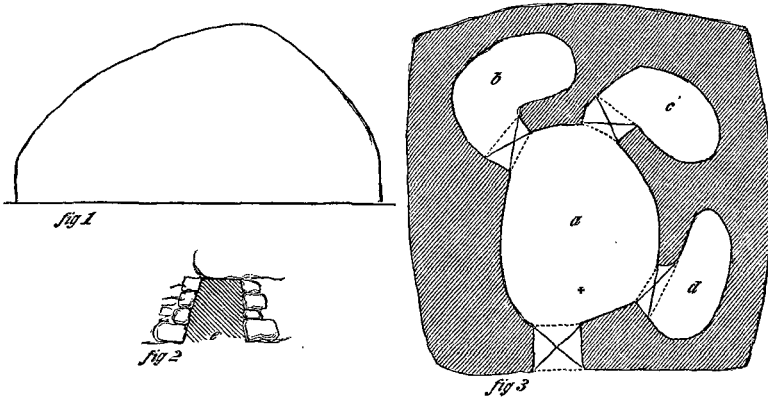
When revising this communication for publication in the "Proceedings," I learned that my friend Captain F. W. L. Thomas, R.N., had recently visited St Kilda, and to his kindness I am indebted for the accompanying plan of this curious building, and the following notes, which I think it best to add here as a supplement:—

"Here are some notes about the Amazon's House, St Kilda.

"It is called *Tigh na Banaghaisgeich*, i. e., the 'Heroine's House,' and is situated in the 'Valley of the Heroine,' or *Gleann na Banaghaisgeich*, on the north side of the island. The house, when perfect and covered with a layer of turf, would have been of a depressed beehive form, and about ten feet high. (See woodcut, fig. 1, elevation of side opposite to doorway.) In plan it is an irregular square, the wall in front being

built perpendicularly for three feet (and two feet behind), from thence sloping rapidly in to the top.

"The house is built of moor-stones, such as were most conveniently near, and the stones are not remarkable for size. The doorway (fig. 2,



Elevation of Doorway) faces the line of the valley, is about 3 feet high, with inclined jambs (see sketch, *e*). The central chamber (see plan, *a*, fig. 3) is 9 × 11 feet, and 8 feet high, irregularly oval; and the arch is formed by overlapping stones in the usual way. There has always been a hole (*farleus*) at the apex, to allow the smoke to escape and to admit light; the *farleus* would be closed with a flagstone or turf in bad weather.

"Around the central chamber are three doorways entering to irregular beehive chambers (*b*, *c*, and *d*, plan, fig. 2), identical in type and style with those in the Pictish Castle at Bragir, Lewis, &c., &c. These chambers, in the thickness of the wall, are irregular ovals, about 5 feet high.

"In the same glen, and near this *Tigh*, are the ruins of at least two others of the same kind. The *Tigh na Banaghaisgeich* is identical with one class of the superterranean or above-ground Picts' houses of the Orkneys; for which see Wilson's 'Pre-historic Annals,' or my own paper in Vol. XXXIV. of the 'Archæologia.'

"Another of these structures was on the adjacent island of Borrera, but is now destroyed.

“ I have forgotten to say that a shapeless lump of stone lies a little within the doorway of the Amazon’s House (shown in fig. 3, by a black point inside doorway); it may have been made use of for a table, or to block up the doorway; but except for the tradition that here the Heroine was wont to lay her helmet, it would have no interest.

“ The Amazon’s House is of the same class with our earliest stone buildings—belonging to the era of cromlechs, stone-circles, Picts’ castles, &c.; but while in other parts of Britain the style and type have vanished for a thousand years, in the Outer Hebrides we find them (in the Bothan of Uig) continued to the present day.

“ I had no time to collect traditions about the Heroine; Mr Macdonald has noted, that in the chamber marked *e*, the progenitor of the Macleods of Berneray was captured.

“ Martin, the historian of St Kilda, has a very good description of this dwelling. He says that some of the inhabitants dwelt in it all summer (1697); though it was then some hundred years old. The Amazon was famous in the traditions of St Kilda; within her house or dairy was a stone on which she laid her helmet, and her sword was placed on two stones on the opposite side. In her time there was a tract of dry land between St Kilda and Harris; and as she was fond of hunting, she would slip her greyhounds after the deer in St Kilda, when they would take their course towards the opposite isles. Martin tells us that there were several other traditions concerning this famous Amazon, but he does not give them, for he did not know that these stories are not the invention of an active imagination, but are the distorted and disjointed records of fact.

“ The Amazon, who has left her name to a glen and house in St Kilda, is probably the same of whom I find an interesting notice in some manuscript volumes of the ‘Traditions of Lewis,’ written about 1834 by Mr D. Morrison, a native of Stornoway. It forms part of a genuine Ossianic tale, and is to the following effect:—

“ About the fourth century, when the Danes held violent possession of some of the north-western isles of Scotland, the Fingalians occasionally came to the north isles in quest of venison, which was their principal article of food. Those heroes were at one time in Orkney, and three of

them, Tosker,¹ Rines, and Cyrill², took a tour along the coast of one of the islands, when they saw a boat close by the shore with only one man in her. The three heroes spoke to the man, and asked him if he had any fish in his boat. 'None,' said the man, 'but one king'-fish.'³ 'Well,' said they, 'we have got a king ourselves, who is superior to your king, and you must give the king'-fish to us.' 'No,' said the man, 'I must keep it for his Danish Majesty,⁴ who lives at present in one of the adjacent isles.'

"Those three heroes took the fish from the man, though he resisted to the utmost, and one of them, seizing the fish by the tail, used the man most cruelly with it. However, the poor boatman returned to his Danish Majesty, and told the king how he had been maltreated by the three Fingalian warriors.

"The fisherman so cruelly used was the Danish king's nursing-father, and his name was Gow na Cuan (properly, Gobha a Chuain), or 'the Smith of the Ocean.'⁵ The Danish king resented the ill usage received

¹ "Tosker, i.e. Osgar, son of Oisín.

'Flaithbheart, a lady of great power
Over ten ladies of comely habits,
Gave birth to Osgar, at Imchoin in the west—
She was nine years the wife of Oisín.'

P. 12, Vol. i. Trans. Oss. Soc., Dublin.

² "Cyrill, i.e. Cairrioll of the White Skin.

'Oisín. There were four men of us,
Who were never vanquished in conflict;
Faolan the liberal, and Cairrioll,
MacLuigheach, and Diarmid.'

P. 73, Vol. i. Trans. Oss. Soc., Dublin.

³ "King's-fish, probably that species of dogfish called by sailors the Nurse. That this kind of fish was formerly much esteemed, is proved by the Laird of Clanronald keeping a man whose only duty it was to catch them; and how this fisherman deceived his master may be seen in the 'Traditions of Lewis.'

⁴ "His Danish Majesty's name was Cairbair Roy, and this king is unmistakably the homologue of Cairbre Liffechair. In fact, the story of the Mulletach is a part of the Lewis version of the battle of Gabhra; or Guare, as Mr D. Morrison writes it."

⁵ "Although the attributes of 'Gobha (pronounced Goo) a Chuain,' or 'the Ocean Smith,' are scarcely those of Mananan Mac Lir, the Gaelic Neptune, yet I have little doubt the one is a prototype of the other. The Ocean Smith is well known

by his foster-father, and prepared to make reprisals. But the smith's wife, who was called 'the Mulletach,'¹ went to the king, and said, 'Stop, do not put yourself to any unnecessary trouble or danger, for I will go and be avenged upon those daring Fingalians for the usage given to my husband.'

"This woman, Ossian described as surpassing any man or woman of those times in the amazing strength of her body, as well as in the wonderful proficiency which this unrivalled heroine exhibited in the field. The Danish king, by the Mulletach's advice, delayed further proceedings, but the Mulletach took her passage to Ireland, where the Fingalians were at that time.

"This heroine landed and went at once towards the Fingalians' camp; and she got herself so slyly into the midst of the camp, and, says Ossian, the system of warfare used by this wild woman on that day was to them, as they beheld it, truly terrific. The Mulletach was so full of revenge, and so active with her arms in both hands, that before they could look about them, she had killed one hundred of their number, and among these was a son of the king.

"Fingal, seeing this unexpected slaughter of his men, ordered Tosker, Gaul,² Ossian,³ and others, to engage and stop the fatal play of this in the Lewis; for it is told that, coming from Ireland with a basket of coals on his back, he gave himself a shake when at the mouth of Loch Roag, and the pieces that fell out of the basket now form the group of islands and rocks at the north end of Berneray. He had a 'smiddy,' also, near Little Berneray, now sunk beneath the ocean, but fishermen bring up the slag of the furnace on their lines, which attests the fact.

¹ "Mulletach. There was some difficulty in hunting up the meaning of this word, but it is probably only another form of Moralltach, which would mean 'The Greatly Savage.' If this reading is correct, 'A Mhoralltach Min Ruaidh Muireann' would be 'The Greatly-Savage Soft-skinned, Red-haired Muireann;' Muireann being 'a frequent proper name for women among the ancient Irish.'" It is explained as meaning mor-fhinn = long-haired. (P. 292, Vol. iv., Dublin Oss. Soc.) It appears that Moralltach was the sword of Mananan, and that it gave the finishing stroke at the first blow. (Vol. iii. ditto.)

² "Gaul, i.e., Goll Mac Morna, or "Goll of the Arms, the chief of chieftains." (P. 144, Vol. v., Dublin Oss. Soc.)

³ "Ossian, i.e. Oisín Mac Fhinn. So much has been said and written about this individual, that little more need be added, except to remark, that a narrow class of archæo-

heroine. Tosker and the others engaged her with their javelins, but the Mulletach defended herself wonderfully clever, for she could use either of her hands at whatever weapon she made use of. But so irresistible were Tosker's strokes, which he dealt with an impetuosity highly admirable not only to me, his father—says Ossian—but to all the hosts as they beheld the awful play between Tosker my son, and the Mulletach on this day.

“This unmatched woman was all of her body coat-of-mailed so securely that neither Tosker nor Gaul's strokes had their wonted fatal effects, and she seemed to be invulnerable; but at length Tosker got her back to a rock, but even then she kept them off by her javelins. Tosker then said to Gaul, “Level you upon her and keep her back to the rock, while I go away for a few moments.” Tosker went right above her head, and let fall a large stone, which struck her on the head, and by this blow she expired immediately.

“The description that Ossian gave of this battle, and also of this woman, is interesting indeed, as well as amazing. For he said that when his son Tosker had got the Mulletach's back to the rock, that Fingal, by consent of his men, offered her many valuable gifts, and the freedom of going away without any more fight with his men. But this heroine said that she would rather take home the heads of Tosker, Rines, and Cyrill, than all the wealth of Ireland.

“Gobha a' Chuain, the husband of the heroine, as soon as he learned of the death of his spouse, set sail for the Orkney Islands, and reported the fatal issue of the late engagement. The Danish king asked Gobha a' Chuain where did he leave the Mulletach. The Smith of the Ocean said that Fingal's heroes killed her. “Fingal's heroes,” replied the king; “no, I will not believe it.” Sayeth the king,

“Oir mur do shluig talamh toll i
No mur do bhath muir sleamhuinn lom i
Cha robh aca an Eirin thall na mharbhadh a Mhuletach.”

logists—perhaps in revenge of a dishonest appropriation attempted many years ago, seem to desire to keep himself, and all that has been done in his name, to themselves,—forgetting he is as much the property of the Albannach as the Eirionnach.

That is :

“ For unless a hole in the ground swallowed her,
Or unless the smooth slippery sea drowned her,
They had not in Eirin over as many as could kill the Mulletach.”

But the Smith said—

“ Cha do mharbh i ach an Fheinn
'A bhindhinn bharr nach toirear eis
Tha iad Ullamh laidir luath
Ro ealamh dearbh chollgannt.”

That is :

“ (Who) did not kill her but the Feinn,
The band from whom tribute cannot be taken.
They are active, strong, and swift,
Most expert (and) truly active.”¹

“ So much for the Mulletach, Min Ruadh Mairinn ; or Mulletach, the soft-skinned, red-haired Mairinn, who, I conjecture, is the renowned Amazon of St Kilda. We have so few myths connected with our Pictish antiquities, that the legends which can yet be saved will be the more valued from their comparative scarcity. Besides the above, the worthy historian of the Lewis makes mention of the giant-builders of some of the Pictish Duns, and of their battles with the Fingalians, tales bearing the tone and manner of antiquity, like those which the intelligence and industry of Mr Campbell has rescued from oblivion to stimulate the imagination of the poet, and the analytical sagacity of the historian.”

¹ “ My Gaelic instructor, Mr John Morrison, has translated these verses, and the credit is also due to him for the still more difficult task of reading and spelling his namesake's Gaelic.”