

III.

LETTER FROM ST KILDA. BY Miss ANNE KENNEDY. COMMUNICATED
WITH NOTES, BY CAPT. F. W. L. THOMAS, R.N., F.S.A. Scot.

Having, by the courtesy of Captain Otter, an opportunity of visiting St Kilda in 1860, besides photographing many of the inhabitants, and seeing as much as I was able, I made the acquaintance of the Rev. Mr Kennedy, who was then missionary there. Subsequently a string of questions was forwarded to him on points of antiquarian interest; but he, probably not to give offence to weak brethren, turned the letter over to his niece, and I have no reason to believe that the subject lost by the exchange.

As the opportunities of going to St Kilda seem likely to increase, I have transcribed the substance of her letter, which may serve as a guide to archæologists as to what to observe in that remarkable group of islets.

“ST KILDA,¹ 9th April 1862.

“DEAR SIR,—I have endeavoured to collect some of the traditions of St Kilda according to your request. I do not find any one in St Kilda who can tell me more about *Banaghaisgeach* or *Gobha Chuain*;² they have heard of the *Banaghaisgeach*, but not of the *Gobha Chuain*. But I have got some other stories—though, may be, they are of no importance—from Euphemia Macrimmon,³ the oldest woman in St Kilda. The [first] Macdonald⁴ who came to St Kilda was with his brother on the shore [of

Uist ?], gathering seaweed ; he struck his brother on the head, and he thought he had killed him. He fled to St Kilda and had a family there. He had a son named Donald. Donald and another man, named John Macqueen,⁵ were going up to Oiseval,⁶ the most eastern hill, to hunt sheep. As they were passing a little green hillock⁷ they heard churning in the hill. John Macqueen cried, 'Ho ! wife, give me a drink.' A woman in a green robe came out and offered him a drink [of milk] ; but although he had asked for it, he would not take it. She then offered it to Donald, and he said he would take it with God's blessing, and drank it off. They then went to their hunting, when John Macqueen fell over a precipice and was killed ; and it was thought he met his fate for having refused the drink.

"Donald Macdonald lived in St Kilda till he was an old man. He then went to Harris, where he was seized with the smallpox, and died there, about 133 years ago.⁸ The next year his clothes were brought to St Kilda by one of his relations, when the inhabitants were all seized with the disease, so that only four grown up persons were left alive on the island ; but they are the descendants of this same Macdonald, who continue in the island yet.

"The houses were then [133 years ago] built in two rows with a causeway between them, which they called the Street. The houses were very different from what they are now ; they had not beds, but holes in the heart of the wall, as in *Tigh na Banaghaisgeach*. There were two apartments, as at present,—one for themselves, the other for the cattle. In their own end they spread the ashes on the floor, then a coat of peat dust, then another of ashes, and so on, until the time for sowing barley, by which time the floor was raised to a great height. It was counted a good manure for barley and potatoes, and is still made, not in their dwellings, but in a little house beside their dwellings. About thirty years ago⁹ their houses were altered and set as they are now. When they were making a level space for the foundations, they discovered a house in the hillock, which was built of stone inside, and had holes [beds] in the wall, as in *Airidh na Banaghaisgeach*, or *croops* as they call them, which seems to have been the fairy's residence. There was another house of the same kind discovered a little afterwards above the burial-ground, and it is there yet ; they found ashes and half-burnt brands in it.¹⁰

“ Before the forefathers of any of the present inhabitants came to the island, there were two men named Dugan [Duncan] and Ferchar Mor, who were in Oiseval gathering heather ; and they cried ‘ *Loingeas cogaidh*, the *loingeas* (war-galleys) are in Boreray Caolas [Sound of Boreray] ; *teichibh teichibh do Teampull na Trionaid*,’ i.e., flee to Trinity temple or church. Trinity was the name of a temple¹¹ which stood where the burial-ground is now. Some of the inhabitants remember seeing it ; it had two doors, and the roof was covered with green turf. The people, in alarm at the enemy, fled to the temple, when the two men, Dugan and Farquhar, came with burdens of heather, and put them to the door of the temple, and set them on fire. They burnt all the inhabitants to death except one woman who escaped in the smoke. She fled to another temple,¹² that was on the south side of the island, at a place called Ruaival, which is beside the Island Dun. She hid herself there, and came to the village through night, unknown to them, and brought away some corn, and a hand-mill, and some fire, by which she was supported and preserved until a boat came to St Kilda. When the boat came, the men went cheerfully to meet it, thinking that no one was on the island but themselves ; but the woman waited till the boat was at the shore, when she made her appearance and told the boatmen all that had happened. The boatmen seized the men, and put Farquhar on Stacharumil,¹³ a small island beside Boreray,¹⁴ for punishment ; and as they left him there, he jumped after the boat into the sea and drowned himself. The boatmen took Dugan to Soay,¹⁵ another island of St Kilda, and left him there as a prisoner. They took the woman away with them, and St Kilda was left desolate and without an inhabitant. It is not known how long St Kilda was left uninhabited ; but after a time Dugan’s bones were found in a cave in Soay, and a dirk stuck in the ground where the bones lay. The cave is called after his name, Dugan’s cave, till this day.¹⁶

“ There is no other name known in St Kilda for the Dun, but the Castle of Dun ;¹⁷ neither is it known who built it.

“ But there were two brothers, one named Colla Ciotach,¹⁸ the other Gilespeig Og or Young Archibald ; each of them had a boat, and both were racing to St Kilda, for he who got there first was to be the proprietor. When they neared St Kilda, Coll saw that his brother would arrive there first ; so Coll cut off his hand and threw it on the east point, which the

boats pass as they come into the harbour, and he cried to his brother, 'This [the hand] is before you;' and the point is called Gob Cholla, or Coll's Point, to this day; and there is also a well not far from the point, called also Tobar Cholla, or Coll's Well.

"Coll and his brother used to war with each other. Coll resided in the Dun,¹⁹ and Archibald in a large house, built under ground in Boreray. The house is called Tigh a Stalair,²⁰ after the name of him who built it. It was built on stone pillars, with hewn stones [?], which it was thought were brought from the point of the Dun. It was round inside, with the ends of long narrow stones sticking through the walls round about, on which clothes might be hung. There were six croops or beds in the wall, one of them very large, called Rastalla; it would accommodate twenty men or more to sleep in. Next to that was another called Ralighe, which was large, but rather less than the first. Next to that were Beran and Shimidaran, lesser than Ralighe, and they would accommodate twelve men each to sleep in. Next to that was *Leaba nan Com*, or the Dog's bed, and next to that was *Leaba an tealich*, or the Fireside bed. There was an entrance [passage] within the wall round about, by which they might go from one croop to another without coming into the central chamber. The house was not to be noticed outside, except a small hole on the top of it, to allow the smoke to get out and to let in some light. There was a doorway on one side (where they had to bend to get in and out) facing the sea, and a large hill of ashes a little way from the door, which would not allow the wind to come in. Bar Righ was the name of the door. The present inhabitants of St Kilda, when in Boreray fowling, or hunting sheep to pull the wool off them, which is their custom instead of shearing them, used to live in the house until about twenty years ago, when the roof fell in. Some of the croops are partly to be seen yet.

"It is not known in St Kilda whether Tigh a Stalair was built when the Dun was built.

"There was a temple in Boreray built with hewn stones. Euphemia Macrimmon remembers seeing it. There is one stone yet in the ground where the temple stood, upon which there is writing; the inhabitants of St Kilda built *cleitean* or cells with the stones of the temple. Euphemia Macrimmon has seen stones in Tigh a Stalair on which there was writing. There was also an altar in Boreray, and another on the top of Soay.

"A son of the king of Lochlin²¹ was wrecked on a rock a little west of St Kilda. He came ashore in a small boat, and while he was drinking out of a water-brook a little west of the present church, those who were then the inhabitants of St Kilda came on him and caught him by the back of the neck, and held his head down in the brook until he was drowned. The rock on which he was wrecked is called *Sgeir Mac Rìgh Lochlain*, or the Rock of the Son of the King of Lochlan, until this day.

(Signed) "ANNE KENNEDY."

Notes on the foregoing Communication. By Captain Thomas.

¹ "St Kilda." St Kilda, temp. Charles II. (p. 298, De. Re. Alb.); St Kilder (Peter Goas, 1663); St Kildar (Map, 1583). I. St Kilda (Nep. Fran. 1693). Island of St Kilda is the English form of *Eilean Cheile-Dé naomh* (Gaelic) = Island of the Holy Culdee. Hirth, Hirta, Hyrtha, Hirt. In modern speech the island is called Hirt (pronounced Hirst), being a contraction of *h-Iar-tìr* (Gaelic) = West-land, West country. There is a Gaelic saying, "as far as from Hirst to First," *i.e.*, as far as from St Kilda to Perth. A native of St Kilda is called "*h Iartach* (pro. Hirstach).

In an atrocious "Tabula Nova," in the Strasbourg edition of 1525, of Ptolemy's Geography, in which "*S. Andreas*" is in the centre of Scotland; "*donde*" placed by Duncansby Head; *Argatt* = the Orkneys; "*Lisree*" = Islay; and "*bra*" = Jura—the most western isle (except the famous "*Brazil*," by which Rokol may be intended) is "*Danchuli*," which possibly represents *San-chul(d)i*, for St Kilda; if so, this is apparently the earliest occurrence of the name.

² "Gobha Chuain." This is in reply to the question if any traditions of these mythological persons remained. See p. 225, Vol. III. Proc. S. A. Scot.

³ "Euphemia Macrimmon." Miss Euph. Macrimmon, of the same name as the hereditary pipers of Macleod, stated herself to be 60 years of age in 1860. Her photograph is sent with this paper.

⁴ "The first Macdonald." This tradition may refer to Archibald (Gillespie) Dhu, who murdered his two (legitimate) brothers about 1506. Gregory says he afterwards joined a band of pirates; and it is quite possible that he harboured in St Kilda and had children there. I have a traditional account of the murders, but it is too long for insertion here. This, however, does not square with the tradition that the clothes of the son of the "first Macdonald" caused the outbreak of small-pox in St Kilda, which happened in 1730; nor with the account by Macaulay (pp. 263, 266, "Hist. of St Kilda"), that the Macdonalds of St Kilda claimed kinship with Clanranald of South Uist; for Gillespie Dhu was of the clan Huisten of Slate. Of the two clans formerly in St Kilda, the *Mac Ille Mhoirre* (*Mac Ghille Mhuire* = son of the servant of Mary) is plainly Morrison, from Lewis; but I can make no sense out of *Mac Ille Rhiabhich*, which appears to mean the son of the servant of the Grizzly (man). Perhaps this can be explained in South Uist.

⁵ "John Macqueen." "The people of this island have a tradition that one *Macquin*, an Irish rover, was the first person who settled himself and a colony in their land" (p. 51, Macaulay, "Hist. St Kilda"). In 1861 there were seventy-two Macquiens and Macqueens in North Uist, eight Macqueens in Harris, and fourteen in Lewis. The name in Gaelic is *Mac Chuinn* = son of Conn.

⁶ "Oiseval." Called by Macaulay *Ostrivaill*, and misprinted *Oterveaul* by Martin for *Oserveaul*. The word is plainly *Austr-fell* (Norse) *i.e.*, the East Hill. In the Orkneys *Aust-sker* has become Au-skerry.

⁷ "A little green hillock." That is, a *Sithean* (pro. Shean), the usual abode of fairies. The adventure related is one of a large class. On the mainland, at *Achadh-na-ghirt*, or the field of the standing corn, I am told by one of my correspondents, that two men were ploughing; one of them said to the other that he wished his thirst was upon the dairy-maid that he heard churning the milk in the rock. A few minutes after a woman came out with a cog of milk. The first man to whom she offered it refused to take it, on which he fell down dead. The other took it; the woman then said to him [in Gaelic, of course] "May it be as nourishing to you as your mother's milk."

⁸ "133 years ago." Compare chap. xi. Macaulay's "Hist. St Kilda."

⁹ "About thirty years ago." See p. 32, vol. ii. Wilson's "Voyage round Scotland." There are plans of two of the houses in Plate XXX. Vol. VII. Proc. S. A. Scot.

¹⁰ "Brands in it." This is an interesting notice of two primitive dwellings. They were of the class called "Picts' houses" in the Orkneys. See a paper on "Primitive Dwellings," in Vol. VII. Proc. S. A. Scot.

¹¹ "Temple." Both Martin and Macaulay call it "Christ's" church; and they are probably right, but the point is worth inquiry. It is said that only cathedral churches were dedicated to Christ, and certainly of the sixty-four named chapels in the outer Hebrides none are dedicated to Him; but also there is only one dedicated to the Holy Trinity. Wilson (p. 38, vol. ii. *l.c.*) increases the confusion by calling the chapel "St Mary." Miss Kennedy has written "*Tobar*" (Well) in mistake for "*Teampull*" (chapel), but the context clearly shows what was intended.

¹² "Another temple." The chapel referred to is that of St Brendan, and St Kilda is an appropriate place to find a chapel dedicated to the navigating saint, who was born at Tralee, in Kerry, in 484; he "spent seven years sailing about on the western sea, and landed on various strange places." Was St Kilda one of them? There was another chapel, dedicated to St Columba, situated between St Brendan's and Christ-church.

¹³ "Stackarumil." Probably a mistake for Stackarumin. This is the *Stac an Armiunn* (Stack of the Hero) of Martin and Macaulay.

¹⁴ "Boreray." There is another Boreray by North Uist, which has a remarkable "hole" in it; hence its name, *Bor-ay*, or *Boru-ay* (Norse) = Bore or Hole island. But I have not heard of any such hole in the St Kilda Boreray.

¹⁵ "Soay." Soay, Soa, for *Sanāa-ay* (Norse), *i.e.*, Sheep (or Wether) island. The word is obsolete in modern Danish and Swedish; and even in the Orkneys and Shetland, Sheep-island is *Færay*; modern, Fara and

Faray; so that Soay is an ancient form fossilised in the Gaelic. The Gaelic equivalent is *Eilean nan Caoirich*. Fordun refers to Soay without naming it, stating that near Hirth (St Kilda) is an island twenty miles long, where wild sheep are said to exist, which can only be caught by hunters. There is a Soay on the south side of Skye, and another south of Iona.

¹⁶ "Till this day." This is a very curious and, as far as I know, original tradition.

¹⁷ "Castle of Dun." So *Dun Fir-bolg* is obsolete.

¹⁸ "Colla Ciotach." There is here, no doubt, the confusion which must frequently arise when a narrative is kept in memory by word of mouth. The historical Coll Ciotach (Coll the Left-Handed) was a Macdonald of the family of Colonsay, who, having escaped from the surrender of Dunyveg, in Islay, led a life of piracy in the spring of 1615. (Gregory, "Hist. of the Isles"). Among the few sentences that are not copied literally from Martin in Buchan's "History of St Kilda," is one (p. 46) to the effect that after the Irish rebellion of 1641, Coll Ketch, having lost his right hand and been defeated, was forced to fly for his life. He came to St Kilda, where the inhabitants fled from him; but he reassured them by showing his handless arm, and came to terms by presenting his mull. He lived with them for three-quarters of a year. It was at this time that the inhabitants were discontented with their ignorant priest. An appeal was made to Coll, when he pronounced the ludicrous decision "that he had never heard of a priest being deposed for not knowing Pater Noster." (Compare p. 227, Macaulay's "Hist. of St Kilda," where Col. (Colonel) is printed in mistake for Coll.) Tober Cholla, or Coll's Well, is thus spoken of by Martin (p. 25, "Hist. St Kilda"), "There is a very large well by the Town, called *St Kilder's* Well, from which the island is supposed to derive its name. . . . There is another well within half a mile of this, named after one *Conirdan*, an hundred paces above the sea."

The Archibald Oig of the text is probably the son of Coll Ciotach, who, in 1644, commanded the Irish contingent, and acted as lieutenant-general under Montrose. But the tradition refers to something long antecedent to

the seventeenth century, and commemorates a civil war in this small community. The way in which St Kilda became the property of the Macleods is told with greater probability in Morrison's "MS. Traditions of Lewis." Macdonald of Skye and North Uist, and Macleod of Harris and Dunvegan, both laid claim to St Kilda, when it was agreed that both should have a boat of the same size and made by the same builder. They were to cast lots for the choice of boat, and to start together, and whoever arrived at St Kilda first and "kindled a fire thereon" was to be the proprietor. Macleod won the race, and possessed the island. The historian of the Macdonalds tells that the "good" John of Isla, first Lord of the Isles (who died 1380), "gifted Hirta or St Kilda to the Laird of Harris," p. 298, De Reb. Alb.

¹⁹ "The Dun." I regret not having been able to visit Dun Fir-bolg to ascertain whether it had been a Pictish tower or a mere walled space. The photograph of the point on which it stands—taken from near the Manse—is of little assistance. The point will, however, be seen to be much more sober in outline than the view given in Wilson's interesting "Voyage Round Scotland" (vol. ii. p. 5). Wilson "could discover no trace of fortification, except that towards the extremity a rude wall seemed to cross it, so as to prevent any one who had landed from the sea being suddenly attacked or incommoded by others from the main island." It is desirable that this Dun should be more fully investigated.

²⁰ "Tigh a Stalair." The paragraph describing this primitive dwelling has been quoted in a paper on "Primitive Dwellings," at p. 172, Vol. VII. of Pro. S. A. Scot. I have but little to add to what is there stated. Macaulay (p. 54, *op. cit.*) tells that the "Staller" headed a rebellion against the steward, which—considering the oppression practised by him till quite recent times—was no great wonder. The "Staller" retired with sixteen persons to Boreray (in the text *Soay* is misprinted for *Boreray*), built this house, and maintained himself there for some time. Both Macaulay and Miss Macrimmon note a resemblance between the stones of Tigh a Stalair and Dun Fir-bolg.

Boreray is deserving of a complete investigation, and Tigh a Stalair should be carefully planned. It is most important, archæologically, as

being a *Pict's house* which has been inhabited till the present generation, and goes far to prove the *original* intent of those structures. I use the term "original" advisedly, for although they were constructed for dwellings, it is quite possible that they became the sepulchres and monuments of their former possessors. Although many cairns have been made for purposes of sepulture, yet it is to be noted that these cairns are modelled after the fashion of chambered cairns, which were undoubtedly dwellings. In fact, a chambered cairn with a hole in the apex is a dwelling; if it is closed, it is a sepulchre; so that those cairns which were constructed by or for the magnates of prehistoric times were literally *houses* for the dead.

²¹ "Son of the king of Lochlain." It would take many a page to relate all that is said to have happened in the isles to a son of a king of Lochlain; but in every place he appears to have come off "second best."