

## IV.

ST COLUMBA'S LOCH, IN SKYE, AND ITS ANCIENT CANOES. BY  
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The parish of Kilmuir, in the north end of Skye, is much less known to the tourist, the man of science, and the archæologist than it ought to be. The sweet bay of Uig and the picturesque Quiraing are the only points visited, though a few more leisurely feet do find their way to Flora Macdonald's grave in the old churchyard near the sea. To the scenery-seeker and the geologist this forgotten extremity of Trotternish is peculiarly rich in objects of beauty and interest.<sup>1</sup> Here the historian may trace the scenes of ancient deeds done by the early Celts, the ravages of the Vikings, the feuds of the clans, the wild tales connected with the seats of the Macdonalds at Monkstadt and Duntulm, and other places; the visit of James V. to the Western Isles, when he called at Duntulm and gave his name to Portree, the King's Port, and similar numerous old stories connected with this district. Here the man of sentiment may see the spot where Prince Charlie landed from Uist with Flora Macdonald, the old mansion of Monkstadt where the heroine beguiled the Hanoverian captain and gave the prince time to go to Kingsburgh, where he slept; and he may visit the grave of one who has shed a brighter romance round the sad fortunes of that most hapless prince.<sup>2</sup> To the archæologist and antiquarian, Kilmuir is also rich and interesting and full of valuable remains. It contains numerous examples of the ancient "duns" or hill forts, six of which receive names in the parish<sup>3</sup>; of cairns, some of which are large and chambered; of circles of standing-stones at various parts; of grave mounds and hut circles; of fine old ruins, such as the picturesque pile of Duntulm, occupying the site of a more ancient "dun"; of *cills* or chapels at different places; of Highland huts, still largely primitive in their style; the scenes of ancient customs and superstitions, as Loch Sianta,<sup>4</sup> or the Holy Loch;<sup>5</sup> and other interesting remains of primitive days.

<sup>1</sup> As I have elsewhere tried to show, in a paper on "the Glacier of Loch Sneisdale," read before the Edinburgh Geological Society this winter.

<sup>2</sup> See Statistical Account of Inverness-shire, parish of Kilmuir, p. 255, &c.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 266.

<sup>4</sup> Sianta = sancta, or holy.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 265.

It is to one centre of archæological interest in this parish that I would now draw the attention of the Society—the *Loch of St Columba*.

#### LOCH-CHOLUIM-CILLE OR COLUMBA'S LOCH.

A few miles beyond Uig, in the hollow between the high road and the old mansion of Monkstadt, the ancient seat of the Macdonalds of the Isles, lies the bed of an ancient lake, now drained, called *Loch-Choluim-Cille* or Columba's<sup>1</sup> Loch.<sup>2</sup> It was, no doubt, named after the great apostle of Iona, so popular in the Highlands, after whom so many places have been gratefully called. It would appear to have originally been a loch of about a mile long and an eighth of a mile broad, the reclaimed portion of which now covers some 230 acres. At a still earlier period it likely formed a bay or arm of the sea, from which it lies but a short distance, and above which it is very little elevated, so little indeed that the want of elevation formed the chief difficulty in draining it. This ancient sea connection is suggested and proved by a well-marked sea-beach existing on the coast and running round the loch. The loch may have formed a sea bay in comparatively modern times, for the designation *loch* is applied to both sea gulfs and fresh water lochs over the Highlands; and the same name of Columba's Loch was applied, as already noted, to this lake and to Portree Bay.

The loch would seem to have long existed as little better than a marsh, whose flatness and shallowness, as well as fine alluvial soil, suggested the wisdom of draining it; and it speaks much for the enterprise of the Macdonalds of the Isles, that an undertaking so great for the time and the district should have been seriously undertaken as early as 1715! In that year of the first Stuart rising, the draining of the loch was begun and some of the water was run off; but it was afterwards abandoned on account of the political disturbances of the time. In 1763 operations were renewed, and the loch was drained, but from neglect the water again returned. In 1824, after five years' hard labour and much expense, the

<sup>1</sup> I find the name variously spelled Loch-Choluim-Cille (which the Rev. Mr Macgregor tells me is the correct form), Loch-Chalum-Cille, Loch-Colum-Cille.

<sup>2</sup> It is remarkable that Portree Harbour bore the same ancient name, Loch-Choluim-Cille.

drainage was finally and successfully completed,<sup>1</sup> the water being carried to the sea by a great canal or ditch, still preserved, three-fourths of a mile in length.<sup>2</sup> The bed of the loch now forms a flat plain, with great depth of alluvium, which is partly cultivated but is mostly covered with grass and used for pastoral purposes, in the centre of which stand certain islands with ancient remains, now easy of access and inviting investigation.

#### ANCIENT CANOES FOUND IN THE LOCH.

*Canoe discovered in 1763.*—In 1763, the year when the second and temporarily successful attempt at drainage was made, an ancient boat was dug out of the bed of the loch. This boat is thus described in the Statistical Account of the Parish, so often already referred to, and which is one of the best in these extensive and valuable volumes. It was written by the Rev. Alex. Macgregor of the West Church, Inverness, once parish minister of Kilmuir, and son of the former minister.

“When the lake of Choluim-Cille was drained, in or about the year 1763, there was an oaken boat discovered deeply imbedded in the bottom of the lake. It would seem, from its situation, that it had been there for many ages. The boat, although not large in size, is said to have been much stronger and far more firmly built than any of modern date. The iron rings which were fastened in the ends of it were of almost incredible thickness, so much so that they were converted into sockets for instruments used in the parish for tilling the ground.”<sup>3</sup>

Thinking that the word “built” in this account had been used inadvertently or in a vague general sense, as applied to an ancient submerged canoe, I wrote to the Rev. Mr Macgregor, mentioning my doubt, and asking additional information, if such could be had. I found my surmise correct, and I received a letter containing additional and interesting details, parts of which I now transcribe:—

“INVERNESS, 25th April 1876.

“I find, on consulting my manuscript scroll of the Statistical Account of Kilmuir, Skye, that you are right in your opinion as to the boat found

<sup>1</sup> See Statistical Account, pp. 246, 247.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 279.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 267; these were the iron sockets for the Highland *cas-chroms*, or “crooked spades.” See p. 555.

in Loch-Choluim-Cille. I may state that the writers of that Account were restricted to about forty pages of the printed matter. I think that about seventy pages of mine were granted; yet, if they had published the whole, it would have exceeded a hundred pages. Consequently, my manuscript was greatly abridged, almost under every head.

"I find that I derived the account of the said boat from an old man, residing near the manse, named John Macdonald, who died ten or twelve years ago, upwards of ninety years of age. He was possessed of a wonderful and most correct memory. He could give day and date of every feud and battle, I believe, in which the Highlanders were ever engaged, and I was greatly indebted to that old man for many things in my Statistical Account. I will, therefore, copy *verbatim* the note in my manuscript which I had from him in reference to the boat in question, and, as I have said, it no doubt confirms your opinion. I do not think that any one now alive in that parish knows anything about it; and even at the time of my writing that Account, I had no idea of the importance of stating what kind of boat it was, but merely that a boat was found, which was remarkable for its strong iron rings."<sup>1</sup>

The following is the original note from the Rev. Mr Macgregor's MS.:—

"Old John says that this boat, found in Loch Choluim-Cille in 1763; must have been a '*Currach-fiodha*.'<sup>2</sup> It was sunk very deep in the mud, and was much destroyed in digging it out. Some said it was of fir-wood, and others maintained it was of oak, and *all of one piece*, about 14 feet long and 3 feet broad. At the one end, there were three large links

<sup>1</sup> The Rev. Mr Macgregor gives additional details regarding this remarkable old man. He says—"I wish I had a month or two of good old John as he was forty years ago, and many an old song, many family incidents, and many things of deep interest connected with Skye would have been preserved. But, at that time, I had but little concern about these matters, and so I missed the opportunity. He was long in the army (in the 79th Regt.) in Egypt and elsewhere, and he could tell where he was and what doing on any day in any year. He understood English well, and being stone blind for fifty or sixty years, was exceedingly fond of my reading stories to him. I read to him all Wilson's '*Tales of the Borders*,' and many years afterwards he could repeat every incident and name and date in these and similar tales with perfect accuracy."

<sup>2</sup> "*Currach*" is a boat made of wattled work and hides or skins, anciently used; but "*fiodha*" is wood—so that "*Currach-fiodha*" means a boat of wood or log boat.

fastened to a staple, and, at the other end two, links. The iron of the links was strong and massy, and of such good quality that it was made into *cas-chrom ceaps*.<sup>1</sup> It was supposed to be the '*Berlinn*' which was used as a ferry-boat between the monastery and the shore. John told me that his father, *Donnuchaidh Ceannaich*,<sup>2</sup> was one of the party that raised the boat, and it was very heavy. The wood of it got very black after it was washed and cleaned, but got very brittle when dry. It was broken in the ends by taking out the rings, and soon destroyed by people taking pieces of it away."

The above account is very interesting, and it is fortunate that Mr Macgregor secured so much information from this remarkable old man, and that his original notes have been preserved.

*Canoe discovered in 1874*:—On June 29, 1875, I visited the parish of Kilmuir for official purposes, as I do yearly. On that occasion, I examined, amongst other places, St Columba's loch and ruins, in company with the parish clergyman and the schoolmaster at Kilvaxter. On descending from the ancient cairn which stands near the quarry, whence the stones for the buildings in the loch are said to have been taken, we came on the broken remains of what seemed an ancient boat or canoe, which, on inquiry, we learnt had been dug out of the bed of the loch. We happily found one of the two men who had dug it out, but the other, unfortunately, was not then at hand, and when his services would have been of great use afterwards in seeking for the rest of the boat, he had left for the herring fishery on the east coast. The man whom we questioned was old, but showed considerable intelligence. He answered the inquiries made of him with fair distinctness, but having thought the discovery of no value, and being engaged in other work when the boat was found, he had not paid it any special attention, and varied not a little in his statements when closely questioned, especially in a later interview. This want of clearness, though not unnatural in the circumstances, was none the less unfortunate, and rendered the subsequent attempt at finding the remainder of the boat unsuccessful. By the help of my two companions, who knew Gaelic well, for the old man had little

<sup>1</sup> "*Cas-chrom*" is the crooked spade, and "*ceaps*" the iron sockets on them.

<sup>2</sup> That is, *Duncan the merchant*.

command of English, especially in more minute description, I was able to obtain the following information regarding the discovery of the boat:—

It seems that in the summer of 1874, this old man and another tenant were employed by the farmer of Monkstadt to clean out the deep ditch which runs along the west side of the old loch. Near the quarry already mentioned, while engaged at this work, they came on part of a boat, some 4 feet below the surface. It projected into the ditch from the west side, and lay more or less horizontally, in a natural position, and inclined to the ditch at an angle of some 20°. The projecting portion was evidently only part of a longer boat, the rest of which was buried in the soil. Thinking it of little or no value, the men cut off the projecting end with their spades without much difficulty, for the most of the wood was soft and spongy. They thus severed from the rest of the boat a part of the stern end about 4 feet in length, threw it carelessly on the bank, and continued their work in the ditch. They thought so little of it that they mentioned it to no one in particular; so that the minister knew nothing of it, and the schoolmaster, who lived at no great distance, heard of it only on the morning of our visit, having accidentally met the old man and mentioned that we were in search of ancient things. There is no doubt that the wetness and uselessness of the wood alone prevented its being carried off and consumed as fuel. The broken part of the boat remained on the bank for more than a year, exposed to wind and weather, to sheep, children, and passers by, so that, when we saw it, the boat lay in fragments, dried and broken, partly on the ground and partly in the ditch. It was, happily, in such a state, however, that we were able to put the pieces together and reconstruct very completely the stern end of the boat. Having obtained all the information we could from the old man, I took a sketch of the portion of the boat thus reconstructed, which is now shown.

As I had to return to Skye some time after, I thought it well to take steps to discover, if possible, the rest of the boat which still remained in the bed of the old lake. I wrote, accordingly, to the proprietor, Capt. Fraser of Newton, near Nairn, who entered at once into the idea and gave instructions to his local manager to employ men to dig out the rest of the boat, when next I visited the place. This I did about a fortnight after, on the 16th of July. Through the activity of the manager, who entered

keenly into the spirit of the search, and with the assistance of the minister and schoolmaster, a large number of men were early at work that morning at this part of the ditch, under the guidance of the old man who had previously given us the information regarding the boat. I found the men hard at work on my arrival, having cut deep into the ditch for a considerable distance on both sides of the part indicated. They had, however, discovered nothing of the missing boat, and had found only some pieces of wood and a long pole of soft saturated fir, which came out in fragments; and they were beginning to fag from want of success and the disagreeableness of the work, which had to be carried on by wading deep in the oozy ditch in the accumulating water. After minutely questioning the old man, the search was resumed with renewed vigour. The longer the digging was prosecuted, the more it began unfortunately to be discovered that the old man's former certainty as to the exact place where the boat was found had passed away, and his statements became the more hazy the more he was questioned. At last, after long digging for a considerable distance, amidst increasing difficulties from the gathering water, which had to be dammed out to carry on the work, he confessed that he could not remember the exact spot! It is not, therefore, to be wondered at that nothing came of the severe labours of that day, except the discovery of some additional pieces of fir, and what seemed bits of the boat, which at one time, with keenest expectation, we thought we had found. The search had to be abandoned, for that day, sometime after I left, without further discovery.

I wrote again to Captain Fraser, urging him to continue the digging along the ditch, on both sides of where we had been at work, till the broken end should be discovered, as it undoubtedly lay somewhere near that place; but he did not, I am sorry to say, deem it worth while continuing the search, and thus this laudable endeavour at discovering the lost canoe was abandoned for that time. It is to be hoped, however, that the digging will be again resumed, and I should recommend to the Society of Antiquaries to take such steps as they may think good towards discovering this ancient boat. I can assure them that they will receive the best co-operation from the Rev. Mr Mackenzie, the parish minister, and Mr Nicholson, the schoolmaster, and myself; and I have no doubt that Captain Fraser will give every assistance in any efforts they may make for the purpose. The pieces of the boat already found have been

taken possession of by the manager, in accordance with Captain Fraser's directions, and are now in safe keeping at his house near Uig.

The boat seems to be of the usual kind of ancient canoe, being not built, but hollowed out whole from the trunk of a tree. The part found was, as already said, the stern end. It was 4 feet long,  $2\frac{1}{2}$  feet wide, and fully 6 inches high. The stern was 9 inches thick, and the bottom 3 inches thick. (I send a sketch of its appearance when the parts were finally pieced together.)

The bottom was nearly entire, except a longitudinal wide crack or hole, which coincided with a groove along the outside of the bottom. The stern seemed to be very nearly complete, and likely of its original height, which was 6 inches or more, but the sides were a good deal broken, although one side seemed pretty complete. The outer curve of the stern was well rounded; the inner curve had been very well smoothed by some sharp tool, which seems to have cut with ease through the hard fibres of the wood. There were no signs of fire having been used in hollowing out the tree. The inside of the boat seemed to have been smoothed with much care, and the outside also rounded and smoothed and not left in its original rough state. The marks of the spades used in cutting through the boat were very distinct at the cut edges, which consisted of good firm wood, little affected by its long immersion in the bog.

In the middle of the thickness of the stern, a groove runs along the top from side to side, half-way between the inside and outside. The purpose of this groove is not apparent, unless it were made to lay small articles on. The outside of the bottom was very much rubbed and smoothed. It had been rounded and smoothed when first made, but the smoothness had evidently been very much increased by the bottom being subjected to much rubbing while the boat was in use, by grating along the ground and being drawn up on the shore. Along the outside of the bottom, running from stem to stern in all likelihood, were two hollow grooves, at equal distances from each other and the sides. These grooves were about  $\frac{1}{2}$  an inch deep, and remarkably smoothed and rubbed, as if ropes had worked in them. I can make no suggestion as to their use. They terminated at the stem, where it began to curve upwards from the flat bottom.



The kind of wood of which the boat consists I have as yet been unable to determine. I have sent a specimen of it to the Secretary of the Society, who has submitted it to several parties, and it now remains with him for inspection. The general opinion, he tells me, is that it is either alder or some kind of pine.<sup>1</sup> When examined on the spot and freshly cut from the boat, the undecayed portions had a decidedly resinous or piny smell, which suggests some hard pine wood, such as pitch pine. There were different opinions expressed regarding it by those engaged in digging for the boat, and many thought it was oak. It would be a matter of some interest to determine the precise nature of the wood, as this would decide whether the tree grows in Skye, or was a foreign trunk, and if the latter, where it came from. It might in this case be a floated log brought by the Gulf Stream, which carries so much to the western shores of the Long Island, or a log cast ashore from some wreck.

The main body of the bottom and stern was of firm wood, cut through with some difficulty by the spade; but the rest of the boat was greatly decayed through the long immersion it had undergone, some of the pieces being as soft as cork or sponge. The whole of the wood was intersected by the blackened stems of the *Equisetum*, which had pierced the wood and run along its grain and into every crevice.

The same dubiety seems to have existed regarding the wood of the canoe found in 1763, as already told in Mr Macgregor's narrative; but it seems to have been of a different timber, probably oak, as it turned quite black on exposure, whereas this wood remained brown or bleached.

*General Remarks on the Canoes.*—Both the canoes found in this loch, which have been here described, resemble in appearance and formation the usual prehistoric canoes found elsewhere in Britain, and especially in Scotland.<sup>2</sup> Both had been formed out of single trunks, according to the universal type of such canoes found in Scotland and Ireland, except one of

<sup>1</sup> The Rev. Mr Macgregor does not think it probable that the boat was made of alder, as it is a rare wood in Skye, which he says is not swampy enough for alder. He thinks it was probably constructed of fir or pine, which before the erection of lighthouses was found in huge logs on the shores, in consequence of shipwrecks.

<sup>2</sup> See Lyell's "Antiquity of Man," p. 48, &c.; and "Notices of Scottish Crannogs," by Dr John Stuart, reprinted from the Transactions of the Antiquarian Society for 1866, p. 35, &c.

those dug out of the silt at Glasgow, which was built of several pieces.<sup>1</sup> The first boat was 14 feet long and 3 feet wide; the second is  $2\frac{1}{2}$  feet wide, but its length is, of course, not yet known. The lengths of ancient canoes were very different, varying in Britain from 8 feet, like one of those found in Lochar Moss,<sup>2</sup> to 36 feet, which was the length of one found in 1726 at the mouth of the Carron;<sup>3</sup> but one recently found in Loch Lotus, Kirkcudbrightshire, was 45 feet long.<sup>4</sup> A width of  $2\frac{1}{2}$  and 3 feet is very common in these canoes,<sup>5</sup> and some are even narrower, one found in Lochar Moss being only 2 feet wide.<sup>6</sup>

The depth of the first boat is not known. The second boat would seem to have been very shallow, being only some 6 inches deep, at least as judged by the remains, which may be worn or imperfect. But these old canoes would seem to have had no great depth. One in the Museum of the Society, found at Springfield, on the Clyde, has a depth of only 9 inches;<sup>7</sup> another, found at Closeburn, was of the same width;<sup>8</sup> one, found at Cahore, Wexford, was 11 inches wide.<sup>9</sup> The stern of last year's boat was formed out of the same trunk as the rest of the boat, and was not an inserted piece like those of three other canoes mentioned by Dr Stuart.<sup>10</sup> The stern is flat outside, and slightly rounded at the corners, but it is curved round in the inside, as shewn in the sketch. The strong iron rings and staples in the 1763 canoe seem to be quite peculiar to this boat, and I have not seen any mention of similar iron rings as being found in any other ancient canoe.

In determining the age of the canoes, there is one source of doubt, in the fact that in St Columba's Loch we have the remains of different ages, from those of the early artificial stone islands, so common in the lochs of the Hebrides and especially the Long Island, to the later structures of the Culdees and more modern Christian times. But the fact that these canoes so closely resemble those found in connection with the early prehistoric times of the Stone and subsequent periods, would seem to afford a strong presumption that they belong to such early ages. The existence of the

<sup>1</sup> See Stuart, p. 36, and Lyell, p. 49.

<sup>3</sup> See Stuart, p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> See Stuart, p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> See Stuart, p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> Proceedings, *supra*, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> See Stuart, p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> See Stuart, pp. 36 and 37.

<sup>2</sup> See Stuart, p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> See Lyell and Stuart.

<sup>8</sup> See Stuart, p. 36.

iron rings in the 1763 canoe would seem to show that it belongs to a later age than the Stone period, and to a time when iron, and good iron, was in use. But St Columba's Loch, if thoroughly explored, would most likely yield examples of the remains of a long series of ages, and of very different types of men and styles of workmanship, like all lakes which have long been the scene of habitation by successive races, such as Dowalton Loch and many others. I should be inclined to assign the canoe discovered last year to an early date.