

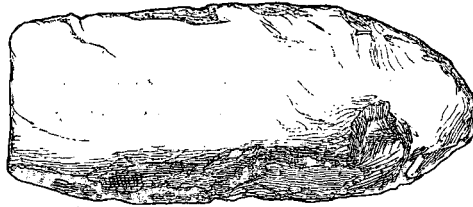
## I.

## NOTES ON THE ANTIQUITIES OF THE ISLAND OF ST KILDA.

By J. SANDS, Esq., ORMISTON.

*Tigh an t-sithiche*.—On my first visit to St Kilda in 1875 I heard that a subterranean house existed at the back of the village, and on my second visit in 1876 I determined to get it opened and examined. It is situated about 40 yards to the N.E. of the churchyard, and in a spot which commands a view of the bay. The door was covered by a crop of potatoes, and the owner objected to the ground being disturbed merely to gratify idle curiosity. But on my promising to pay for any damage that might be done, he at length assented to my request, and three men volunteered to discover and clear out the premises. This house was found by accident about thirty-two years previously by a man who was digging the ground above it; but after a hasty survey it was covered up again, and had never been opened since. It is called the *Tigh an t-sithiche*, or house of the fairies. After a short search the door in the roof was again discovered, and a quantity of stones and earth thrown out. The house measures 25 feet long by 3 feet 8 inches wide, and is about 4 feet high. The St Kildans said the masonry was rude but strong. The stones that form the walls are large. The roof is composed of flat stones, laid across from side to side, with earth on the top. This house runs due north and south, and on the east side, at a right angle, is a *croopa*, or bed in the wall. I at first thought that this was a passage, but the St Kildans were confident it was a bed, and on a closer inspection I came to the same conclusion. The floor was covered with peat-ashes and soot to a depth of a foot or two. Mixed with the ashes was a large quantity of limpet shells, bearing the mark of fire, bones of sheep and cattle, bones of sea-fowl, chiefly those of the fulmar and solan goose. I also found a large number of rude stone implements resembling hatchets or wedges, and part of a lamp. Fragments of coarse pottery were also discovered. The floor was laid with flat stones, and underneath was a drain. The men told me they had often found small vessels of clay in the earth, but had never seen any pottery made, nor heard that it had ever been made in Hirta. Stone

lamps are still to be seen above ground, and some old men told me they had often used them when in Boreray and Soa. It is remarkable that all to whom I showed the implements recognised them at a glance—“*Sean lamhog, sean sgian,*” old axe, old knife, they said. I imagine that the hole in the roof was the original door, because I found a number of stone implements lying around it, above the stones and under the soil.



Rude Stone Implement from the underground house in St Kilda  
(7½ inches in length).

Sometime afterwards, when digging near the *Tigh an t-sithiche*, I came upon the *midden* of the establishment. It contained a large quantity of limpet shells, bones, and two stone implements. Subsequently I discovered numbers of similar implements in the ruins of old houses above ground. It is probable that stone implements were used in St Kilda at a very recent date.

*Clach an eòlas*.—At the back of the village, not far from the churchyard, is a large stone, not different in appearance from the numberless stones lying thereabout, but which was believed to possess wonderful properties. If any one stood on this stone on the first day of the quarter he became endowed with the second sight, and was able to see all that was to happen during the ensuing quarter.

*Chapel*.—A chapel formerly stood in the little churchyard at the back of the village, but it was demolished some years ago. Some of the men remember when the ruin was 16 feet high. It was built of squared stones, one of which is still to be seen built into a cottage. A cross is incised upon it. I was told that a stone with an inscription on it had been carried off by a former factor.

*Airidh mhòr*.—In the glen, now called Glen Mòr, at the north-west side of St Kilda, is an ancient building called *Airidh mhòr*. It is circular in form, about 9 feet in diameter, and built of flat stones, which converge as they ascend, until the space becomes so narrow that a single stone covers it. This house is covered outside with earth and turf, and looks like a little hill. There were three *croopan* or beds in the wall. One of these beds had been destroyed when I saw the building in 1875, but otherwise the house was in good preservation. Two men, I regret to say, have since that date taken away a large quantity of the stones to build *clactyan*. *Airidh mhòr* is described by Martin and Macaulay. The former calls it the Female Warrior's House, or *Tigh na Bana-ghaisgeach*. All the traditions connected with it, and alluded to by Martin, seem now to be forgotten.

On the face of the hill called Sgal overlooking the east bay, amongst the *débris* that has fallen from its rocky ribs, is an ancient building, which tradition says was used as a hiding place in times of danger. It had been covered by stones, but was found again last summer. I went and threw out the rubbish. It is built with comparatively small stones, and is not a substantial work like the subterranean dwelling behind the village. It contains two *croopan*. I saw no ashes or smoke-marks or anything to indicate that it had been used as a permanent abode.

SOA.—On the 14th of August last year I went with a party of men, who were going to catch fulmars, to the island of Soa, and ascended to the top. I saw the "Boitha an Dugan," referred to by Miss Kennedy in her letter published in the Proceedings of the Society, vol. x. part 2, p. 704. As I am not aware that it has been described by any one from personal inspection, I shall give a sketch of it. A murderer, Dugan by name, was banished to the island of Soa to die at his leisure. He took shelter under a huge stone that springs out of the ground like the chisel of a plane. He deepened the floor with his dirk, and built dry stone walls at the sides and front, leaving a door of about 2 feet square. Here his dirk and bones were discovered after a time. This primitive hut is surrounded by great masses of huge stones, and is not easily distinguishable. It is still occupied by the six young women who go to this island every summer to catch puffins for the sake of the feathers. They generally remain three weeks at a time, but when the

weather is bad, are sometimes detained for six weeks. The coast is wild, and if the sea is rough it is extremely difficult for a boat to approach, as I experienced. There are some other primitive houses on the island. Near the top of Soa is an ancient altar (?) built of loose stones, and in good preservation. It is about 3 feet high. It seems to have been encircled by small standing stones. There is no chapel on this island.

BORERAY—A building like *Airidh mhòr*, but much larger, stood, until a few years ago, in the island of Boreray. Old people remember it well, and have often slept in it. It was said to have been built and inhabited by a hermit called Stallir. Not a vestige of it now remains, it having been used as a quarry by men building clactyan. I visited Boreray on the 29th June last year. I could not discover the Druidical circle mentioned by Macaulay, and the St Kildans seem never to have heard of it. That author, as will be seen afterwards, is not to be implicitly relied on. I saw three very primitive dwellings, in which the women live when they go to Boreray to catch birds. They are built on the plan usual in St Kilda—two walls close together, and approaching as they ascend, so that stones can be laid across to form a roof. For the sake of warmth they are covered over with earth and turf. One of these huts is 15 feet long by 6 broad at the floor. It is  $6\frac{1}{2}$  feet high at the hearth, which is close to the door. The latter is about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  feet high, and has to be entered on hands and knees. There is a semi-circular seat of stone around the hearth, and the rest of the floor is raised a foot higher; and is used as a bed. A small wall of stone protects the door from the wind. The girls generally live on this island for three weeks in July, and have no male protectors. If there is sickness or death they cut two large marks on the turf, which can be seen in Hirta, which is about  $3\frac{1}{4}$  miles distant, and a boat, weather permitting, is sent to their aid.

THE DUN.—On the 31st July I went with a party of men to the island called the Dun. Here I saw the site of a pagan altar (?), but the structure itself has been probably thrown into the sea. I was disappointed in being unable to find the castle so elaborately described by Macaulay. There is no such castle on the Dun, and probably never was. But I examined the wall mentioned by Wilson. It was evidently intended to keep an enemy who had landed on the island from getting to the extremity. It is built of loose stones, is broad at the base, and has parapets inside, on

which the defenders could have stood. This wall, the St Kildans say, was higher at one time, and was pierced with narrow loopholes. There is a narrow cave under the wall having two mouths, one outside the wall and the other inside. It may have been used as a passage by the people. Although a rude structure compared with the Dun Fir-bolg described by Macaulay, this fortification is interesting as being the only relic of war in St Kilda, the inhabitants of which evidently trusted to concealing themselves in case of invasion. As Macaulay was in St Kilda in 1759 (or says he was), it is almost certain that if any castle built with squared stones had been on the Dun at that time some tradition would have existed respecting it, or traces of where it stood, and how the stones had been used, would have been visible. The St Kildans deny that there was ever any other castle on the Dun but the wall described. Rory Mòr the impostor, who flourished in 1695, Buchan the first minister (1705), and Lady Grange (1734) are still remembered, and if so, it is not likely that a large castle existing in 1759 should have been utterly forgotten. I saw a low cavern (called a *sean tigh*, or old house) on the Dun, which is sometimes occupied by the men who go to pluck sheep, and the women who go to that island to catch birds.

*Customs of St Kildans.*—As some of the existing manners and customs of the St Kildans may throw a light upon the habits of ancient and primitive populations, I shall try to describe them.

The ground is now all dug with the spade, but I saw a *cass chrom* or two put away on the rafters of barns. A wooden rake is used instead of a harrow. Oats, bere, and potatoes are cultivated, and a few cabbages and turnips. Reaping hooks are sometimes used to cut the crop, but in general it is pulled up by the roots, the straw being used to thatch old houses and cellars. The grain is thrashed out with a flail. It is scorched in a pot or put into a straw tub (like a flat-topped bee-hive), and dried with heated stones. It is then ground by hand-mills. The women sit on the ground half-naked, and work at the mill like furies. Sheepskins, stretched on a hoop and perforated with a hot wire, serve as sieves. A fragment of the sieve will be seen on the distaff sent herewith. The meal is baked into cakes and made into gruel and porridge. Meat is often cooked along with these.

The St Kildans are warmly clothed, which probably accounts for the

immunity they enjoy from pulmonary and other diseases. The men make all their own clothes, and also dresses for the women. The gowns of the latter seem of a very antique fashion. They are fastened on the breast with a large pin made from a ling hook. Their plaid is secured with a brooch made from an old penny. The bill of the sea-pyot or oyster catcher was formerly used as a pin for the gown and plaid. In warm weather the women are often to be seen on the cliffs and in the glen without any clothing but a woollen shirt. The men also strip to their underclothing when engaged on the cliffs. The *brog tiondadh*, or turned shoe, was universal until within a few years. Specimens are still to be seen. They are made without welts. Caps of lambskin were also the fashion, but I have only seen one. A live peat, stuck on the end of a stick, served for a lantern on a dark night. I have often used it myself.

Lucifer matches, although used by the minister, are looked upon as curiosities by the people, who smile when one is struck. Nor is there a flint and steel on the island. The turf fires are always kept burning, and if one happens to go out a live turf is borrowed from a neighbour. When parties of men or women go to the adjacent islands they take a kettle of burning turf with them. If the embers are covered with turf and ashes the fire will survive for a great many hours. I myself had no matches, and never required to borrow a cinder for some months. The fires in St Kilda have probably been burning for centuries.

The sheep are *plucked*, sheep-shears being unknown. The wool is spun by the wheel into thread for cloth, blankets, and stockings. Thread for sewing is spun by the spindle and distaff. The women dye the thread with indigo (bought from the factor), and with lichen found on stones. Almost every man is a weaver in winter.

The looms are all made of wood without any iron. The cloth they make is all twilled, which requires four treadles. They buy leather from the factor, but tan sheepskins. Martin says this is done with the roots of tormentil. One man told me that bark found under the turf was used to tan leather, but I neglected to prosecute the inquiry, not seeing its importance at the time. I send a sample of the sheepskin tanned by themselves.



Spindle from  
St Kilda

(6½ inches long).

The ropes used on the cliffs were formerly made of horsehair and even of straw, and accidents were more frequent than now when lines of hemp and Manilla are employed. Some of the old horsehair ropes (forty years old) were, however, used last year. A portion of one of these is exhibited. Middle-aged men remember when there were horses on the island. They are now extinct.

The stone implements found in the *Tigh fo Tulamlh*, and above ground, were no doubt used to split open solan geese and other sea-fowl, and also to cut up the carcasses of sheep and cattle. One man told me he had seen a long thin stone used to fell oxen.