

I.

NOTES ON THE PIGMIES ISLE, AT THE BUTT OF LEWIS, WITH  
RESULTS OF THE RECENT EXPLORATION OF THE "PIGMIES  
CHAPEL" THERE. BY WILLIAM COOK MACKENZIE, F.S.A. Scot.

The first traveller, so far as I have ascertained, who wrote about the Pigmies Isle was Dean Monro, who, in his pastoral capacity, visited Lewis about 1549. I shall quote his description in full, in modern English.

"At the north point of Lewis," he says, "there is a little isle called the Pigmies Isle, with a little kirk in it of their own handiwork. Within this kirk the ancients of that country of the Lewis say that the said pigmies have been buried there. Many men of different countries have delved deeply the floor of the little kirk, and I myself among the rest, and have found in it, deep under the earth, certain bones and round heads of wonderful little size, alleged to be the bones of the said pigmies; which may be likely, according to sundry histories that we read of the pigmies; but I leave this far to the ancients of Lewis."

George Buchanan, in his *History of Scotland*, quotes the Dean's statement with apparent conviction.

An official account of Lewis, drawn up about 1580, refers to the little kirk and the pigmies' bones, which, it says, on being measured, proved to be not quite two inches long.

The most circumstantial account of the isle is given by a Captain Dymes, who visited Lewis in 1630. He, too, had dug up some bones, but he quaintly remarks: "My belief is scarce big enough to think them to be human bones."

A Lewisman named John Morison, who wrote an account of his native island about 1680, mentions the isle and the bones, but scoffs at the pigmy theory, believing the bones to be those of "small fowls."

In his well-known description of the Western Isles at the end of the seventeenth century, Martin tells us of the small bones which had been dug up. "This," he adds, "gave ground to a tradition which the natives have, of a very low-statured people living once here, called '*Lusbirdan*' or pigmies."

The word "*Lusbirdan*" is clearly the modern *Luspardan*, which, both in Gaelic and Scots, stands for "pigmy." Dr MacBain is probably right in deriving it from *Lugh-spiorad*, or little spirit, though Jamieson gives other and more fanciful derivations.

In Blaeu's map, the name of the isle appears as *Ylen Dunibeg*, or Island of the Little Men. In a rough sketch of Lewis drawn by Captain Dymes, it appears as the "Isle of Pigmies," which name is also given to it by Martin, though he states that the natives (like Blaeu) called it the "Island of Little Men," a distinction with a difference. In the Ordnance Survey map of the present day, it appears as "*Luchruban*," which is plainly identical with *Luchorpáin*, or *Luchrupáin*, the diminutive people of Irish legend; and the full name was probably *Eilean na Luchrupáin*, or Island of the Luchrupain, the dwarfs who were complementary to the Irish *Fomhóraigh* (Fomorians) or giants. It is impossible to say when this name supplanted that of the Pigmies Isle, but not improbably it was given to the isle by Irish antiquaries, who thought they had discovered in the small bones, relics of their legendary *Luchrupáin*. Captain Dymes states that the bones had often been dug up, especially by the Irish who came to Ness for that purpose. The context seems to show that he meant natives of Ireland, and not merely Gaelic-speakers.

It may be observed that the latest contemporary notice of the Pigmies Isle appears—of all places—in an ode. Collins was evidently a firm believer in the pigmy theory, and in his *Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands*, published in 1749, the little islet at Ness, with its accepted tradition, receives honourable mention.

Early in the nineteenth century, the voice of the sceptic was heard in the land. Dr John M'Culloch roundly denied the very existence of the isle, and, moreover, based an unworthy attack on Dean Monro's veracity, generally, upon his account of it. I find M'Culloch's aspersion on Buchanan's "pious and well-informed man" reproduced in a popular handbook to the "Highlands and Islands," published in 1877; so it is obvious that the Dean's reputation for veracity has suffered most undeservedly by M'Culloch's ill-considered attack.

If for no other reason than that of restoring Dean Monro's character as a reliable writer, I am glad to have re-discovered the Pigmies Isle. I found it chiefly by means of Captain Dymes's description in a manuscript I lighted upon, when searching for material for my *History of the Outer Hebrides*. I had no opportunity at the time of making further investigations, but my brother, Mr C. G. Mackenzie, and my cousin, Dr Mackenzie, both of Stornoway, subsequently made an exhaustive search in the so-called chapel, and with some tangible results.

Dr Mackenzie has prepared a statement of their discoveries, from which I extract the salient features. The finds were disappointing, being confined to some pieces of hand-made and unglazed pottery, a number of bones, and a small quantity of peat-ash. But the structure itself is of a distinctly interesting type.

The isle lies to the north-west of the lighthouse at the Butt of Lewis. It has an extreme length of about 80 feet and an extreme breadth of about 70 feet, and is completely isolated from the mainland of Lewis only during very high tides. The surface is covered with short sea-grass. The greenness of the grass and the peculiar rounded shape of the isle make it a conspicuous feature of the landscape. The visible portion of the structure which was explored stands at the end contiguous

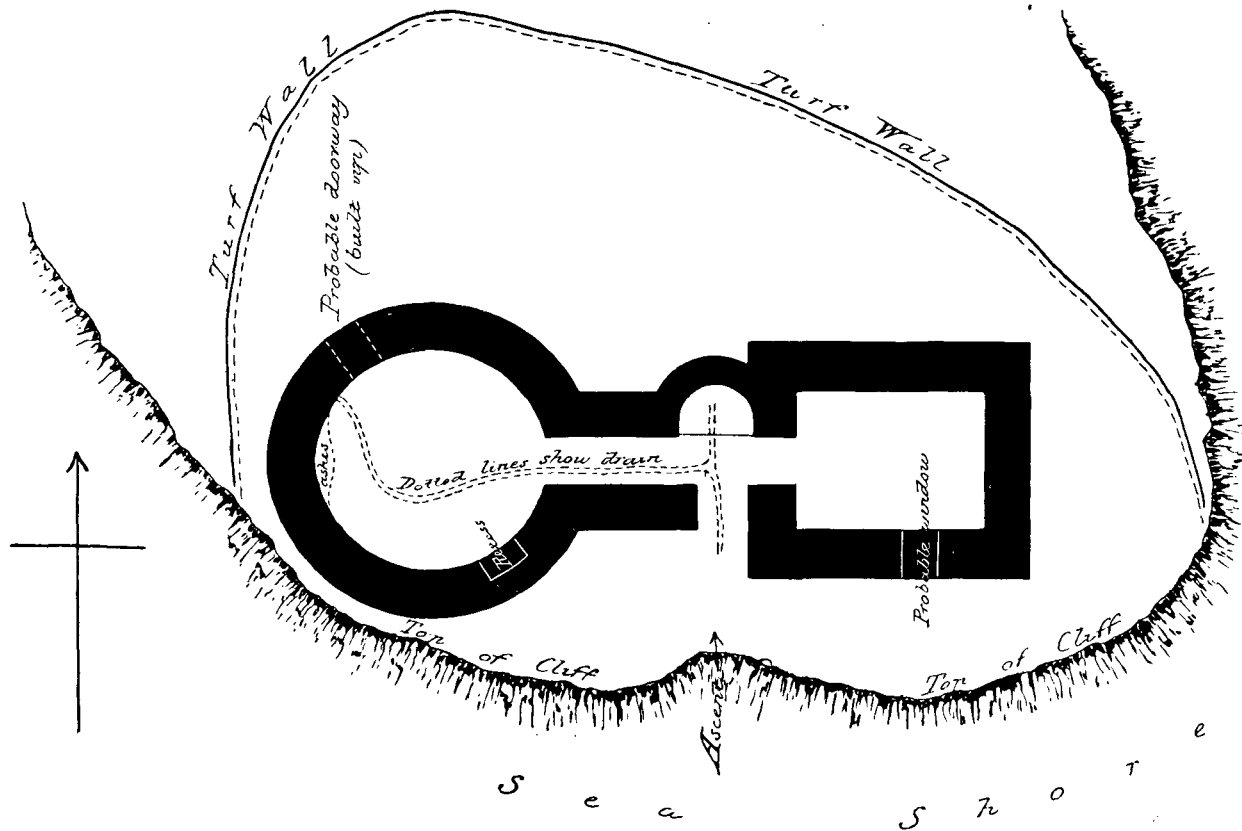


Fig. 1. Ground Plan of Pigmies Chapel, by Alex. MacDonald, C.E., Stornoway. (Scale, 8 feet to 1 inch.)

to the mainland. The long axis of the building runs almost due east and west. "Of the building itself," says Dr Mackenzie, "I found only the oblong portion, seen on the plan (fig. 1), partially exposed to view. The walls of this portion are composed of flat and neatly-laid stones, unmortared. They are 2 feet in thickness, and stand from their foundations at a general height of 2 feet. About the middle of the south wall, there is a shallow opening, 18 inches wide, forming part of the two sides and bottom of a square. It appears to have been used as a window. Its sill is 18 inches from the foundation line of the walls."

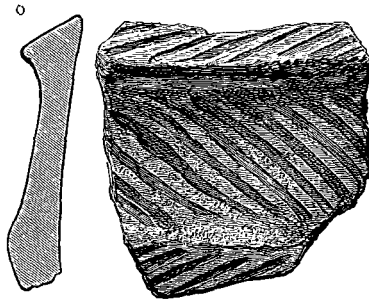


Fig. 2. Fragment of Unglazed Pottery found in the Pigmies Chapel.

This is the portion of the building known to Dean Monro and the other writers whose descriptions have been quoted. The modern investigators followed their example by digging up the floor of the so-called kirk, and between the upper layer of loam and the lower of sea-sand, they found the bones and the patterned pottery. It consists of one piece of the bottom, with part of the side, of a small vessel of reddish clay, not made on the wheel or fired in a kiln, and unglazed; three portions apparently of the sides of different vessels of dark micaceous clay, about  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch in thickness, somewhat resembling the old craggans, and ornamented with rough parallel scratches, as if drawn with the broken end of a twig; and a fourth fragment (fig. 2), showing the

lip of a larger vessel, elegantly shaped, well smoothed on the inside, and the outside ornamented with the same linear striation. The loam at both ends of the layer was impregnated with a reddish material, resembling damp peat-ashes.

The part of the structure which was laid bare for the first time is described by Dr Mackenzie in detail, the gist of his statement being as follows:—

From the so-called kirk, a passage, 21 inches wide, leads due west for a distance of  $6\frac{1}{2}$  feet. Its walls, dry-built and plumb, are 2 feet in height. There are two interruptions in the wall, one on its south side, where it should have abutted on the west end of the chapel, and the other on the opposite side. The former, which has a width of 27 inches, appears to have been the doorway of the structure. The niche on the north side is semicircular in shape; it has a breadth of 41 inches and an extreme depth of 30 inches. Its floor of carefully laid flat stones is about 9 inches above the general level of the passage floor. The roof of this recess appears to have been semicircular in shape.

At its western extremity, the passage opens into a roofless circular apartment about 10 feet in diameter. Its walls are very well built of dry-stone; they rise from their foundations to a height of about 4 feet. At the west of the chamber peat-ash was found, and under the floor some more of the small bones.

In the wall of this chamber is a small square recess, 17 inches high, 15 inches broad, and 19 inches deep.

The interior long axis of the entire structure (comprising the circular chamber, the passage, and the kirk) measures 24 feet 9 inches. The floor of the whole slopes from its western to its eastern extremity, the gradient being about 1 in 50.

A remarkable feature of the circular apartment and the passage is the drainage system, of which evidences remain. A carefully-built drain, composed of flat stones laid in a "V" shape, enters under the foundations where marked on the plan. From this point, it runs in front of the fire-

place in the circular chamber where the ashes were found, and curving gently, courses under the full width of the floor through the passage. Opposite the niche in the passage, it is joined by another drain of the same construction, which emerges from the floor of the niche. From this junction, it passes to the outside through the doorway, not apparently having entered the kirk at all.

The contents of the drain—a pultaceous dark-coloured deposit—were freely dotted with a pure white substance, resembling chloride of lime.

The whole structure is surrounded by what appears to have been an old turf-grown stone dyke, the diameter of the enclosure measuring, roughly, 40 feet. This dyke impinges upon the building at its west end, is close to it and the edge of the cliff on the south and east, and is furthest from it on the north-west.

Dr Mackenzie believes that the character of the whole structure has been for the first time revealed by the excavations above described, and that the roofs of the chambers and the passage between them, of which no part now remains, were probably similar to those of certain archaic buildings which he saw on Eilean Mòr in the Flannan Isles in 1896, the latter consisting of large slabs of stone forming a beehive dome, with a circular hole at or near the apex, while the passages were lintelled over with flat slabs. The further suggestion is made that the roofs of the Luchruban chambers were probably turfed, in order to afford additional security, and, possibly, more effective concealment.

I believe I am right in affirming that no exact counterpart of the Luchruban structure is known, though its general plan would appear to warrant its classification with other buildings of a primitive type found elsewhere in the Hebrides. A difficulty, however, arises in the persistence with which the oblong chamber—the only portion of the building known to previous investigators—is designated in past accounts as a “kirk” or “chapel.” Moreover, it will be remembered that Dean Monro declared it was the handiwork of the pigmies themselves. Probably the chamber is too small to have been

used at any time as a chapel, though it may conceivably have been utilised as the oratory of a hermit, who made the circular chamber his dwelling. The two chambers are too similar in construction, except in form, to warrant the assumption that the smaller one was added to the other at a later period. The structure, as it appears to-day, was clearly the original plan, whoever the designers may have been. Dr Mackenzie states that the chapel on Eilean Mòr stands apart from the beehive buildings, but its plan is the same, its wall structure similar, and its interior dimensions somewhat less than those of the so-called Pigmies Chapel.

The local tradition at the present day connects a saint named Frangus—a name suggesting French nationality, and not to be looked for in the Roman calendar—with the pigmies of Luchruban. St Frangus is said to have been an outlaw who lived on the sands of Lionel at Ness. According to the tradition, which was recently taken down from the lips of an old resident of Ness, Frangus was unkind to the pigmies, who hanged him on a hill, which is called *Bruich Frangus* to this day. It is conceivable that this Saint Frangus may have used the structure at Luchruban as a place of retreat, thus accounting for the smaller chamber being known as a “chapel.” But the most likely explanation is, that it was popularly known by that name, owing to its resemblance to the remains of chapels or oratories which were known to exist on other islets along the coast of Lewis.

The tradition now current in Ness about the pigmies themselves is not without interest. They are said to have been “Spaniards,” who came to Lewis 500 years B.C. In the year 1 A.D. “big yellow men” came from Argyll and drove the little men from Cunndal (a cove near Luchruban) to the latter island; but when the pigmies got numerous, they emigrated to Europie and Knockaird in the same vicinity. They lived on “buffaloes,” which they killed by throwing “sharp-pointed knives at them.” Here we apparently have the story of the small dark aborigines invaded by the Goidels or Early Celts, tradition thus tallying with the results of modern ethnological research. At Cunndal



I discovered some twenty-five or more hut-circles, with stone foundations in, I think, one instance only, the others being simply mounds of turf. I could obtain no information in the district about them, except that they had been used for storing sea-weed and for fish-curing purposes. But further inquiry elicited the fact that they had existed "from time immemorial," and, according to the old Ness man, they had formed the dwellings of his pigmies previous to their migration to Luchruban.

The question naturally suggests itself: Did the pigmy story take its rise from the discovery of the small bones at Luchruban, or was it a current tradition before that discovery? John Morison and Martin seem to suggest the former theory; but Dean Monro, the earliest narrator, appears to hold the contrary view; while the tradition of the present day supports the assumption that the pigmy legend is entirely independent of the bone discoveries.

Any lingering notion that the bones recently found may have been wholly or partly human, has been completely dispelled by expert examination. I sent them to the Natural History Museum at South Kensington, to secure an authoritative pronouncement by a comparative anatomist. They were examined by Dr Charles W. Andrews, who has kindly classified them in detail. Of fourteen different specimens submitted to him, he pronounced seven to be the bones of mammals and seven those of birds. The mammals comprise oxen, young lambs, sheep, and a dog (or a fox); the birds represented are the rock pigeon, the razorbill, the greater and the lesser black-backed gull, and (?) a petrel, the bone pertaining to the last-named being a portion of a mandible, difficult of classification.

It is quite obvious that the mammals and birds formed the diet of the dwellers in the subterranean chambers. With the exception of the ox, they are all indigenous to the district, and even at the present day the gull is largely used for human food at Ness.

It is perhaps beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in detail the value of the pigmy legend, as bearing upon the origin of the remarkable

structure at Luchruban. That the tradition about the pigmies has its roots in ethnological facts is, I think, a demonstrable proposition. Allowance must be made for the exaggeration of tradition, which measures its low-statured peoples by inches, just as it measures its tall peoples by yards. Hence we have pigmies and giants to represent races who were shorter or taller than the race perpetuating the traditions.

It is fairly obvious that the pigmies of Luchruban were simply a prehistoric people of short stature and dark hair, who were contemptuously called *Dunibeg* or "little men" by their successors, a name which was inaccurately Englished and perpetuated as "pigmies." Naturally, the discovery of the small bones would give a tremendous fillip to the pigmy idea, and so the error persisted owing to the ignorance of comparative anatomy which prevailed. It is at least satisfactory to have given this myth a final burial.

The Island of Lewis offers a remarkably rich field of investigation to the ethnologist, in view of the marked diversity of its types. Dr Beddoe, whose authority will be acknowledged, suggested that one of these types, "a short, thick-set, snub-nosed, dark-haired, and even dark-eyed race," was probably aboriginal, and possibly Finnish. Have we here the descendants of the so-called pigmies? The Laplanders or true Finns have certainly some physical affinities with the short and dark type of Lewisman (a type which is but sparsely represented in the island); while the *gammar* or huts of the Lapps, as described by travellers, bear a resemblance to the Luchruban structure, as it must have been originally designed. Customs lingered in Lewis as recently as the eighteenth, or even the nineteenth century, which have elsewhere been regarded as peculiar to Lapland. And Professor Sven Nilssen<sup>1</sup> shows convincingly, as I think, that the pigmies of tradition and the dwarfs of the Sagas belonged to the same race as the Laplanders of the present day. Moreover, the well-authenticated traditions in Shetland about the Finn-men apparently offer corroboration of the view that the "little men" of these islands were of

<sup>1</sup> *The Primitive Inhabitants of Scandinavia.*

Finnish or Lapponic origin<sup>1</sup> The Firbolg, the short dark men of Irish tradition, who were driven from Ireland to the Hebrides by the Tuatha de Danaan, represent, not improbably, the same race. Dun Fhirbolg in St Kilda may be of some ethnological value.

It is a noteworthy fact that while Highland folk-lore is full of the *Famhnairean* (the Irish Fomorians) or giants, there is a curious absence of the complementary *Luchrupáin* or dwarfs. How is this to be accounted for? May it not be that they are represented by our old friends, the fairies, who, by the way, are sometimes called *Duoine Beaga*, the ancient name of the Pigmies Isle?

It is impossible to elaborate this suggestion here, but I may mention one fact concerning the Lewis fairies. One of their names is *Muinntir Fionnlagh*, translated as the Finlay people, a title which, as applied to fairies, has baffled Lewis folk-lorists. I venture to suggest that this name means "the little Finn people," and that it links the Finnish aborigines with the "good little people" of fairy lore who dwell in the bowels of green hills like Luchruban, and practise uncanny arts like the Lapp wizards.

<sup>1</sup> It may be observed that in Foley's dictionary (but not in O'Reilly's) one of the Irish names for a pigmy is *Leappacán*.