

IV.

ANTIQUITIES AND OLD CUSTOMS IN ST KILDA, COMPILED FROM NOTES MADE BY REV. NEIL MACKENZIE, MINISTER OF ST KILDA, 1829-43. BY REV. J. B. MACKENZIE, F.S.A. SCOT., KENMORE.

The name by which the island is known wherever Gaelic is spoken is 'Uirt,' sometimes used in the aspirated form of 'Huir.' It is derived from 'I' (island) and 'ard' high. All the place-names are derived from modern Gaelic, so that it is probable that the more ancient inhabitants were exterminated by the Norwegians when they frequented the island. That they did so is, I think, almost certain. In clearing the glebe I removed a mound in a little field, and found in it a long and narrow whetstone, an iron sword, a spear-head, and various other pieces of iron, mostly of irregular shape, and the use of which was not obvious.

From their language, traditions and surnames, the present inhabitants came from the long island in comparatively recent times. The only linguistic differences are in the shade of meaning which they attach to a few words, and the way in which they pronounce words in which 'r' rough occurs and the sound they give to 'd' or 'g' in some combinations. The 'r' they uniformly pronounce like 'l' as in 'ruith' run, which they pronounce 'luith,' otherwise the tone and pronunciation are the same. At present the M'Donalds are the most numerous, and the other surnames are M'Leod, Gillies, Morristan, M'Queen, M'Kinnon and M'Crimmon.

There are in St Kilda proper two or three Keills, where there are the ruins of small churches, one of them dedicated to Mary, another of them to Brenan, while in Borrera and Soay there still remain altars of rough stones. In the Glen near the shore there is a sacred well called *tobar-nam-buaidh*, well of virtues. Further up the Glen is a round building of very coarse workmanship, roofed with stones overlapping one another till they terminate in a round hole which gives light to the building. It is called the Giantess' house, and is covered with grassy turf. At the head of the Glen, and near the top of 'Mullach Mor,' there is a small ruin called *tigh an fhir faireadh*, the watchman's house. It commands a view of every possible landing place.

Clach Aotaig. This is the name given to a semitransparent stone, which both here and in other parts of the Highlands is held in superstitious veneration. In many places it is called *clach buaidhean*, stone of virtues. To get this stone, boil the raven's eggs and return them to the nest, when by and by the raven will go and get a *clach aotaig* to try and cure them, when if you are lucky you may secure it.

Scattered about here and there, and very numerous, were green mounds called *cnocan sithichean*, which were looked upon as the abodes of the fairies. These were all removed in the course of agricultural improvements. They were composed of stones mixed with a little earth to a depth of two or three feet. At some distance below this layer were stone coffins formed in two different ways. At times they were formed of four flat stones set on edge and covered by a fifth. At other times both the sides and roof were formed of several stones set in the same way. These were seemingly of different age from the former. In a few of them bones were found, and in nearly all of them pieces of earthen vessels.

In clearing for agricultural purposes, a small park near the centre of the glebe and at the foot of *Avismheal*, I came upon a flat stone a little under the surface. On the top of it were some ashes. On lifting it up I saw that there was a curiously built space underneath, but as it might be a relic of some ancient place of worship, I did not disturb it but replaced the stone. The stones removed were built into a thick wall around the little field, but there remained two stones which were too heavy to remove, and as they were lying flat and occupying a good deal of space, I raised them on end. They may puzzle some future antiquarian.

The north glen was the sheiling, and here the cattle and sheep were kept during the time when they might injure the crops if kept on the other side of the island. As in other parts of the country the ewes were milked daily. Ewe and lamb were allowed together during the day, but at night the lambs were folded. This not only allowed the milk to accumulate but kept the ewes from straying far during the night. In the morning the ewes were also folded, and the communication between where they were and where the lambs were was through a tunnel in the wall,

about three feet from the ground, so that only one lamb could come at a time.

The only remains of a fortification are on the island of "Dun." The seaward end of this island is separated from the other part by a very narrow neck of land. There is also at this point a natural rock escarpment which raises the protected side considerably above the other. It was further strengthened by a low wall of large stones, which mostly remain in their original position. There are also visible the ruins of houses.

As a race the natives now are rather undersized and far from being robust or healthy. They are generally of slender form, with fair hair and a florid complexion. On the whole they are good-looking. The diseases to which they are most subject are spotted fever (?), dyspepsia and nervous disorders, with swelling and bowing of their limbs. There is also the mysterious boat cough. In their own opinion they get it by infection when a boat comes from Harris. Now, it is from Harris that the factor and their friends come, and when either come they remain for several days. During the whole of that time the natives stand about exposed to the weather in a way to which they are not accustomed. During that time, also, they partake of a good deal of spirits, of which they seldom partake at any other time. The whole way in which they live at such a time is quite abnormal, and the wonder would be if they escaped a cold. When boats come from other places from whom they get little spirits and no violent upset of all their usual habits, there is no such result. When hooping cough, measles, or scarlet fever visit the island, there are more than the average number of deaths.

The disease, however, which caused by far the greatest mortality was a visitation of small pox. It was brought to the island in the clothes of one of their number who died of the disease in Harris. It broke out just after a party had been left on Stack-an-armin to collect feathers. At such times they generally remain away for about ten days. Before that time expired the disease had made such progress that there were not in health a sufficient number to form a crew. Death after death followed. At last there were scarcely sufficient left to bury the dead. As they had then no

spades, one man is said to have dug eleven graves with the back board of a wool card about 18 inches by 9 in size. No coffins were attempted. So weak were the survivors, that when the dead bodies sometimes fell off the planks on which they were being carried, they were unable to raise them up again, and had to drag them to their graves. The hand of death was heavy on the place ; out of twenty-five families only five could keep a fire. There were ninety-four deaths. When the factor came next summer he found those who had been left on Stack-an-armin all well. They lived on fish and fowls, but at times suffered much from cold and hunger. They made fish-hooks out of a few rusty nails, and also contrived to stitch together their clothing with feathers and patch them with the skins of birds. They returned mostly to empty houses, crops generally never reaped, and the cattle roaming about half wild.

Strength is the quality they most admire, and they are always boasting of the strength of their ancestors. In proof they pointed to the large stones in some of the old walls and ruins. I got them persuaded after a little to build for themselves new houses on a more enlarged and better plan, but I could only get them to work when I wrought along with them. So long as I could be with them they would work quite eagerly, but whenever I had to leave they soon got tired. One evening there was a large stone which I wished raised to a certain position, but they thought their ancestors only could do that. Next morning I got up early, and before any one was about had it raised by means of levers and a bank into position. I cleared everything away and left. Soon I found them all looking at it in astonishment, and I explained to them that probably it was knowledge more than strength that their ancestors possessed, and at anyrate that it was by knowledge that they must emulate their achievements. I showed them how it could be done, but did not show them how badly I had bruised my thumb.

Of their most ancient houses several still remain entire. They are circular or nearly so, and roughly built. The walls are 6 or 7 feet thick, with spaces for beds left in them. These bed spaces are roofed with long slabs, and the entrance from the interior of the house is about 3 feet by

2 feet. The walls are not arched but contracted gradually by the overlapping of the stones to nearly a point. The entrance door is about 3 feet by $2\frac{1}{2}$. The outside is covered with earth and rubbish and appears like a green hillock. In some places they are almost entirely underground. The furniture of these houses, so far as I can ascertain from tradition and what still remains, was a quern, a hollow stone called *clach shoilse*, filled with oil and a cinder of peat for a wick; a vessel made of badly burnt clay called *cragan*, which was used for a pot, a water pitcher and a dish to drink out of, and a rope made of hide. The houses which they occupied when I came to the island were larger and more oval shaped. The walls were 7 or 8 feet thick, about 6 or 7 feet high, and the same height all round. The beds were in the thickness of the wall as before. There was also the same absence of a window. The only opening for light was a small circular opening at one end where the thatch joined the wall, left for the exit of the smoke. The door aperture was near the end and faced the east. It was higher than that in the former houses, and had a wooden door with wooden hinges and lock. A partition of rough stones about 4 feet high, called *fallan*, divided the abode of man and dog from that of cattle. There was a light wooden roof resting on the inner edge of the wall covered with about 18 inches thick of straw simply laid on, and not in layers as ordinary thatch. When beaten flat and uniform it was secured by numerous straw ropes called *siman*.

The straw used was that of barley. The barley when ripe was pulled up by the roots and made into sheaves. When these were dry they were cut in two and it was the root half of the sheaf which was used for thatch. The reason why it was put on in such quantity and in the above loose way, was, that in spring, when the young barley was about two inches high, the thatch was taken off the house, and the half of it which was next the rafters and impregnated with soot, was taken and spread as a top dressing over the young barley. The remainder, which had been the outer layer, was now replaced and formed the summer thatch. In autumn about a foot of fresh straw would be added and all made snug before the winter

gales. This way of roofing left a broad walk along the top of the wall. As these thick walls were only faced with stones and filled up in the centre with earth and rubbish, and the houses generally touched each other, there was a broad grassy walk from house to house along the top of the wall. The furniture consisted of an iron pot or two; a chest or two; a wooden dish called *buta* and another called *cuman*; a straw vessel like a large flat-bottomed beehive called *loban*; an iron lamp called *cruisgean*; a quern, and a few old barrels, some of them hooped by a rope made of a kind of ground willow twisted. The cattle occupied the division next the door, and it was not cleaned out till spring. At the other end lived the family, and there all the ashes, dirty water, and still worse, was spread out over the floor, and covered from time to time with layers of dry peat dust. Before the time of removal for use in spring the mixture was often higher than the side walls, so that a visit to a sick parishioner was quite an adventure. Owing to the thickness of the wall the door of the house was at the end of a low tunnel. Before the door, and extending part of the way into the tunnel, was a hole into which was thrown all the birds not used for food, the refuse of the others, and such like abominations. As the doorway was not more than 5 feet high, you had to make your way past this in a stooping position, till at the end of the tunnel you reached the door. If it was spring-time, on passing the door you had to climb up among the cattle, which got excited from the presence of a stranger, the barking of dogs, and the shouting of your friends above. Amidst great excitement you got helped along, and hoisted over the 'fallan.' Now you had to creep along on hands and feet, as it was only near the centre of the house that one could even sit upright. In this way you arrived at the edge of the steep slope above the bed opening, down which you went headforemost, nothing visible above but your legs, while you spoke and prayed with the sick. They wonder themselves that they are not so strong as they believe their ancestors were. The wonder rather is, that under such conditions they survive at all. In building new houses for themselves afterwards, all these houses were removed except a small one occupied by a widow.