

II.

NOTES ON CONTIN CHURCH, ROSS-SHIRE, WITH ITS SACRAMENT HOUSE, AND TWO SEPULCHRAL SLABS IN THE CHURCHYARD.
BY THE REV. A. C. MACLEAN, MINISTER OF CONTIN.

As Contin Church was dedicated in the name of St Maelrubha, the "Red Monk" of Applecross, it is probable that it was actually founded by him and was the scene of some of his labours. In the case of churches dedicated to Celtic saints this was often the case. The name of St Maelrubha is thus connected with the churches of Applecross, Lochcarron, Isle Maree, and Urquhart in the same county of Ross; with Lairg and perhaps Golspie in Sutherland; Bracadale in Skye; Harris in the Outer Islands; Kilarrow in Islay; Craignish in Argyllshire; besides Keith in Banffshire, Kinnell in Forfarshire, and Crail in Fife.¹ Of Irish royal lineage, St Maelrubha is said to have been born in A.D. 642, and to have ultimately reached Applecross about 673 by way of Iona. His Ross-shire churches may therefore have been founded at the end of the seventh century, or at the beginning of the eighth. He is said to have died in 722. Till the beginning of the nineteenth century there was still held within sight of Contin Church a market called Feill Maree, afterwards removed to Dingwall, and practically forgotten now. Within sight of the church is also a name-site of St Maelrubha—Preasmaree. For something more than a century the spot has been used as the family burial-place of the Mackenzies of Coul. Within the enclosure, about three-quarters of an acre in extent, are a number of stones, cup-marked, and a grave of slabs of stone with the covering slab removed.

Historical references to Contin Church are few. In 1227 John, vicar of Contin, was present at Kenedor with others of the clergy of Ross at the settlement of a dispute between the bishops of Moray and Ross regarding the churches of Kyntalargyn and Ardrosser (*i.e.* Kiltarlity and Ardersier). In the lessons for St Maelrubha's day in the Aberdeen Breviary² we are told that *prefati insulani*, perhaps Danes or perhaps men from some of the islands, invaded Ross and slaughtered the congregation who were keeping St Maelrubha's feast in his church at Contin. In 1529 the Premonstratensian canons of Fearn had a yearly payment of 8 lbs. of wax in the town called Contin.

¹ See Dr A. P. Forbes, *Kalendars of Scottish Saints*, p. 382, and Dr Reeves' paper "St Maelrubha: his History and Churches," in the *Proceedings* of this Society, iii. p. 258.

² *Breviarii Aberdonensis pars cœstiva*, fo. xc.

In 1550 Queen Mary presented David Stewart to the rectory of Qwentan, vacant by the death of one Fores. At the Reformation the parsonage and vicarage belonged to Mr. Robert Burnet, who had two sons legitimated in 1575, and who appears in 1587 as vicar of Contin and canon of Ross.¹

The church appears to be in the main a mediæval building, 61 feet by 25 feet externally, 55 feet by 18 feet within. There do not seem to have been any openings in the north wall, or the east and west gables. About 1832 repairs were made and 8 feet added to the walls to allow headroom for galleries, altering the whole fashion of the church. At various times doors and windows have been opened, closed, or altered, and new doors were made at each end of the south wall to give access to these new galleries, and a session house was added at the middle of the south side. At that date windows to light the galleries were opened in both gables.

About 11 feet from the east gable in the south wall are remains of the jambs of a doorway which must have led into the chancel, and some 10 feet from the west end are the jambs of the doorway to the nave, now built up. When the new doorways were opened, the free-stone mouldings of the original doorways were carefully turned into the building, and new faces, square in section, cut on the face where the stones had been damaged. The main walls of the church were built of water-worn schist stones, picked out of the river hard by, and set with hard white lime. Freestone was used for the jambs and lintels of the doorways and windows, and for the quoins at the corners of the church. The main walls of the present church may have been built about 1490, as the former church had been burned by the Macdonalds about 1482-1488.

Lying in the churchyard is a slab of schist, 6 feet 6 inches long, carved with an elaborate floriated cross in low relief (fig. 1). The upper part of the slab is somewhat broken at one corner, but the breadth at the arms of the cross is 22 inches, and at the foot of the slab 20 inches. The cross has a richly ornamented head; the arms end in leaves with three points, not unlike ivy leaves; from each arm spring similar leaves, one on each side, their stems being returned to meet the stems of the opposite leaves springing from the adjacent arm of the cross, so as to form four three-quarters of circles joining each other at the middle of each arm, and leaving small panels roughly triangular where the arms intersect at the centre of the cross. The shaft of the cross is floriated; five pairs of leaves, each with three points, springing from it, each pair leaving the shaft above a pair of short, single-pointed

¹ *Origines Parochiales*, ii. p. 504.

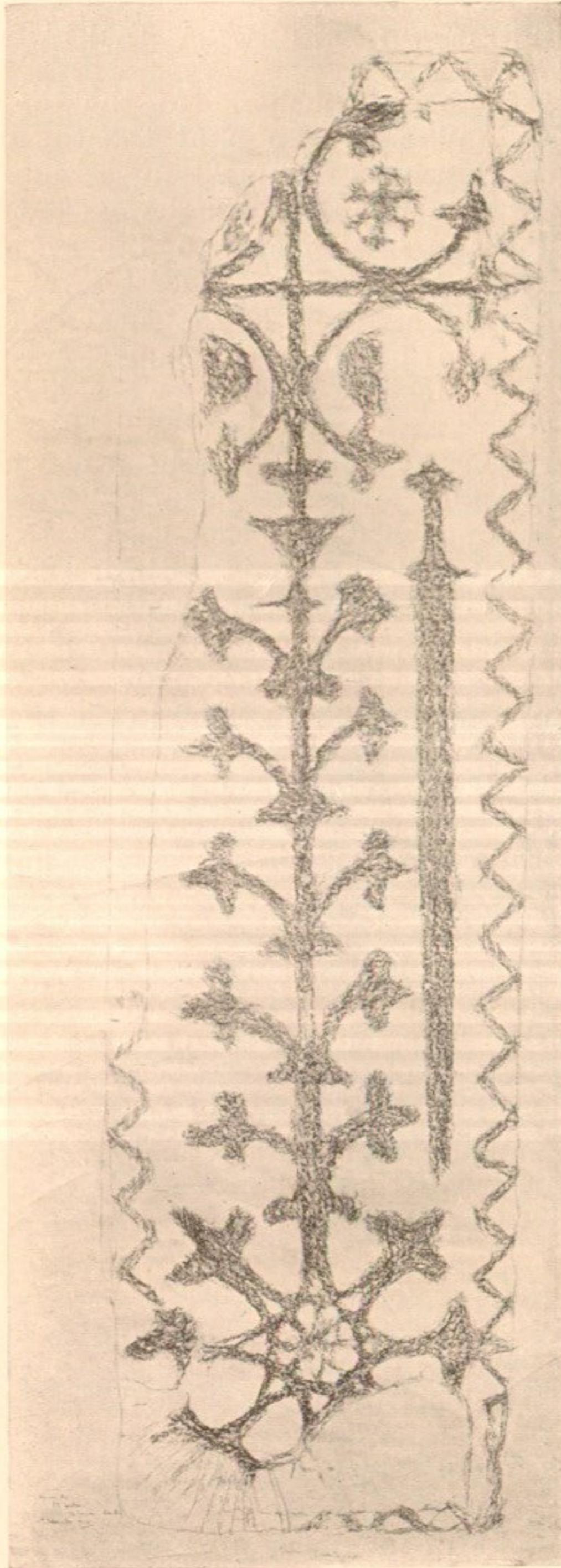


Fig. 1. Slab in the Churchyard carved in Relief. From a rubbing
6 feet 6 inches in length.

leaves at intervals of about 7 inches. At the top of the shaft are three expansions not unlike the knop at the top of the shaft of a processional cross, but perhaps intended for groups of leaves. The shaft does not rise from steps in the usual way, but terminates below in an arm of a second and smaller cross of the wheel type, with eight points, each ending in a trefoiled leaf, the stem of which divides and joins on each side with the stem of the leaf next but one. These stems thus form parts of a series of intersecting quarter circles, the space in the centre of the cross being filled with a wheel-like ornament, within a circle 6 inches wide.

In the spaces between the arms of the head of the cross, or rather, between the arms of the larger or principal cross, are ornaments which are rather puzzling. That on the dexter side above the transverse cross arm is broken away; on the sinister side there is a six-pointed wheel-like ornament or flower, of which the points are floriated at the ends. On the dexter side below the arm is the greater part of a plain disc, of which the outer part is broken away, while opposite to it is half a similar disc. A possible explanation is that these discs were intended to be carved as ornaments and were never finished; that an attempt was made to carve the sinister disc and that it failed, so that half was left uncarved and the rest merely cleared away. It is by no means certain that the rest of the cross was ever quite finished; while the present surface may be due to weathering, it is also possible that the final touches were never put to it.

The leaves springing from the sinister side of the cross-shaft are about $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches shorter than those on the other side, leaving space for a sword, 3 feet 3 inches long, with short quillons at right angles to the handle, which is $6\frac{1}{2}$ inches long.

Upon a chamfer $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide round the edge of the slab runs a zigzag ornament not unlike a series of half dog-teeth, each member of the zigzag being thicker in the middle than at the ends. The leaves at the ends of the arms of the cross extend over the chamfer and intersect the zigzag.

The total length of the design has originally been 6 feet 7 inches, that of the shaft 2 feet 11 inches between the crosses. The diameter of the cross at the head has been 2 feet 2 inches, of that at the foot, 1 foot 8 inches. The shaft is about $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches thick.

Upon another stone is a fine large wheel-cross head (fig. 2) consisting of a central boss about 4 inches wide, in the midst of a raised centre from which radiate eight equidistant arms terminating in bold fleurs-de-lys, the points of which join in most cases. A circle 17 inches in external diameter and $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches thick crosses the arms at the spring of the fleurs-

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de-lys, which are outside it. The width of the cross is about 2 feet 6 inches and the arms are 2 to 3 inches thick.

During repairs to the church in 1908, a sacrament house was dis-

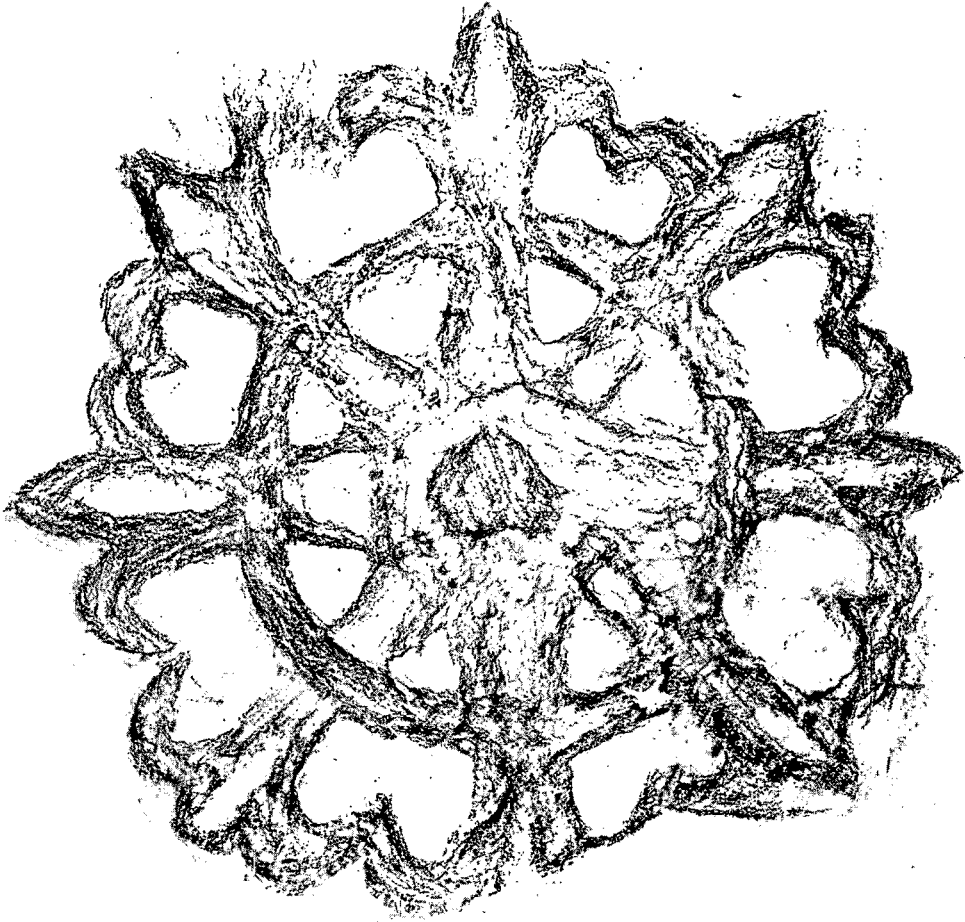


Fig. 2. Head of another Cross in the Churchyard. From a rubbing.

closed in the north wall of the church about 4 feet from the east end. It had been covered with lath and plaster during the alterations in 1835-1836, and supports for the laths were driven into the mouldings. The gallery staircase has now been raised to allow the sacrament house to be seen.

The sacrament house is much plainer than most of the better known examples further south (fig. 3). The arch is bluntly pointed, and its large and shallow mouldings surround a check for the door. Its height to the outside of the mouldings is 3 feet, and its width 2 feet 6½ inches. The opening is only 1 foot 9 inches high by 1 foot 1½ inches wide. As in other cases, the interior of the recess is larger than the doorway; it is 1 foot 8 inches wide, 1 foot 4 inches deep, and 2 feet 4 inches high. From

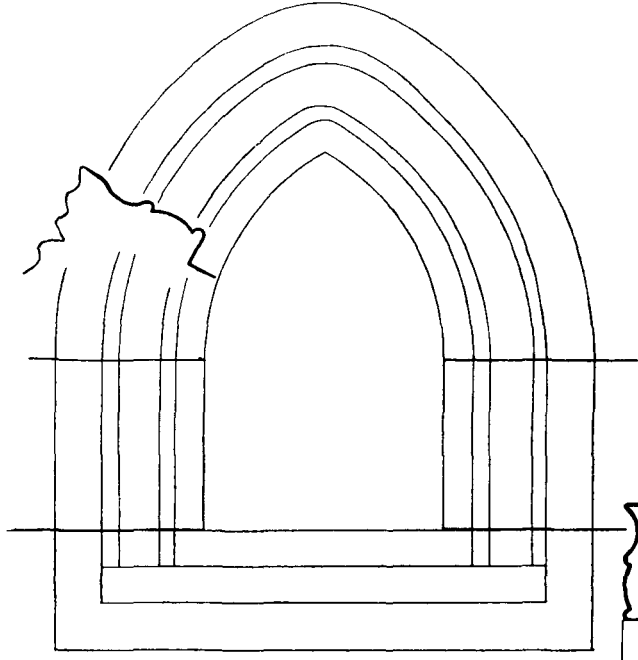


Fig. 3. The Sacrament House. From a photograph.

the character of the mouldings (see fig. 4) it is probable that the sacrament house is of very late date, not earlier than the end of the fifteenth century. The material is a local grey sandstone.

Almost in the middle of the north wall, and near the ground, is a recess for an effigy, which has now disappeared. The arch springs from plain rectangular jambs at a height of about 1 foot from the original ground level, and is segmental in form with a roll moulding on the edge and a hollow outside it. The length of the recess is 6 feet 7½ inches, the depth 1 foot 5 inches, and the height to the crown of the arch 2 feet 10 inches.

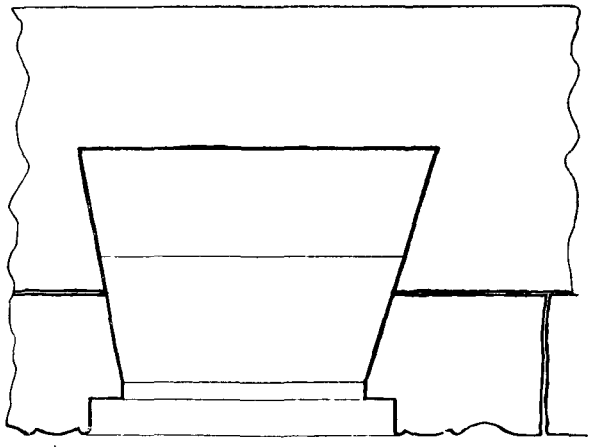
— ESTABLISHED CHURCH —
— CONTIN. ROSS. —
— RECESS IN NORTH WALL. —



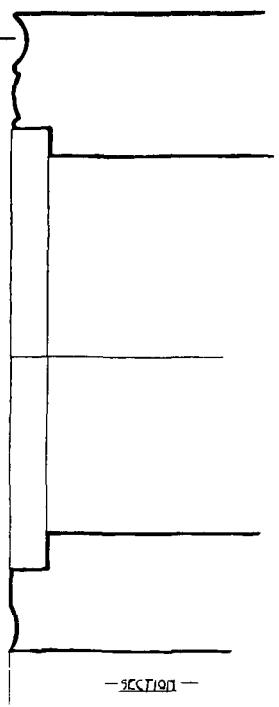
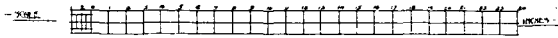
— HALF SIZE ELEVATION —



— FULL SIZE SECTION —
— or —
— Moulding round opening —



— PLAN —



— SECTION —

Fig. 4. Plan and Details of Elevation of the Sacrament House.

In the *Statistical Account* it is referred to as "cist Mhiclea Mhoir," the tomb of the big Maclay. The material is reddish-grey sandstone. Excavation to a depth of $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet failed to reveal any trace of the effigy, and only brought to light about half a dozen human skulls and a large number of bones thrown in indiscriminately.

Beneath the floor of the church were found in 1908 three carefully dressed stones, each square in section, but curved, as if to form part of an arch, terminating in vertical pointed edges set at right angles to the foot of the stone, so that the three curved stones if placed with the pointed edges of the vertical parts together would form a small structure like three out of four ribs of quadripartite vaulting supporting part of a square boss. These three stones, with a fourth, might perhaps have formed part of the framework of a small stone belfry, although the whole structure must necessarily have been very small.

The drawings and measurements of the sacrament house are by Mr Alexander Maclean, architect, a native of Contin.