

Some Heathenish and Superstitious Rites: A Letter from Lewis, 1700

DOMHNALL UILLEAM STIÙBHART

Ane Accompt of some heathenish & superstitious rites used
in the Isle of Lewis given by a friend to Mr Alan
Morison Minister of Ness 15 Aprill 1700

Within these hundred yeirs last there were many superstitious rites used, wherof I shall give ane accompt of such as I remember, although now extinct since yor fayrs entry to the Ministry.

I have seen and heard in all the Chappells and kerks that ever were roofed in this countrey, The people men & young women travelled in flocks from all quarters upon these saints days to whom these kerks were dedicated and kindled great fyres in these kerks all the neight over, & spent the whol neight in in pyping singing prophane songs, dancing & whoreing too, that seldom I heard of these meetings (when I was a child) but I heard also of such & such persons falling in fornication or adultery at such ocasioness, & this made a sport of. I know yor fayr had great difficultie, and did put the superieors of the countrey to it before he could get this custome quyt abolysed. I have been a boy travelling in yor parish and at four miles distance from the kerk Molruy, when wee came in view of it, all the company fell on there knees discovered there heads, saying there Pater noster, Praying the saint Molruy to blesse them. I have seen oxen sent 12 miles off to that kerk to be slane and given to the poor.

I have seen Mc Torcal Vc Varrish go about the Lewis wt the crosse Molruy, puting it thryce about everyones head & rubbing the cristall stones in it to there eyes. The like adoration was performed to flanan in Uig, & generally to all dedicated kerks wherof there are about 24 in countrey, but none of them at present roofed, save one in Stornway

Another paganish custome, wch I fear is not as yet abolysed, it being more privat is. Many when the[y] see the new Moon first after the chang, they pray standing before it, wt their heads discovered. Others anoynt there eyes sunday morning wt holy water. Others contribut a quantity of Corn & make malt of it, & brew it into ale, and drink it in the kerk pouring the first coigfull into the sea, that they may have fish the better that yeir and sea ware for there land, And all the town will joyn in this work but now its abolysed, they called this kynd of sacrificeing **Shion**, but the Etymology of that word I know not. Others killed ane heiffer or bul-

lock and threw the blood of it into the sea wt certane rites and ceremonies promiseing to themselves therby the more abundance of fysh and sea ware to be brought ashore to them

Another custome was upon Candlemas Even or in Irish féil **bríde** after supper, St Brigida's bed was made in a Seive wt a litle straw and clean cloaths, a handfull of barley and oats unthressed was taken and wrapped about wt Linnens well pinned, and made into the fashion of a womans body. Then every persone in the family man woman and child put in something wch he daily wor into the bed, and after all was compleet for the service, all the familie fell on thr faces and wt high voices cryed **ndanig briid, gun di riist**. I Remane

At Bragar april 15
1700

Yor loving Cousine
J Morisone

THE BACKGROUND

This extremely interesting letter is preserved in the Colin Campbell Collection in Edinburgh University Library, under the reference EUL MS 3097.12. It is a copy written in the hand of the Rev. Colin Campbell of Achnaba, minister of Ardchattan, himself. Although he published very little, Campbell (1644–1726) enjoyed a high reputation among his contemporaries as a mathematician, an astronomer and a theologian (cf. Ó Baoill). Although a great deal of Campbell's cultivated Latin verse survives in his papers, rather sadly there is very little concerning the culture of his own people. However, we are fortunate that the minister saw fit to copy the above letter. He probably intended it for the famous Welsh polymath Edward Lhwyd, who was at that time engaged in his antiquarian tour around the Celtic countries. Lhwyd had met the minister at the Synod of Argyll in 1699, and at the end of the year had written to him asking for help in gathering information, including: 'The Peculiar Games and Customes, observd on set days throughout the year; and any other Fashions yt you know peculiar to the Highlands' (Campbell and Thomson: xix, 4–5 [= Edinburgh University Library MS 3099.14]). Then as now, the people of the Outer Hebrides were perceived by other Gaels as preserving many customs otherwise lost on the mainland. It is to be expected that Campbell would keep an eye out for any useful material from these islands.

The original copy of the letter was written by the well-known Iain mac Mhurch' 'c Ailein (c.1630–1708), John Morison of Bragar, grandson of the last brieve of Lewis. In *An Clàrsair Dall*, William Matheson writes about him as follows:

He was tacksman of Bragar, entered in the records of the estate as a sixteen-pennyland – the largest agricultural unit in Lewis. John Morison was also a man of good education, and was the author of a description of his native island that is still extant. A performer on the violin, and a poet whose *ex tempore* verses figure prominently in Lewis tradition, he was a man of many accomplishments, accepted as leader and counsellor by his fellow islanders, more especially as they seem to have regarded him as the representative of the family who had been custodians of the law in Lewis for so many generations.¹

It was probably in the early 1680s that Iain mac Mhurch' 'c Ailein composed his (mainly geographical) description of Lewis for Sir Robert Sibbald, under the name 'Indweller' (cf. Maciver; Mitchell: 210–15). Iain obviously gave Martin Martin a great deal of the material concerning superstitious beliefs in Lewis which appeared in his *Description of the Western Isles of Scotland* of 1703; indeed, Martin had a high opinion of his informant, referring to him as 'John Morison of Bragir in Lewis, a Person of unquestionable Sincerity and Reputation' (Martin 1703: 315; cf. 28–30). It is immediately apparent that the material in the book and the letter come from the same source, except that the letter is rather franker than Martin was prepared to go in print. In passing, it is interesting to note that 'Indweller' writes that in the space of three weeks he had been able to cure 'the legg of a young gentleman which had been inflamed and cankered for the space of tuo years' with the *gioban Hiortach* (oil from 'the grease of ... fowles especially the soline goose': Mitchell: 212). Now, in a letter written just before he was about to set out for the Long Island in March 1696, Martin mentions 'the accident befallen my leg' (NLS MS 1389, fo.85). One wonders if the young traveller was himself treated by Morison – he certainly was very much a proselytiser for the benefits of the *gioban* in his later career.²

Iain mac Mhurch' 'c Ailein sent his original letter to his first cousin the Rev. Allan Morison of Barvas (c.1655–1723), who had as a glebe the tack of Tàbost, Ness.³ The Rev. Allan was the son, and successor, of another one of Martin's Lewis informants, the Rev. Donald or Daniel Morison (c.1620–?1696), who appears to have been the third son of Ailean mac Iain mhic Ùisdein, and thus was Iain mac Mhurch' 'c Ailein's uncle.⁴ It is likely that Colin Campbell obtained the letter as follows.

Two of the erstwhile episcopalian Skye ministers having submitted to the newly-presbyterian Synod of Argyll in May 1692, visitations were despatched to the northern Hebrides in 1695 and 1696, in order to judge the religious situation and to oust the remaining episcopalian clergy from their parishes.⁵ While holding a meeting in Clachan Sand, North Uist, on 26 July 1696, the synod's representatives heard how the island was being ministered to by the Rev. Alexander Cooper (c.1670–1706), who had taken over from his fellow episcopalian Allan Morison after the latter had received a call to Ness some four years previously.⁶ After the visitation had made its report, the synod determined to call Cooper and Morison to account, not only because of their episcopalianism, but also on suspicion of surreptitiously dividing up the teinds of the parishes for their own benefit.⁷

The Presbytery of Skye was unable to summon the two recusant ministers to a meeting of the synod in 1697 – a time of great hardship in the Gàidhealtachd – 'because of the stormines of the weather and great interveeneing Sea'.⁸ However, the following year the presbytery was more successful, and in June 1699 Cooper and Morison at last stood before the Synod of Argyll – possibly with Lhwyd as a spectator – to give account of themselves.⁹ Alexander Cooper took a compliant line with his inquisitors, presenting them with a 'testificat of his ordinatione', his licence to preach and his

call from the parish heretors, and baldly confessing: 'I do acknowledg my self highly faulty in my methods'.¹⁰ Accepting his statement, the synod allowed him 400 merks out of his stipend for the coming year, when he was to appear once again before them. Allan Morison, however, intended to stand his ground. But although he denied he had intruded himself into his parish, he was unable to present any firm proof to the contrary – a letter from the late Bishop James Ramsay to the episcopalian Presbytery of Lewis which he gave to the synod as evidence did not refer to him at all; neither did he have 'the Presb's act nor the Call of the people to produce'. He was ordered to appear the following summer, with the relevant documents 'and what other papers or evidences he hath in his favours'. However, like Cooper, he was still allowed to preach in his parish and collect his stipend:

But in the mean tyme the synod considering the greatnes of the charg of Nesse & Cladich, and that some relicts of Heathenisme & Popery ignorance and prophanity are there abounding, also considering the vast distance that parioch is from any supply the great number of souls wtin the sd parioch the discontignity of the towns the danger of the inrods of the Priests wt other weighty considerationes have allowed the sd Mr Alan this yeirs stipend he exercising his Minry in the sd parioch of Nesse & Cladich, and this allowance to continue to the nixt summer synod alanerly¹¹

The following year, on 7 June 1700, Allan Morison once more appeared before the Synod of Argyll, this time with the papers demanded of him. The synod, however, was unimpressed:

Compeared Mr Allan Moryson episcopall incumbent in Ness and Cladich in Lewis, conforme to the appointment of ye Last Summer Synod, & produced ye call of Ness & Cladich, and act of ye presbrie of Lewis yranent: The Synod considering the sd call to be of ye Date nyntie two yeares, & ye sd act of ye pretended episcopall pr[esbitr]ie of Lewis to be of no force, in regairde Episcopacie was abolished by act of Parliat some yeares befor, and finding yrfr yt the sd Mr Allan setled in ye sd charge wtout ye concurrence of anie church Judicature Declared ye sd call illegal; and that ye sd Mr Allan neyr has, nor had anie pastorall relation to ye sd parioch of Ness & Cladich & therto Delaying ye furdre consideration of yis effair to ye nixt Summer Synod.¹²

There the matter was allowed to rest. As long as Allan Morison continued to minister the gospel in what was the most distant parish in its territory, the Synod of Argyll was content to allow him to receive the ministerial stipend, and to be supervised by the Presbytery of Skye – although we may doubt just how much supervision, if any, he received from the ministers on the other side of the Minch, doubtless put off by the prospect of an arduous, expensive journey and a cold welcome awaiting them at the end of it.¹³ We should not imagine, however, that the minister of Ness was thereafter somehow confined to his bounds. Together with his cousin the Rev. Angus Morison, the notorious episcopalian minister of Contin Aonghas Dubh, he managed the affairs of his kindred, and also acted as tutor and administrator for the children of another erstwhile colleague, the Rev. Donald Nicolson, chief of the Nicolsons of Scorrybreac.¹⁴

Towards the end of Morison's life, however, there came about a curious twist in his fortunes. Following the failure of the jacobite risings of 1715 and 1719, and the exile of Uilleam Dubh, the Catholic Mackenzie chief, the forfeiture of the Seaforth estate in 1720 meant that at last the way was open for the Presbytery of Skye to impose its authority on the island, and to collect the ecclesiastical dues. A rental prepared for the Trustees of the Forfeited Estates in 1721 showed that the Lewis rents – and therefore its teinds – were considerably higher than the synod had previously thought. It is probably this which, in March 1721, spurred the Presbytery of Skye to petition the church authorities to erect a new system of five parishes on Lewis. The Trustees evidently demurred at having to more than double the amount of money they spent on the church, and thus, in July 1722, it was agreed that a commission would be sent by the presbytery to gauge:

the extent of the teinds That it may appear what fund yr is for provideing the Minrs As also that a proper Cognition be made by the Presbetry or any others the Lords shall be pleased to appoint of the bounds & extent of the sds Isles and of the method of divideing the same into paroches And what are the fittest places for situating the kirks and Manses

It is clear, however, that the commission could expect grudging help at best from any of the Lewis tacksmen they had listed as potential witnesses. For local knowledge they had to rely in particular on none other than Allan Morison:

being minister in the sd Island these twenty eight yeares by past and had frequent occasion to travell through the whole bounds therof

The report, recommending the erection of four parishes in the island, was drawn up at Stornoway on 17 October 1722. It was accepted by the trustees in Edinburgh, and on the 19 December the decret of disjunction and new erection for the island of Lewis was formally ratified.¹⁵

It is clear that the coming of the commission affected not only the island, but Allan Morison himself. On 2 August 1722 Allan Morison once more stood before the Synod of Argyll, having entered a petition in which he informed them that:

by the Grace of God's spirit studying the holy Scriptures with the Converse of men and Good Books he had attained to the full Conviction and persuasion of presbyterian ordination & Government, to be the ordination and Government of Christ's Church, As also the Doctrine contained in the Confession of ffaith Larger and Shorter Catechisms to be the true Doctrine of the holy scriptures, and that thence he had the greatest desire to pass the remainder of his Ministry and Life in Communion with the Ministers and people of this Established Church of Scotland¹⁶

In their presence, he therefore 'judicially disowned the Episcopal Hierarchie, and subscribed the Confession of ffaith . . ., and promised all due submission to the judicatories of this Church'.¹⁷

Although we are in no position to doubt that the Rev. Allan Morison's conversion to presbyterianism was anything but genuine, we might also note that the political and the ecclesiastical situation in Lewis had changed considerably following the forfeiture

of the Seaforth estate after the 1715 Rising. In the new circumstances which prevailed, Morison was no longer able to depend upon the protection of his chief, or the isolation of his parish. In addition, he was now growing old. He had to think about his wife, about his sons. His participation in the commission, and his submitting to the synod, may well have had ulterior motives.

Less than a year after confessing his errors before the Synod of Argyll, on 5 July 1723, the Rev. Allan Morison died.¹⁸ It is noteworthy that the presbytery granted his wife a widow's pension, and that Morison was succeeded in his parish by his son Murdoch (*c.*1695–1767) (CH2/473/6: 68; Matheson 1970: 247; Scott 7: 200). As the last episcopalian minister of the island, Allan Morison's death marks the end of an era in the church history of Lewis. His lasting memorial, however, is the arrangement of four parishes which remains in Lewis, albeit with subsequent modifications, to this day.

It will have been noted that Iain mac Mhurch' 'c Ailein wrote his letter to Allan just two months before the latter was due to appear for a second time before the Synod of Argyll. Whether it was deliberately composed for the occasion or not, it must surely have been part of the evidence presented by Morison to his presbyterian adversaries in June 1700. Here was concrete proof, from the oldest and most well-regarded tacksman in Lewis, that the parish certainly did not abound with 'relicts of Heathenisme & Popery ignorance and prophanity' as the presbyterians alleged, and that this state of affairs in no small measure due to the efforts of the episcopalian church, in particular thanks to the work of Allan's father, the Rev. Donald Morison. We are fortunate that the Rev. Colin Campbell saw fit to copy the letter, whether on behalf of the synod, for Edward Lhwyd, or just for his own personal interest. Indeed, who knows if his uncle's letter might even have helped Allan Morison keep his charge and his stipend at a time when other episcopalian ministers all over Scotland were losing their livelihood?

It is worth mentioning that Allan Morison was not without a friend, or at least a close relation, in court when he was called before the synod in 1700. This was the Rev. John Morison (*c.*1675–1747), who had just been ordained as minister of Glenelg the previous year. He was in fact the second youngest son of Iain mac Mhurch' 'c Ailein himself, and may well have had a hand in asking his father to write such a letter on Allan's behalf.¹⁹ We should also note another member of the Morison clerical dynasty who was a near neighbour of Colin Campbell, namely the Rev. Donald of Kilbrandon and Kilchattan (*c.*1678–1746), grandson of Aonghas mac Ailein, who was married to Christian, daughter of Martin's third Morison informant – and brother of Iain mac Mhurch' 'c Ailein – the Rev. Kenneth Morison of Stornoway (*c.*1647–1720).²⁰

THE LETTER

'Ane Accompt' is a fascinating – though all too short – document, taking us back to the childhood of Iain mac Mhurch' 'c Ailein in the 1630s, at a time when Lewis had not yet been totally subdued by the Mackenzies. What is immediately apparent is how much

the Protestant religion had affected the island even during Iain's lifetime, some 150 years before the coming of evangelical religion. Although Allan's father, the Rev. Donald, had taken great pains to extirpate the 'heathenish & superstitious rites' described in the letter, local tradition suggests that he did not enjoy total success in his efforts.

Perhaps the Rev. Donald's most notable achievement – if we might call it that – was the abolishing of the custom of visiting chapels on the feast days of the saints to which they were dedicated. He was certainly not the first protestant minister to have tried, as appears – in terms very reminiscent of the letter – from an official report on Lewis composed by Capt. John Dymes in 1630:

In their religion they are very ignorant and have been given to the idolatrous worshipping of divers Sts. as doth appear by their Chappells wch are yett to be seene, but they are now most espetically devoted to one of their Sts. called St. Mallonuy whose Chappell is seated in the north part of the Ile, whome they have in great veneration to this daie and keepe the Chappell in good repaire. This St. was for cure of all their wounds and soares and therefore those that were not able to come vnto the Chappell in person they were wont to cutt out the porporcion of their lame armes or leggs in wood wth the forme of their sores and wounds thereof and send them to the St. where I have seen them lying vpon the Altar in the Chappell. Within the Chappell there is a Sanctum Sanctorum wch is soe holy in their estimation that not anie of their weomen are suffered to enter therein. Anie woman wth child dareth not to enter within the doores of the Chappell, but there are certaine places without where they go to their devotions. They had two gen[er]all meetings in the yeare at this Chappell, the one at Candlemas, and the other at Alhollautide where their custome was to eat and drinke vntill they were druncke. And then after much dancinge and dalliance together they entred the chappell at night with lights in their hands where they continued till next morninge in their devotions. The last tyme of their meeting was at Candlemas last. They were prevented of their Idolatrous worpp by a gent. whoe is a Minister in the Ile, who albeit the place was farre from his aboade and out of his Cure, hee mett them at their Assembly in the Chappell where he began first to reason wth them, then to admonish them and afterwards to threaten them with God His Judgmts and the Lawes of the Realme, in somuch as divers of the better sort of them promised to forsake that wonted Idolatry of theirs.²¹

Whoever the gentleman minister was, his strictures mostly went unheeded; it would be another generation before the custom was – apparently – 'quyt abolysed' by Allan Morison's father.²²

We can see the original intention of such celebrations in the papal letter of 1403: 'To all the Christian faithful. Indult granting an indulgence to visitors to the church of St. Mary in Barwas in the isle of Lewis, Sodor diocese, on certain feast days and those who contribute to its reparation' (McGurk: 103; also Barrell: 254; cf. Watkins). In other words, the visiting – and indeed the upkeep – of the chapels in Lewis was not just a matter of 'superstitious rites', but closely tied in with patterns of belief, 'official' as well as 'unofficial', of the old pre-reformation religion. The letter suggests that the twenty-four chapels on the island were at the very least culpably neglected by the

established church, not just in an attempt to keep social order – and, in the absence of parish clergy, the feast days certainly seem to have degenerated – but also in an effort to abolish the cults of their saints, and indeed to efface the remaining traces of the Catholic church in Lewis.

Campbell's 'Molruy' shows that the minister misread as Maol-rubha the original letter's 'Molvey'. The dedication perplexed nineteenth-century visitors too: Second Corporal Michael Hayes of the Ordnance Survey recorded it in May 1852 as 'Fo'luith', while in the brief notes Alexander Carmichael jotted down on 27 October 1873 from the then bed-ridden Ness seanchaidh Angus Gunn (*An Guinneach*), it appears as 'Bholai'ey', 'Phollaiy', 'Pholley' and 'Phol Aoi'. In other words the temple was consecrated to 'Moluaidh', a name derived through the variant 'Moloch' from Moluag, the saint of Carmichael's native Lismore (EUL Carmichael Watson MS 115, fos.2v, 3; NAS (West Register House) RH4/23/148; cf. Carmichael i: 126–7; Robson 1991: ii, 99–103; also Mackenzie 1792: 290). It is interesting to note that the alternative form of the saint's name – 'Molonachus' – appearing as Dyme's 'St. Mallonuy', as 'templa St Molonochi' in a fragmentary list of island chapels from c.1700 preserved in the Scottish Catholic Archives, and as '*Tiample Maloni*' in Colin Mackenzie's 1792 account of Lewis antiquities, certainly persisted – possibly under the influence of the clergy – into the mid-nineteenth century, being recorded by Arthur Mitchell as 'Maolonfhadh' (SCA SM3/14, '75'; Mackenzie 1792: 291; Mitchell 1860–2: 267; for St Moluag, see Clancy: 219–23, 225–6; Dransart: 234–40; Watson: 292–3)

Nevertheless, Angus Gunn averred that 'Bhol. came fr[om] Baile na Neirv where the King lived', *Baile na Nirribhidh* evidently being a rationalisation of *Baile na Beirbhe*, Bergen, an entrepôt whose name was of course as familiar to nineteenth-century Leòdhasaich as it was to their Viking ancestors. After a peculiar and apparently counterintuitive aside that 'Phollaiy built his temple put coal [?charcoal] under the (Steigh) to put an echo in [i]t', Gunn told Carmichael how, after the walls were built, the saint prayed for a roof: 'thainic gu[th] thuige 'n dei dhan choil[each] gairm e dhol a thearnadh gu trai Sheannta [i.e. Tràigh Shanndaidh]. gu ro an ceann eir tin [tighinn].' The roof magically fitted the new church: 'Rinn i n ceann 's cha ro bior a chor s cha ro bior as ionais. No nails in it. Spars & couples fitting into one another so ingenously that it wld never move.' This may or may not be a distant memory that the original church had a keel-shaped roof.²³

Given Carmichael's own statement in his manuscript memoir of Gunn that 'My limited time and imperfect understanding of the kind courtesy old mans impaired enunciation prevented me writing down much of his highly interesting old lore' (EUL Carmichael Watson MS 230(a), fo.26), the more detailed version of the legend he appended thereto may be somewhat embroidered, probably with information gleaned from other Ness seanchaidhean:

A son of the King of Scandinavia became a good man and wishing to perform good deeds for the evil deeds he had done he built a church down at Rudh Eorpaidh and called it

Teampull Maoluag, Saint Maoluag's or Saint Malachie's Temple the walls of which are still entire. When the walls of the temple were built the King's son had no roof to put on and he was in great straits. He did not know in all the living world what to do for a roof for the weather was so stormy that his fathers galleys could not go to Lochlan for wood to make a roof. The prince prayed and prayed and when he prayed his best a voice came to him in a dream of the night and told him to go to the Stoth and that he would find a roof there. The Prince arose and went down to the Stoth and there he found a roof floating in the Port prepared and of the size required for his temple. The roof was taken up and placed on the walls of the building which it fitted.²⁴

Teampall Mholuaidh was unquestionably one of the most important centres of worship in Lewis during the late mediæval period, the focus of a complex of temporal and ecclesiastical power alike. For some centuries both Morisons and MacLeods possessed power bases there; indeed, the residual but insistent evidence of local tradition might conceivably be interpreted to suggest that we are not so much dealing with two closely allied families as two branches of the same original kindred. Donald Murray, drawing upon information supplied by his namesake the Eorpaidh seanchaidh, describes the Teampall as 'the Laird's Church. The MacLeod Chiefs of Lewis had a mansion house in Eorobie in close proximity to the Temple and no one could find access to it but through a gateway which went through the mansion house'. A related site somewhat to the south, now known as Cnoc a' Chaisteil, is described by the Rev. Donald MacDonald in the Old Statistical Account as once occupied by '*Caistel Olgre (i. e.)* Olaus his Castle'. His contemporary Colin Mackenzie ascribes the Teampall's construction to 'one of the first McLeods of Lewis', while William C. MacKenzie recounts a tradition that it was built by 'King Olaf of Norway', a clear error for Olghair, ancestor of the MacLeods – and possibly the Morisons as well. However, there may already have been a Teampall Mholuaidh in Eorpaidh before the coming of these kindreds. It is noteworthy that the older of the two chapels on Pabaigh in the Sound of Harris is also dedicated to Moluag; according to the Bannatyne Manuscript, both Ness and Pabaigh appertained to the mysterious 'Clan Iгаа [Clann a' Ghobha] or the descendants of the Armourer' whose heiress is supposed to have married GilleMhoire, the progenitor of the Morisons. Perhaps tellingly, the later, larger temple in Pabaigh is dedicated to Mary, as is the chapel in Barvas, the parish church of Ness and the West Side. The MacLeod gateway, 'a zigzag covered walk', was apparently finally choked by sand in the first half of the nineteenth century; much of the stonework of both rampart and stronghold had already been plundered for local use, and – as part of a wider and seemingly deliberately systematic reuse of the material of local historic structures to construct new institutional foci for church and education – in the building of Lionail Schoolhouse (Murray: n.p.; MacPhail 1898b; MacDonald 1795–7: 270; Mackenzie 1792: 291; MacKenzie 1919: 141; Martin 1703: 48; Lawson: 12–14; Robson 1997: 55; *ibid.* 2004: 18; NMS SAS MS 28/'(d) Lews', 1; 1/2(f)', fo.7; SSS PN1966/10 [Louis Murray, Tàbost], no.44; cf. EUL Carmichael Watson MS 95, fo.35v; MS 115, fo.4v; the ancestry of the MacLeods is discussed in MacLeod 2000; Matheson 1978–80; Morrison: 1–20; Sellar; also Abernethy).

After describing the little stream near the temple known as Uisge, or Sruthan, na Comhraich, the Water of the Sanctuary, the Rev. Malcolm MacPhail writes:

MacLeod of Eoropie (MacLeod of Lewis), tradition asserts, erected a cross in an enclosed space in South Dell, Ness, known to this day as ‘Buaille na Crois’ – the cross enclosure – and enacted a law to the effect that the whole of the Ness district to the north of ‘Buaille na Crois’ was to be a sanctuary. He was obliged, says our legend, to remove the cross to ‘Uisge na Comhraiche’ near his own mansion-house.²⁵

Even among the plethora of *asyla* throughout the islands – indeed, possibly the precincts of every chapel may once have afforded protection to the fugitive – the sanctuary in the north of Lewis stood out, embracing as it did an entire district (EUL Carmichael Watson MS 95, fos.27–8; Matheson 1972–4: 398–9; Robertson: 256–62; SSS SA1949/9/A6 [Aonghas Caimbeul, ‘Am Puilean’, Suaineabost]). Judging by its description on Blaeu’s map as ‘Ard Chombrick’ – ‘Àird Chomraich’: height, or better peninsula, of the sanctuary – the area today called ‘An Taobh Thall’ was still known as a refuge, possibly even to mainlanders, until at least the early seventeenth century. It is not necessarily a coincidence that this major sanctuary was immediately adjacent to the Taigh Mór, the seat of the Morison brieves of Tàbost, who must have practised their legal knowledge as mediators or legal brokers between fugitives and would-be avengers (see Hyams: 26–30). One might also note the well-known tradition of how ‘MacLeòid’ (or, alternatively, the pygmies of Luchruban!) condemned a man to death on Cnoc Fianais, then had him taken outwith the refuge’s bounds to a hillock now known as Bruga Frangais in order to carry out the sentence (MacKenzie 1904–5: 255; SSS PN1966/14 [Norman MacRitchie, Na Còig Peighinnean], no.77).

The fame of Teampall Mholuaidh outlasted that of its sanctuary. Around 1700 it is recorded:

In Levisa variæ erant celiæ, quarum una no[mi]ne St Molonochi in hanc usque die[m] miraculis clara²⁶

A century later ‘a great deal of superstitious veneration’ was still paid to the church, some of the people still retaining ‘a few of the Popish superstitions’ (MacDonald 1795–7: 270):

The country people send their friends that are long lingering in sickness, to sleep here for a night, where they believe the Saint grants them a cure, or relief by death.²⁷

Further details were recorded by the Rev. John Downie, recently transferred from Stornoway to Urray, in a letter of 14 April 1789 for the ecclesiastical antiquary Lieutenant-General George Henry Hutton:

There are several Chapels up & down the Island, which still bear the name of the Saints to whom they were dedicated, as John Peter Mary Bridget &c., the walls of them in general are pretty entire, & surrounded by a Cemetery. Ignorance & Superstition have created & to this day propagated a perswasion that cures are performed by addressing the tutelar Saints

of these Solitary mansions. One in particular in the district of Ness is larger & more entire than any of the rest. Patients of disordered intellects are freq[uen]tly bro[ugh]t thither, a bed of straw & blankets is made up for them within the walls, where they are left till morning alone. The Saint is expected to appear to them in person, to cure them. I know not his name in English or Latin, but in Gallic *Mo Lài* is the name. *Mo* is only a term of endearment used by his Votaries.²⁸

This raises the interesting possibility that the cure was effected with the covert participation of the locals themselves, maybe through the *cléireach* or clerk of the *Teampall*.

Writing in May 1833, George Clayton Atkinson records that ‘St Malachi’s’:

has much celebrity throughout the Western Islands, for the power it possesses of curing insane persons, and those afflicted with a variety of diseases.²⁹

That the prestige of the *Teampall* endured so long might be ascribed to the increased isolation of Ness from the island authorities, temporal and spiritual alike, during the eighteenth century. It seems that following the death of Allan Morison his cousin Donald, grandson of Iain mac Mhurch’ ’c Ailein, took over the tack of Tàbost. Barvas thus became the centre of worship in the parish. The ‘remote and ignorant’ district of Ness was largely neglected ‘owing to the distance the want of Roads and the number of rapid waters which intervine particularly in the winter Season’ (NAS CH2/473/1, 297–8; also 324; Matheson 1970: 199). Although the Ordnance Survey name-books record that *Teampall Pheadair* at *Suaineabost* was said to have been rebuilt in 1756, it was towards the end of the century, and particularly with the accession of Rev. Donald MacDonald to Barvas parish in 1790, that the church initiated a more active approach to the district. The process of spreading ecclesiastical authority may have already been underway before MacDonald arrived from *Applecross*. Writing in 1813 of *Teampall na Crò Naoimh* in *Galson*, William Daniell recounts and comments:

It was visited till within these last few years by many of the peasantry, who would assemble here at stated periods to feast and dance for two or three successive nights. At one of these merry meetings it was ascertained that a man had taken an indecorous liberty with a female; the hallowed purity of the temple was in consequence destroyed and it has not since been resorted to. As a proof of the high offence taken at this indignity by the genius of the place, it is asserted, and firmly believed by the islanders that a taper lighted within the walls is immediately extinguished. The fable affords a pleasing exemplification of their simple and guileless manners, and this is not the only instance in which popular superstition has been converted to moral purpose. The removal of such delusions is a natural consequence of social improvement, but it is highly important that the dissemination of sound and rational improvements should immediately supplant them and establish restraints of superior efficacy.³⁰

If Daniell’s account is to be trusted, it may be connected with the Barvas kirk session’s hounding in the early 1780’s of ‘Murdo Clairach Tenant in Galson’ – seemingly the

cléireach or clerk of the teampall – for ‘keeping as a Domestic in his family a woman with whom he had been guilty of Adultery, to which it was notour he had paid no regard.’ (CH2/473/1: 211–12; also 215, 224).

Writing in the middle of the following decade, MacDonald tells of how the place of worship in Ness, ‘an old Popish church, called St Peter’s, was enlarged and rebuilt last year; it is thatched with heath.’ (MacDonald 1795–7: 268) The rebuilding involved the destruction of other chapels in the district. Angus Gunn, probably referring to the second of these reconstructions, told Carmichael that ‘When Eaglais Phead was built the roof was taken off [Teampall Mholuaidh] & put on’; Teampall Pheadair was extended using the ‘stones of [nearby] Temple Tomais’ (EUL Carmichael Watson MS 115, fos.2v, 4v). The evangelical revival begun by the schoolmaster John MacLeod in Galson in 1820, culminating in the erection of the government church at Cross nine years later, brought the era of community worship in the teampall to an end.³¹

Nevertheless, roofless as it was, Teampall Mholuaidh retained a residual sanctity even after the evangelical ascendancy took hold in the district. In 1873 Angus Gunn told Carmichael that until forty or fifty years previously: ‘When peop[le] came ashore (say fr[om] Rona) Clann ic ill Mhoire) [sic] they went deisail an Teample & gail [gabhail] an Urni – before going to the sermon of the min[i]st[er].’ (EUL Carmichael Watson MS 115, fo.3) At the end of the nineteenth century, the Rev. Malcolm MacPhail states:

Such was the veneration the Eoropie Fane was held within living memory, even sixty years ago, by the people of the Eoropie district, that they would pass on the north side of the ruined temple when leaving the stackyard, but return from the field on the south side – thus completing the tour of the temple ‘Deiseil’.³²

According to Donald Murray:

When I was a boy it was believed by some that if one afflicted with insanity could be coaxed to sleep within the precincts of the Temple he was sure to be at least partially restored. The rites and ceremonies after arriving at the Temple were in the key days of the shrine particular and minute. After arriving at dusk the patient was made to walk round the Temple seven times sunwise (deiseal) and made to drink water from the holy Well of St Olaf (Tobair an Naoimh Oluaidh) [*recte* Tobar an Naoimh Moluaidh] and was then copiously sprinkled with the same water, but unless the patient slept within the Temple after this preparatory treatment there could be no cure.³³

Murray’s description is supplemented by the earlier account of Arthur Mitchell:

The patient walks seven times round the temple, is sprinkled with water from St Ronan’s Well, which is close at hand, is then bound and deposited for the night on the site of the altar. If he sleeps, it is believed that a cure will follow, if not, the powers are unpropitious, and his friends take him home, believing it to be the will of Heaven that he shall remain as he is. The water was formerly brought from the well in an old stone cup, which was left in the keeping of the family, regarded as the descendants of the *clerk of the temple*.³⁴

Mitchell goes on to recount that patients have even been brought to the temple from

the mainland, though the cure only worked for two islanders, one of whom later had a relapse.

Despite his elaborate and apparently trustworthy account, checked by ‘a native of Lewis’ (probably the Rev. Malcolm MacPhail), we might doubt whether the ceremony was still being observed, as Mitchell implies. Indeed, MacPhail records that the last visits for such a purpose ‘as far as I can guess from memory, occurred in the latter end of the forties’ (MacPhail 1898b) – a time of great distress in the island. This is substantiated by Second Corporal Hayes of the Ordnance Survey, who recorded in 1852, on the authority of his informant John Morrison of Cnoc Àrd, that the temple

remains under the protection of some Saint or Angel by whose power or through whose Intercession insane People who sleep in it one night are Restored to their senses. The Experiment they say was successfully made a few years ago by An Uig man.³⁵

The temple remained a shell until it was restored under the auspices of the episcopalian church at the beginning of the twentieth century.³⁶

Iain mac Mhurch’ c Ailein’s statement that at the end of the seventeenth century only one temple in the island remained roofed might appear to be contradicted by the fact that from the date on its lintel Teampall Amhlaidh in Gress appears to have been rebuilt in 1681. The Lewis presbytery were prepared to keep some of the more convenient chapels standing, while allowing the majority to fall into disrepair.

The identity of the mac Thorcail mhic Mhairis who went round the island “with the crosse Molruy” is somewhat obscure. Mairis, or Maurice, is of course the alternative non-Catholic name for GilleMhoire – hence Clann MhicGilleMhoire turn into Na Moireasdanaich. Round transparent rock crystals were of course common for curing eye diseases, among other ailments. Although it might be tempting to imagine the cross to be similar in design – albeit doubtless not on such an exalted level artistically – to the famous twelfth-century Cross of Cong in the National Museum of Ireland, it may be more likely that we are dealing with a simple object, probably wooden, with crystals set in holes drilled for that purpose, perhaps similar in shape to, although rather smaller than, the metre-high cross from Rona presently exhibited in Comunn Eachdraidh Nis, Tàbost (cf. Beith: 39–40, 152–6, 158; Black: 434–44, 448–50, 454–5, 470, 503, 522–6; Fisher: 115; Martin 1703: 225–6; Muir: 191–2).

Iain mac Mhurch’ c Ailein’s statement concerning the cogfull of ale poured into the sea, that ‘they called this kynd of sacrifeceing **Shion**’ would tend to support Capt. Thomas’s hypothesis that the name originally derived from Old Norse son-, an atonement or sacrifice (Thomas: 522n.2). However, we need not think that Martin Martin, reporting how the sacrificer ‘cry’d out with a loud Voice saying, **Shony**, *I give you this Cup of Ale*’ (Martin 1703: 28), mistakenly applied the name of the rite to a ‘Sea-God’ object. It may have been that the rite was syncretically assimilated by islanders to the honour of the mysterious indigenous supernatural being ‘Sionn’ or ‘Sionnaidh’, whose root is clearly cognate with words such as sionn, sionnach, sionnachan and

sionnaich.³⁷ It might be suggested that the second element in the Lewis kenning for the fairies – ‘muintir Fhionnlaigh’ – and in the local names for the dangerous little whirlwind which sometimes occurs on the moor – ‘uspag Fhionnlaigh’ or ‘maighdean Fhionnlaigh’ – is a modern ‘rationalisation’ of the original ‘Sionnaidh’ (cf. MacPhail 1896: 402; 1900: 442, 443; Anon.: 157–8, 170; A. Campbell: 8; also Mackenzie 1904–5: 258; *ibid.* 1905: 267; Campbell (ed. Black): 316n.117). Complicating matters still further is Ronald Black’s ingenious suggestion that the Nisich were pouring libations to John the Baptist, though one might trace the name back to the Old Norse form Jón rather than to ‘Seonaidh’.³⁸

It is worth noting that, although Martin says that the custom was kept ‘at Hallow-tide’, Iain mac Mhurch’ c Ailein does not tie it down to any particular time of year. Indeed, Alexander Carmichael recounts that it was carried out at midnight on Maundy Thursday, Diardaoin a’ Bhrochain Mhóir, but his claim that the rite was still celebrated – at any rate openly – in Ness in the early nineteenth century seems rather suspect (Carmichael i: 162–3). However, there can be no doubt but that a number of rites connected with the sea did continue intermittently up until the evangelical period at the very least, and not only in districts such as Carloway, Bernera and Uig whose people may have had little time for Morison ministers. Such invocations have a habit of resurfacing during times of crisis – it is worth remembering that Lewis had been suffering a terrible famine for several years when Iain was writing in 1700. St. Brianuilt, sister of St. Ronan, was, it seems, invoked for sea-ware in the late eighteenth century; while in the early nineteenth century there was apparently an incidence of ‘tamnadh’, a sacrifice of either a sheep or, more commonly, a goat, at the beginning of the fishing season.³⁹

Although such sea rites, with a definite goal in mind, appear to have remained ‘underground’ despite the church’s disapproval, the custom of making the Leabaidh Bhrìghde (‘in a seive’ or criathar)⁴⁰ on the eve of Latha Féill Bhrìghde (February 1) has quite fallen out of memory in Lewis. In the Outer Hebrides, the rite survived in Uist the longest: Alexander Carmichael has given us a very elaborate account of the various festivities connected with it (Carmichael i: 166–73). However, although Carmichael wrote his description in the present tense, it appears from Father Allan McDonald’s work from the turn of last century that it was last celebrated in Uist in the middle of the nineteenth century at the very latest (cf. J. L. Campbell: 159–60, 168; also Campbell (ed. Black): 540–1; Hutton: 134–8; Ó Catháin; Ó Duilearga: 320–3, 408). Similar customs may possibly have endured in Argyllshire up to the end of the century (Tolmie: 102; Mackenzie 1935: 190–2).

The words cried by the celebrants of the rite – *ndanig briid, gun di riist* (‘[Gu]n tàinig Brid’, *gun dì* [i] rithist’) – appear to have been mistranslated by Martin as ‘*Briid* is come, *Briid* is welcome’, where he must have understood ‘dì’ as being connected with phrases such as ‘S e làn dìth ur beatha’, ‘Tha sibh dìth-bheathte’ (Martin 1703: 119). However, ‘dì’ is best read as ‘tì’, an older present subjunctive form of the verb ‘thig’ – for a similar usage we might look at a line by Uilleam Ros in his song *Moladh*

a' bhàird air a thìr fhéin: 'Gun tì Nollaig Mhór le sonas'.⁴¹ We might thus translate the call as: 'Bride is come; may she come again'.

It is very interesting, and rather unexpected, that Iain mac Mhurch' 'c Ailein used classical Gaelic script when writing the Gaelic words in his letter. We might see this as a faint echo of the learning of his ancestors the brieves; then again, we might remember that his grandfather Ailean had an Irish mother, and had himself spent some time in Ireland during the years when the 'ewill troubles' were convulsing his homeland. Iain appears to have had one of his sons educated at an Irish bardic school: this, of course, being none other than Ruairidh, the famous Clàrsair Dall.⁴²

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to the staff of Comunn Eachdraidh Nis, Edinburgh University Library, the National Archives of Scotland, the National Library of Scotland, the National Museums of Scotland, the School of Scottish Studies, and the Scottish Catholic Archives for their patience and forbearance, as well as to Douglas Ansdell, Paul Bibire, Ronald Black, Abigail Burnyeat, Aonghas MacCoinnich, Màiri Maciver, Finlay MacLeod, Mary Macleod, Colm Ó Baoill, Roibeard Ó Maolalaigh, Michael Robson, John Shaw, Christine Smith, Andrew Wiseman, and Alex Woolf for their suggestions and advice. An earlier version of this article appeared in *Fios a' Bhaile*, the journal of Comann Eachdraidh Bharabhais agus Bhrù.

NOTES

- 1 Matheson 1970: xli; traditions and documents concerning him are recorded and annotated on 206–44.
- 2 Cf. Martin 1703: 185; 'an approved Vulnerary for Man or Beast'; also 282, 285; Martin 1698: 57–8, 112–13.
- 3 Cf. Matheson 1970: 246; Scott vii: 191, 200; NLS Acc. 9711, Box 7/2, 138–41 (notes from Norman Morrison, *Adventures of Angus Og and other tales* [Inverness, 1940]: 72–5).
- 4 Cf. Matheson 1970: 189, 245–6; Scott vii: 200, 205; MacDonald 1981: 376; Martin 1703: 11, 19, 23, 24, 29; NLS MS 1314, fo.9.
- 5 NAS CH2/557/3, 94–7, 99, 133, 141, 753–4, 758 [*recte* 153–4, 158]; CH2/557/14; NLS MS 1307, fos.130, 133.
- 6 CH2/557/14, 'Minuts off The visitation Sent by ye Synod off Argyll to visit ye Hebrides Anno Domini MDCXCVI', 7–8; cf. Scott vii: 191.
- 7 CH2/557/3, 759 [159].
- 8 *Ibid.*, 774–5 [174–5].
- 9 *Ibid.*, 788–9 [188–9].
- 10 *Ibid.*, 821 [221]; cf. NLS MS 1307, fo.136v.

- 11 CH2/557/3, 823 [223].
- 12 *Ibid.*, 859 [259]; see also 828 [228]. It is interesting that Alexander Cooper did not attend, nor was he condemned as a result.
- 13 CH2/557/4, 46, 82, 242, 254–5; /5, 215; NAS E655/13/32; E655/16/53.
- 14 NLS MS 1316, fo.186v; NRA(S) 2950 (MacLeod of Dunvegan) /1/850/1–6; also NAS RD2/91, 521, 522.
- 15 For the information in the preceding paragraphs, see NAS TE19/823; also CH1/2/36, fos.172–7; CH1/2/46, fos.158–9; E655/13/32; E655/16/6; E655/19/5, /8–9; E655/26/3.
- 16 CH2/557/5, 280–1.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 283.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 296.
- 19 CH 2/557/3, 855, 859 [255, 259]; see also 761, 784, 808, 824 [161, 184, 208, 224]; /4, 3, 171, 173, 241; Matheson 1970: 196–8; Scott vi: 446; vii: 49–50, 146–7, 149. John Morison was father of another Rev. John Morison, the famous Petty Seer.
- 20 Matheson 1970: 189, 191–2; Scott vi: 89; vii: 205–6; viii: 692; MacDonald 1981: 376; Martin 1703: 29. There is a letter from the Rev. Donald to Colin Campbell preserved in EUL MS 3097.8. It is interesting to note that the Rev. Donald Morison's brother, Rev. William of Tiree (c.1690–1735) (Scott vi: 120), had a son John who appears to have taken over the Campbell family's tack of Achnaba, possibly while Dugald Campbell, great-grandson of Colin, was away fighting in India (Ó Baoill: 467; MacKinnon and Morrison iii: 31n.2).
- 21 MacKenzie 1903: 592; the evidence concerning the various chapels in the north of Lewis is expertly dealt with in Robson 1997. For Crùisle nam Ban Torrach, 'where the frail women were put', cf. EUL Carmichael Watson MS 115, fos.2v, 5. For Candlemas, cf. Hutton: 138–45; also Martin 1703: 29; Daniell v 5: 63.
- 22 MacKenzie suggests that the minister might have been Farquhar Clerk, recorded as minister of Ui in 1642 (*ibid.*: 524–5).
- 23 Reused timbers from it apparently still survive in the district: cf. SSS PN1966/17 [Angus Campbell, 'Am Puilean', Suaineabost], no.23; Robson 1997: 71. Carmichael possibly misunderstood Angus Gunn's explanation of how the mortar for the temple wall was made: cf. SSS SA1949/9/A5 [Angus Campbell, 'Am Puilean', Suaineabost].
- 24 EUL Carmichael Watson MS 230(a), fos.27–8; it is unfortunate that we do not have an account of Teampall Mholuaidh from William Watson, who gathered lore in Ness in 1867: cf. EUL Carmichael Watson MS 95, fo.31v; NLS Acc. 9711, Box 1/4, 285.
- 25 MacPhail 1898b.
- 26 SCA SM3/14, '75'.
- 27 Mackenzie 1792: 291.
- 28 NLS Adv. MS 29.4.2 (xi), fos.192v–193; cf. *ibid.* (xiii), fo.50v.
- 29 Quine: 127.
- 30 Daniell v: 63

- 31 NAS CH2/473/2, 50, 57, 69–70, 74, 80, 82, 84, 115–18, 134–5, 138, 154–6, 163–4, 165–8; NLS Acc. 9711, Box 7/2, 28–9; MacFarlane: 13–18, 47–9, 88–90; MacGilliosa: 13–15; Macleod: 107, 113–14; Mac-Neacail: 8.
- 32 MacPhail 1898b; also idem 1895, 168.
- 33 Murray: n.p.; cf. Mould: 176.
- 34 Mitchell 1860–2: 268; cf. also – although erroneously ascribing the temple to ‘St. Clement’ – Daniell: v, 62.
- 35 NAS (West Register House) RH4/23/148; cf. NMS SAS MS 28/‘3’, fo.10: ‘the daft lad of Aird Bheag’.
- 36 See Barber; Meaden.
- 37 Cf. Carmichael v: 388–91; vi: 127; and maybe ii: 352; but note also Ronald Black’s conjectures in Campbell (ed. Black): 232–3, 332n.181, 497n.815, 548–9, 590n.114.
- 38 Martin 1703: 29; MacPhail 1895: 165; Ronald Black is at present preparing a book about the Gaelic year based upon his ‘Quern-Dust Calendar’ articles in the *West Highland Free Press*. For guidance in these complex matters, my thanks to Paul Bibire, who also suggests the relevance of Són, the mythical vessel in which the mead of poetry was kept, ‘obtained from the dwarves by marooning them on a tidal rock until they handed it over’.
- 39 MacPhail 1895: 164–5, 166; idem 1898a; Thomas: 522n.2; NAS GD492/186, Capt. F. W. L. Thomas to Sir Arthur Mitchell, 12 Nov. 1868; NMS SAS MS 28/‘3’, fo.8; SSS Maclagan MSS, 8529–30; Macbain: 171; also Martin 1703: 109; Macdonald 2000: 124–5; EUL Carmichael Watson MS 115, fos.3v, 4v. Perhaps the killing of a goat or sheep was a later replacement for the ‘heiffer or bullock’ whose sacrifice is described in the letter.
- 40 Cf. J. L. Campbell: 159.
- 41 Cf. Calder: 70, 249; also Thomson 1988: xxxvii; 1962: xxix; Ferguson: 95.
- 42 Matheson 1970: xlii, 187, 188; 1976–8: 70–1.

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