

Jura burials: was a crime committed here?

by Ronald Black

In any form of investigation, from police work to pure science, there's a place for given facts, for hypotheses, and for context.

Homicide is a good example. The body and the forensics are the facts. The witness statements are allegations, which must be verified. But then the context has to be considered – perhaps personal relationships, gang warfare, drug trafficking or terrorism.

So too at the interface between history and Gaelic oral tradition. The Dewar Project is preparing its first selection of Dewar's

stories for publication, to be called *John Dewar's Islay, Jura and Colonsay*, and I'd like to use this space to discuss a short passage of oral tradition that's going to be in it. This text is the 'body' that needs to be explained. I'll say what others have said on the same subject, then I'll provide the context, which will lead us to wonder: "Was a crime committed here?"

The tradition, literally translated, is this. "It

was considered that Jura was not consecrated land for burials. The people of the south end of the island buried at *Cill Chaluim Chille* (Keills) in Islay, and the north end in Colonsay, until one time the farmer of Achachois died. His body was brought for burial as far as Daiseadail. They rested the bier on a slab – Leac Earnadail. A storm blew up, there was no way of getting across the ferry, and everyone except his two sons abandoned the corpse. When they saw they had been forsaken, they brought the corpse to their own land and buried it at Achachois. They called the place Kilearnadale.

"In the *Cearn Uachdair* ('Upper District') they used to bury in the consecrated churchyard of Colonsay. They would carry the coffin to the *corpach* ('body place') at the boundary between the laird of Jura's and MacNeil's, or to the *corpach* near Rubha an t-Sàilein. They would carry the coffin on poles. At the last funeral, they set off with it and a storm blew up; they had to throw the coffin and poles into the sea. When the boat reached land, the body was found waiting for them at the harbour. They buried it at Ardlussa, and that was the start of burying there."

This is strange if true, for Jura is one of the biggest islands of the Hebrides. Can it really be the case that the people of Jura were so averse to burying the dead in their own island that they carried the bodies of their loved ones over the sea to Islay or Colonsay?

Jura is mostly waste. The main inhabited parts are strips of land along the eastern shore (facing the mainland) and the south coast (facing Islay). The short north coast (facing Scarba across the whirlpool of Corryvreckan) and the long west coast (facing Colonsay) are uninhabited. But for the people of the northern half of Jura, that makes it still worse. We're being asked to believe that they carried coffins nine miles across a desert before getting to the caves on the west coast, then bringing them as much as twenty miles by sea. Why would they do that?

Down to the Reformation in 1560, the situation was this. The two holiest places in the Hebrides, both dedicated to Calum Cille (St Columba), were the abbeys of Iona and Oronsay. Both were west of Jura. Iona is a small island off Mull, Oronsay is a small tidal island off Mull, Oronsay is a small tidal island off Mull. (Dewar's 'consecrated churchyard of Colonsay' perhaps means Oronsay.) Also dedicated to St Columba was the church at Keills in Islay, which is only a mile west of Port Askaig, to where there's a short ferry crossing from Feolin in Jura. Dewar's text mentions burials at Oronsay and Keills, but not Iona. In Jura itself there were two churches, at Kilearnadale in the south and Kilchianaig near Ardlussa in the north. So



until 1560 (and for long after, no doubt), high-status burials could take place at Iona or Oronsay, mid-status ones at Keills in Islay, low-status ones in Jura itself.

There's plenty of evidence on the ground for the truth of what Dewar says. The slab called Leac Earnadail is on the shore a mile south of Feolin. There are many caves on the deserted western shore, especially around Corpach Bay. One small one about 100 metres north of Abhainn na Corpaich has been walled at its mouth to form an external shelter, which may have been roofed. Another, about 70 metres south of the burn, has a rough stone platform at the mouth, and Martin Martin, writing about 1696, says that one of these Corpach caves had an altar in it. In a cave at Rubha an t-Sàilein (on the north shore of Loch Tarbert), there are cobbled areas, and over a hundred crosses are incised on the walls – each almost certainly representing a funeral. (It's called the *Uamh Rìgh* 'King's Cave', but the names of the glen, river and lochs hereabouts also contain *rìgh*, so I suspect it's actually *ruighe* 'shieling ground'.)

The earliest published evidence for the burial custom is in the *New Statistical Account* (1845),

which speaks of spacious, comfortable caves 'where the inhabitants of Jura and other countries, on their way to Oronsay and Iona to bury their dead, were in the habit of depositing the corpses of their friends, until a favourable opportunity of prosecuting their voyage to Iona and Oronsay occurred'.

We learn a lot from the Colonsay side. The author of one book on that island, Symington Grieve (1923), tells us that the bodies of the dead were sent from distant parts of Scotland to Oronsay or Iona for burial, and that the route for funerals was via Jura. He thought that the Ardlussa estate may have earned considerable revenue in this way, it being 'upon the main route for funerals passing from the mainland to Iona and Oronsay'. He points out that the large number of interments at Oronsay 'is evidenced by the wide area outside the walls of the present cemetery where human remains are found near the surface'. I would add, however, that down



Mausoleum of the Campbells of Jura at Kilearnadale

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to about 1700, burials invariably took place inside a church, not outside it, and that the Jura folk usually adhered to old customs longer than others. Perhaps they were still anxious to bury within a church until as late as 1800. The author of another book on Colonsay, John Loder (1935), claims that the reputation of Oronsay for burials was second only to that of Iona, and persisted long after the monks had disappeared.

During the eighteenth century, he says, services in the island were held at *Pàirc na h-Eaglais* ('Church Park'), Balaromin Mor, which was convenient for those coming from Jura or Islay for the purpose.

The point here is that after the Reformation, Jura and Colonsay formed a single parish. The minister could only be in one place at a time, which often meant Colonsay.

Given what I've said so far, a reasonable hypothesis might be as follows. The Jura folk believed it would benefit the soul of the deceased to be buried in the most sacred ground possible. The arduous journey to Oronsay or elsewhere was a penance which would benefit the souls of the coffin-bearers as well as the deceased. As this was all very expensive, perhaps we're only talking about high-status burials. The poor are often ignored in historical sources.

But now I come to 'context'. In his splendid book *Jura: Island of Deer* (2001), Peter

Youngson doesn't discuss any of this, other than remarking that around 1700 'it seems doubtful if the inhabitants could even have expected the benefit of clergy in the matter of the burial of their dead'. But he does provide a good deal of thought-provoking information on the trials and tribulations of the early ministers of the parish of Jura and Colonsay. Until 1766, more than 200 years after the Reformation, they had no manse, no adequate stipend, and no glebe (farm) by which to maintain themselves and their families. What's more, it's unclear where they preached. There's some evidence that Kilearnadale was still in use in 1707, but from about then until 1777 there was no church in Jura, and until 1801 there was none in Colonsay either. The old pre-Reformation buildings simply fell apart, and a visitor to Jura in 1764 reported that 'the Minister has neither Church, Manse nor Glebe'.

How was this allowed to happen? Well, under Presbyterianism, local landlords had a lot of power in the church, and were expected to provide the funds to maintain it. Those of the parish of Jura and Colonsay were Campbell of Jura and MacNeil of Colonsay. The Campbells of Jura were despots, routinely detested by every minister for over a century. There was a persistent tradition that the administrative centre of the parish was Oronsay, but it could never be held as proven, although the Campbells claimed that it was. In the 1760s Archibald Campbell of Jura prepared a dossier to defend himself from having to give up some land for a manse and glebe, and produced some documentary evidence about the Rev. John MacSween, minister of the parish from about 1673 to 1702:



Rubha an t-Sàilein: coffins were carried 9 miles across a desert to the caves here

“McSwine deponed in 1676 that he had been for six or seven years in possession of the Monastery of Oronsay as his Glebe and received rents and casualties for the same.”

MacSween had been able to manage because he was wealthy enough to hold some land in both Colonsay and Jura, but the same wasn't true of his successors. When the Presbytery of Kintyre demanded to know in 1727 why the Rev. Neil Campbell had never provided his parishioners with Holy Communion since becoming minister in 1703, he answered that ‘he was discouraged from attempting such a work in regard he found little appearance of the reality of Religion among them, and that he has no constitute eldership in his parish’.

In 1766 the Rev. Alexander Hossack and the Presbytery of Kintyre forced the issue. Convening at Kilearnadale, they were told of places nearby called ‘The Bishop’s Dale’, ‘The Beddal’s Glebe and ‘The Bishop’s Well’, all now Campbell property, tenanted by Donald Black and others. That was good enough, and they proceeded to designate a glebe by the old church. Archibald Campbell of Jura objected, saying he intended to build his own house there. So they crossed the burn, on which Campbell protested against any part of his land being

used, claiming that there was already a glebe in Oronsay. The presbytery ignored him, and instructed their surveyor (who was present) to survey land for a glebe, manse and church ‘as the law requires’. This dramatic confrontation was remembered in oral tradition, noted in 1913. Apparently Hossack lost patience with Campbell and said: *Bheirinnse mach e ged a b’ann eadar do bheul ‘s do shròin.* (“I’d take the land even from between your mouth and your nose.”) One of Campbell’s men said to the landlord: *Am buail mi e?* (“Will I hit him?”) *Cha bhuail, cha bhuail,* said Campbell. “No, don’t.”

Campbell believed in litigation, not violence. Using legal channels, he tried (and failed) to persuade the church to accept land somewhere else in the island – further inland, it seems, for as Youngson says, ‘generations later we find the Campbells still contesting the matter of seaweed in front of the glebe with each succeeding minister’. The manse was finally built in 1774. And Colonsay was formally disjoined from Jura in 1862.

Youngson says that from 1695 onwards the Campbells of Jura had been buried in their family vault at Kilearnadale. Clearly it wasn’t the rich but the poor who were burying in Keills or Oronsay. They were, it

seems, being forced – which brings us to the little matter of Barnhill and Ardlussa. These two farms on the north-east coast belonged to the MacNeils of Colonsay from 1737 to 1874. Dewar tells us that the boundary between their land and the Campbells’ extended to Corpach Bay. This explains how boats were available at Rubha an t-Sàilein and Corpach to bring corpses to Oronsay. The Jura folk were not fishermen, and had no vessels of their own, so these must have been provided by the Colonsay estate.

My conclusion, then, is this. The *available evidence* suggests that the strange custom described by Dewar was voluntary. The *context*, however, suggests that it was forced on the people by landlords who owned the church ground, and did not wish to see as much as an inch of scarce Jura land used for burials. That, after all, might give the church a right to it.

A crime against humanity may have been committed here. And when Dewar speaks of the first funerals that took place at Achachois and Ardlussa, he could be describing acts of rebellion. It’s no wonder that Jura folk were prominent in the first recorded emigrations from the Highlands to America, in 1738–39.