

“God’s punishment” - Judge’s final verdict on ‘sacred’ stones?

Writer and researcher **Gerry Burke**’s final installment of a fascinating period in Argyll’s history

The last word on the mystery of the sacred stones of Iona may still lie at the bottom of Loch Fyne - but a voice from beyond the grave has delivered a judgement on the “brutal” historic stewardship of the island.

It was a mysterious single line of Gaelic in an old-fashioned reporter’s notebook that finally exposed the ‘enlightenment-era’ desecration of Columba’s pilgrim island.

It opened a Pandora’s Box of hidden history that resonates to this day - and it also revealed the forgotten heritage of two fabled dynasties bonded by a new-found DNA link.

Recent research revealed the scandal of priceless artefacts from St Columba’s time being sold off like tourist trinkets. Sculptured stones and crosses were looted to falsely endow faraway places with “borrowed” antiquity.

Gold and silver had been the targets of the earliest Viking raiders but the plunder of historic memorabilia continued during the stewardship of several dukes of Argyll. It reached a peak during the hell-raising years of 6th duke George into the Victorian era when his notorious exploits threatened the family fortunes.

Circuit judge Lord Henry Cockburn damned the “Argyles” in a neglected memoir for the “brutally kept monuments and temples” after visiting Iona in 1840.

The former Solicitor General for Scotland, on a break from Inveraray high court bench, wrote: “What a disgrace to their owners who I understand are the Argyles. (sic)”

A blistering judgement written up in his hotel room reads: “All the waters of Loch Fyne will not cleanse them from the shame of these neglected solemn ruins.”

He added: “If proprietors who behave so bad (sic) had all the apology of bankruptcy, this might be a consolation, for a well-disposed mind could not fail to consider this as God’s punishment for their crime.

“But every one of them wastes yearly, on contemptible importance, what would be quite sufficient to transmit these sacred gifts of a former age to succeeding ones and in such a condition that they might be admired, as they descend, without



Iona stones

The Culloden veteran was the ex-commander of British forces in the American war of independence, a well-educated diplomat with a huge appetite for international history who treasured local heritage. His battle wounds and bravery brought a fortune home --- and his illegitimate Indian children with “Iroquois” Sally Montour into the ancient Campbell bloodline.

having the veneration they inspire marred by unnecessary disgust.”

Damning

Lord John Murray, court of session judge and senator of the college of Justice knew Celtic crosses and sculptured stones had been dumped in the bay when Strachur Park was his country seat. But the friend of Lord Cockburn and Sir Walter Scott refused to have anything to do with them.

In correspondence with the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland over possible recovery, he echoed Cockburn’s sentiments but only offered to indicate where the sacred memorials still lay.

The clue to the cargo’s existence was left by John Dewar, the early “roving reporter” employed by 8th Duke George to record local historical tales for posterity. He jotted down the enigmatic Gaelic line “The vessel containing the crosses and grave slabs sank between Strachur and Creggan.” in his 150-year-old notebook. He must surely have investigated but no archive story has been recovered among the hundreds he filed.

The obscure line was picked up by Dr. Ronnie Black, honorary fellow in Edinburgh University’s department of Celtic and Gaelic Studies. He is leading the huge international translation and transcription project to finally publish ten volumes of Dewar’s work --- the biggest Gaelic anthology collected in Scotland.

The mysterious cargo, sunk or jettisoned on upper Loch Fyne, endangered the reputation of another Campbell chief with a towering reputation to protect.

The ancient stones landed almost on the doorstep of General John MacArthur Campbell of Strachur’s new-build stately home. Local folklore records them as having “miraculously” floated ashore.



Kilmaglash church at Strachur



Lord George Murray

His young, childless wife Helen raised and educated them for a society life-style with a well-stocked library and a grand piano. Illegitimate daughter Catherine became a lady in her own right with marriage to another local laird.

But the ancient stones of Iona came to haunt the bay opposite the grand new mansion. It had been suggested the laird may have wanted to invest the new church with antiquity and the sculptured stones, now built into the church walls, were imported from Iona.

But it appears those seabed stones were never retrieved. Experts who examined the "local" figured stones, on-site and digitally from as far away as Australia, are satisfied they were sculpted in the vicinity. An earlier existence in an old graveyard nearby is correct.

Seumas Fergusson, chief of Clannfhearghuis of Strachur, wrote in 1940, that they commemorated his ancestors and had originally been removed from their graves on Iona. He said they had later been taken to nearby Celtic Chapelverna but he didn't say when, why or by whom. His predecessors sold the Strachur Park land to general Campbell

Druid circle

The American war of independence veteran was particular about preserving a druid circle and two ancient standing stones in front of the house with written instructions --- but made no mention of any imports in his time.

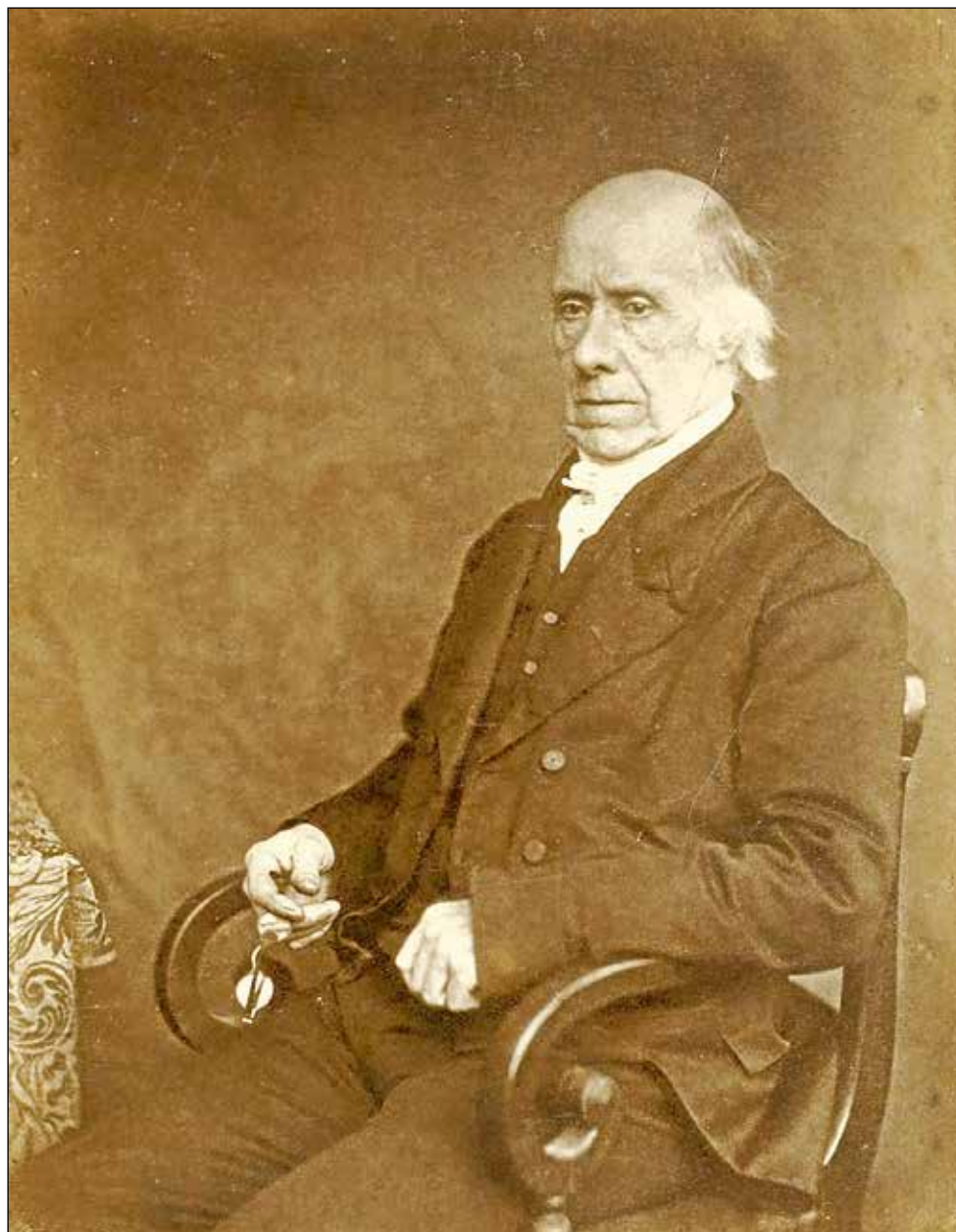
He was a God-fearing individual with a tested sense of honour, essential in his long experience of negotiating with and holding the trust of the Iroquois tribes of the Canadian borderlands.

He respected their religions and, though a Presbyterian building his own Kilmaglash church of Scotland in Strachur, attended the Episcopal Sunday services at St Paul's in Wall Street, New York -internationally-renowned as the 'little church that stood' through the 9/11 atrocities.

The devout couple appear to have confounded their own kirk minister by providing sanctuary in a makeshift chapel for villagers who rebelled against him. They clamoured for local 'independent' preacher Donald ban MacArthur before he was press-ganged by a neighbouring Campbell laird.

MacArthur preached to huge crowds prompting some other lairds to ban him from their land. Known as the Fisherman's Pastor, he tried to outwit colonel Campbell of Southall by preaching below the high water mark on the Colintrave foreshore in October 1805.

He and three constables forcibly boarded him on a vessel for Greenock where he was shipped to Ireland on HMS *Tourtinelle*. He was released after intervention by some other landowners including Lamont and Bannatyne on Bute but finally emigrated



Lord Cockburn

to America.

If General Campbell was a benefactor it's likely he would have maintained a diplomatic silence.

On reflection, he appears the most unlikely person to have joined a plot to loot any Christian site. The general died at home in 1806, Helen in Edinburgh in 1838.

Crinan Canal

A possible scenario is that a boat containing sacred artefacts was bound for somewhere north of the new Crinan canal. It may, indeed, have been carrying building materials for the new house - perhaps even the legitimate quarried slab of Iona marble he lies under in Kilmaglash parish church.

Such an arrangement would fit with normal sea transport practice in those days - a personal transaction with the fifth Duke, his successor Lord Lorne, or one of his retainers. It's unclear, however, whether the load was dumped too early after attempting a 'puffer-style' delivery or whether the vessel keeled on a hidden sandbar that exists to this day. There are accounts of a sea chase and hasty attempts to jettison contraband. There may have been more than one occasion.

An exploratory dive and sonar search on the likeliest location was planned for this Easter when tides and weather were perfect, but Covid-19 intruded. Another attempt will be made when circumstances change.

The mystery of why John Dewar left us in suspense may never be solved.

Meanwhile, Dr. Black has circulated the *Dunoon Observer's* coverage over past months to members of the Dewar project team seeking fresh translations for some of the original sources referenced. He said: "It is much to Dewar's credit that he faithfully reported things about the Campbells that were good

and bad. But, yes, it is conceivable that Dewar drew the line about reporting things that were recent and actionable."

Ian Macdonnell, Australian author of *Clan Donald and Iona Abbey*, a member of the High Council of the International Clan Donald Association, has been a vociferous critic of the "abuse" of the island's heritage by certain past Argyll aristocracy.

He said: "It is still not widely understood and acknowledged that looting took place particularly in more "enlightened" Georgian and Victorian times.

"Historical facts should not be concealed on the presumption of needing to shield local identities no matter what their esteemed, favoured standing might be. Nor are present figures and recent figures accountable for what happened in the past.

"All or most clans have episodes which they'd rather forget concerning a past chief or two. It's widely acknowledged many Campbells have made significant, valuable contributions towards Iona's rebirth."



George Campbell, 8th Duke of Argyll

Historic Collusion of common ancestry

A "DELIGHTED" Kate Tobin, descendent of the Iroquois-Montour Indians and David Campbell of Strachur, 17th chief of the MacArthur Campbell clan, met as cousins at the weekend after an

on-line introduction by Gerry Burke.

They exchanged current family background and look forward to comparing mutual links. They plan to meet after the present Covid-19 restrictions are lifted.

