

The “drowned tombstones” of Iona

- in Loch Fyne



St John's Cross, Iona

Strachur Bay - site of the 'drowned' stones

ARGYLL HERITAGE researcher **GERRY BURKE** diverts on the Faith in Cowal pilgrim ‘secrets’ trail and offers a tantalising theory on the enduring mystery.

A DANDY duke, a fancy-dress chieftain, a redcoat general and Sir Walter Scott’s real-life ‘Antiquary’ hoaxer may hold clues to two of Scotland’s most intriguing graveyard mysteries.

The bare bones of history are never far from the surface in Strachur churchyard where the mysterious, intricately-figured tombstones displayed in the church walls are classed as ‘Iona-style’. The seabed stones down the brae are reputed to come with full pedigree. Both guard dark-age secrets from beyond the grave.

In a previous existence, the “drowned” stones in Strachur Bay may well have marked the graves of legendary Scottish royalty and bygone chiefs of Dalriada. Along with revered Celtic devotional crosses they are reputed to have been looted from Iona, renowned crucible of western Christianity, between the reformation and Victorian times.

According to reports in the 1800s at least one pillaged hoard lay abandoned in the silt and weed beyond the shore between the local post office and the Creggans Inn. Lord Murray who tenanted Strachur House at the time refused to dredge for them. Spooky local folklore kept others away.

Trendy trophies

I related last year how Iona sculpted stones were marketed as pretentious trendy antique window dressing despatched to adorn landed estates as far away as the Outer Hebrides and Donegal. Some were used as magisterial street furniture. A sculpted Celtic cross commemorating an ancient abbot of the island was initially used as the old townhead market marker in Inveraray.

Today, its uninterpreted, unexplained, intricate gaelic inscription baffles visiting dog walkers down by the shoreline

Lord Cockburn, solicitor general for Scotland, damned the neglect of Iona’s ruined heritage as “brutal” when he visited the island in 1840.

He delivered a ‘God’s punishment’ damnation on the Duke

of Argyll owners at the time. His outrage and that of local aristocrat, Lord John Murray, senator of the College of Justice is now forgotten.

Much of the desecration took place under the island ownership of the fifth duke of Argyll - but ‘gorgeous’ George, his son who became the sixth duke is a more likely culprit. The concerned father was trying reign in George’s squandering of the family fortunes with reckless highlife in London and on the continent. At one point the fashion mentor could not afford the annual levy to keep his name out of a popular mistress’s notorious diary publications.

Was he perhaps handsomely bribed by a sublimely crafty German specialist relics dealer who knew the value and price to pay for Iona’s ancient heritage?

Middleman

That likely middleman, conveniently on the island at the time, would be the notorious Rudolphe Raspe, the flawed scientific genius paid by the government to exploit natural resources from coal seams to precious metal ores for cash-strapped lairds and estate owners. He was also a professional dealer in ancient artefacts and curios and fleeced many of his wealthy commissioners in the salons of London, Edinburgh and beyond.

He’d already ripped off and embellished the daredevil tall tales of a real-life Russian adventurer for his fantastical version of the “Adventures of Baron Munchausen.” He was the inspiration for the moonshine mining trickster in Scott’s Antiquary novel, where Sir Walter assured readers astonishing events actually happened.

After secretly planting Sir John Sinclair’s Caithness estate with ‘fool’s gold’ samples for a fake mining study he cast up on the west coast to set up the Duke of Argyll’s Iona Marble company. The temptation of abundant, abandoned, ancient heritage must



Kilmaglash church in Strachur

surely have been tempting. He had the sophisticated customers, he knew their vulgar desires, and he knew the value of the abandoned monuments that surrounded him. Early puffer-style boats were equipped for heavy lifting and voyage through the new Crinan canal and up and down the west coast.

But the Strachur-bound cargo was perhaps destined for more sacrosanct surroundings - alongside yet another accumulation of historic carved stones appropriated more locally in equally bizarre circumstances

Buying history

It is possible they were intended to lend more venerable antiquity to the brand new church of general John Campbell of Strachur, retired from his role as king George III’s commander-in-chief in the American war of Independence. He planned his new estate meticulously, importing cargoes of the finest materials and furnishings for Strachur House, Kilmaglash church, The Inn and ancillary buildings - and perhaps the very slab of Iona marble that covers him today.

The Culloden veteran appears to have been a God-fearing parishioner who, in wartime New York, attended Episcopal Sunday services at St. Paul’s in Wall Street, renowned today as “the little church that stood” through the 9/11 atrocities.

He had a high regard for ecclesiastical history and even demanded the pre-Christian standing stones and circle below his front windows should not be interfered with.

So why did he apparently cause local outrage by also importing anonymous sculpted stones and bones from the humble Chapelverna graveyard a mile or so up the road?

His intention to house them in a more convenient, improved setting may have been well-intentioned but he seems to have misjudged the mood of some old families.

MacPhuns, MacOlchynies, MacGillesbuigs, Fergussons in the Churr area and even some Campbells appear to have still clung to some forbidden ecclesiastical practices of the earlier church which got a previous Rev Archibald McClaine into trouble with the Argyll synod.

General John probably reckoned the graveyard swap would pacify the revolt and the stones would impart antiquity to the fabric of his church - further glorified with plans for even more illustrious Iona monuments.

Yet another exotic figure enters the mystery.

Whatever his hopes, the bones were given Christian re-burial but the historic graveslabs were never included in the church until the early 20th century. They have been examined by experts who insist they are of Loch Awe school origin and workmanship. But who do they commemorate?

Seumais MacFhearghus of Stra-churr and clan Alpein, an adopted 20th century New Yorker, may have been light on his claims to his vanity title and other European royalty connections but he certainly knew his Dalriadan clan history.

The moustachioed, military-uniformed, sword wearer vaunted his shared ancestry from Fergus mor Mac Erc, legendary king of Dalriada and precursor of later kings of Scotland. He is reputedly buried on Iona.

Seumais told everyone who would listen that the Fergusson tribe came originally to Strachur from Knapdale where much of the Iona monumental stone was quarried. They were carvers and sculptors themselves, creating grave slabs for the chiefs when



General George Campbell



Seumais MacFhearghus

they were buried on Iona.

There may be some truth in a tale that a first batch of stones lost in the bay was a bungled ‘Reformation rescue’ when local Fergussons sailed to Iona to save their ancestors’ memorials after the Campbells took over the island. Curiously, Rev MacLaine may have been in the advance guard after leaving his Strachur charge.

Therein lies another tale - along with the Rev Archibald Gillespie’s heavenly vision above Strachur witnessed by dozens of parishioners ‘and several gentlemen’. For another day, perhaps, combined with spectral battle in the sky and the ghostly funeral galley of the Argylls, it could pass for a Baron Munchausen fantasy.

Tombstone territory for Mr Raspe?

CHURCH MEMBER Cathie Montgomery lent a hand with another wee graveyard mystery last week. Curiosity got the better of us in relation to a scatter of mossy old stone lumps reclining redundantly against the drystane graveyard wall.

We eventually realised at least one was a magnificent intact, hewn, tabular slab just under six feet by two feet weighing about 4cwt It got only a fleeting mention, eoth four neighbours, in the graveyard inventory when it was compiled over ten years ago because no words were visible. Presumably on the upside.

With assistance, we turned the top one over assuming any inscription might be protected on the underside. Alas, it went wrongway down after a tantalising glimpse of what might have been the mark of an old stonemason’s chisel.

Someone else might give them a go - they looked pretty tantalising to us.

Where’s that Rudolph Raspe when he’s needed in the graveyard?



Cathie Montgomery and Gerry Burke



An upturned ancient stone in Strachur churchyard