

Skye from Somerled to A.D. 1500

G.W.S. Barrow

THE bigger islands of western Scotland may be, and no doubt have been, classified in various ways. From the standpoint of the historian of medieval Scotland one particularly helpful classification is by language and culture — with the all-important proviso that neither of these features possesses an accepted, self-evident chronology, and for the historian chronology is fundamental. From the geography of Ptolemy of Alexandria, in the second century after Christ, we can deduce that the Big Four, among the islands outwith the Kintyre Peninsula — i.e., omitting Arran — were Lewis, Skye, Mull and Islay (Watson, 1926:6 and at 37-42; Richmond, 1954:134 and at 136). Two of these already had names close to those we recognise today, Skitis and Malaios. We must envisage a northern British, Brittonic-speaking population spread, rather thinly, across the isles. If, taking a hint from Adamnán (Sharpe, 1995:136-37 and at 293-95),¹ we call them Picts² we shall not be led astray, provided that we allow some cultural differences between society in Skye and those in the rich firthlands of Easter Ross or the relatively rich plain of Strathmore (Sutherland, 1997:72-73).³

Between the time of Columba in the sixth century and the time of Somerled in the twelfth Skye must have experienced two major social and cultural revolutions. Between the end of the sixth century and the end of the eighth the Pictish or north Brittonic language — of which traces have been left just across the water from here, in Applecross, at Pitalman (Pitalmit, Bailanailm)

1 In the earlier edition of A.O. and M.O. Anderson, rev. M.O. Anderson (1991:62-3)

2 Adamnán reports that Columba needed an interpreter to preach the gospel to Artbranan.

3 This book provides a convenient comparison of Pictish stone carving in Skye and Raasay with that in Easter Ross and Strathmore.

in Glenelg and Pitnean in Lochcarron (Watson, 1926:78 and at 458)⁴ — must have given way to the Q-Celtic Old Irish language already in general use in Argyll and perhaps as far north as Ardnamurchan. A language switch on this scale must imply substantial immigration as well as assimilation. Despite the presence of *na h'Annaidean* in Barvas (Watson, 1926:253),⁵ there seems no compelling reason to believe that this northward push of Gaelic speakers reached further than Harris, if indeed as far (Bannatyne Club, 1851-55, ii:377-78);⁶ but where Skye is concerned the push must have been effective and thoroughgoing. Dr Barbara Crawford has written that 'there appears to be a general consensus among place-name specialists that none of the Celtic place-names in the Western Isles can be proved to be of pre-Norse origin, and as far as Lewis is concerned "most or all non-Norse names have a post-Norse character"' (Crawford, 1987:96). There seem to be two insuperable difficulties here. For one thing, if we take the term 'Western Isles' literally, it surely cannot be maintained that islands such as Islay, Jura and Mull have no Gaelic place-names of pre-Norse date.⁷ Even if Dr Crawford's 'Western Isles' means the Outer Isles, it is hard to accept that Kilbarr of Barra is post-Norse — my money would be on an unrecorded *Innis-bharr* preceding Barrey, for Barra. For another thing, we must consider the church establishments of Skye. Dedications to Mary, in Sleat (Bannatyne Club, 1851-55, ii, I:340),⁸ in Duirinish (ibid:359),⁹ on

4 Watson, *CPNS*, 407 deals with the rare place-names containing Pictish *pett*, 'portion, share', to be found in Lochcarron (Pitnean, now obsolete) and Glenelg. Watson was, I believe, wrong to refer to two distinct *pett*- place-names in Glenelg. There seems in fact to have been only one, first recorded as Petalman [*RMS*, iii, no.2297] later as Pitchalman [*Retours*, Inverness, no.19] eventually, as Bailanaim, the form appearing on the earliest O.S. 6 inch map [Inverness-shire, 1876, Sheet XLVIII]. Pitalmit is shown on the map of Inverness-shire by William Johnson published by J. Thomson (Edinburgh, 1830). I am grateful to Dr Virginia Glenn for introducing me to this map.

5 I cannot find the name on modern maps.

6 The old church of Harris was called Kilbride, and on the small island of Killegray in the Sound of Harris there were Teampull and Tobar na h'Annaid. These names point to some antiquity.

7 For example, in Islay, Loch Finlaggan, Dùn Guaidhre; in Jura Beinn an Oir, Loch Tairbear; in Mull Beinn Mhór (Ben More) seem unlikely to be of post-Norse date.

8 Kilmore (NG 658069).

9 Kilmuir (NG 256477)

the west side of Trotternish (ibid:349),¹⁰ and to Christ in Strathsuardal near Broadford (ibid:343-44),¹¹ might of course have been brought in by newly-converted Norse men and women. But it is not seriously conceivable that the thoroughgoing provision of dedicated Christian worship sites right across Skye is to be dated later than the Norse settlements. In Trotternish and Raasay we have Kilmalúag,¹² in Minginish Kilmolruy,¹³ in Snizort Kilcholmkill,¹⁴ in Glendale Kilchoan,¹⁵ at Portree Kiltalorcan,¹⁶ in Lyndale Kildonan¹⁷ and in Vaternish and Uig *cill-Chonnáin*, Saint Connán's church.¹⁸ Columcille, Donnán, Molúoc, Connán, Talorcan and Maelrubha were not the saints of converted Norsemen; nor was this name-construction characteristic of the period after c.850. Talorcan, in particular, is a very obscure saint, seemingly a Pict from his name, otherwise known only as patron of Kiltarlity west of Inverness, of Fordyce near Cullen and of Logie Buchan near Ellon (Watson, 1926:298). And why, or for that matter how, did the notably early element *annaid* (< *antiquitatem*, 'superior church') come to be established in Skye, as for example

10 Kilmuir (NG 3870).

11 Cill Chriosd (NG 616207)

12 NG 436748 (Kilmalúag of Trotternish); NG 547367 (Kilmalúog of Raasay).

13 NG 375260 (Kilmolruy of Minginish).

14 NG 418486 (shown as 'Chapel').

15 The remains of a 'Roman Catholic' chapel in Glendale, reported on in 1790 [*OSA*, xx, 163-64], presumably represented the medieval church of Kilchoan. I have not located this church, the graveyard of which is mentioned in [Nicolson, *History of Skye*, 282].

16 The name Kiltalorcan is not on modern maps, but the site of the church seems to be at NG 497443, marked 'Chapel' in Gothic. For the church and its dedication see [Mackinlay, *Ancient church Dedications in Scotland: non-scriptural dedications*, 213; Watson, *CPNS*, 298; *OPS*, ii, I, 355 'Ceiltarraglan' (misinterpreted)].

17 NG 3554 (no church site is marked on the 1:50000 O.S. map).

18 NG 225613 (Trumpan church, with medieval carved burial stone in the graveyard); NG 4063 (Uig of Trotternish, for whose dedication to St Connán [Watson, *CPNS*, 282; Dunlop and Cowan, *CSSR*, 19 and at 26].

Clach na h-Annaide and Tobar na h-Annaide at Kilbride near Torrin, west of Kilcrist? There is also Annait in Vaternish. *Annaid* is surely an emphatically pre-Norse term (Watson, 1926:250-54).¹⁹

By the mid-ninth century or even earlier the second major social and cultural revolution to affect Skye must have been well under way. This of course was the Norse settlement, which must surely have been as thoroughgoing in Skye as in Lewis and Islay, more thoroughgoing than in Mull or Arran. As the overwhelming majority of surviving old settlement names in Skye are of Norse origin, we cannot underestimate the thoroughness of the Norwegian occupation of the island, beginning perhaps in the earlier ninth century. But the point must not be pushed too far. Although the Ptolemaic name for Lewis, Dumna, disappeared, the Ptolemaic names for Skye (Skitis) and Mull (Malaios) survived and Islay (Ile) is an old name. The Norse invaders did not change these names, any more than they changed Bute, Arran, Rathlin or Kintyre. In Skye they can surely not have eliminated the existing population, although they may have enslaved many of them. The lineage and family of Somerled bear witness to miscegenation and assimilation. Sumarliði itself is Norse, but while his father Gillebrigte and his grandfather Gilleadhamhnán bore Gaelic names, Somerled gave Norse names to his younger sons Raonull (Raghnull) and Olaf while the name of his eldest, Dubhgall (literally ‘black foreigner’ or Dane), points to a Scandinavian link (Duncan and Brown, 1956-57:192-220).²⁰

‘Skye from Somerled to 1500’ presents us with a long span of history which in principle ought to be crammed to bursting-point with events. For a variety of reasons, however, we lack the evidence for a continuous history of Skye. The division of the isles which followed the great sea battle off Colonsay (January 1156), in which neither Somerled nor his opponent Godfrey II son of Olaf the Red king of Man could claim victory (Anderson, 1922, ii:231-32;

19 Despite the arguments deployed by Clancy [Clancy, ‘Annait in Scotland and the origins of the parish’, 91-115], that the term *annaid* (Olr, *andóit*) in Scotland indicates a church in a superior relationship to others, i.e. a potential ‘parish church’, a post-Norse date for this term seems unlikely.

20 See also Sellar [Sellar, ‘The origins and ancestry of Somerled’, 123-34]. Although Mr Sellar makes a strong case for the reliability of Somerled’s pedigree over eight generations back to Godfrey son of Fergus he agrees that Godfrey’s name points to intermarriage between Norse and Gaelic elements occurring remarkably early.

Broderick, 1979:f.37v.), left Skye outwith the area which generated most narrative and record sources until after the Treaty of Perth in 1266 (Duncan and Brown, 1956-57:206).²¹

As Archie Duncan and Al Brown wrote many years ago, ‘Unfortunately, the sixty years after 1164 are a dark period in the history of the western seaboard’ (ibid:197). Yet we can try to cast a little light on this darkness where Skye is concerned. The island had twelve parish kirks (Munro, 1961:68).²² This puts me in mind of the six medieval parishes (earlier six districts) of Islay (Lamont, 1966:1-8 and at 72-73), and of the six sheadings of Man (Kinvig, 1975:9-10 and at 12-13); we know that after 1164 the links between Man and Skye were close (Anderson, 1922, ii:458-60). The twelve parishes of Skye may have had an administrative significance, as the Islay districts and Manx sheadings undoubtedly had. It is from the Chronicle of Man that we learn of the existence in Skye, in this very period of darkness, of an administrative officer who might be associated with the twelve parishes. This was Paul, Balki’s son, described as ‘sheriff’ (*vice-comes*) of Skye (ibid:458; Broderick, 1979:f.42v.) — perhaps we should translate this as *syslumaðr*, *sysselman*, ‘man of business’, factor or in old Scots usage ‘doer’, administering Skye on behalf of King Olaf. We may discern something of a dynasty here, Balki Paul’s father, who would have flourished back in the twelfth century,²³ Paul himself flourishing in the 1220s and 1230s (Anderson, 1922, ii:458-59 and at 478; Broderick, 1979:ff. 42v-43r.) and Paul’s son Balki who was active in the Norwegian expedition of 1230-1231 (Anderson, 1922, ii:474-75).

These administrators served the kings of Man, but the dynasty of that island was not a happy band of brothers. Raonall, oldest son of Godfrey II but apparently illegitimate, treated his younger, legitimate, brother Olaf the Black,

21 The ‘north isles’ (Lewis, Harris, Raasay and Skye) were allotted to the kings of Man by the settlement of 1156, while the remaining outer isles, together with the Small Isles, Coll, Tiree, Mull, Jura and Islay went to Somerled and his sons. The inclusion of Harris within Garmoran is probably a mistake.

22 The twelve parishes of Skye might have been traditional lore. Cowan [Cowan, *The parishes of medieval Scotland*, 183] was only able to identify eleven parishes, but he reckoned Kilmaluag in the north of Trotternish to be identical with Kilmuir.

23 Balki father of Paul the sheriff may have been son of a certain noble called Paul who helped King Godfrey the Black against Somerled c.1155 [*ESSH*, ii, 231; *CRMI*, f.37v.].

in a very scurvy manner – allotting to him infertile Lewis and, when Olaf complained, having him imprisoned by the king of Scots for over six years (Anderson, 1922, ii:456-57; Broderick, 1979:ff.42v-43r.). Even after Olaf was freed, on King William's death, Raonall and his wife plotted his murder, sending their son Godfrey to Lewis to pursue and kill him (Anderson, 1922, ii:458; Broderick, 1979:f.42v.). By this time Olaf had married a daughter of the new earl of Ross, Ferchar mac an t'sagairt (Anderson, 1922, ii:458; Broderick, 1979:f.42v.). He escaped to the safety of his father-in-law's court and with the help of Paul Balki's son gathered an army with which to attack Godfrey in Skye. They surprised Godfrey and his men sheltering in the little *Eilean Chaluimchille* in Chaluimchille Loch (Loch of Monkstadt) and slew almost all they found (Anderson, 1922, ii:458-59; Broderick, 1979:f.43r.).²⁴ Against Olaf's wishes, Sheriff Paul had Godfrey blinded and castrated (Anderson, 1922, ii:459).

This is said to have happened in 1223. In 1230 King Hakon IV of Norway decided to sort out all these rebellious and quarrelsome westerners, and also, in the bygoing, put a check to the ambitions of the king of Scots, Alexander II. The Norwegian expedition was not an unqualified success, but from the point of view of the historian of Skye it is noteworthy for introducing us to the forebears of the Macleods, Thorkell son of Thormod and his son, also Thormod (ibid:475).²⁵ The former was killed in Skye by Sheriff Paul's son Balki (Anderson, 1922:475) — perhaps Thorkell was an adherent of Godfrey son of Reginald. The son, Thormod, was attacked in Lewis by Norwegians returning home — Thormod escaped, but they captured his wife and the great treasure that he possessed (ibid:478). This Macleod treasure on Lewis is interesting in view of the splendid ivory chessmen found at Uig in west Lewis early in the nineteenth century (Glenn, 2003:no.L1 (a)-(c); Stratford, 1997). Perhaps it was only justice (although it sounds very like a thoroughgoing bloodfeud) that Paul

24 Eilean Chaluimchille is at NG 377689 (Kilmuir parish). It is in the now drained Loch Chaluimchille. I am grateful to Mr David Sellar for pointing out to me the true site of Godfrey's defeat.

25 The most authoritative and percipient survey of the evidence for MacLeod origins is by Sellar [Sellar, 1997-98, 233-58]. The sources reviewed in that paper do not consider the possibility that the Thorkell and Thormod of Haakon's saga were MacLeod ancestors. The occurrence of Thorkell son of Thormod and his son Thormod in connection with Lewis, Harris and Skye in the 1230s seems too much of a coincidence for them to be of a different lineage from *Sìol Torcuill* (Lewis, Raasay) and *Sìol Thormoid* (Harris, Dunvegan), ancestral to the Macleods.

Balki's son was slain by yet another son of Raonall, Godfrey the Black (Anderson, 1922, ii:478, 544 and at 566).²⁶

King Olaf the Black's marriage to Christina of Ross can be seen as the beginning of a Ross interest in Skye, which for all we know, might have been a resumption of interference by the pre-1168 earls. Earl Ferchar was succeeded by his son William (1251-1274) who was closely associated with the Comyn earls of Buchan and their close kinsmen the Comyn lords of Badenoch. The Scottish kingdom was moving inexorably towards the annexation of the Isles. By 1262 Earl William commanded a severely punitive raid on Skye, killing men, women and children and burning or destroying churches and settlements (ibid:605).

Just as Haakon's Saga gives us our earliest chronicle mention of the first Macleods, so it also introduces us to an early, perhaps the earliest, Matheson, Kiarnak Makamal, who collaborated with the earl of Ross in the attack on Skye (ibid:605). This man, as Kermac Macmaghan, figures in the exchequer roll for 1266 (as copied by Sir John Skene in the late sixteenth century) when he seems to have been involved in some royal displeasure incurred by the earl of Ross (Stuart, 1878-1908, i:19-20).²⁷

If there is truth in these reports to be found in Haakon's Saga it must mean that the chief men of Skye were believed to have Norwegian sympathies. Yet, as we know, when Haakon came with his big fleet in 1263 he found even the northern isles lukewarm and many in the Sudreys openly loyal to the king of Scots. The Scots were bold enough to have men and ships at Inverie on Loch Nevis (ibid:18-19). In 1264, the year after the battle of Largs but two years before the definitive treaty of Perth, the sheriff of Inverness held only two hostages from Skye (ibid:13) — even if they were the sons of important men it hardly points to deeply felt disaffection. The military operations of the earl of Buchan and Alan Durward were directed mainly at Caithness, but in the summer of 1264 the Scots army was busy subduing the Hebrides, presumably including Skye (ibid:5-6 and at 11; Anderson, 1922, ii:648-49).

No locally produced narrative source comes to our rescue in the later thirteenth century to replace the chatty, informative sagas. The darkness is broken in the early 1290s by the abortive legislation of King John which

26 Possibly this was Godfrey *Donn* referred to in this period in the *Chronicle of Man and the Isles*.

27 The form of surname here is closer to the normal Gaelic form than that in Haakon's Saga, but it is clear that the two references are to the same individual.

proposed the establishment of a sheriffdom of Skye, with the earl of Ross as sheriff (Thomson and Innes, 1814-75, i:447b red). Under this plan the importance of Skye itself is emphasized, for the island was to be headquarters of an administrative region stretching from Glenelg, Kintail and Lochcarron in the east to Barra, the Uists and Lewis and Harris in the west. The eight *davochs* — i.e. *ouncelands* — of Rum and Eigg were also included (almost certainly with Muck and Canna), and though not explicitly specified we may assume that Raasay and Applecross formed part of the scheme. A very significant phrase in the record of 1293 is ‘the king’s lands of Skye and Lewis’ — this can only refer, surely, to the demesne estates (whichever they were) held in the two islands by the kings of Man and the Isles. And it is precisely this phrase which occurs in a letter written to the king of England in 1297 by Alexander (MacDonald) lord of Islay (Stevenson, 1870, ii:188).²⁸ The letter is mostly a diatribe against Alexander’s distant kinsman Lachlan MacRuairidh, who according to Alexander had with his men been attacking and laying waste the lord king’s lands of Skye and Lewis, slaughtering the men, raping the women and burning the king’s ships sheltering in church sanctuaries.

There is no doubt that in these years Lachlan was a force to be reckoned with, a bold and ferocious sea-king, with strongholds at Castle Tioram and Kisimul in Barra. In 1299 it was reported to the Scots guardians that Lachlan, in alliance with the earl of Buchan’s brother Alexander Comyn, was busy attacking the people of Scotland, burning and laying waste lands and property (*Nat.MSS.Scot.* 1867-71, ii:no.8; Barrow, 1988:107) Five years later the earl of Atholl feared that the peace of northern Scotland was in serious danger because Lachlan, still allied to Sir Alexander Comyn, had commanded that every *ounceland* (*davoch*) — presumably of the Macruairidh lordship of the Isles, but perhaps from further afield including Skye, — was to provide a twenty-oar galley (Bain, 1881-87, ii:no.1633). Even Lachlan appreciated the overwhelming power of King Edward I, to whom he came in person at Ebchester near Durham in August 1306, to swear fealty and ask for the lands of Sir Patrick Graham (Palgrave, 1837:310).

The tumultuous years from 1297 to 1314 are most unlikely to have been peaceful for Skye, but evidence is far to seek. Alexander MacDonald was killed by the MacDougalls in 1299 (McDonald, 1997:168-69), and it does seem that MacDougall adherence to John Balliol pushed the house of Islay into the Bruce

28 Note that in this Latin letter the name Lachlan is rendered as Rolandus.

camp. At Bannockburn Bruce was famously supported by Alexander's brother Angus Óg of Islay and since Christina lady of the Isles — senior member of the MacRuairidh family if we confine it to those of legitimate birth — was a relative and close adherent of Bruce (Barrow, 1988:170), while Earl William II of Ross had come into his allegiance in 1309 (ibid:177), we would hardly be indulging in wild speculation to envisage at least a contingent from Skye at the famous battle.

The link between Skye and the earls, if not the earldom, of Ross was strengthened by Robert I, whose sister Matilda was married to Earl William's son and heir Hugh (Cokayne, 1910-59, xi:145; Balfour Paul, 1904-14, vii:236). Before succeeding his father in 1323 Hugh had received from the crown the lands, presumably the crown lands, of Skye and also Trotternish, apparently as a unit distinguishable from Skye as a whole (Thomson, 1882-1914, i:App2. nos.61 and 63). The island itself emerges during the fourteenth century (at latest by 1370) as a *dominium*, lordship (ibid:no.354), but inflation must have set in, for Sleat was a lordship by the 1460s (Munros, 1986:127) and Angus Master of the Isles was styled 'lord of Trotternish' in 1485 (ibid:187) — all the more remarkable since the MacLeods of Dunvegan had charters for Trotternish from John, last MacDonald lord of the Isles (ibid:227-28). Perhaps we come nearer the truth if we note the office of bailie of Trotternish in the fifteenth century (Thomson, 1882-1914, ii:no.2420). A thirteenth-century sheriff or *sysseleman* of Skye would have needed bailies. Would it be fanciful to envisage six bailiaries for the island from an early date — Trotternish, Lyndale (or Vaternish), Duirinish, Minginish, Bracadale and Sleat, with two parishes in each — paralleling the six sheadings of Man?

I have said that King John's legislation of 1293 establishing a sheriffdom of Skye was abortive. Of the three new sheriffdoms of that year it has seemed to historians that only Lorn or Argyll became a reality (McNeill and MacQueen, 1996:208-10). But a royal charter of 1541 refers in a completely matter of fact way to 'the sheriffdom of the north isles' (certainly not referring to Orkney and Shetland), (Thomson, 1882-1914, iii:no.2297), including Glenelg and Bracadale. The king toured the isles in the summer of 1540 and was doling out sheriffships for Argyll, Lorn, Knapdale and Kintyre. But fresh appointments to sheriffships are not the same as creating a completely new sheriffdom (Cameron, 1998:246-48).²⁹

29 The king is said to have inspected the castle of Dunscaich in Sleat (NG 595122).

I have not been able to discover this sheriffdom in record of the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries, nor does it seem to figure anywhere in the Pitlochry Medievalists' *Atlas of Scottish History* (1996). But it cannot be dismissed as a clerical error, still less as fiction. Could it be that since the 1290s, or at least since the reign of Robert I, there was a notional sheriffdom of Skye which simply does not appear in the admittedly scanty record? This sheriffdom would have had some relationship to the bailiaries I have envisaged.

The fleeting glimpse of Earl William III of Ross as lord of Skye in 1370, two years before he died, is almost the last we hear of the island, politically speaking, until Alexander, third MacDonald lord of the Isles, succeeded to the earldom of Ross in 1436. In 1463 Alexander's son and successor John granted 28 merklands of his lordship of Sleat to his half-brother Gilleasbuig (Celestine) for the service of one galley of 18 oars (Munros, 1986:no.80). Six years later the same lands were transferred to John's brother Hugh, already styled 'lord of Sleat', for service expressed in general terms (ibid:no.96). Hugh was ancestor of Donald Gormson, prominent as lord of Sleat in Queen Mary's reign (Dawson, 2002:131, 160, 198 and at 201).

Galley service, general throughout the isles since Norse times, was beginning to fade away, slowly, in the mid-fifteenth century, leaving its traces chiefly in heraldry and on sculptured stones. It raises the question of materials and their availability, for surely the supply of timber big enough and of good enough quality to build a well-found *birlinn* was under threat by the later 1400s? John of the Isles' charter of Sleat for his half-brother Gilleasbuig declares that the land comes with 'wood, oak trees, broom and brushwood', but we must doubt whether this is to be taken literally (Munros, 1986:127).³⁰ The charter was evidently the work of the lord of the Isles' secretary, Thomas Munro (ibid:liii, 123, 126 and at 154). Most of the surviving documents composed by Munro display such an excess of *formulae* and diplomatic protocol that we are left feeling that he was either determined to give his master his money's worth or else merely showing off (ibid: nos. 78, 79 and 96).³¹ Thus oak trees turn up in

30 The list of easements and perquisites in the charter, beginning *per omnes rectas metas* and ending *sine revocacione seu reclamacione* reads as though it had been taken from a formulary, including everything for good measure.

31 A series of documents issued by the lord of the Isles between 1461 and 1469 is characterised by the inclusion of elaborate and repetitive *clausulae* of easements and liberties. It may be Munro's stylistic influence that we see in the series as a whole [Munros, *Acts of the Lords of the Isles*, nos. 72, 76, 78, 79, 80, 82, 88, 89 and 96].

charters anent Lochbroom, Lochcarron, Lochalsh, Torridon and Kishorn as well as Creich and Spinningdale in Sutherland (ibid:nos. 76 and 82). I am not suggesting that the oak trees were not there, but of what quality and in what quantity must be unclear. Seven centuries earlier Adamnán abbot of Iona tells us that Columba, staying for a few days on Skye, encountered a wild boar in a dense forest (Sharpe, 1995:175). Alas! I am no palaeobotanist and do not know whether the Western Isles in general or Skye in particular might have been much better provided with significant woodland and sizeable trees in the earlier middle ages than in the days of Johnson and Boswell or in modern times. Martin Martin certainly believed, in 1703, that Skye, as he puts it, 'hath antiently been covered all over with Woods, as appears from the great Trunks of Fir-trees, etc. dug out of the Bogs frequently, etc. There are several Coppices of Wood, scatter'd up and down the Isle; the largest call'd Lettir-hurr, exceeds not three miles in length.' This is Lettir-fura on the coast of Sleat (Martin, 1970:142).³² Alexander Nicolson, the historian of Skye, says that bog firs are rare in the island but common on Rona (Nicolson, 1994:231).

As is well known, Skye became the seat of those bishops of the Isles who owed allegiance to Scotland, or at least to the *ecclesia Scoticana*, after the English (who had deprived the Scots of the Isle of Man c.1333) adhered to the Roman popes in 1387. The Scots remained loyal to the Avignonese popes (Watt and Murray, 2003:257 and at 262-64; Nicolson, 1974:190-93 and at 237-46). In fact it seems that a separate episcopal see had already established itself at Snizort on Skye by the 1320s, though it is only known to have elected one bishop (Watt and Murray, 2003:262). By 1433 the then bishop, Angus, an illegitimate son of Donald lord of the Isles, was petitioning the pope to have his see transferred from Snizort to 'some honest place', probably meaning Iona (Dunlop and MacLauchlan, 1983:25). Thirty years after Angus's death another Angus, almost certainly the first one's son, was provided to the see and duly consecrated at Rome (Watt and Murray, 2003:264). It is perhaps easy to view the distinctly laid back processes by which, first, a bastard son of the lord of the Isles was rapidly ordained priest and then consecrated bishop of the Isles and, second, that bishop's manifestly illegitimate son was appointed to rule the same diocese, as exemplifying an entirely typical West Highland way of doing things. Perhaps they do, but I suspect that in the later fifteenth century there were dioceses very much nearer to Rome where not very dissimilar customs were observed.

32 Lettir-fura lies from NG 7115 to NG 7517, and is wooded at the present day.

In any event, we are lucky that the first bishop Angus went to Rome in person in 1428 (Cameron, 1934:8). The record arising from his visit suddenly provides a window through which we can see the name and situation of one Skye clergyman whom the bishop took with him and of others with whom he was connected (Dunlop, 1956:203; Dunlop and Cowan, 1970:19-26).³³ The churches involved were Kilcrist (Cill Chriosd) of Strathsuardal (Strathswordale), Kilchonnan of Uig, and Kilchonnan of Vaternish (Trumpan), all classified as rectories. The clergy, described as subdeacons or in two cases as ‘alleged priests’, were either (in one case) at Rome, petitioning for favours, or were at home on Skye being petitioned against. The petitioner was Domhnall mac Maelchomghall, subdeacon and parson of the church of St Connán of Uig, annual value 4 merks (Dunlop and Cowan, 1970:26). He was permitted to hold the rectory of Kilcrist in Strathsuardal (value 7 merks) because two clerics in turn had held it for a year without taking priest’s orders, namely Donnchadh Mac Dhonnchaidh and Maelcholuim Mac Gillebhrigde. Interestingly, the latter was entitled *rannare*, i.e. a nobleman’s household steward or dispenser (Dunlop, 1956:203-04). But not content with these favours, Domhnall was also given leave to take the parish church of St Connan of Vaternish because first Domhnach Mac Gillechoinnich had held it for a year without becoming a priest and then Andrew ‘of Buth’ (Bute – or perhaps Boath near Nairn?) had detained the church improperly (*ibid*).

Domhnall seems to have reached Rome in 1428, but evidently did not complete his business there till June 1429 (Dunlop and Cowan, 1970:26). History does not relate whether he survived the summer heat and endemic malaria of Rome to win home to Skye. If he did, his struggles would still not be over unless he could enforce the papal decisions in his favour, possibly with secular help.

We can surely not deny that this record reveals a highly unsatisfactory state of affairs. Parochial livings were bandied about, recklessly it seems, and the Christian faithful were surely in constant doubt as to who their pastor was, or to whom they could turn for the baptism of their children or the burial of their parents. Rapid exchange of benefices was by no means peculiar to Skye or even

³³ Probably the most authentic form of the petitioner’s name appears in [Dunlop and Cowan, *Calendar of Scottish Supplications to Rome, 1428-32*, 25] viz. Donald Macmolcomgayll. His father would have been named as a devotee of St Comgall of Bangor and Tiree. Mr David Sellar thinks it likely that Donald was a Nicolson, of the family ancestral to the Nicolsonsof Corrybreac (*per litt.*, 5 Aug., 2003).

to Scotland. In England such benefices were known as 'chop churches', and in his Ford Lectures of 1933 Professor Hamilton Thompson drew attention to the case of the deanery of Chester le Street in County Durham (Hamilton Thomson, 1947:107-08). Vacant by death in 1408, it was given to John Thoralby on 6 April but resigned on 12 April so that John could take the rectory of Lockington in Yorkshire. John Dalton replaced Thoralby at Chester-le-Street but resigned the living on 15 April to Walter Bosum who only a fortnight later exchanged it with Robert Assheburn for the vicarage of St Oswald's, Durham. Thompson writes that during the fourteenth century the custom of exchanging benefices had reached serious proportions and by the end of that century it had developed into an abuse (ibid:107).

What does strike me, however, in the case of Skye is that the ecclesiastical structure was sound and record-keeping adequate. The names, status and values of benefices were preserved and although the scribes or clerks in Rome had severe problems in reproducing west highland personal names they seldom baffle us permanently. I leave you to imagine the clergy and their servants setting out from Skye six hundred and seventy-five years ago on the long, expensive and complicated journey to Rome. Any historian would be thankful that the record generated by their journey has survived.

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