# IONA: HISTORY, TRADITION AND SETTLEMENT

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For centuries pilgrims and visitors have been drawn to Iona. In the medieval Cathedral church (now restored), in the Nunnery ruins, in the richly carved crosses and stones and in the sites associated with St. Columba, they gain a glimpse of the religious and historical significance of this small island. There is, however, another side to Iona's story, that which concerns the people and their way of life. In this paper I shall try to shed some light on this neglected history by choosing three of the unifying threads that provide it with its continuity: firstly, the families themselves; secondly, the land from which they have lived; thirdly, some aspects of the parish life, community custom and culture that have bound them together.

**The Families**

Before the 18th century there is no very clear picture of Iona's inhabitants. Neither the archaeological nor written records give more than slender clues as to who the earliest of them were. There is one Bronze Age burial cairn, dating from ca 2000 BC, and one Iron Age hill fort, Dùn Bhuirg, thought to have been occupied between 100 BC and 200 AD. The mention of a "parsonage" in the 14th century implies a secular population by that period and there are occasional references to rents paid by Iona tenants through the 16th and 17th centuries.

In 1770 John, 5th Duke, succeeded to the Argyll Estate which for about 80 years by then had included the former Maclean lands in Mull and Iona. He is remembered chiefly for the energetic and innovative approach he took to improving the vast lands in his care and, in order to base this on a clear idea of the numbers and social organisation of the tenants, he asked his Chamberlains to compile a list of inhabitants in 1779. It was, in effect, a Census, giving names, ages and status – although, in Iona's case, the total numbers only of the women were recorded. Despite this limitation, the list is enormously useful in fixing the population of 1779 at 249 and in identifying the families this comprised.

Out of sixteen surnames on the list, a core of nine were to survive through the following century and, in seven cases, well into this one: Black, Cameron, Campbell, Lamont, MacArthur, MacDonald, MacFarlane, MacInnes and Maclean. By far the most numerous after 1779 were MacDonald and MacInnes. Tracing the names back

from 1779 is more difficult. For example, the 24 heads of household named in letters of caption by the Earl of Argyll against rebels in the Duart lands in 1675 consist largely of patronymics. In the Sheriff Court papers for 1716 there is a list of 25 Iona men among those delivering up their arms, after having kept garrison with the rebels in Cairnburg, in the Treshnish Islands. This was not necessarily a full list of family names, as it probably excluded older men, but it is the earliest to come to light so far giving a clear range of surnames, totalling fourteen. Some of the later names occur here, eg Black, Lamont, MacInnes, Maclean but the most common, McInlester (Fletcher), does not reappear in any later documents. Another interesting name which makes an appearance here, and then disappears, is Obrolochan (William and John). The name Donald Obrolochan is carved on a pillar in the Cathedral. He was from a well-known Irish family of stonemasons and churchmen and is thought to have been employed at restoration work in Iona around the year 1450.

Rentals and memorials to the Duke in the mid-18th century show further variations in the names present on the island, at least those of the tenantry. By charting these changes it has been possible to surmise two things. Firstly, the population was not static during th 18th century. There was clearly movement in and out and, indeed, in the period of just over sixty years between 1716 and 1779 there was a noticeably higher turnover of surnames than in the following sixty years up to 1841. This should be qualified slightly, perhaps, by the second conjecture that there were almost certainly some changes of surname, in particular *to* MacDonald. This was a known practice in the Highlands, either due to the wish to identify with a more powerful family or because a Gaelic name was unusual and hard for the Chamberlain or minister to write correctly.

Moving forward from the 1779 list, the Old Parochial Register for baptisms and marriages was begun for Iona in 1804, that for deaths in 1835 and the first nominal Census was in 1841. With the addition, often crucial, of information gleaned from oral tradition, it has been possible to reconstruct a large number of family trees. These reinforce the strong line of continuity that the families represent in Iona's history, showing the recurring use of Christian names and a close pattern of relationships within the community. By far the greatest number of marriages throughout the 19th century were contracted among the islanders themselves or with partners from the Ross of Mull and Tiree. By the 1891 Census, 50% of the population still bore one of the core surnames of 1779, predominantly among the crofting tenantry. And around 75% would have been able to trace a line, via male or female antecedents, to the early 1800s and in many cases also to 1779. Even today, about a dozen of the permanently occupied households on the island could do the same.

Kinship links were an integral part of Highland society and often revealed themselves in working practices or forms of mutual support. A small example might be a remark made to me by an informant, when talking about a late crofter Archie MacFarlane: "One year he fell out with his neighbours and needed help with

ploughing. He got use of a horse from Hector Maclean and I remember the old folk saying that it was because there was a connection." Following up this clue in the records, I found that they were indeed related, through Lamont grandmothers.

The social cohesion provided by close family links, and the value placed on these, were noticed by some visitors. The young Henry Davenport Graham, for example, spent several years on Iona as guest of the Free Church minister. In May 1848 he wrote to his father: "The people here are different from people anywhere else and one of their peculiarities is the spirit of clanship which still exists among them". Two months later – and note that this was a time of severe hardship following the potato famine of 1846 – he wrote: "It is very pleasing to see how very anxious the poor people of this place are for one another's safety, all the inhabitants live together in such harmony that it is like a large family... Most of the islanders are related to one another and they carry out their claims of connexion to the utmost extent; a second cousin is considered a very near relation and a man who would not serve a second cousin before his most intimate friend (not related to him) is looked on as a most unnatural monster".

**Living from the land**

How did the island support these families? A key change was the introduction of individual holdings, or crofts, in 1802. Prior to that the people had worked the land under the communal system known as runrig and a map drawn for the Estate in 1769, by a William Douglas, shows very clearly this pre-crofting agricultural pattern. His meticulously drawn-in ridges indicate the extensive cultivation of all the arable land, reaching out too into areas such as the Machair or the lower slopes of DùnI now used only for grazing. On outlying parts also, for example at Port a' Churaich on the southern coast, there is noted: "Good green pasture part of which has been in tillage". The only settlement is a cluster of houses between the landing-place at Port Rònain and the Cathedral. This corresponds to 18th century descriptions such as that by Thomas Garnett in 1798: "All the huts in the island are grouped together in the form of an irregular village".

Garnett was one of several visitors to comment on what they saw as an outmoded system of agriculture in the Highlands. Of Iona he wrote:

> This mode of letting arable ground to several tenants prevents those improvements which would otherwise be introduced. This island, from the nature of its soil, seems much more capable of improvement by cultivation than any part of Mull; but this can never take place to any comfortable extent till the tenants have leases and comfortable cottages instead of the wretched hovels which they inhabit.

The 5th Duke of Argyll was alive to the need for agrarian reform and was already

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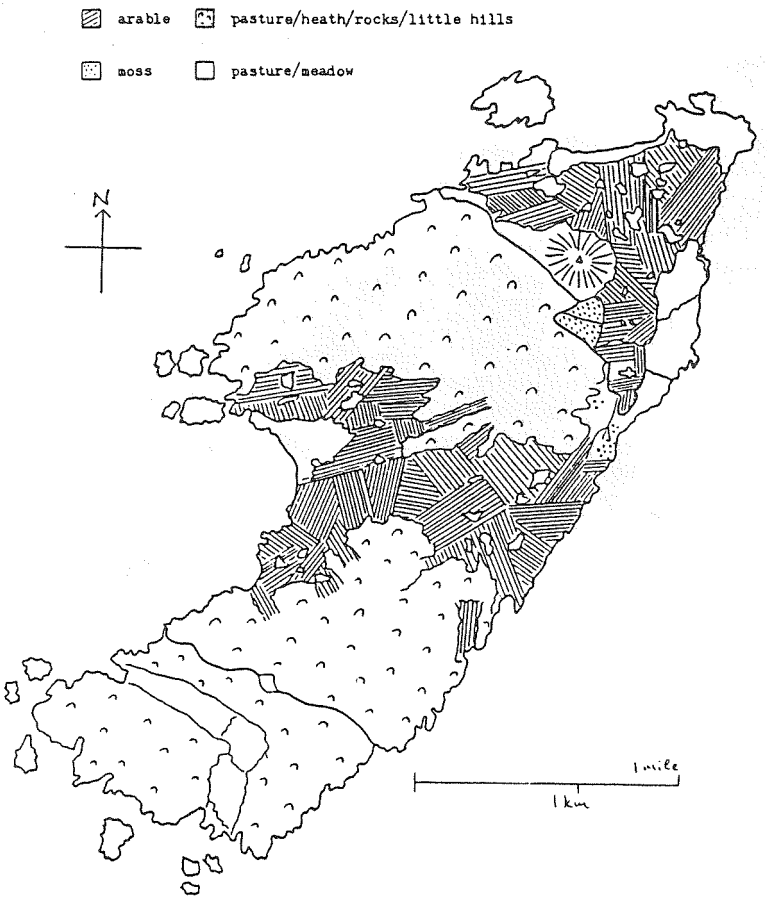
Features of 1769 Douglas Map, copied onto modern map :



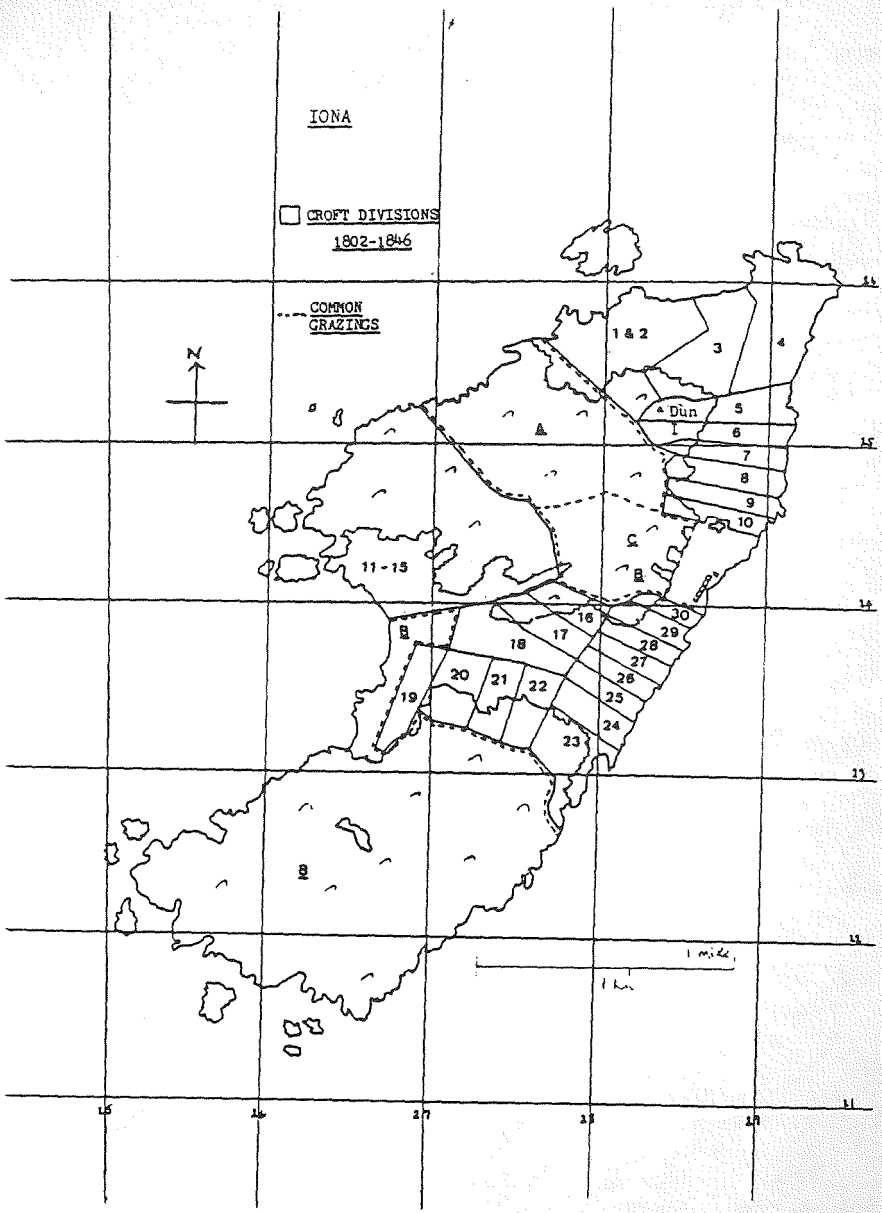
leading the way among Highland landlords in ordering the enclosing of land and its apportionment into separate lots or crofts. He had also made attempts to expand the economy of his lands. Iona, for example, was identified as a potential fishing station, as were Bunessan, Kinlochspelvie and Tobermory. Experienced fishers were brought in, fishing materials were offered, salt supplies guaranteed. But it did not become the commercial concern anticipated and by 1795 the minister recorded in the Old Statistical Account, with regret, that fishing was "followed only as a by-job". Also in the 1790's, a flax-spinning experiment among the Iona women and the quarrying of marble were both short-lived ventures. Kelping did undoubtedly provide useful extra income for the people, especially as the Iona and Mull tenants enjoyed a rare advantage in being permitted to work the shores themselves and sell directly to the merchants, rather than through a tacksman. But the quantities made and the prices reached were still very variable at the end of the 18th century – nearly 32 tons made in Iona in 1788, only 10 tons in 1790.

There is no evidence that any of these efforts to diversify were intended by the Duke as substitutes for the main activities of working the land. At the heart of his zeal for improvement was a re-organisation of the agricultural system. In 1800 he instructed his Chamberlain, James Maxwell:

> Being satisfied that it will be of great advantage towards the improvement of my estates in Mull and Morven if the small tenants were led to divide their farms or at least the arable parts of them and every man to build his house upon his own particular lot, you will turn your attention to this object.

In 1802 nine-year leases were granted for 30 crofts on Iona. Over the next few years the people built their dividing dykes and then their houses. The non-crofting population, the tradesmen and cottars were relocated in a new village street facing the shore.

The Chamberlain described the people of the Mull estate as entering "very heartily" into the new scheme and in 1805, after collecting rents in the Ross of Mull and Iona he reported: "I have had no cause hitherto to complain of the payments made by your Grace's tenants". Rents were met by sale of cattle, some exporting of grain and potatoes, kelping while it lasted and seasonal wages earned from harvest and other farm work in the Lowlands. This last was probably quite significant for a place within relatively easy reach, by sea, of the Clyde and its hinterland. An accident in 1822 provides a chance piece of evidence about the contribution of Ross and Iona to this migrant labour force. In August of that year a smack, the Mary of Iona, collided with a tug off Gourock and 42 of the 46 aboard drowned. Most of them were young women on their way to Lowland farms. This lived long in local memory as Bàthadh nan Buanaichean, the drowning of the harvesters. Local tradition maintains that two boats sailed that day. This is implied in the story of a woman who saw a sgart (cormorant) – a sign of bad luck – on the fated smack and switched to the


IONA
CROFT DIVISIONS
1802-1846
COMMON GRAZINGS
N
1 & 2
3
4
Dùn
5
6
7
8
9
10
A
B
C
11 - 15
16
17
18
19
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21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
1 mile
1 km

other one at the last minute.

Between the making of the crofts in 1802 and the early 1840s there was a small amount of voluntary emigration or migration from the island but the demographic trend was firmly and steeply, upwards. The highest recorded figure, 521, was in 1835 but a calculation of natural increase indicates that this almost certainly rose even higher in the late 1830s. By this time, however, the islanders' economy stood on a precarious base. Sources of income had gradually been eroded with the collapse of kelp prices, the depression of harvest wages due to an influx of Irish labour, the ending of military service and, worst of all, the fall in price of their main asset, black cattle. This vulnerable situation was highlighted seriously when crops failed in 1835 and 1836. That crisis largely affected the cottar class in Iona and the emergency food supplies, plus a return of normal harvests by the end of the decade, ensured that most survived. But the underlying problems had not been effectively resolved and ten years later the consequences were to be much more damaging.

The year 1846 is recalled in Iona as A' bhliadhna a dh'fhalbh am buntàta – the year the potato went away. The devastating suddenness with which the potatoes blackened and died must have made it seem as simple as that. The crop just disappeared, as Ground Officer Alexander MacDonald explained to the Estate Chamberlain on 29 July 1846:

> I consider it my duty to say that since you left the place, the disease in the potato crop has made alarming progress both in the Ross of Mull and Iona. The fields that then appeared beautiful and in full bloom are this day as if overrun by fire. I tremble at what may be the consequence from the complete failure of this staple article of consumption.

The potato was not only food for the people but fodder for their pigs and poultry also and there was often a surplus which could go for export. Unlike 1837, crofters as well as cottars were struck this time and the disease recurred for several years, resulting in a longer and more widespread period of destitution. There was, however, a well-organised and swift relief effort, with Government store ships based at Tobermory and Portree. Meal was also provided by the Estate although only in return for work, for example at draining for which grants were made available to landlords through the Drainage Act.

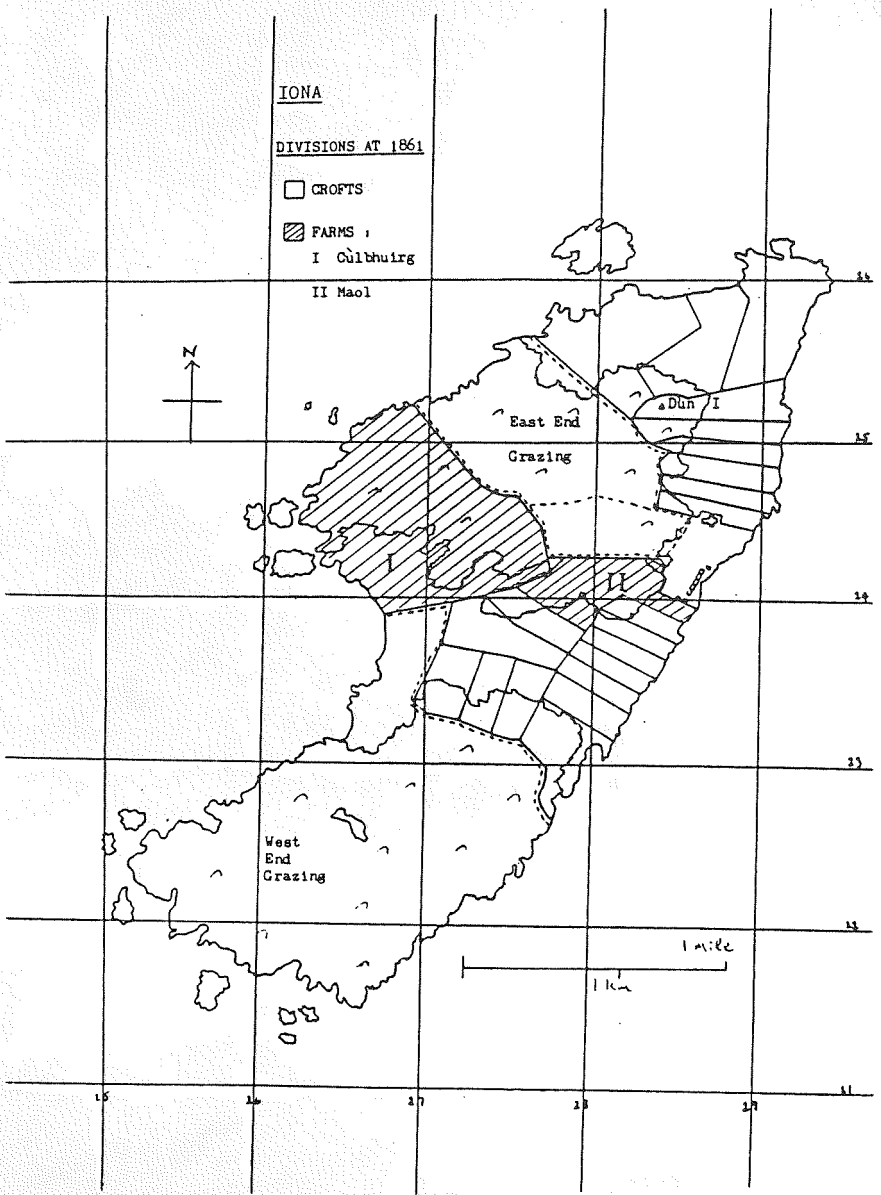
1846 was also significant for the Iona, Ross of Mull and Tiree folk as it brought the arrival of John Campbell of Ardmore in Islay, the Duke's new Factor – the Factor Mòr as he became known in these parts. He was to prove an energetic and controversial figure. Both he and the 8th Duke believed strongly that the only long-term solution was to make the tenants' holdings larger and more productive and to reduce overall the number of people. They pursued these twin aims consistently, and with considerable measure of harshness, over the next 20 years.

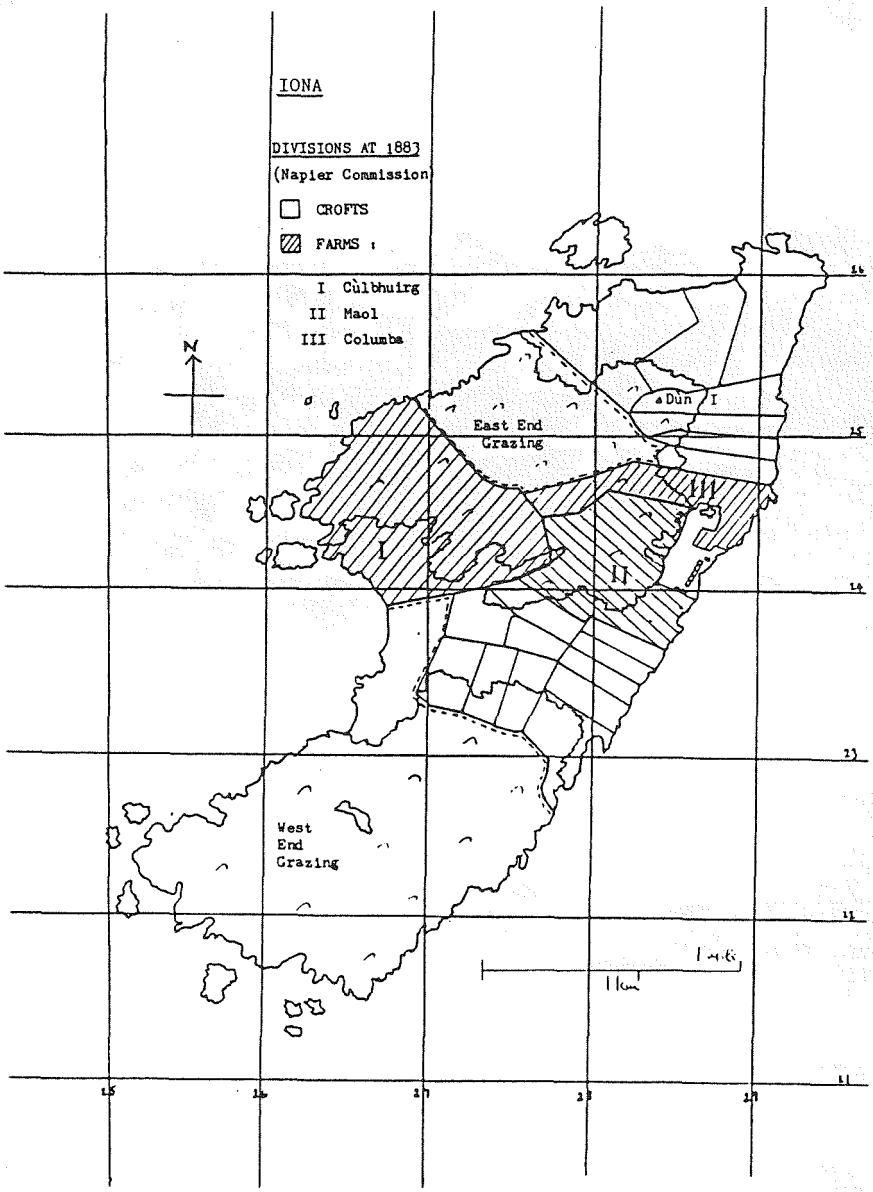
One of the Factor Mòr's early actions was to raise the Iona rents by no less than 50% in 1847. It was this, rather than more direct results of the potato famine, that was to mark that year in local tradition. Thirty-five years later it was to form the first complaint by Iona crofters to the Napier Commission. The Factor Mòr later argued that the land had been under-rented and that Iona was fertile enough to improve its productivity accordingly. It was very likely, however, to have been partly a ploy to persuade some to leave their holdings. And 1847 did see the start of a wave of emigration from Iona that was to reduce its population by nearly half over the following ten years. The Estate offered assisted passage, it organised ships and bought up stock and crops from those willing to depart. In other words, the option of emigrating was deliberately made easier just at the point when staying became an increasingly harsh alternative. The mood of the people was summed up by the Free Church minister in a letter to the Duke early in 1847:

> A good many of the Ross people I understand have thoroughly made up their minds for America and I make no doubt a considerable proportion of the poor crofters of Iona will do so also, though they manifest at present a great deal of perplexity and want of determination. Half a dozen families of Iona have written to Dr. Lang intimating their wish to go to Australia along with him. Some families from here have gone out with him on a former occasion who are doing well.

By the 1860s the smaller population of Iona had settled into a slightly different pattern. The first farm had been formed in 1848, from the amalgamation of five crofts. Two more were created by the same process in the 1850s and 1860s. There were now twenty crofters and despite the scarcities of the destitution years, and the arrears accumulated after the rent rise, they did survive. Cattle prices had risen in the 1850s and opportunities for trade and tourism were opening up with the rapid improvement in steamship services in the second half of the century. Margins, however, remained slim. There are several references to the fact that many could not have made ends meet without assistance from relatives, either working on the mainland or settled overseas.

The crofters became engaged in a series of wrangles with the Factor Mòr, principally over rents. When Malcolm Ferguson, better known locally as Calum Bàn, presented evidence from the two Iona townships to the Napier Commission in 1883, a major part of his well-agrued case was that the crofters were paying double what they felt their holdings were worth. They were caught in a vicious circle of constant cropping and overstocking, and thus exhaustion of the soil, in an effort to meet them. In the long tour the Napier Commission found only six places where the question of rent was more prominent than that of access of land and three of them were Iona, the Ross of Mull and Tiree. The Iona rents were the highest listed, averaging £20.9.6 for an average arable acreage of 8.1. Following the Crofters Act of 1886, the new Crofters' Commission finally met in Bunessan and Iona in April 1890. The outcome


IONA
DIVISIONS AT 1861
CROFTS
FARMS :
I Cùlbhuirg
II Maol
N
East End
Grazing
Dùn I
West
End
Grazing
I mile
1 km


IONA
DIVISIONS AT 1883
(Napier Commission)
CROFTS
FARMS :
I Cùlbhuirg
II Maol
III Columba
N
Dùn I
East End
Grazing
West
End
Grazing
1 mile
1 km

was a reduction in all rents, plus partial or total cancellation of arrears. The Estate had in fact already granted an abatement of 10% in 1884 and so, taking this into account, the Iona crofters were now paying 35-50% less for their holdings than when the Napier Commission met. For them, the Crofters Act had settled their major grievance.

The experience of Iona's crofting population differed in some key aspects from that of communities in other parts of the Highlands. Their creation in 1802 was part of an agricultural re-organisation where good-sized holdings were laid out on existing arable land. The crofts did not, therefore, arise from the process of displacing people from fertile glens to cramped and rocky coastlines. Although the population did suffer during the potato famine years, and although the numbers were winnowed down considerably, they were not decimated nor cleared away altogether. The three farms that replaced former crofts were not as large as many sheepfarms elsewhere, nor were the incoming farmers strangers from the Lowlands but Gaelic speakers from Mull or with a Mull connection. One crofting family moved eventually to the tenancy of a farm.

A central factor was the land itself. Many visitors remarked on the quality of Iona's arable and pasture land and of the grain and livestock they could produce. The proportion of cultivable land to the whole was always high. The link between a healthy agricultural base and a healthy population was made by an anonymous traveller in 1806:

> It is a general observation that religious houses were always situated in a fertile country. Iona is said to be remarkably so... We saw excellent barley growing close to the walls of the monastery. The people are healthy, tho' not remarkable for cleanliness... the island is very populous, more so in proportion than any other of the Hebrides, the best proof of fertility in a country where there is no commerce and where all the inhabitants must be supported by the fruits of their own soil.

**Parish and Community Life**

This same traveller's account was one of the rare ones that hinted at the culture and sociability of the Gael, which had long co-existed with a life of meagre resources and austere surroundings. His party was accompanied by a piper from Ulva and he describes in vivid detail the impromptu dancing and music on the shore, with around 200 of the islanders. The following year, 1807, the Swiss visitor Necker de Saussure also met with merrymaking on Iona during an evening of dance, song and comedy. "This scene greatly amused us" he wrote, "and we were astonished to see, under so foggy an atmosphere, in so dreary a climate, a people animated by that gaiety and cheerfulness which we are apt to attribute exclusively to those nations who inhabit the delightful countries of the South of Europe".

Observations such as this serve to remind us that the wealth of a place cannot be measured in economic terms alone. It is clear that the Iona people also placed value on the conviviality of their ceilidhs and recreation, on their bonds of kinship and on their customs and traditions. There are numerous accounts – and memories – of concerts, picnics, sports, regattas, New Year shinty matches (succeeded by football and then golf), debates, talks (the young men had a Mutual Improvement and Debating Society in the 1860s), weddings and other gatherings to mark personal events. Many working practices, too, depended on a strong community spirit when people came together for thatching, swimming horses, droving cattle and so on.

Schoolteachers and ministers took an active part in the social life of the island and the school itself was used a great deal for social events before the building of the library in 1904 and the village hall in the 1920s. The first schoolmaster was appointed in 1774 by the Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SSPCK). It became a Parochial school in 1841, administered by the Mull Presbytery of the Church of Scotland until the Education Act of 1872 and the formation of a School Board. Throughout, there were good reports of the school as, for example, when the appropriately-named SSPCK Inspector Mr. Tawse visited in 1828: "I found 66 scholars present and upwards of 100 names on the roll. I was very well pleased indeed with the appearance and proficiency of the children". This was during the long tenure of Allan Maclean, who served as teacher for 40 years and who also became well known to visitors as an engaging and respected guide to the antiquities. In addition, he ran an evening Gaelic school for about 30 older people and made up for the lack of a resident minister before 1828 by holding prayer meetings twice a week and scripture-readings, plus a Sabbath School, on Sundays.

It was in 1828 that the church and manse, to Thomas Telford's design, were built in Iona as part of the parliamentary scheme to establish additional places of worship in the Highlands and Islands. Prior to that, the minister for the parish of Kilfinichen and Kilviceuen in Mull had crossed to the island four times a year to hold services. Visiting clergymen and itinerant missionaries helped meet the spiritual needs of the population in the early 19th century. Baptist Dugald Sinclair reported a good response on a visit to Iona in July 1814. (He was doubtless unaware of the slight ambiguity at the end of the first sentence!) "Preached twice to an audience of about 400, many of whom seemed attentive and expressed thankfulness when the sermon was over. In this little island they had only two sermons preached for a whole twelvemonth past!"

Both ministers and the SSPCK were, of course, keen to discourage the kind of folklore and custom which they feared would undermine Christian teaching. Dr. John Walker, in 1764, noted that the carrying of a corpse round the Cathedral ruins before burial had only recently been abolished by the minister. Enough references to "Ossianic tales" or "marvellous legends" survive, however, to indicate that as rich an oral culture will have thrived in Iona at one time as elsewhere in the Highlands.

Rituals bound in with the rhythms of nature, too, must have linked back through many generations. Alexander Carmichael, recording folklore in the 1860s, recorded memories in Iona of two very old customs: the leac Gruagach, or flat stone onto which milk was poured for the guardian spirit of the cattle; the casting of oatmeal into the sea on the Thursday before Easter to guarantee seaware for the next year's crops. Seasonal customs which lingered much later include the decorating and keeping of the last sheaf from the harvest, common in Iona until the 1930s. Placenames, of course, can reveal traces of ancient practices, beliefs or stories – for example, Tobar na Gaoithe Tuath (well of the north wind), where sailors went to recite an incantation of some kind and raise a favourable wind; Sìthean Mòr (large fairy hill), site of various stories of the little people and their enchantments; Dùn Mhanannain, a hill called after Manann, a god of the sea.

In conclusion, the fame of Iona is long established, dating from Columba's arrival there in the 6th century. It should be recognised, however, that the history of the ordinary people who have lived there also has deep roots and a long line of continuity. It is inconceivable that such a fertile spot as Iona, lying in the centre of the main west coast sea route, would not have been populated and cultivated from the earliest days of human movement among these islands. This community of people, their links to each other, to their culture and to the land they have worked, has provided a fundamental and enduring strand in the story of the island.

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NOTE on population levels : 1779 : 249
1800 : 376
1835 : 521
1841 : 496
1861 : 263
1881 : 243
1901 : 213

**SELECTION OF SOURCES**

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