John Stuart to Thomas Pennant: description of Iona

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Of Iona, or I-colm-kill[x1]

Of, Iona or I-colm-kill a small island separated from Mull by [damage] parts less than an English mile in width.—

It is about [damage] broad. The [damage] is situated S.W. and [damage] covered mostly with a very white sand which consists principally of powdered shells. On the opposite side the coast [damage] is extremely rugged and rocky—

The principal hills or eminences in I-colm-kill are called Dun-I, i.e. the round hill or eminence of I-Cnoc-nan-aingeal-mòr i.e. the great eminence of the angels, Cnoc-nan-aingeal-beag i.e. the small eminence of the angels, Carnan-buy i.e. the yellow eminence, and Carnan-chul-reh-Eirinn i.e. the eminence [damage] back turned to Ireland[damage]

The inhabitants [damage] to be more fertile [damage] The soil consists entirely of the [damage] sand which is found [damage] the coast but mixed with more [damage] It is extremely favourable to the growth of bear, of natural Clover, crows foot and daizy. It is subject however to the general inconveniences of the sand [damage] very dry, or very wet season, the crops are indifferent. Oats do not thrive and are but little cultivated. The common increase of oats when sown, fourfold; of bear, fivefold.

— The arable land is in perpetual tillage —

Run-rigs — Grass in common — The last of the bear-seed sown in summer 1772 about the 20$^{th.}$ of June ——— Lint and Potatoes observed to thrive very well —

The [damage] in Tir-I,[x2] Col, North [damage][1] a person who has [damage] tolerable idea of all the [damage]

Part of the black Cattle in the island are housed in winter [damage] muirill, is what [damage] often most fatal to them. — The common price of a milk-cow here is from 2 £ 10 sh. to 3 £ 20 sh. Sterling. — of horses, from 3 £ to 6 £, —of sheep, 3 or 4 shillings.

Nine score of milk cows mantained in all upon I-colm-kill and about 500 sheep — Servants commonly paid by one fourth of the Crop, together with grass for three or four Cows, and some sheep ———

This island is the property of the Duke of Argyle [damage] present rent is about [damage] burdens. The [damage] Pounds, thirteen [damage]———

There are thirty eight families at present in I-colm-kill [damage] of which at an average there [damage] five souls — Eight of the heads of the [damage] families are of the name of Mac-Innys, six of them Mac-Donalds, four Mac-Arthurs, three Mac-Leans, three Mac-Echarns, three Mac-Farlans, two Morisons, two Mac-Ilvuys, two Mac-Laomins, one of the name of Cameron, one Mac-Millan, one Mac-Philip, one Mac-Kay, and one Black.

Some of these, it is said, are lineally descended from the very persons who sailed from Ireland in the sixth along with Columba.

The inhabitants [damage] island all of them observed [damage] infirmities of age — [damage] spare the diseases which [damage] them.

— They [damage] of the [damage] with those of Mull, but not [damage] so acute or lively. They are intirely secluded from the rest of the world, seldom see Strangers and but rarely hear the voice of an instructor. They have not so much as a school-master among them to teach their children the first elements of learning and knowledge — In this island once famed as the seat of letters and much religion, now darkness, superstition and ignorance reign.

According to the tradition of the islanders, Columba first [damage] Oransay, with views [damage] having vowed that [damage] in no country [damage] could be seen, [damage] island, and set out for Iona. After landing it is said that he went directly to the top of the principal eminence in the island, raised a heap of stones upon each, but could not perceive his native country from either of them. The heaps of stone are still shewen ———

There are hardly any monuments of Druids now remaining in this island, excepting a Druidical circle, 15 feet in diameter, which is to be seen on the top of Cnoc-nan-aingeal — About a quarter of a mile S. from the Nunnery, and within a few yards [damage] likewise a burying place [damage] which, if the uncertain [damage] of the present inhabitants [damage] upon, the Druidical priests and their flock were interred; before the introduction of Christianity —

The ruins of religious houses in I-colm-kill are considerable. Ouran's Chapel, or, as it is called by the natives Reilig-Ourain, Ouran's burying-place, is said to be the first building of Columba's in this island, though indeed it seems to be the work of a much later period. It is situated in the most centrical and beautiful part of Iona near the Easter coast. The wall is still pretty [damage] like most of the other [damage] is situated nearly E. and W. It is about 34 feet long and $19^{1/2}$ broad; [damage] in its W. end.

The [damage] stone that ^covers the grave in which it is said one of the Kings of France was buried is mistaken by some for marble, but is only a granite ———

That so many crowned heads from different nations have been buried in this island was, it is said much owing to an old prophecy which is still preserved in the following lines:

Seachd bliashna roimh 'n bhrà'
Thig muir that Eirinn re aon trà',
'Sthar Ile ghuirm ghlais,
Ach snàmaidh I Cholum Chlèirich.

"Seven years before the end of the world, a deluge shall drown the nations. The sea at one tide shall cover Ireland, and the green-headed Ilay but St Columba's Isle shall swim above the flood.

At the distance of [damage] hundred feet N.E. of Ouran's chapel lies the Monastery of the Monks. The great Church belonging to it is situated W.N.W. and E.S.E. —

S$^{t.}$ Martin's Cross, quite entire, erected about 200 feet from it's S.W. corner — S$^{t.}$ Mary's Chapel, of the same size with Ouran's, situated about 400 feet from it's S.E. corner. — There are about 12 paces from the Church to the inner inclosure, and about 64 thence to the outward inclosure. South from that a Causeway extending for about 100 paces to a handsome Cross, which is 17 inches broad, $3^{1/2}$ inches thick, and ten feet high, above a neat pedestal of three feet in height ———

About 92 paces S. of this Cross there remain the walls of the Curia, or as they now call it, teampull-sgir-achd parish-church. It is situated nearly E. and W., is 41 feet long by $20^{1/2}$ broad —

About 7 paces S. of this are the ruins of the Monastery of the Nuns ———

The beautiful red granite employed in building all these houses was taken from Nuns-island a small rocky island in the sound of I. The hewen works of the doors, windows, corners of the wall or pillars in the different buildings are all of free-stone. The quarry from which this free-stone was taken is said to be still visible at no great distance upon the coast of Mull

Killin Dec$^{r.}$ 31. 1773.

Dear Sir

I am sorry that I must again plead my being obliged [damage] from home for a fortnight past [damage] for not writing you sooner ———

I send you inclosed some remarks upon I-colm-kill I found it necessary to be ^more particular in them thany you would deem requisite, as by the last visit to that island I had an opportunity of being informed of some more circumstances & facts, and of examining by measurement lengths and distances which before were but imperfectly guessed at by the eye —

Except the monastery of Monks and that of the nuns, I hardly think that any of the other buildings merit a particular or minute description from you ———

I shall endeavour to send you by next week's post the Remarks upon Cana, and shall omitt no opportunity in my power of sending you the rest in due time ———

I am not a little concerned that I should in any measure be the means of stopping or retarding your progress in your work — Surely no new intelligence that I can impart to you relative to your voyage can be of such consequence as that it ought to have that effect.

The same or nearly the same œconomy as to the management of farms prevails in most of the W. isles ———

Tiends is the Scotch word importing the same with your Tithes in English law. In Scotland the Tiends are at present mostly, either by lease or purchase from the Lords of Erection, in the hands of the Heretors of the different parishes. There is one Forbes who writes *a treatise upon Tiends*; but you'll find a succinct account of the laws relative to these &c. in *Erskine's Institutes of the law of Scotland* ———

When I wrote you last I was misinformed with regard to the period from which the Court of Session lay it down as a rule for themselves at present [damage] open no Decreet of Augmentation which have ^since past. I am now told th[damage] time commences from the year 1704, and not from the Revolution.

I am
Dear Sir
Your obliged humble Serv$^{t.}$

John Stuart

Editorial Notes

[1] The letter is illegible at this point, but from Pennant's use of Stuart's material in his *Tour in Scotland and Hebrides 1772*(p.277) the remaining words can be identified as references to North and South Uist

Authorial Notes

[1] x The Galic name is I, signifying an island, or I-Cholum-chille ie. the island of Columba of the church.

[2] xTir-I i.e. the country of I