

# Canoe Pilgrimage to the Isle of Boreray

## Celtic Era Burial site at Field of the Monks in Outer Hebrides & Birth Place of the Grandfather of the First Man on the Moon

Alastair McIntosh

Govan, 2015

**Summary:** *This is a photo essay of a canoe journey in July 2015 to the Isle of Boreray off North Uist and Berneray, Western Isles (Outer Hebrides), Scotland. It provides the local source of the story linking the astronaut Neil Armstrong to the island. Describes a visit to the burial place of monks of the Celtic era, including discussion of the early medieval incised cross, burial mounds, curious rock features, prehistoric cup marks and abandoned settlements. The author, who was raised on the Isle of Lewis well to the north of Boreray, is not an archaeologist and writes in a private capacity, but serves on the Advisory Group of the [Sacred Natural Sites Initiative](#) of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature as well as on the advisory board of the Iona Community.*



The Isle of Boreray, seen as two low humps with a beach inbetween when viewed from the spot on North Uist where Alda stopped his taxi. We paddled the 2 miles out from the point by Siabaigh, Isle of Berneray, jutting out on the right. “A very, very spiritual place” – John MacAulay of Flodabay, Harris.

In October 2013 I gave a series of talks in the Faclan Hebridean Book Festival to mark the publication by the Islands Book Trust of *Island Spirituality: Spiritual Values of Lewis and Harris* (now out of print, but available to download free [as a PDF file](#)). Early in the morning after speaking at Lochmaddy on North Uist, I needed to take a taxi to catch the Berneray ferry over to the isles of Harris and Lewis.

It was my very good fortune that the driver happened to be an island tradition bearer, Alastair “Alda” Ferguson. We were a little early for the ferry, and as the road rose onto higher ground above the coastline just prior to its descent down to the Berneray causeway, he pulled in to a lay-by, stopped the engine as if to convey a sense of circumstance, and pointed out to a couple of humps like a breaching green sea monster out across the Atlantic Ocean. Solemnly, he turned to me and announced: “That is the Island of Boreray, the birthplace of the grandfather of Neil Armstrong, the first man on the moon.”

At the time I was working on *Poacher’s Pilgrimage: an Island Journey* (due from Birlinn in June 2016), a book that explores some of the ancient wells and “temple” sites of the outer isles over the course of a twelve day hike through Harris and Lewis that I made in 2009. At Alda’s words the pieces fell together. I just thought to myself with a smile: “So here are a people who know a thing or two about *pilgrimage*.”

### **The Voyage Over**

In that moment I felt drawn to visit Boreray should ever the opportunity arise. Around the same time, Vèrène (my wife) and I had acquired an inflatable canoe. In the summer of the following year, 2014, we took a holiday on Berneray. Boreray forever loomed temptingly on the horizon. However, the weather that year was unsettled, and at the time we lacked the dry suits that are advisable for safety. That didn’t stop me from taking every opportunity I could to pick the brains of local lobster creelers and lifeboat crew about the tides. In July of this year, 2015, we returned to Berneray and, during a spell of settled calm weather, now duly equipped with dry suits, we set out on the adventure.



Departure from Berneray, with the northerly hump of Boreray looking deceptively close behind

We chose a day with a gentle westerly breeze of about 8 mph, steadily dropping as the day progressed. The prevailing pressure system was slack, moderately high, and unlikely to harbour any sudden blow-ups. We embarked on the ebb (falling) tide drawing from the zone of the causeway's inlet. This would counteract the wind and help to carry us out into the Atlantic. We planned to return on the flow tide so as to have both wind and water in our favour. Our safety contact was a retired Berneray fisherman, John "Shonny Mhor" Macdonald, who told us that there was mobile signal on Boreray, and recommended that we phoned him when we left, when we got there, and when we got back. He also took it upon himself to drive out to a headland in his car and check that we were OK on the way back. Such is the old island way of the older folks looking out for the younger ones and it was lovely to feel this still alive.



What they call these days a "Selfie" – the on-board taking of which being a yogic feat of navigational contortion

The kidney-shaped Boreray is a mile-and-a-half long and about two-thirds of a mile wide. The distance across water from our departure to our destination points was exactly two miles. These inflatable canoes are incredibly portable. Ours weighs 20 kg with paddles and I carry it on my back in a rucksack. However, such boats are sluggish in the water which makes them generally unsuitable for longer journeys. As well as added safety precautions, you have to plan to go with and not against nature. We normally chug along at a medium walking speed. Under the conditions described, our crossing to Boreray took 50 minutes. The waves were at most about a metre high, this being a gentle ocean swell with only the occasional splash across the bows. There was never any need to open our self-bailing drain plug. It was an exhilarating passage, a gentle experience of utter wildness, the insignificance of being something incredibly tiny in that ocean as vast (to us) as outer space, and thrilling to feel that we were actually doing this.

The wind slacked as we came into the lee of Boreray's east coast. We chose a cove and pulled the canoe up the shore. It was one of those stunning days – probably just about the only one of the summer - when the Hebrides become the Mediterranean, but without the tourists and hotels. You get the feeling why, as Adomnán mentioned in his seventh century biography of Saint Columba, people back in Celtic times came from far and wide to seek out God, said to enjoy full residential status in these parts.

We stood above the high tide mark and looked back to North Uist and Berneray from whence we'd come. Pabbay (Priest's Island, of much illicit distilling hilarity, as Shonny Mhor can tell) lay to the north. The distinctive Tertiary volcanic structures of the tip of Skye stepped up to the southeast. The Precambrian mountains of Harris dipped and rose across the northeasterly horizon, with Roineabhal – once threatened



by the superquarry dreams of a multinational corporation – the most prominent. On gaining a little height, St Kilda and other oceanic islands were clearly visible to the west, and hidden from sight but far to the south would have been Eigg, Iona and then, eventually, the full stop of Ireland, far to the foot of the great Outer Hebridean exclamation mark in the sea. At least, that is how it might look from space.



Looking back to Berneray beach from Boreray, Roineabhal on Harris to the right

### **The Neil Armstrong Connection**

Once fully ashore, we wandered amongst the ruins of past settlements. The islanders had chosen to evacuate in 1923. One family subsequently returned, but the last of these died in the 1960s after the creation of the island's single croft smallholding.



Boreray was evacuated in 1923, having become too remote for all but one family

Macleans of Boreray can be found living on North Uist today. Now the island's sole inhabitant and crofter is Jerry Cox who came from elsewhere to live there.



Vérène in her dry suit near the old school, renovated by Jerry Cox the sole inhabitant today

It was perhaps Alda Ferguson's pomp and circumstance when he turned off his engine that had so locked Neil Armstrong and the moon into my navigational system. I subsequently telephoned him to check the facts. He said that his source had been the late Roddy MacAskill of Berneray, a tradition bearer who he considers to have been a reliable source.

MacAskill had maintained that Armstrong's grandfather's parents had left Boreray when Neil's grandfather was just six months old. The family ended up in America. James R Hansen's biography of Neil Armstrong, *First Man*, traces the surname to Langholm in the Scottish Borders and makes no mention of the Hebrides. However, the family genealogy seems confused around the time of Neil's great grandparents, Hansen remarking, "It seems they did not marry" and their son was adopted by another family after the mother died. Tantalisingly, on p. 25 Hansen says of Neil's parents: "No one in either family had ever been Christened 'Neil'. Perhaps they knew that 'Neil' was the Scottish form of the Gaelic name Néall, which translated as 'cloud' or that, in its modern form, it meant 'Champion'." Neil is, of course, very much a Hebridean name. The influence of the Irish Uí Néills ("descendants of Niall", the King of Tara) had extended to the Hebrides during Celtic times. Richard Sharpe's introduction to his translation of Adomnán's *Life of St Columba* states: "It is possible that Iona was a principal church for both Dalriada and the Northern Uí Néill."

### **Martin Martin and *Cladh Manach*, the Field of the Monks**

Only on the morning that we set out on the trip did I learn about the island's more ancient claim to pilgrim fame, namely, as what we would today call a sacred natural



site (see [www.sacrednaturalsites.org](http://www.sacrednaturalsites.org)). As I'd quickly googled for information, I'd hit on website mentions of *Cladh Manach*, the Monk's Field. We went there with only the vaguest idea of where or what it might be, but later, I found that the main source of information is a passage from Martin Martin's ethnographic account, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*, which written around 1695.

Martin devotes a full page to Boreray or "Borera" as he called it, not to be confused with Boreray of the St Kilda group. He describes the island's loch with its rich harvest of eels, the agriculture and archaeology, and mentions an inhabitant by the name of *MacVanich* which, as he points out, means "Monk's Son". Quite what this might have implied for Hebridean clerical celibacy is not explored! However, while not an expert on the matter, I have read suggestions that the religious order of *Céli Dé* – the Servants of God or "Culdees" – who succeeded the Celtic monks, were (or could be) married. Martin states:

The burial-place near the houses is called the Monks-field, for all the monks that died in the islands that lie northward from Egg were buried in this little plot: each grave hath a stone at both ends, some of which are three, and others four feet high. There are big stones without the burial-place even with the ground; several of them have little vacuities in them, as if made by art : the tradition is, that these vacuities were dug for receiving the monks' knees when they prayed upon them.



### **Help from Jerry Cox in Finding Sites**

As we came to the island's main beach we were fortunate to meet and be warmly welcomed by Jerry Cox, who was out walking his dog. His useful website of the island's history, as I subsequently discovered, is [www.boreray-island.co.uk](http://www.boreray-island.co.uk).

He said that the island used to get a lot of canoe visitors – mainly university and school groups. These days two factors have put paid to that: Health and Safety, and the internet replacing actual reality with virtual reality.



Jerry pointed us towards the Monks' Field with its burial mounds and the prehistoric cup marks. He also told us where to find a little cross carved into the rock on the shore beneath the site. We found it about a couple of hundred yards beyond the main beach, just above the high tide mark, cut into a black hornblende-rich bedrock. Some initials of evident relatively modern origin are also carved into rock nearby. Of these, Jerry writes to me his assessment that: "The nearby C 19<sup>th</sup> name and initials bear no resemblance to the cross in terms of technique. The rock has been chosen by different people at different times because of its relative smoothness. I am certain that the cross is considerably older."



After getting back to Glasgow from our visit, Jerry emailed to say that he'd been visited by the sanctuary-seeking retired environmental planner, Bill Stephens, who had kayaked over to look at the site. It turns out that there is confusion as to which cross is what on Boreray, and that the one that Jerry had found and directed us to on the beach is not the one referred to in antiquarian records. Those records are themselves mis-labelled thus compounding the confusion. Jerry wrote:

Bill left me the grid reference of this cross. I checked it with my GPS the following day and found it [i.e. the GPS spot, not the cross] was about 12 meters south of the main burial mound, close to another mound... There are clearly two crosses. The one on the RCAHMS website (amongst the graveyard) seems to be missing. I have never seen it; either it is grassed over, or it was removed prior to my first arrival in 1998... [but] what I [found] with my GPS is that the RCAHMS grid reference confirms its alleged location within the burial mounds.

Bill Stephens has subsequently copied me an email to Jerry, saying:

Last Friday I visited the RCAHMS in Edinburgh but ... wasn't able to access all of the aerial photographs I was hoping to. However, I did manage to have a chat with Ian Fisher, the author of the *Early Medieval Sculpture* book, and Ian Scott, who did the drawings, and they confirmed that it was there when they visited in the 1990's!

There are three online site references for Boreray on the website of the Royal Commission of Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS), the underlined hyperlinks direct to them.

1. [ID 928196](#) **Reference:** *Documentary Reference:* A general reference page about Boreray, with map of the south end and links to the next 2 pages.
2. [ID 10395](#) **Boreray, Cladh Manach:** *Burial Ground, Cup Marked Rock:* A page devoted to Cladh Manach, the Field of the Monks, with details of site visits and a picture not of the cup marks, but of Ian Scott's drawing of the cross slab. *However*, when you click on the Information tab underneath his drawing (a wee "i" symbol, that is hyperlinked), it is mis-labelled as "Clach an t-Sagairt, North Uist. Cross carved on rock". Bill has confirmed this mis-labelling. He'll be speaking with RCAHMS on a forthcoming archival visit.
3. [ID 319371](#) **Boreray, Cladh Manach:** *Cross Incised Stone(s) (early Medieval):* A page with information about the cross stone, with Ian's drawing, but again misidentified as Clach an t-Sagairt in the information box.

The first of those links (<http://canmore.org.uk/event/928196>) says of the cross stone: "The terminals are expanded and may originally have been barred." It interests me that barring is a feature common in the Eastern or Orthodox Church. The Celtic Church was in its prime before the split between the Eastern and the Western churches of 1054, and there is a body of opinion, contested but one to which I am sympathetic, that prior to the Synod of Whitby (664 CE) the Celtic Church was closer to the Eastern church, with its pronounced Creation-centred, decentralised (autocephalic) and mystical spirituality, than to the centralising and scholastic authority of Rome.

Ian Fisher's drawing of the "official" Boreray Cross, the one that may now be missing, is shown below, this taken from the links above but originally in his monumental study, *Early Medieval Sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands* (RCAHMS 2001). Meanwhile, I await with interest the outcome of Bill's further inquiries and research at RCAHMS, and may later add to this PDF accordingly.





The Boreray cross-incised stone that may have gone missing, RCAHM reference SC 406991



The cross on the shore below *Cladh Manach* as discovered by Boreray crofter Jerry Cox



## Burial Site, Cup Marks and Strange Stones

Vérène and I scrambled up the slope behind the cross, heading west towards a number of low mounds on the skyline. Close to the largest mound we found the cup marks and in an area of about twelve acres round about, there were various other mounds and distinctive stones including a huge slab that appeared inset with a footprint, a mound headed with a quartz knob and a pinnacle-like black hornblende boulder.



**Clockwise:** 1) The largest of the Boreray mounds, 2) Slab with apparent footprint, 3) Quartz headstone on low mound, 4) A black hornblende rock that reminded me of the type found in Scandinavia to which a dab of fish oil would be applied as a blessing or propitiation, such stones being seen as “old friends”.





Cup-marked rock near the biggest mound. We put the sheep's skull there - for scale, not ritual!  
I think it remains the case that nobody really knows what cup marks were for.

What Martin had referred to as “this little plot” seemed to me to extend over perhaps a dozen acres, but sense of this is perhaps made by the RCAHMS statement: “Until the early 20th century the site was marked by an uncultivated area in arable ground ... but there are no remains except for the cross-marked stone.” RCAHMS also suggests that mounds to the west of the burial site are field clearance mounds. I lacked the archaeological competence to interpret what I was seeing, but clearly, some modern survey work would be merited. The largest of the mounds are visible with the naked eye from where Alda stopped his taxi as pimples on the hilltop three miles away.

In a talk given to the Islands Book Trust, *Boreray and its place in the early history of Christianity in Scotland* (kindly supplied to me by Jerry Cox, and appended herewith), the late amateur archaeologist, Ian Stewart-Hargreaves, interpreted Martin's Eigg reference (above) as implying that St Donan and his massacred monks were buried on Boreray. However, both Camille Dressler (the Eigg historian) and I think that he has misread Martin. Martin speaks of “all the monks that died in the islands that lie northward from Eigg” having been “buried in this little plot” – not the monks of Eigg itself. The Eigg people hold that their martyrs are buried in situ at Kildonan cemetery.

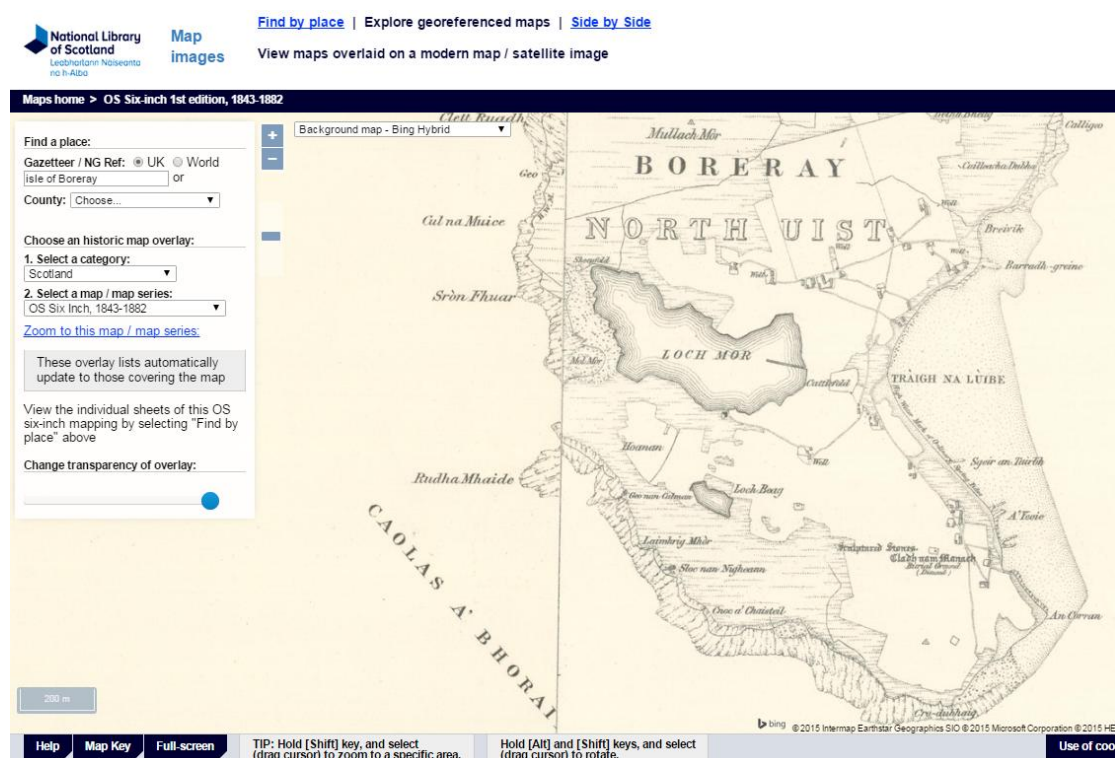
What can be said, is that for many of the islands north of Eigg up as far as Harris, Boreray is a very central place. One stands there surrounded by places that have deeply sacred ancient associations – wells, temples (pre-Reformation chapels) and

place-names. As a poem by R.S. Thomas has it: “The parish has a saint’s name time cannot unfrock.”

## Site of the Holy Black Women – an Early Convent?

The RCAHM entry gives the name of the island’s chambered cairn as *Na Cailleach Dubha*. (Vèrène and I did not know about or have time to discover this, but there’s a picture on Jerry Cox’s website.) RCAHM translates the place name as “The Black Hags”. Unless somebody was being a radical feminist revisionist and seeking to reclaim terms of feminine abuse, a more fitting translation might be, “The Black Old Women” or “Holy Black Women”.

*Cailleach* place names can refer to nuns (Dwelly’s dictionary) as well as to old women, the “black” referring to their habits. Indeed, it remained commonplace, throughout most of my boyhood in the 1960s, to see widowed island women dressed almost completely in black signifying both mourning and a turning inwards to spiritual devotion. A name such as *Na Cailleach Dubha* may therefore suggest a convent; indeed, one that would have been nicely in sight of Mt Roineabhal on Harris with the reputed nunnery at St Clement’s, Rodel, at its foot (see discussion in my forthcoming *Poacher’s Pilgrimage: an Island Journey*).



First Ordnance Survey map of Boreray (southern half only here), mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, [NLS](#), marking *Cailleacha Dubha* (top right, where we landed), and in the south, *Sculptured Stones* and *Cladh nam Manach Burial Ground (disused)*

Overall, I very much concur with Ian Stewart-Hargreaves view that Boreray was probably a place of considerable spiritual significance and may have hosted a monastery in its own right. I am astonished not to have heard previously of the self-evident importance of this site for the Celtic Church. I even found myself wondering, as a longshot, whether Boreray might be added to such candidates as Tiree as the possible lost monastic isle that Adomnán called *Himba*, from which the Iona monks were forever going to and fro.





Walking back from the Field of the Monks towards *Cailleacha Dubha* (distant green point) where our canoe was beached

### **Voyage back to Berneray**

Our journey back from Boreray went very smoothly. The wind had dropped, but remained sufficient for us to sail all the way back with the canoe sail, taking the same fifty minutes as it had taken on our way out. Vèrène steered with a paddle while I fished and caught a lythe (pollack) which provided us with a good feed that evening.



Back to Berneray under sail in a gentle breeze

### “A very, very spiritual place”

I was left reflecting on how the place had affected me. As Vèrène rested that afternoon, I had wandered amongst the stones and mounds, taking in the fullness of the surrounding landscape and pondering what it had all meant for the Celtic monks. From their surviving writings, one thing of which we can be sure is that they loved John’s gospel, the most mystical of the gospels. That, perhaps, remains our main connection to those early Christians today today.

Later in the week Vèrène and I crossed over to Harris (by ferry!) to stay with our friend John MacAulay of Flodabay, a boat-builder, church elder and tradition bearer. He was not able to add information (neither were Alda or Shonny Mhor), but he did say that he has always considered Boreray to be “a very, very spiritual place.”

After getting home to Glasgow I used the visit as a basis for a *Thought for the Day* broadcast on BBC Radio Scotland (text below). TFD is supposed to bring a faith perspective to current affairs, being broadcast during the main morning news programme. I had to do some more navigational yoga to wangle Boreray in, but it seemed to work, and left the presenters laughing at such an “adventurous” thought.

*On which point* .... the tides and weather patterns of the Sound of Harris area can often be unexpected and treacherous. Tides between some islands can reach about six knots (i.e. running speed). I grew up in small boats in Hebridean waters, but would not recommend a voyage of this nature without experience, good local knowledge, and safety equipment including buoyancy aids, a wet or dry suit and, preferably, a personal locator distress beacon (PLB). Even then, it’s easy to make mistakes. For a forthcoming embarrassing laugh in that respect, watch out for my next sacred natural site write-up (once I’ve time to do it), about our trip, made in the following week, to the [Isle of Bhallaigh](#) (Vallay).



## Appendices (below)

1. Thought for the Day broadcast
2. Ian Stewart-Hargreaves' talk to the Islands Book Trust



**Alastair McIntosh**  
**v. 12 October 2015**

[www.alastairmcintosh.com/articles/2015-Pilgrimage-to-Boreray.pdf](http://www.alastairmcintosh.com/articles/2015-Pilgrimage-to-Boreray.pdf)

**Thought for the Day – c. 0723, 30 July 2015 - BBC Radio Scotland**

*from Alastair McIntosh - Quaker, author and independent scholar*

Text below or Listen [here](#)

Good Morning

It's been a washout for the holidays with July having [double the normal rainfall](#) in parts, but that's not stopped my wife and I from getting out in our canoes!

Two miles off North Uist is a tiny island that I'd yearned to visit ever since the local taxi driver pulled in, pointed it out, and solemnly said: "That is the island of Boreray, the birth place of the grandfather of Neil Armstrong, the first man on the moon."

I thought - "So, here's a people who know a thing or two about pilgrimage" - and a fortnight ago, pilgrimage was indeed the spirit with which Vèrène and I paddled out into the Atlantic.

We wanted to experience Boreray's *Field of the Monks*, its burial mounds reputedly from all the Celtic monastic outposts of the islands north of Eigg. A small cross, cut into black bedrock on the shore, reminds the visitor that their spiritual basis, was community ongoing.

That afternoon Shonny Mhor, a retired Berneray fisherman, drove out to a headland to check that we were safe. That's the way of such communities, the older folks looking out for the younger ones.

Are these traditions disappearing? Perhaps, yet not everywhere. The other night I took friends fishing in the Firth of Forth.

The mackerel turned up just as we were heading home. By the time we'd filled a bucket, the rising tide had reached full flow and we had to fair hammer it back up the coast to return to Kinghorn pier.

We saw folks watching us through binoculars, and knew that, had we been in any danger, their lifeboat would have launched in minutes.

I thought how lifeboat crews give so much unpaid time – to borrow from the Psalmist - for "they that go down to the sea in ships [and] cry unto the Lord in their trouble" (Psalm 107).

The monks who rest in mounds on Boreray would have known and loved those selfsame ancient words. There you glimpse it: the depth through time, of community ongoing.



This is the text of a presentation that the late Ian Stewart-Hargreaves, a silversmith and amateur historian living on the Isle of Lewis, gave to the Islands Book Trust. Authorities with whom I've spoken, as well as my own take, consider that he over-stretches his evidence base in drawing on Martin Martin to link Boreray with the massacre of Eigg monks. However, as there is some interesting speculation, I have appended it for the reader's interest and as a mark of respect for Ian S-H's love of such matters.

### Boreray and its place in the early history of Christianity in Scotland.

There are many reasons for visiting this island. My interest is in S. Donnan, because there is a tradition that he and fifty-two of his companions are buried here.

In order to understand the significance of this island, one must come to terms with the importance of Donnan in the early history of the Christian beginnings in Scotland.

The starting point for us has to be with S. Ninian, who before his death in 432 became responsible for sending members of his Whithorn community up the western side of Scotland and over to the North and the East. Dedications to him of churches and place-names in these areas attest to these facts. Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, (Lib iii. cap iv.) written in 731, asserts that Ninian worked among the northern Picts. This statement is confirmed by dedications to Ninian in the West, East and North of Scotland. Some, claiming that Bede was working from the Ptolemaic map, which shows Scotland as a dog leg to the East, wish it to be believed that Ninian only worked in the West of Scotland, claiming that Columban missionaries were the bringers of Christianity to the Picts of the North and East of Scotland.

If we accept Tertullian's assertion that Christianity had marched in parts of Britain that the Roman armies had not by 200, the efforts of Ninian must be thought of more in terms of the head of a theological college, who prepared people for monastic and evangelizing duties, rather than the head of missionary base. This suggests that his community was a reservoir of clergy, who were sent out to serve in already established monastic and lay Christian communities.

Donnan, who died in 617, was a continuator of the work of Ninian and was such in the same places in which Ninian's followers had served. Forbes in *Kalendars of Scottish Saints* (1872) identifies two Donnans both of whom are given as being remembered on 17.iv. They were separated by him into the areas in which places are dedicated to them. One is associated with Caithness, Ross and Inverness-shire: the other, mainly with islands to the West of Scotland. I do not think that there were two Donnans but I do accept that he is associated with two separated areas of Scotland. This may well be accounted for by the fact that since movement on the sea was easier than over land, human settlement was either on coastal lands or in glens that were easily accessible from the sea.

When it is realized that Donnan trained at *Candida Casa*, (Whithorn), which was from where set out for his work, (Scott, *The Pictish Nation: its People and its Church*, Edinburgh, 1918, pp, 99 and 267.) the connection between the work of Ninian and Donnan will be more apparent.

As might be expected, one cannot think of the Church in Scotland in the Sixth

century without referring to Columba. On his progress north, Donnan called in at Iona and spoke with Columba, asking him to become his anamchara [soul friend]. Columba refused with the words, "I will only be soul friend to folk of white martyrdom, i.e. I will not be (thy) soul friend, for thou and the whole of thy community with thee will go to red martyrdom." (*Felire of Oengus*, London, 1905, p. 117.) White martyrdom referred to those who went into exile for Christ: red martyrdom referred to those who were killed for Christ. Whether this conversation occurred or whether this prophecy was back-dated after the death of both is a moot point.

There is more to this exchange than meets the eye. Columba was a Gael; Donnan, a Pict. If the conversation took place, it would have been at a time when the Gaels were usurping the land, language and Church of the Pictish people. In asking Columba to be his anamchara, Donnan is making a charitable offer of reconciliation, which Columba churlishly refused.

The killing of Donnan and his fifty-two monks was most probably the act of 'broken men' from Scandinavia, who had been exiled for their behaviour and survived by piracy and looting. It is thought that they lived on the Northern Isles. One wonders what behaviour among Scandinavians, then or now, would have been considered so egregious as to merit such exclusion. One version suggests that these 'broken men' were a 'hit squad' hired by the female grazier of Eigg, who held that monks frightened the animals. It was the bells.

Donnan and his companions have the doubtful honour of having been the largest number of martyrs of the Celtic Church killed on a single occasion. One story goes that they were at Mass and asked their assassins to allow them to finish. When they had, they retired to their Refectory, where they were killed. They did not want to defile their church with their blood. This version suggests where they were beheaded: another, that they were incinerated in a burning building. That Donnan and his companions were buried on Boreray and that each had a stone at their head and feet, suggests that they might not have been reduced to ash in a conflagration.

Whatever damage was sustained to the Donnan community and their structures, this was not the end of that community. Oan, who died in 725, was one of its later leaders, as was Cumine Ua Becce, who died in 751. Cumine Ua Becce is described as being a '*religiosus*', as opposed to an anchorite. The word '*religiosus*' is always used to refer to a member of a religious community in contrast to a solitary. The difference here is that of a cœnobite and an anchorite

Having given a brief outline of the life and work of Donnan and having shown that his community on Eigg continued after his death, let us now turn to this island.

"The Burial place near the Houses is called the Monks-Field, for all the monks that dyed in the Islands that lye Northward from Egg, were buried in this little plot, each Grave hath a Stone at both ends ...." (Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*, (1702), page 68.) This is thought to be a reference to the martyrdom of S. Donnan and his fifty-two companions on 17.iv.617 on the isle of Eigg. "... its site being



shown on the Ordnance map as 'Cladh nam Manach' [Burial-ground of Monks.] . . . This graveyard stands in an elevated position near the south-east corner of Boreray." ( Beveridge, *North Uist*, 2001, page 301.)

I believe that the tradition that Donnan and fifty-two of his companions were buried on this island evinces the presence of Donnan's western centre being on this island but this is a monastery of which we know nothing. This monastery was the centre of those serving Pictish communities on the western side of Scotland and which were, then, north of the Gaelic presence. This site would have allowed easy access to the islands and to the western coastal regions of the Mainland. I suggest that like other sites, Liamishader on Lewis would be an example, the Donnan monastery on Boreray became a Viking settlement in the Ninth century and is one of those pre-Viking, Pictish monasteries of which we know nothing. We do know that Auchterless was a centre of Donnan's work in the East, which would have been too distant to serve the area covered by those on Boreray. This and the fact that he and his monks were buried here suggests that Boreray was the western equivalent of Auchterless. A reasonable assumption is that it was members of the Boreray community, who recovered and buried the bodies.

Where was this monastery on the island? The obvious place would be where the ruins of the blackhouses now are. I suggest that the assumed monastic site to the south of the island was the entry and departure point for the island and that the buildings included a 'slipper chapel', which is a feature seen at Liamishader, Bragar and Eoropie. These 'slipper chapels' shrived visitors and pilgrims as that they would be in a suitable condition to enter what would have considered sacred territory. I venture that on the island there are still stone crosses or parts of stone crosses as yet to be found.

That Donnan had fifty-two monks at what would have been an outlying monastery of his co-workers in this region, suggest that Donnan's co-workers might have been far more numerous than is commonly appreciated.

In short, this island and Donnan deserve a reputation that is far greater than that current. Both were significant aspects of Pictish culture before it was subsumed and destroyed, firstly, by Gaeldom and, then, by the Vikings.

Ian Stewart-Hargreaves

(The opinions, assumptions and suggestions contained in these notes are mine, and mine alone, and must not be thought to represent those of any member of the Island Book Trust.)

VISIT 31/7/10