

An untold tale of a sunken cargo of sacred artefacts: Scotland's cradle of Christianity tomb-raided by aristocratic guardians?

Gerry Burke follows a clue from the 'new' Dewar Manuscripts and discovers a link with a Loch Fyne laird who has a 'Do Not Disturb' warning on his own marble grave slab.

A SINGLE line of Gaelic handwritten in a story collector's notebook 150 years ago has lifted the lid on an internationally-renowned "holy" island free-for-all that tarnishes the heritage of some Argyll aristocracy.

The resurrected Dewar Manuscripts, the plain-spoken, true tales and legends that document historic clan-land episodes from the time of Robert the Bruce, contain a giveaway that might yet uncover sacred relics from the seabed

George Campbell, 8th duke of Argyll, paid for a 'truthful' version of the 'people's history', now revived and improved for a major archive publishing project, thanks to a family 'death duties' deal with the Revenue. We revealed recently how his pioneering 'roving reporter' John Dewar was instructed: "Don't let us make out to be worse savages than we are but let us tell the truth and shame the de'il."

But Dewar, an Arrochar man who tramped Argyll and its remote west Highland margins, appears to have blanked a significant chapter in Scottish history --- or was, perhaps, censored from a level above his pay grade.

Deliberately or otherwise, he left a ticking timebomb to indict his employer and his ancestors and associates with ancient grave and shrine plunder which angered Sir Walter Scott, Johnson and Boswell and Lord Murray, the Lord Advocate for Scotland. 130,000 visitors each year are, currently, unaware a national disgrace has been swept under the carpet.

The glaring omission in Dewar's recollected time-travel episodes highlights rather than conceals the wholesale destruction and desecration that took over where the Vikings and the zealots of the Reformation left off.

Campbell dynasty

The Clan Campbell dynasty abandoned its duty of care to Iona and its people when they assumed responsibility from the MacLeans of Duart and earlier MacDonald Lords of the Isles. Samuel Johnson said even the native people themselves were "remarkably neglected". Worse, was wholesale "cash and carry" looting and destruction of internationally-revered artefacts commemorating 48 ancient kings of Scotland, including MacBeth and Kenneth MacAlpin, and eight Norwegian and six Irish.

Duke George's uncle, George 6th, an infamous, spendthrift seducer who



George, 6th duke of Argyll

squandered the family holdings and inheritances appears to be the main culprit during the late 18th and early 19th centuries when steamboat adventure cruises began. The partypal of the Duke of Wellington and Beau Brummel was "guardian" of Iona during the wholesale black market trading of sacred artefacts. The internationally-renowned marble quarry was exhausted to the point the 8th duke had to import Italian Carrara marble for the effigies of he and his third wife in the abbey. He made efforts to improve the situation but faced criticism for doing too little too late

Before him, 5th duke John and other ancestors appear to have misappropriated a whole series of iconic Celtic crosses from Columba's "sainted isle" to enhance vanity projects on the earthly portions of the Campbell empire and elsewhere.

The ancient "mercat crosses" of present-day Inveraray and Campbeltown, for example, were shipped out and, though some of the religious carving had been deliberately defaced during the Reformation, the names of Iona dead can be read to this day. One was taken as far away as a Campbell estate in Uist, another to Tiree, and other priceless sculptured stones and crosses were traded south of the Border as status symbols. The pre-Christian black oracle stones that solemnised promises and "magical lucky marbles" are long gone. Some consecrated slabs that served as boat ballast were eventually used as mainland house lintels

It has been suggested some of the artefacts may have been bought or removed as some sort of misguided archaeological rescue mission by some collectors. But 300 memorial inscriptions allegedly copied and passed by a government investigator to one of the dukes for posterity were never seen again.

Curious remains

A report in the Gentleman's Magazine from the 1830s reported: "Curious remains of antiquity have been disinterred from the ruins ... Mr Rae Wilson, having overcome the superstitious opposition offered to his endeavours, has at length succeeded in removing the rubbish from the tombs of many a light of the darkened ages.

"A fine altar was found in the chapel and a beautiful piece of sculpture representing the decapitation of the Baptist. The tombs of the Norway chiefs and sea kings are restored to light and the Scottish monarchs who chose this place of sepulchre now sleep in no unnoticed monument."

They did not mention the misguided, well-intentioned young antiquarian accidentally wrecked a marble altar frieze which was eventually broken up for lucky charms. He did, however, donate three cases of "curiosities" where they may remain unnoticed to this day in the Hunterian museum. Later official probes discovered 15th century remains underneath those from centuries earlier.

Details of the carnage on Iona first came to light in the early 1800s and were still unfolding when Queen Victoria was painting "the light in the west" over Iona Abbey during her royal yacht visit in 1847.

The Iona Club, set up to address the looting and cultural destruction on the island, staged archaeological rescue missions to clear crumbled walls and dunghills from sacred turf. Ironically, their efforts made it easier for the 19th century "monuments men" to load up. The 6th duke was its chairman when the most shameful destruction was being carried out. He wrecked the family finances with his London high-life recorded in a "Fanny Hill" expose by Harriette Wilson and clearly could not afford the annual £20 to keep his name out of it.

But some of the archaeological 'trophies' arrived in upper Loch Fyne - and that's when the depredation attracted attention and censure from the most respected figures in the land.

Sank off Strachur

The line of Gaelic that gave the game away appears to be an aide memoire by John Dewar in one of his notebooks and was translated by Ronnie Black, honorary fellow in Edinburgh University's department of Celtic and Scottish Studies. With Gaelic academic Dr Chris Dracup he is leading the huge project to finally publish the ten volumes of Dewar's work starting next year. It is a huge exercise by volunteers at home and abroad and the biggest Gaelic anthology collected in Scotland.



George, 8th duke of Argyll

The enigmatic line reads: "Chaidh an sotheach anns an robh na croisean s na Leaca-lighe fodha eada agus an Creggan." It translates as: "The vessel containing the crosses and grave slabs sank between Strachur and Creggan."

Mystified, Ronnie Black approached members of Strachur and District Local History Society to see if they could shed light on any connection to the note. There had been inferences about a number of carved gravestones built into the local church and their disputed origins. There had also been references to such shipments in the area, either deliberately dumped or accidentally scuttled but it was unclear which Creggan shore was involved.

An Iona steamboat traveller's guide of 1830 contained a fleeting reference to looted stones in Loch Fyne stating they could be seen at low tide and now there was confirmation of an almost precise location --- directly opposite a recently-completed stately home.

Lumsden's guide for Iona abbey visitors states: "Some ancient stone crosses are yet standing near this

ancient (Iona) pile. Previous to the Reformation, there existed 360 of various sizes and beautiful workmanship, many of which were carried away to adorn the streets of distant towns and villages.

"In Cowal there is a popular tradition that a great number of crosses and tombstones were sunk in Loch Fyne opposite to Strachur where, if we believe the fishermen of that place they are still to be seen at low water.

The report appears to put the American war of independence hero, general, John Campbell, laird of Strachur, in the frame as a customer who may have wanted to add a touch of antiquity to the brand new church he had also built.

Lord Murray

Fiona Campbell, an enthusiastic local historian, next discovered more confirmation in a letter from Lord John Murray, the Lord Advocate for Scotland to David Laing, Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries Scotland.

After gen. Campbell's death he tenanted Strachur House as his country retreat and confirmed he knew about the "dump" at the bottom of his carriageway and had even been asked by a friend to dredge for the stones.

Mr Laing was complaining in 1856 about the removal of the Celtic crosses to Inveraray and Campbeltown and hoped "several other remains of this class would be discovered" with the Duke of Argyll's authority and "a few such crosses would amply indemnify any trouble or expense to be incurred."

Lord Murray stated: "...there are some boatloads of stones which were brought from Iona and there are some in the churchyard which resemble the tombstones at Iona very much." He invited him to examine them but offered no information on who might have been responsible and believed they had been removed before his time.

With due diligence he criticised the "grasping disposition of the scotch (sic) nobility and gentry." He added: "I think you may assume that the nobility were grasping and the clergy and people sufficiently fanatical and roguish to take and destroy anything but I do not know whether scotch people like to be reminded of the bad qualities of their predecessors. Perhaps it may do them good, however..."

Why this extraordinary story was never passed on by Dewar remains a matter of conjecture. Ronnie Black said: "Just bear in mind the 8th duke paid his wages so he may have decided not to inquire too closely, or at least not to write anything down beyond the innocent wee note he had written already.

He also suggests the mid- 19th century might have been a bit too recent for his remit but Dewar takes up several pages relating an extraordinary tale from the general's exploits in Boston at the end of his American campaign.

Whisky tycoon

The 8th duke who commissioned the Manuscripts had them translated from Dewar's native Gaelic but didn't publish them and after some activity by a later duke it was the early 1960s before a serious attempt was made to get the tales into print.

Red Hackle whisky tycoon Charles Heppburn put up the money for a



The cross at Inveraray



Iona, as painted by Queen Victoria

promised ten volumes but after the first was published the deal fell through with accusations levelled about political bias and historical bigotry going back to pre-Reformation days. An influential political fringe group maintained the 10th duke had been intimidated to renege on the deal by "establishment" interests who they believed wanted all Scottish history to be silenced.

The group had ties to Sir Hugh Fraser who owned the wealthy retail and newspaper group and had only recently forked out £1.5 million to take the bulk of the island of Iona out of the hands of the Campbells for the nation

Who owns the stones and crosses allegedly under the surface of Loch Fyne is unclear for the moment, but there appears no doubt regarding

Gen. Campbell's gravestone under the aisle in Strachur Church.

It cannot now be seen but is a full-size marble grave-cover of what looks like the heavily-veined Iona type and states it was erected to his memory by his widow Helen "...by whom it is earnestly requested that no heir or successor shall ever disturb this sacred repository."

NEXT WEEK: The confusion of ancient stones around Strachur