

*An Account of some Remains of Antiquity in the Island of
Lewis, one of the Hebrides.*

In a letter from Colin M'Kenzie, Esq; to John M'Kenzie, Esq;

DEAR SIR,

NEWINGTON BUTTS.

HAVING no notes about me here, you will receive with the greater indulgence, the following Account of some Antiquities in the Island of Lewis.

Where authentic records are wanting, or antient coins not to be found, as is the case in the antient history of these islands, the only remedy for throwing light on the subject lies in the remains of antient structures and monuments, and the names of places, compared with the traditionary accounts of the natives; for, in these islands, the names of places are frequently descriptive of some quality belonging to them, or allude to some event preserved in oral tradition; and though little dependence can be had on the last alone, yet, when the venerable remains of former days may be pointed out, to confirm the simple tale, and agreeing with a knowledge of that language, which of itself is one of the greatest curiosities handed down from antiquity, the impression received from such concurring evidence must be little short of conviction.

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I will place them in the order to which the aeras that they are supposed to belong naturally ranks them.

Circles of Stones.

These are to be found in several parts of Europe, but particularly in Britain: "The horrid circle of Brumo," is mentioned by Ossian: The island of Lewis contains several of these; and if, as is generally thought, they were the temples, or places of worship of the Druids, this island must have been one of their chief colleges in the north, as Mona was to the southward; or perhaps, on being driven from the former, the latter, being remote, has been resorted to as a place of refuge. These circles are called by the country people by the general name of *Taoursanan**, the etymology of which, if known, might explain the uses they were designed for. The inhabitants have no certain accounts of these structures, except very extravagant fables of the one at Calernish, which I am to speak of. Amongst the ignorant, extraordinary works are always attributed to magic: Thus, Stonehenge, on Salisbury plain, Graehm's Dyke, &c. But it may be observed that the word *Druichg*, which is now only applied in Gaelic to magic, has been descriptive of the arts studied by these antient philosophers, and may serve as a proof to favour the opinion of those who think that this structure at Calernish has been their chief place of worship in these parts.

Calernish is on the side of an arm of the sea on the west side of Lewis: On a rising ground above the village, there is a circle of

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stones

* *Taoursach* signifies mournful: If it be true that human sacrifices were offered on the Druidical altars, such a name would be very applicable, and may be the origin of this appellation.

stones with a remarkable high stone in the center. From this circle a double range extends down the hill to the northward, and at the end there is a higher stone, which at some distance resembles a small obelisk. From the other three sides of the circle stretches a range composed of three stones; so that the whole forms a cross. Mr Pennant says the antient Druids placed their altar towards the south. If I remember well, this stretches from north to south. Martin, who wrote about the beginning of this century, says, the Chief Druid used to stand on the central stone. From the idea I still have of it, I have drawn the annexed plan: The measures I actually took on the spot, and still remember. Round each of the stones which compose the circle, there is a hollow which retains the rain water; this was so wide round the central stone, as to embarrass me much in taking its dimensions. Were a ditch cast across the circle to a tolerable depth, some utensils, ashes, &c. might be found, to throw still more light on the subject. I have been told that a stone bowl was found, and afterwards thrown, through a superstitious dread, into the hollow round of the central stone.

In the compass of two miles, and in sight of this structure, three more circles may be seen. One is double, and the stones mostly deep buried in earth. Of another, only five stones remain. It may be objected, that the Druids, having their temples in the deep recesses of woods, would not reside in an island, where there is none: But it appears, from the trees found in mosses, and frequently many found below the sea mark, that this island was once wholly overgrown with wood.

In many other parts of Lewis the remains of these circles are seen. Between Garbert and Shader, on a rising ground, there are the remains of a very extensive double circle. Some of the stones about the inner circle, which are pretty large, appear to have been thrown
down

down by violence. It is not unlikely, that at the introduction of Christianity, the votaries of a new religion would find some merit in destroying every memorial of the antient superstition: The violence with which this zeal raged, at a more enlightened period, must be always regretted by every admirer of Scottish antiquities. I must not omit, that these stones, whose size certainly required some machinery to rear them up, are entirely rude; have no marks of the chissel; and at a distance make a very grotesque appearance; that at Calernish is called by the country people, *na Fharr Chrace*, who, they say, were thus metamorphosed into stones while dancing.

Monumental Stones.

The custom which prevailed amongst the antient inhabitants of Britain, of erecting stones where a remarkable personage was slain, or in memory of an extraordinary event, has, I presume, been the origin of the many single stones to be found in the island of Lewis.

Two of these are near Stornaway: *Clach Stein*, at Bible; but the most remarkable for size and name, is *Clach an Druidhall*, at Shader, on the west side of Lewis. It stands alone in a muir, and is about sixteen feet high, four broad, and three thick. If we recollect that a third more must be below the surface of the earth, and that it is at least a mile and a half from the shore or any rocky ground, it excites surprise how it could be carried and reared there. That it has been placed there appears from the hollow ground about it, the smaller stones to support it, and the verdure of the earth about its foundation, while the muir surrounding it is covered with heath. No tradition remains of its use.

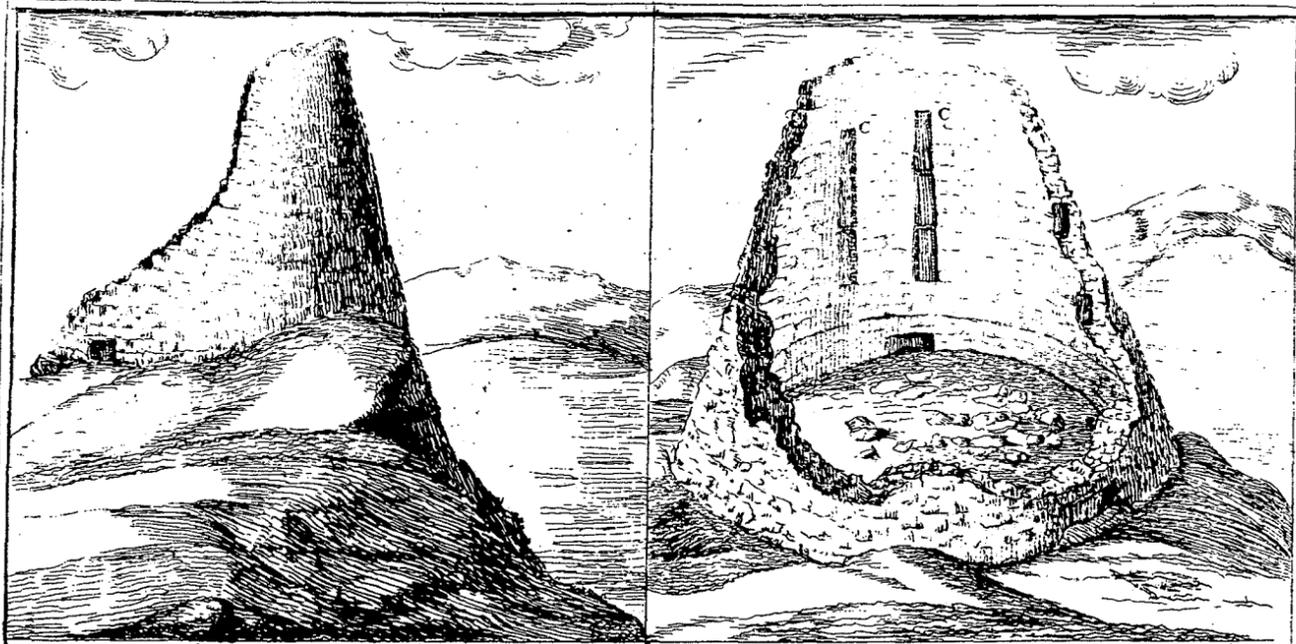
Cairns.

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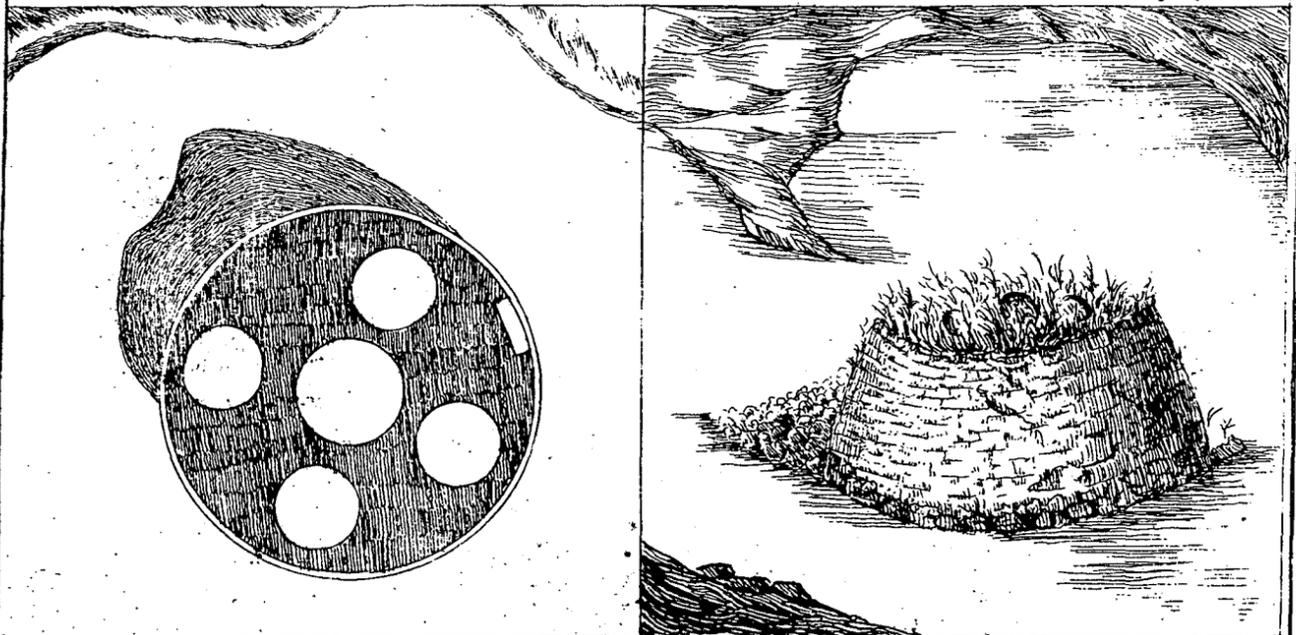
I have not observed any of these large heaps of stones, called Cairns, and which are so frequent in Rosshire and other parts of Scotland, in Lewis, except one two miles from Grace, in the muir, and which is called *Cairn a bharp*, in memory, they say, of a Danish prince of that name, there slain.

This brings us down to a later period, and it may not be improper to mention the settlement of the northern nations in this island, of which the traces may be seen in their forts, the names of places, and some customs not yet wholly eradicated. At what period the Danes first settled here is not known, but their piratical expeditions to the coasts were very early, and long before their settlement: Their wars with the natives of these coasts are generally the subject of their ancient poems. The situation of these islands, and the revolutions that took place among them, are entirely omitted or very slightly touched upon by our historians, till the reign of Alexander III. when we are informed that the King of Norway, finding the Prince of the isles had shaken off his yoke, resolved to reduce them to obedience, and accordingly fitted out a powerful armament. The result of that expedition is well known, and that it ended in the total subversion of that government in all the western isles; the Orkneys and Zetland were kept for some time after. Much about this time we may place the extirpation of the Norwegian force in Lewis, which is thus related: That these foreigners, being quartered on the inhabitants, and becoming, by their oppressions, very troublesome, a plan was concerted to cut them off; and the *Fiery Cross* being carried round the island, with this laconic message, *marbhadh ghach shen a Bhuana,*

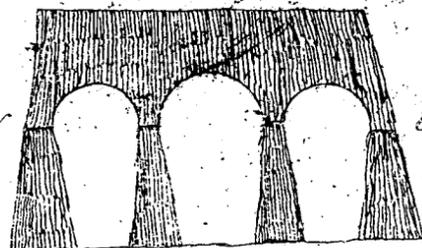




Plan of the Fort at Cromore and Views of the same.



Section of



Cromore

50 Feet Diameter

Bhuana *, *i. e.* Let each kill his guest. The whole were successively cut off as fast as the message went round, the foreigners being no-wise apprised of their intention.

At this period it is likely the Duns, or round forts, were demolished, that no vestige of their slavery might remain. In a small pamphlet †, published last winter, mention is made, that during these troubles in the isles, one of the princes of Man was killed in *Ladhos*, which I presume means Lewis, still called in Gaelic *Leobus*.

Round Forts, or Duns.

The Round Forts, of which Mr Pennant and Mr Cordiner have given several specimens, in different parts of the Highlands, are very common in Lewis, at least their remains. These are universally agreed on to have been built by the Norwegians: The Lewis traditions confirm this. These are often built on small islands in the fresh water lakes, which abound there; but others, and the principal ones, are built on elevated situations: Most of them are entirely ruined, and no idea can be formed of their structure, but from the large one at Carloway, one side of which is entire; but, as the other side appears to have been forcibly and abruptly torn down, it is impossible to examine the upper parts of it. I climbed up over the ruins that had fallen, and over the only entry it had from without, which was only four feet square. On the side facing the area within, are several window-like openings, giving some light to the winding stair-cases, which surround it in a spiral direction within the wall.

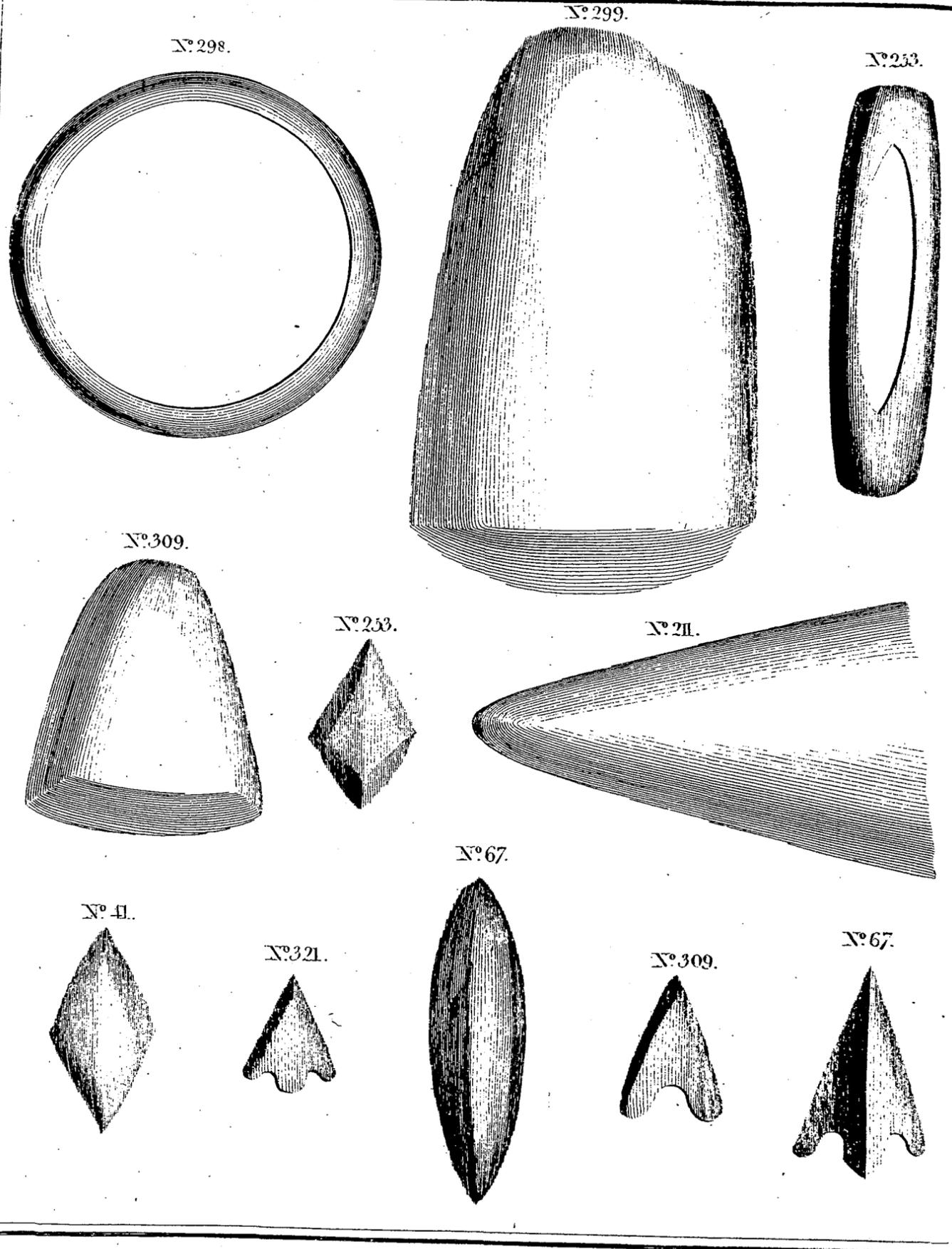
* *Bhuan* signifies the Soldier that was quartered on each house.

† Anecdotes of Olave the Black King of Man, by a Mr Johnstone.

wall. The wall itself is composed of two shells, one perpendicular; the outward one inclining inwards, and fastened together by the large cross stones which form the stair-cafes. In the side of the ruins, I passed in at one end of these stair-cafes, and, in a bent position, descended to the bottom, where I came out below, at a very low opening: But I found it impossible to get to the higher parts; and, as the wall gradually grows narrower, I cannot comprehend how people could get up to the top. I dare say it is 40 feet high, and the diameter within may be 30; the breadth of the stair-cafe I passed through was only four feet. That the area or court within was not covered at top, must be evident, because otherwise the stairs would be quite dark, and the apertures useless. About the height of 10 feet within, there is a small projection running round, which perhaps supported rafters to protect those within from the inclemency of the weather, who certainly could not reside there long, as there was no water within. These forts seem to be calculated to protect a small body from a sudden attack: There is no mortar made use of throughout; and the appearance of this great cone, all grey with moss, on the summit of a lofty rock, above a fresh water lake, is very curious. The tradition relates, that the fort being attacked by the natives, and the only small entrance being shut up, they found it impossible to penetrate into it, till one of them thought of fixing several *ducks* in the narrow crevices between the stones, and thus ascended to the top, where he and his associates proceeded to pull it down, till the garrison, which had no other defence, surrendered.

At Borue, on the west coast of Lewis, there is one on an eminence, which is now an entire heap of ruins. In searching for the stair-cafes in the walls, I observed a cavity, into which, descending with some difficulty, I found a well below, vaulted over head and covered with a coat of clay. An opening from without, about a
foot





foot square, threw some light on this gloomy place. This well or cavern, which was very narrow, lies exactly under the foundation of the wall.

I omitted to observe, that the Norwegian fleets always came to Loch Carloway *, in this neighbourhood, and facing the Atlantic; and hereabouts they had their principal fortrefs. There are other ruins in this neighbourhood, which I did not see.

At Cromore, on the south east coast of Lewis, on an island just large enough to contain it, and in a small lake, there are to be seen the ruins of another circular fort, about ten feet in height. When I visited it, in September last, it was covered with small bushes bearing a red berry, and so thick that it covered the rubbish entirely from view. On examining it more narrowly, I found the area was occupied by several circular cavities, and the spaces between them filled up with stones. Whether this was formed in its original state, or in latter times for secreting their effects in moments of danger, I cannot know; but, as I have not taken notice of any other, I rather believe the latter.

Religious Places.

Along the coasts of Lewis, and frequently in sequestered situations, we often meet with the remains of small buildings, generally about 12 feet long, and cemented with clay, called *Tiample*, and named after some holy man. These are held in great veneration, and are exclusive of the common places of worship, which have also been mostly built on the foundation of some of these *Tiampals*, or chapels.

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* Carla-vai signifies Bay of fleets; Borch signifies a Fort, in Danish.

In the small islands belonging to Lewis, are also chapels of this kind; as on the Flanan isles, which take their name, as well as the chapel, from Flanan; Rona, from Ronan; and one of the Spiant isles, or Holy isles, from the Virgin; at Grace, one dedicated to Olaus; at Gail, one to Cuiston; and many others which I do not now recollect. It appears from tradition, that there were devout men, who, retiring from the world to these distant islands, passed their time in acts of devotion, and inculcating the precepts of Christianity and humanity into the minds of a barbarous race.

As the first settlement of Christianity in Scotland has been placed so early as the persecution under Dioclesian, it has been imagined that some of these refugees, fond of a recluse and solitary life, retired into the western isles, and that these Temples or hermitages have been built by them, as the art of erecting stone buildings was unknown to the natives then. Others imagine, that when Columbus founded his monastery at Iona, he took care to plant the gospel throughout the Hebrides, by dispatching his missionaries amongst them: For confirmation of this, they bring the name Malloni, and others, which are of Irish origin. But, at whatever period this happened, it is very probable that these buildings were erected by devout men, who had retired from the cares of the world, and might very properly be distinguished by the appellation of *Cuiltach*, which signifies a Recluse, or hermit.

I have seen one of these small chapels, which, being placed on the side of a small stream, on the extremity of a very lofty promontory, and commanding a prospect of the channel between Lewis, Sky, and the mainland of Scotland, seemed to be very well adapted for exciting those awful ideas, in which a mind that wholly casts away the little cares of this world, would chuse to indulge.

Temple

Temple Maloni, at Ness, is a large building, and the architecture of a more modern date, which confirms the account of its being built by one of the first M'Leods of Lewis. A superstitious veneration is still paid to it, and no burials are permitted within the verge of the ground that surrounds it. The country people send their friends that are long lingering in sickness, to sleep here for a night, where they believe the Saint grants them a cure, or relief by death. I have known an instance of this not long ago.

Castles.

From the downfall of the northern power in the western islands, to the beginning of the 17th century, the island was in the hands of a family, which, though descended of the old Kings of Man, yet were dependent on the kings of Scotland, as appears from the charters granted from the reign of David Bruce, downwards. As no revolution happened, except the petty feuds among themselves, no transactions of any consequence can be traced from buildings.

The Castle of Stornaway was built in this period, a small part of which remains, which serves as a land-mark to sailors, and to shew the solidity of the building. A Cloyster for black nuns was also founded at Caarnish, which depended on the monastery at Hanis; of it no vestige remains. And the family chapel of the M'Leods, where the chiefs were buried, was built at Eye; here their remains were deposited under a tomb-stone, having the figure of a chief in armour cut upon it.

The endeavours of Government to civilize the islands, then in the utmost state of barbarity, by building a town and fort at Stornaway, which was effected by the Fife Barons; with the failure of that scheme; the planting of a garrison there in Cromwell's time, as well

as in other parts of the Highlands ; and the means by which the more useful arts of peace and industry were introduced, in such a manner as to promise great improvements ; being so well known to you, I need not mention here.

If the forgoing loose account, collected from memory, can give you any satisfaction, it will be very agreeable to,

Dear Sir,

Your most obedient humble Servant,

COLIN MACKENZIE.