This scan is, with his kind permission, the introduction to Michael Robson's important book which is not widely available but can still be purchased from Comann Eachdraidh Nis on Lewis. The cross imaged below is the St Ronan Cross, now beautifully displayed in the community museum in Ness. The cover image is detail from "Remains of a Temple at Galston, Isle of Lewis" (Teampall nan Cro Naomh or Holy Cross Church, Galson) painted by William Daniell in 1819 - see also Dr Finlay Macleod’s “The Chapels in the Western Isles”.

A Desert Place in The Sea
The Early Churches of Northern Lewis
LOCATION PLAN: The Celtic Churches of Northern Lewis

- Teampull na Crò Naomh (Holy Cross Church)
- St Bridget's Church
- St Peter's Church
- St Moluadh's Church
- St Thomas's Church
- St Clement's Church
- Luchruban
- St Ronan's Church
- St Peter's Church
- Butt of Lewis Lighthouse

Road: A857 Stornoway - Ness

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Foreword

We are very pleased to be associated with this important publication in the year of the 1400th anniversary of the death of St Columba. The history of the early churches of Lewis has been neglected for far too long and it is appropriate that it has been highlighted at this time. We are greatly indebted to Michael Robson for undertaking the necessary research and for writing the text in such a short time. We also thank the members of our own Management and Archive Committees who helped with the project in various ways. It is our intention to widen the range of our publications during the next few years. We are stewards of a valuable treasury of textual and photographic material which we would like to make available to as large an audience as possible.

Iain G. Macdonald
Chairman
Comunn Eachdraidh Nis

INTRODUCTION:

Forgotten Treasures

It is easy for the road-bound visitor to the north of Lewis to miss the places and objects of greatest interest. The local resident, on the other hand, knowing full well where they are, tends not to bother with them, just as the citizen of Edinburgh rarely sees the inside of the castle which may be in view every day. The sites and visible remains of the ancient churches which were once and may yet be of deep significance to the people living between the village of Shader and the Butt of Lewis, and even beyond the Butt on the lonely island of Rona, are not the least important in the area's long history. Two hundred and more years ago they impressed visitors who had far more difficult travel problems than those of today. Each site now lies only a short walk from a road, except of course Rona and its neighbour Sula Sgeir!

In 1760 a survey was made of the condition of parishes in the Highlands and islands. Those entrusted with the task were impressed with the lack of up-to-date churches in western districts. 'In almost all these Countrys, where Churches are now wanting', they reported, 'we saw the Ruins of Decent Edifices, which had been antiently devoted to Sacred use. These had been built before the
Reformation. We observe with Concern that Since that period, in many parishes the house of God hath Continued to lye waste'. Educational facilities too were, in their opinion, completely inadequate, an equally disturbing situation as religion and education were then seen to go hand in hand in most parts of Scotland.

At that time the island of Lewis was divided into four parishes, including that of Barvas with Ness. Here a parish kirk and manse actually existed at Barvas itself though there was no officially recognised glebe for the minister. There was also 'another Kirk at Swainbost, twelve miles Distant', for the populous district of Ness was a long way from the Barvas church and needed a more accessible place of worship. And scattered throughout the length of the parish were remains of many 'Decent Edifices, which had been antiently devoted to Sacred use'.

In northern Lewis there are at least eight and perhaps ten of these old buildings, with two or three more on the islands of Rona and Sula Sgeir. Among them is the 'Kirk at Swainbost' which is certainly of pre-Reformation age and like the others associated with the old Catholic church. They are all located on or very near the sea coast and, except for Luchruban and Sula Sgeir, close to settlements in which the people made a living from surrounding good land and from fishing. Each of the buildings is known in Gaelic as a 'Teampull', the English for which is not easy to determine. 'Temple' is really inappropriate, while the commonly used 'chapel' is convenient but not universally accurate. 'Church' is preferred here even though this may suggest a larger and grander structure than any 'Teampull' in the area. For reasons not yet explained 'Teampull', derived from Latin, was the word used in northern Lewis, while elsewhere in the islands the common term was 'Cill' which may suggest a stronger Irish connection. The interior of the Teampull when in use cannot have been anything other than bare and uncomfortable with an earth floor, possibly some stone wall benches, a stone font and a simple altar of small stone slabs. Calculations of building size varied considerably, often being no more than the approximations of surveyors and visitors in a hurry; they are recorded in several published accounts, including the Inventory of Monuments (1928) and subsequent 'Sites and Monuments' lists.

However it is translated and whatever its original significance, 'Teampull' does not now reveal anything precise about the age and function of the pre-Reformation church. More helpful in this respect may be the dedication
or other name by which a church is distinguished. Martin Martin, in his *Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*, first published in 1703, provided the earliest known list of the old Lewis churches and their dedications, including most of those in the northern part of the island:

'St. Collum in Garieu, St. Ronan in Eorobie, St. Thomas in Habost, St. Peter in Shanabost, St. Clemen in Dell, Holy-Cross Church in Galan, St. Brigit in Barove, St. Peter in Shiadir, St. Mary in Barvas.....'

Perhaps the first of these to be recorded was 'St. Mary in Barvas' outside the present 'northern Lewis' district but nevertheless very closely connected with it. 'St. Collum in Garieu' is probably the 'S. Columba' marked on sixteenth century maps and appearing on at least one of them as 'S. Columban'. This dedication is different from the 'St. Columkil, in the Island of that Name', also given by Martin, and may denote an early forgotten church in Ness. It could be represented by 'Ghearen', a name appearing on Pont's map of Lewis and Harris surveyed around 1600, and placed rather vaguely but somewhere not far from Knockaird. Given the possibility that some dedications of an 'Irish' kind might have preceded those of a familiarly 'Roman' note, the sites of churches of St. Columba, St. Ronan and St. Bridget might be older than the rest but this can only be speculation.

Small early places of worship such as the cells on Rona, Sula Sgeir and Luchruban were often founded in remote spots by monks from substantial religious centres like Iona. Courageous figures skilled in the use of sea-going curachs and in means of survival, each sought an isolated place, 'a desert place in the sea', where in a hermitage built of stone he could pursue through physical deprivation and through contemplation a purer spiritual state. In other words he undertook the experience of what was called the 'white martyrdom', for which Cormac, a contemporary of Columba, made three long voyages. To appreciate the hardships these people endured it is better to stand on the bare rock of Sula Sgeir than in the accessible, fertile, machair lands of a place like Eoropie where the church was far larger than the hermit monk's cell and served a different purpose.

It would be wrong to look upon even the larger old churches with conventional preconceptions about parishes, congregations and meetings. Some of these buildings were of a size more suited to a few priestly figures, while only two or three could house a company of local inhabitants, and the relationship of a religious

*A.O. & M.O. Anderson(editor) *Adomnan's Life of Columba* London 1961 p.441
presence to a neighbouring community is not at all clear. The earliest foundations had presumably to face up to pagan Norse invaders, but whether they were destroyed or treated with respect is largely unknown in spite of certain instances of slaughter and plunder. In due course Norse settlers were converted to a form of Christianity and might themselves have encouraged the establishment of churches; and the 'Roman' dedications, or re-dedications, of most of the churches in northern Lewis may indicate foundations of a later period still.

The Catholic pattern of church organisation achieved a system of parishes which became the basis of the later, Protestant arrangement. This meant enhanced importance for those existing early places of worship that were turned into parish churches, while most of the rest declined and even fell into ruin. In addition, landowners or other leaders of the population had increasing influence. Some of the latter may indeed have seen to the establishment of small churches on their own ground for their own and for their neighbours' use. It has been remarked that in Orkney 'chapels' can be associated with units of land called *eyrisland* or 'ounceland', a Norse term for ground possessed by a settlement group or an important individual, and it is of interest that at Shader, Melbost and Eoropie the word *Eire* occurs in placenames though in these examples it may mean 'beach' rather than an area of land.

The churches of northern Lewis, whatever their origin, eventually stood within the territory of the MacLeods of Lewis who maintained possession of their estate, including the small outlying islands, until the early 1600s. Morrisons, however, are known to have held a strong position in Ness and may themselves have required a place of worship. That some at least of the MacLeod chiefs took religion seriously seems to be illustrated in the permission granted in June 1405 to 'the nobleman Roderic Macleord, baron of Leows', to have a portable altar. Two years earlier there was a reference to the church of St. Mary 'in Barwas' [Barvas], to visitors there on feast days, and to those who made contributions towards maintaining it in repair. St. Mary's in Barvas must have been one of the four parish kirks of Lewis mentioned in 1549, while another was the principal ecclesiastical building in the parish of Ness and to be identified either with Teampull Mholuaidh in Eoropie or, more probably, with Teampull Pheadair in Swainbost.

Even in the 1400s there are records showing that churches in the Western Isles suffered from being remote and from the dangers surrounding them in a period of frequent
warfare, so that many lacked priests or monks to serve them. The monastery on Iona was at risk in the 1420s ‘because it is situated in the Isles among the wild Scots....and is almost destroyed in its buildings and rents by continuous wars’. Unless a dominant local figure such as MacLeod of Lewis felt a religious establishment to be important and gave it his protection the church, particularly if small and isolated, was liable to be destroyed in the course of feuds and fights. It might equally well fall into decay through mere neglect and absence of priest or other incumbent.

In spite of such circumstances however the old churches of northern Lewis, as elsewhere, continued to receive the regard of ordinary local people long after they had ceased to function as originally intended. Several examples of this persistent veneration occur in the descriptions that follow, especially in that of Teampull Mholuaidh with which Brand’s account of a similar church in Orkney may be compared:

‘There are several old Chappels in these Isles, which the People resort unto, but that which I heard of, as the most famous is St. Tredwels Chappel in Papa-Westra, which they have such a Veneration for, that they

will come from other Isles in considerable numbers to it, some of us having occasion to be on that Isle, we saw this Chappel, situated on a small low Rock, within a Loch commonly called St. Tredwels Loch, to which we passed by stepping-stones, before this Chappel door there was a heap of small stones, into which the Superstitious People when they come, do cast a small stone or two for their offering, and some will cast in Money; the Chappel hath been but little, and is now Ruinous, only some of the Walls are standing, which the People are so far from suffering to be demolished, that they labour to keep them up, and tho the Proprietour of the ground hath some way enclosed it, yet this proves not effectual to prevent the frequenting thereof.’

Brand, like Martin Martin, was writing around 1700 and with a familiar, Protestant point of view. People still went to St. Tredwel’s Loch for cures much as they did to Teampull Mholuaidh and still frequented other ancient churches for prayer and ‘Superstitious Practices’. Strong adherence to old religious customs associated with the Celtic as well as the Norwegian church was as marked in
Orkney, and Shetland, as in Lewis; 'And tho' their Ministers both privately and publickly have spoken to them, yet they cannot get them to forbear and abandon these Customs'. Antiquity and long practice had firmly embedded the sanctity of both church and custom in the minds and hearts of those who looked upon the fallen walls, and there were stories in the Northern Isles which relate as much to Teampull na Crò Naomh at Galson as to the thirty-five or more 'little Chappels' in Unst and Yell:

'These are said to have been built by Superstitious Zealots in the times of Popery, or as some rather think by Ship-wrackt Seamen, who coming safe to shore, have Built them according to their Vows made by them when in danger, which they dedicated to many several Saints, whom they looked upon as the Patrons of their Respective Chappels.'

It is perhaps as difficult now to discover when the old Lewis churches were abandoned as to fix upon the times when they were built. But it is clear that although eighteenth century Protestant ministers took measures 'for the eradicating and utter abolishing of these Relicts of Paganism and Idolatry' the little buildings, however ruinous, on the rainy headlands and sandy lands of the west have retained their power over the imagination and their ability to claim veneration and respect.