

islands weave into our world today, something that is sought after but rarely found, like the Isles of the Blest. *Tír nan Óg* is just a stone's throw away when travelling through the islands of the West.

The beaches of these islands are described as creamy gold and silver, as they are formed by glacial deposits made up of tiny crushed shell fragments, skeletal marine life and algae. Coastal grasslands off the western seaboard make up the *machair*,

"Compass Points Within Eileana Bride" by Alastair McIntosh

A short essay written for Marianna Lines' handbook (2014), "The Traveller's Guide to Sacred Scotland", Gothic Image Publications, Somerset, pp. 264 - 266. £16.99 / \$30 from the publisher's website at: <http://goo.gl/Bovbfd>

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AN INSPIRED CONTRIBUTION ON THE WESTERN ISLES

by Alastair McIntosh

COMPASS POINTS WITHIN EILEANA BRIDE

THERE IS A TRADITION, reported by the great Alexander Carmichael in the *Carmina Gadelica*, that the Hebrides were once called Eileana Bride – the Isles of Bridgit or Bhrighde. Scholars point out that there is scant written evidence, but then, this was an oral culture, and there is abundant evidence of the veneration of this most lovely and powerful Celtic saint and goddess in the place names of the isles. Most striking is the fact – and I have confirmed it from estate legal documents – that the whole of the Isle of Harris was the Parish of Kilbride – the *cille* – the anchorite's cell or church, of Bhrighde.

It is my visceral experience that the Hebrides are a holy place, a sacred landscape that remains redolent with meaning. These isles have known the *drùidheachd* or 'Druid' lore and still sustain the standing stones and cup-marks of pre-history. They knew the Celtic monks at a time when the Irish Sea, flowing into the Sea of the Hebrides and up from the monastic cells of North Africa, was the information superhighway of Europe's otherwise 'Dark Age'. Then came the humble monasticism of the Culdees, the *Célé Dé* 'Companions of God' and after that, the feudal forms

that came in with Norman influence leading to the Romanisation of the church followed by the Reformation.

The moors and coastlines ripple with long-treasured hints of holiness, whether stone circles, the healing wells or the pre-Reformation teampallan or “temple” ruins. If I take just my own home area Lochs, there are names like Loch Thobhta Bridein (the Loch of Bridget’s Ruin) near Achmore, and the little-known cluster of tranquil “beehive” or bothan stone hut circles out at Loch Ariaigh an t’Sagairt (the Loch of the Sheiling of the Priest) between the Grimshader road and Leurbost. What is more, some of these places are still visited by indigenous islanders, and in a spirit of veneration. A crofter friend who goes back to my earliest school days in Leurbost is, in my mind, the keeper of the Ariaigh an t’Sagairt ruins. He regularly walks out to sit there, and was interested to hear that my late father, the village doctor, had been told by elderly patients of a tradition that there had once been a monastic community on the island on the immediately neighbouring Loch Orasaigh, and that the monks had stocked the loch with Arctic char because these were said to be in prime condition at Lent. Undoubtedly this tradition would have been linked to my friend’s sheilings, and they say that these traditions are dying out, but I say: they won’t die out, if we hand them on, just as there’s a line in an R. S. Thomas poem: “The parish has a saint’s name time cannot unfrock.”

I would only want to add that in our enthusiasm for looking back to see where we have come from, we must not neglect to stand our ground today, and to see forward into time. Although much misunderstood and often caricatured, there is rich spiritual life to be found in the Catholic, Episcopalian and Presbyterian traditions of the Outer and Inner Hebrides. Collectively I think they reaffirm us in the underlying undivided church, better known today through eastern Orthodox traditions with their profound nature spirituality. I have come to think of each of these denominations as windows in God’s house of many mansions. None of them is perfectly placed. Each has problems of draft, damp and rot. Some were caringly crafted by the whisperings of the Spirit. Others, blown through by canon ball and executioner. But at the end of the day, irrespective of their history, these are windows nonetheless into the spiritual world that is the interiority of the material world. God comes shining through them, God as Goddess, God as Christ in whom, as Paul affirmed, there is no male nor female; for are we not in equal measure made “in the image of God”?

Our task today is to open those windows more widely, to polish their glass, to repair their damage and to heal what has been hurt. We are heirs to all that Alexander Carmichael documented, all to which these antique ruins testify, and so much more.

We are heirs and must claim a spirituality that is rooted in nature as the Creation, in its love, its wisdom, its providential joy.

“God’s Providence is our Inheritance” is the town motto of Stornoway. These are times for us to relax our bygone tensions, to breathe deep, to settle our souls’ compass to the magnetic pull of the islands’ spiritual field. They are times for us to take fresh bearings, to navigate new courses in our lives, to live a life that’s not just any old life, but the spiritually promised “life abundant”. Make no mistake of what it is we’re speaking here. Places of rock and heather, fleeting skies and streams of running water, for sure. But underlying all of these, the meanings of love in all its passion.

Alastair McIntosh is author of *Soil and Soul* and *Island Spirituality*, as well as the forthcoming *Poacher’s Pilgrimage* on which this contribution for his artist friend, Marianna Lines, is based.

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ISLE OF LEWIS

CALLANISH/CALANAIS

NB 213 330

Calanais, the name in Gaelic for Callanish, is far more than a stone circle. It is the most important prehistoric monument in Britain along with Stonehenge, referred to as the ‘Stonehenge of the Hebrides’. A central monolith, an inner chambered cairn, a circle of thirteen stones and avenues that run north, south, east and west make up the stone heart of the site, laid out in the shape of a Celtic cross. Yet the complex of Callanish is a wider landscape temple embracing more than twenty satellite sites of stone settings and circles. This is a lunar observatory created as an ancient power centre to witness the major lunar standstill that occurs only once every 18.6 years. The hills of Harris to the south are part of the dramatic tableau that has taken place for over 5,000 years. The next lunar standstill will be staged by the moon in 2025.

Clachan Chalanais or *Tursachan Chalanais* in Gaelic, the Stones of Callanish are situated near the village of Callanish on the west coast of Lewis on a low ridge beside Loch Roag with the Great Bernera hills and the mountains of Harris as a backdrop in either direction. The Lewisian gneiss stone of Calanais is the oldest rock in the British Isles, three billion years old. This black and white crystal banding gives a stark whiteness in colour and texture that enhances every stone as a work of art, allowing the stones to stand out in the landscape from a