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Icolmkill: the ruins of Iona

“That man is little to be envied, whose patriotism would not gain force upon the plain of Marathon, or whose piety would not grow warmer among the ruins of Iona!” (Johnson 1930, 135)

Iona, a small island off Scotland's west coast, was famed as a cradle of Christianity, place of erudition and royal burials. Writings about its ruins between 1700 and 1850 fall between rare travellers' descriptions, notably the first visual record, and the earliest significant scholarly works (Campbell and Thomson 1963; Graham 1850). The 1770s marked a milestone with published accounts of visits that opened up access (in all senses) to Highland's *terra incognita* (Rackowitz 2007). The intrepid were inspired by Johnson's eloquence, but also his companion Boswell's *Journal of a Tour*, Pennant's *Voyage*, and Banks' 'discovery' of nearby Staffa (Chapman 1930; Simmons 1998). As travellers and tourists started coming to Scotland in greater numbers, they could add to their itinerary Mull, Iona and — often the greater lure — Staffa's Fingal's Cave, “of all worldly wonders the most wonderful” (Otter 1824). Beyond simply the picturesque, a boat journey could propel visitors to an awe-inspiring place romantically linked with varying degrees of credulity to the content of Ossianic poetry, and the ruins of the venerated isle (cf. Durie 2003, 38–9). By 1800 Iona experienced regular tourist traffic. Notable artists, composers and writers left inspired, but the majority of the writings are accounts of early travellers and tourists, articles in antiquarian journals and magazines, personal correspondence, and, latterly, books for visitors about the island (RCAHMS 1982, 150–51).

The “*tout ensemble*” needed to be appreciated (Richmond 1819, quoted in MacLean 1833, 20). The schoolmaster, often the only islander speaking Gaelic and English, regularly led the tours. These focused on a block of land embracing the abbey church and its associated monastic buildings, the enclosed burial ground and chapel at St Oran's, a stone causeway, the nunnery, and the many carved stones. Detailed observations expressed concerns about antiquities' condition (crumbling buildings, dung- and weed-covered ground obscuring interiors and sculptured monuments, badly behaving tourists, damage caused by antiquarian howking). Visitors implored dukes of Argyll to act, and some recommended courses of preservation (Logan 1832; Laing 1856). Most stayed only a matter of hours, but those who sojourned commented on the warmth of Hebridean hospitality but challenging living standards. Today's pilgrim encounters tidy ruins, a reconstructed abbey, and a much transformed landscape (MacArthur 2002; compare images in Christian and Stiller 2000, for Iona's ruins were as much 'written' in pictures).

Authors were often sceptical of the colourful stories of the 'insular antiquarian' (Garnett 1800, 243) — narratives their visits created the demand for and influenced. These wove in local superstitions, a topography populated by scenes from Adomnán's seventh-century *Life of St Columba*, and traditions about the burials of Scottish, Irish, Norwegian and French kings, or of druidical activities. Native culture was largely oral but lost sources for Gaelic Columban stories do emerge from the account of an educated Gaelic speaker who visited in 1771 (Sharpe 2012).

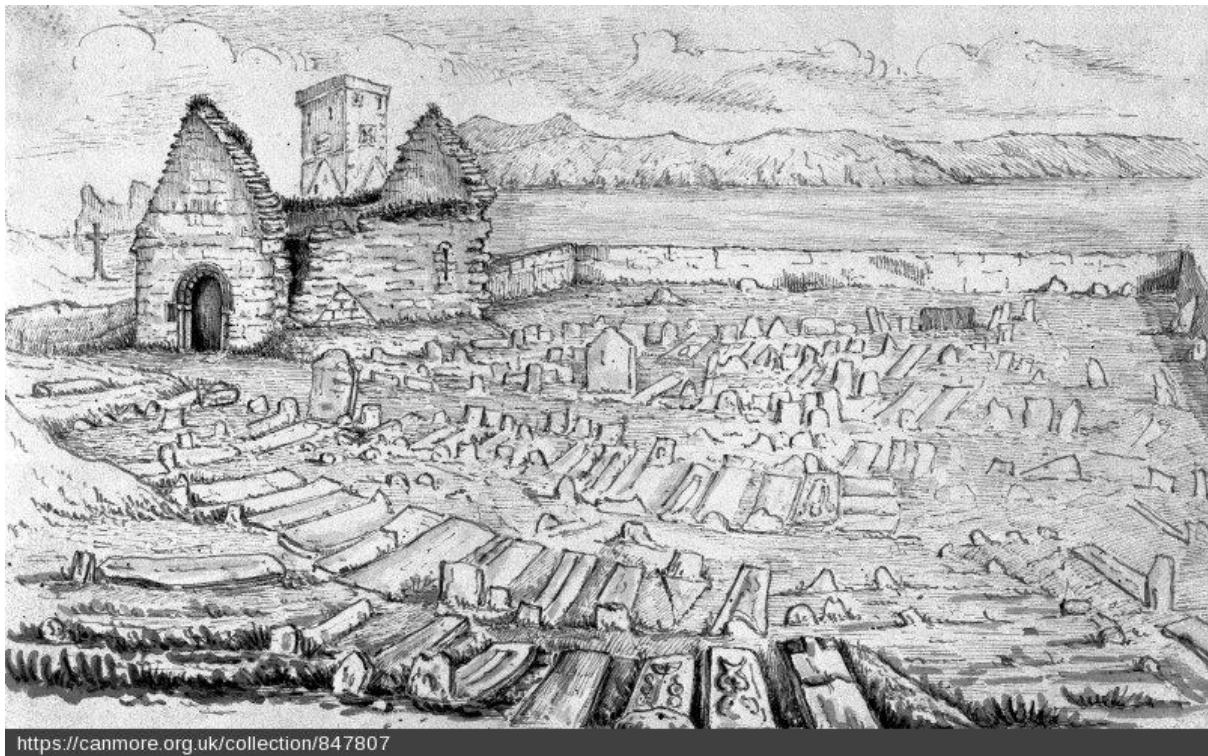
Visitors such as Boswell sought contemplation (Pottle and Bennett 1963, 330–9). For some the simple nature of the ruins, landscape, life-style or behaviour of the inhabitants disappointed. Perhaps surprisingly, while “Compared to [Staffa] what are the cathedrals or the places built by men” (Simmons 1998, 257), travellers avoided explicit comparison with Iona. It was important to “pay the tribute of a sigh to the departed glories of the consecrated island” (Botfield 1830, 270), still “one of the greatest curiosities of the kind in the British Isles” when its history was taken into account (Garnett 1800, 264).

[601 words]

Caption

“Reileag Orain. Burial ground of St Oran” (the original drawing for Plate V of Graham 1850; Crown Copyright Historic Environment Scotland). Featuring extensively in the local Gaelic narratives, Iona’s ‘curious’ visitors wrote extensively about the many types of sculptured monuments populating the landscape of ruins at Iona.

[Note to Picture Editor – publication quality version and permissions are available from Canmore/Historic Environment Scotland; alternatively, a copy could be obtained from a Library of the 1850 printed version, but the MS ver will have been completed in the field]



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