



# MY LIFE AS A REPLICA

**Dr Sally Foster and Professor Siân Jones** introduce pioneering research focusing on the rich social lives of replicas, through a study of the 8th-century St John's Cross, Iona, and its copies

*'heaven in ordinarie' [...] It's a base material, it's a beautiful object. On one level it's a replica, and on another level it's totally the real deal. On one level it speaks less powerfully because it's not the original stone, hand carved with mediaeval tools, but on another level, it's an expression of another kind of workmanship, and of a transmutation of that eternal truth, from the ninth century through to the twentieth century (Gertrude, a recent Iona resident)*

In 1970 a concrete replica of the St John's Cross arrived in Iona sitting incongruously on the deck of a puffer delivering the island's annual supply of coal. Within a week it had been erected at the Abbey, where the original cross had stood. The untold story of this intriguing replica lies at the heart of our new book. Drawing on extensive primary research, including previously unpublished antiquarian sources and oral history, we explore the cultural biography of the Cross and its replica(s) over 1,200-plus years. With ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in 2017, this is also one of the first qualitative social studies of replicas and how they 'work' at places of historic interest. We invite new ways of thinking about the authenticity, value and significance of replicas by uncovering the values that replicas hold, whether for locals, visitors or heritage professionals. We

also tell important new stories about the much-loved, world-renowned island of Iona and its internationally-significant carved stones.

With its 50th anniversary on 6 June, we focus here on the replica's story and aim to convey some sense of its significance. Historic Environment Scotland is listing it at Category A ('buildings of special architectural or historical interest which are outstanding examples of a particular period, style or building type'). This is a landmark decision given that replicas tend to be dismissed in

The concrete replica arrives at Iona, on top of the island's annual delivery of coal

The replica is enjoyed by visitors year-round

heritage contexts as proxies for originals, lacking their own lives and cultural values. As well as addressing traditional cultural values, our research revealed the contemporary social and spiritual values of the replica, reinforced the linked biographies of the original and replica over 1,200-plus years, and made connections between the creativity, craft and passion of the people who created the original and replica.

The artistic and technological achievement of this highly unusual replica, with its prestressed post-tensioned concrete engineering, has previously been recognised by awards, including the Concrete Society Award (Mature Structures Category) in 2000-2001. Today it has age-value, recognised by those who encounter it to have had a life and experienced things: 'It must have a lifespan, well everything has a lifespan... It's nice the way that

*Erected in the base of the original cross, the replica stands immediately in front of the first stone shrine-chapel in the Irish world, built over St Columba's grave*



it's weathered', Gertrude told us. Such experiences are enhanced by lichen growths on its surfaces, which were moulded from the weathered original (above image).

Erected in the base of the original cross, the replica stands immediately in front of the first stone shrine-chapel in the Irish world, built over St Columba's grave. These monuments lay at the heart of a massive mid-8th-century transformation of the early medieval monastery on Iona, an investment thought to be associated with the translation of the saint's relics. A feature of contemporary special interest is that the replica casts a shadow on the recreated shrine-chapel in the late afternoon and evening, just as the original did (above right). The interplay with natural phenomena, such as sunlight and the casting of shadows onto other structures or locations, is understood to be a deliberate design feature of the 8th-century monks to enhance the 'performance' of the crosses in daily life and liturgical rituals. Today, the replica's shadow evokes emotional responses that contribute to appreciation of its authenticity

Laying their hands on the replica, people told us they were able to 'touch' the past

The shadow of the replica hits St Columba's Shrine

and spiritual values.

As identified in the 1970s by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS), the exceptionally tall and wide original cross was composite and initially ringless. Ring quadrants were introduced to support its cross arms after it fell and broke, apparently not long after it was created. This innovative and experimental solution to an already ambitious design arguably led to the creation of the first Irish high cross. Immediately influential on Iona, its form spread quickly throughout the early medieval Irish world and beyond. The St John's Cross is the progenitor of 19th-century 'Celtic Revival' and later 'Celtic' crosses now found the world over, in graveyards, as war memorials, in jewellery such as Alexander and Euphemia Ritchie's Iona Celtic Art, and in other media. This iconic cross has long been recognised by scholars as one of the finest and most important early medieval monuments/works of art in Scotland.

Given its location and inherent structural weaknesses, the St John's

Cross collapsed at least four times. Reconstructed in 1927, it fell in 1951, was reconstructed in 1954 and fell again in 1957. No longer possible to re-erect it outside, the fate of the fallen cross re-ignited discussions at national level about the future of Iona's internationally-significant corpus of carved stones. The Iona Cathedral Trustees who own Iona Abbey committed to a more permanent solution for the St John's Cross, and in 1967 they began the process of commissioning a replica. In practice, the replica happened because of the concern, determination and energy of members of the public who loved Iona, were saddened by the loss of the Cross, and strove over many years to enable a replica to be made.

The design brief, informed by traditional materialist ideas about authenticity, was for the replica to accurately resemble the original and be durable enough to withstand the extreme weather of this Hebridean island. The first step was to create a plaster model of the cross, based on plaster casts of the original. In 1970, Exposagg Limited then cast, transported and erected the replica. It was skilfully engineered in

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concrete to resist strong winds and the corrosive effect of the maritime environment. In Edinburgh, the model was cast in large gelatine moulds, the concrete worked to recreate the finish, colour and texture of the original (below).

Transported in parts to Iona, the replica was erected with enormous care and pride. Murdo MacKenzie recorded this activity in a cine film that also captures contemporary Iona life and its involvement with

the Abbey. He talks of filming a wedding and two funerals, one of them the island's concrete mixer!

Iona has been and continues to be important to the identity of thousands of people, and that special relationship is also to the fore in the stories of how the replica was manufactured and then erected on the island. Experiencing and engaging with the replica today, islanders and visitors create links with its biography, the people

John Lawrie, artist at Edinburgh College of Art, supervises the lowering of the concrete cross-head of the St John's Cross replica onto its shaft for the first time, in Edinburgh

The authors, Dr Sally Foster and Professor Siân Jones



involved, their own lives, and of Iona. In many senses the replica 'is' St John's Cross.

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## FURTHER READING

*My Life as a Replica: St John's Cross, Iona* (Oxford, 2020), S.M. Foster with S. Jones. *History Scotland* readers can buy a copy at £28 (20 percent discount) using code REPLICIA201 from [www.oxbowbooks.com](http://www.oxbowbooks.com), or when ordering on tel +44 (0)1226 734350. Discount is valid until 30 June 2020.

Digital scans of both the replica and original St John's Cross can be found on Sketchfab: <https://scot.sh/stjohn>

Murdo MacKenzie's 1970 cine film *A Study in Concrete by Exposagg: St. John's Cross, Iona* at: <https://scot.sh/murdo>