

ISLAND OF LEWIS.  
PARISH OF BARVAS.

PRESBYTERY OF LEWIS, SYNOD OF GLENELG.

THE REV. WILLIAM MACRAE, MINISTER.

I.—TOPOGRAPHY AND NATURAL HISTORY.

THE parish of Barvas is situated in the northern extremity of the Island of Lewis, extending from south-west to north-east, along the shore of the Atlantic, about 22 miles in length,—and from the shore southward towards the interior of the island, about 7 miles in breadth. It originally embraced a district called Ness, at the eastern extremity, where there is a Government church, and which has been erected into a separate parish called Cross. Barvas, as now constituted, after the disjunction, is only 12 miles long, and 7 miles broad, making in all 84 square miles.\*

*Name.*—Its name is thought to be Norwegian, in common with that of many other places in the Hebrides; but its signification is not known.

*Boundaries, &c.*—It is bounded on the west, by the parish of Lochs; on the south, by the parishes of Stornoway and Lochs; on the east, by the parish of Cross; and on the north, by the Atlantic ocean. Its figure is an irregular parallelogram, having the side to the north in nearly a straight line along the sea coast, indented by a few confined bays.

*Topographical Appearances.*—There are no hills or mountains that can be so called, the whole parish being almost one continued flat of mossy muir, with the exception of the cultivated inhabited part along the shore, which, upon an average, is not one mile in breadth. The vallies or glens, where the streams flow, are consequently of very inconsiderable depth. The coast being bold and rocky, there are some caves or fissures; but none worthy of notice. The extent of the coast may be about 14 miles, all extremely rugged and inaccessible, except four small bays or creeks, where small boats can sometimes land; but no vessel can venture to anchor, on account of the surf, which is generally high, and with

\* The district of Cross, now formed into a separate parish *quoad sacra*, in so far as the present account of Barvas does not apply to it, will be noticed hereafter.

a north, north-west, and north-east wind rises most tremendously. The bays of Bragar and Barvas, having each a headland of short projection attached, are low and partly sandy; but the bay of Shadir, though low, is very difficult of access.

*Meteorology.*—There being no hilly ranges higher than gentle eminences, the country is the more exposed to the destructive violence of sea winds, which frequently carry, in their sweeping blasts, disappointment to the husbandman. The sea coast, the only arable portion of the parish, lies completely open to the north, west, and south winds; and when they come, in harvest, impregnated with the noxious vapours of the Atlantic, and often accompanied by heavy falls of rain, the crops, particularly the potato, suffer much injury. The air is temperately cold, moist, and salubrious, to natives; but the atmosphere is always densely charged with humid exhalations from the surrounding ocean, and from the mossy bogs, lochs, lakes, and water in every shape, with which the marshes are plentifully interspersed. From this cause, frost is seldom intense, and snow generally of short continuance. Dense fogs rarely occur. The luminous meteors, rainbow, halo, and Aurora Borealis or polar lights, are very frequent and brilliant. The glare of the latter sometimes may afford light for reading, and their warlike motions are often interesting. As they advance, at their first appearance, slowly and majestically, the fertile imagination may fancy the cool and stately motion of two mighty hosts approaching to the onset, then the hurry and confusion of the thickening fight, then the rout, the fugitive and pursuer emerging in one another,—until a third party shoots forth as from ambuscade, ending the battle, and resigning the firmament to the stars and ancient night.

The prevailing winds are the south and south-west, and are always followed by rain, if of more than two days duration.

The common complaints are, colds, asthmas, and rheumatisms, incident to this, in common with all rainy climates; but a more uncommon ailment, for which no remedy has yet been discovered, is the five or seven nights sickness,—a disease very fatal to infants, and so called from its attacking them on the fifth or seventh night.

*Hydrography.*—Perennial springs of excellent water are very numerous here, issuing for the most part from sand or gravel, several of them of a chalybeate nature. The moors abound in small shallow fresh water lakes and lochs, without surrounding scenery or beauty. The rivers take their origin from lochs and springs, generally at the distance of six or seven miles from the Atlantic,

into which they fall. They are five in number, the Arnal, Glen, Torra, Shadir, and Borge, all which flow with uninterrupted smoothness, without cascade or cataract, to the ocean.

*Geology.*—Along the whole arable ground, the most striking feature in the surface, as well as the composition of the soil, is the multitude of stones with which it is overrun, rendering it equally injurious to vegetation as unfavourable for culture. The soil is of various kinds; but as the cultivated portion is no more than a narrow fringe, which outskirts the moor, the greatest proportion is mossy, varying from 2 to 12 feet deep, and resting on a hard stratum of clay. The inhabited portion consists either of black earth, gravel, or sand; of the latter, there are banks between the manse and the shore, near 20 feet high, which are making gradual encroachments into the interior, from the constant action of the westerly winds, to which they lie exposed. The bank retains its depth as it advances, while it leaves behind a level expanse of sand, probably of greater depth than itself, and having its surface overspread with a vast variety of whelks, limpets, and the remains of shell-fish similar to those commonly found at present on the sea shore.

*Zoology.*—The more numerous species of animals in this parish, are the most common throughout Scotland, and to all appearance have undergone no change through the lapse of ages in increase or diminution. In the moors, are considerable flocks of red mountain deer (*Cervus elaphus*;) otters (*Lutra mustela*;) in the rivers: and hares (*L. timidus*;) and rats (*M. decumanus*;) in the meadows.

*Birds.*—The land fowl are hawks (*Falco*;) ravens (*C. corax*) and carrion crows (*C. corone*;) with the numerous smaller birds which abound in the western islands, such as the lark (*Alauda arvensis*;) land-rail (*Rallus crex*;) lapwing (*Tringa vanellus*;) plover (*Charadrius*;) pigeon (*Columba Ænas*;) moorfowl (*Tetrao Scoticus*;) snipe (*Scolopax gallinago*;) curlew (*S. arquata*;) thrush (*Turdus musicus*;) starling (*Sturnus vulg.*); robin-red-breast (*Motacilla rubecula*;) wren (*M. Troglodytes*;) wagtail (*M. alba*); sparrow (*Fringilla domestica*;) swallow (*Hirundo*;) sand martin (*H. riparia*.) The waterfowl are the swan (*Anas cygnus*;) gray goose (*A. anser*;) teal (*A. crecca*;) duck (*A. boschas*;) raingoose, cormorant (*Pelecanus carbo*;) soland-goose (*P. Bassanus*;) gull (*Larus canus*, and *marinus*;) crane (*Ardea grus*.)

The domestic animals reared are, horses, black-cattle, and sheep, all of a very diminutive breed. The horses are well-shaped, hardy,

and mettlesome, well adapted for carrying burdens of peat and ware through broken rugged ground, in creels suspended by the crook-saddle. The beef and mutton are of a superior quality.

The rivers contain well-flavoured trout in considerable numbers. Good salmon are caught, annually, on the Barvas river. They come up in June when access is open to them; spawn towards the latter end of September, and return to the sea in the beginning of winter. Ling, cod, and dog-fish are sometimes fished. These, together with herring and every other variety of fish caught on the south side of the island, frequent this coast in great numbers; but the inhabitants are unable to benefit by them, without periling their lives in the tempestuous ocean which surrounds them. With the exception of a very few days in summer and harvest, terrific surges, crested with foam, may be seen rolling to the shore, with unremitting violence.

The horse-fly and the common house-fly abound in their season; but the insect best known, from the torture it often inflicts, is a species of gnat commonly called the "midge," which, without some safeguard covering on the face, will interrupt any out-door occupation. In such seasons of scarcity as the present, a great part of the sustenance of many of the natives for some weeks is the common whelk, limpet, and crab,—the only shell-fish to be found on the coast.

*Botany.*—The botanist has here but little scope for his pursuits. Not a vestige of wood, or tree, and scarcely of a shrub except the wild heath, is visible on the surface of the earth. This gives the country a barren stunted appearance. Yet the deficiency cannot be altogether imputed to the poverty of the soil; for roots and trunks of fir, oak and hazel, with hazel-nuts, are frequently found imbedded in a great depth of moss,—confirming the current opinion, that these northern countries, at some remote period, have undergone some sweeping and desolating revolution. Gardens, when properly cultivated, produce good culinary vegetables, and are capable of bringing fruit-bushes to maturity.

#### II.—CIVIL HISTORY.

*Parochial Registers.*—The only parochial register extant in this parish, dates its earliest entry from the year 1810;—since which time, baptisms, marriages, and distribution of poor funds have been regularly registered.

*Antiquities.*—Almost every populous village in the parish had formerly a small Popish Chapel attached to it, and adjoining

thereto, burying-grounds, which still serve their original purpose. They are all now crumbling into ruins, and one of them has already disappeared in the sand. The names applied to them were, St Bridget in Borge, St Peter's in Lower Shadir, St Mary's in Barvas, and St John's in Bragar; but these appellations are now obsolete. Southward of Bragar, on the border of a loch, are the ruins of a circular tower (dùn) or Danish fort, well adapted for defence, built solely of large stones, three stories high, tapering towards the summit, with a double wall, bound by large flags,—which at the same time form a winding staircase in the interior of the wall, by which one may go round the building. Three more similar ruins are to be seen between Shadir and Borge, two of them situated on small islands, in the centre of lochs, and causeways leading to each, or rather stepping-stones, so artfully arranged, that an enemy who ventured to attack them or advance to their fortress, must, from the zigzag direction, and the deep pits made purposely to intervene, have proceeded with the greatest caution, or been precipitated into one of those gulfs,—and, should a band have been observed attempting to cross over, hardly any so exposed, during the delay thus occasioned, would escape the deadly arrows of the besieged. The third ruin stands at some little distance from the shore, with which it was supposed to have a subterraneous communication,—an opinion resting on no other authority than tradition. In a plain of moss between Barvas and Shadir, there is an immense stone 18 feet high, and nearly the same in circumference, standing almost perpendicular, and no other stone nearer than the shore, which is half a-mile distant. Unless it was placed there by some mechanical power, there can be no better proof that there were “giants in those days.” In either case, it was an effort infinitely surpassing the present stage of mechanical skill in this island. Some suppose it was erected in memory of a native chief who fell there. The tradition of a bloody battle between the native tribes having been fought in its immediate vicinity might seem to countenance this opinion. In those lawless times, when “might was right,” it is said that the inhabitants of the south end of the island, taking advantage of the absence of the chief warriors among their enemies, had made a ravaging incursion into their territories, and by night carried off considerable numbers of their cattle; but the absent champions returning the same night, hastily collected their forces, pursued the plunderers, and overtook them with their booty in the above-mentioned plain, where they

ROSS AND CROMARTY.

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were all slaughtered without mercy, by the superior numbers of their foes;—and, accordingly, there is a small eminence at a little distance called “*Druim nan Cairnan*,” or the hill of tumuli, where the remains of the slain are supposed to be interred. But as there is no other specimen of such monuments in the island, it is more probable that the stone was erected (as the foreign sounding name “*Clach an Trushial*” may import,) to commemorate the fall of one of those famous invaders, who were wont to commit depredations on this island; perhaps some mighty Dane, or one of those “*sons of Lochlin*,” of whom the “*Bard of other times*” delighted to sing, particularly when laid low by the hand of his father, the mighty Fingal.

### III.—POPULATION.

Of the parish of Barvas, as at present constituted, the population cannot be correctly ascertained previous to the year 1821. Every census formerly taken included the district of Cross, now detached. The earliest on record thus taken of Barvas and Cross together was Dr Webster's in 1755, when the population was 1995; by the former Statistical Account, the number of souls then was 2006. In 1821, it was 2568; and in 1831 it amounted to 3011. The population of Barvas alone, since the disjunction, will in twenty years more, at its present rate of increase, equal that of both parishes, as stated by Dr Webster, or, in other words, in one century will be nearly doubled. This rapid increase arises from a general inclination to marry young—from the want of any outlet for the superabundant population by emigration or otherwise,—and from the numerous subdivisions of lots consequent on this accumulation.

Population in 1821 of Barvas as at present constituted,	-	1481
1831, being 811 males and 886 females,	-	1697
1836,	-	1840
Average number of persons under 15 years of age,	618	-
betwixt 15 and 30	462	-
30 and 50	347	-
50 and 70	283	-
above 70	130	-
	—	1840
Yearly average of births for the last seven years,	-	35
of deaths,	-	9
of marriages,	-	12
Number of unmarried men, or bachelors above 50,	-	1
widowers above 50,	-	12
unmarried women upwards of 45,	-	15
families in the parish,	-	371
Average number of children in each family,	-	4
Fatuous persons,	-	5
Blind,	-	4

The inhabitants are all agricultural, and of the few that are artisans none devote their time exclusively to their trades.

*Character, Language, and Habits of the People.*—The inhabitants are about the middle size, of a sallow complexion, probably occasioned by the peat smoke in which they are constantly enveloped. The men are well-proportioned, hardy, robust, and healthy, and the women are modest, comely, and many of them good-looking. The Gaelic is the only language, and has been from time immemorial; and it is spoken, in the opinion of competent judges, with grammatical correctness and classical purity. In their habits, much cleanliness can scarcely be expected, considering their poverty and the wretchedness of their habitations, especially while the present system, which has prevailed for ages, continues, of having the cattle under the same roof with themselves, entering at the same door, and allowing their manure to accumulate without being removed except once a year. Their mode of living most closely approaches the pastoral:—without arts, trade, or manufacture, navigation or literature, their whole round of duty consists in securing fuel, in sowing and reaping their scanty crops, and in rearing their flocks, and tending them at pasture. Yet in these limited circumstances, while supplied with food and clothing of the plainest description, and able to pay their rents, their simple cottages are abodes of happiness and contentment. Blue kelt is almost the only dress worn by the men, and stuffs, variously striped, by the women, with under dresses of plaiding, all home made. In many instances, however, cotton shirts and print gowns are beginning to supersede the use of some of these articles. The formation of the female habits, with their whole appearance, closely resembles that of the “Wandering Bavarians,” or Swiss “buy a broom” singers, who itinerate through this country.

Their ordinary food consists of oat and barley meal, potatoes and milk, variously prepared. Their domestic economy is frugal and moderate beyond conception. The produce of a foreign soil, as tea, coffee, and sugar, and the common conveniences of art, as knives, forks, &c. are to them altogether alien.

They are remarkable for sobriety and hospitality in their own sphere; possess vivacity of intellect, acuteness and sagacity, and are tainted with few vices except such as poverty in similar circumstances begets. They are, in general, tolerably well-versed in the Scriptures, and afford several examples of uprightness and piety.

## IV.—INDUSTRY.

*Agriculture and Rural Economy.*—The uncultivated portion of the parish, and the extensive moors to the southward, which have not been accurately measured, and cannot well be estimated, exceed the arable land in extent, beyond all proportion. By giving proper encouragement, much waste land might, with a profitable application of capital, and with little difficulty, be reclaimed. At present, there are 1468 acres of land cultivated, or occasionally in tillage; 12,146 in pasture; and 489 in fine pasture. The rental of the whole is L. 1070, being on an average nearly 15s. an acre arable, including the value of the pasture attached to it. Each tenant is entitled to a souming proportional to his rent, at the rate of a cow with her follower till a year old, 8 sheep, and half a horse for every pound rent.

*Rate of Wages.*—All the artisans in the parish consist of 6 blacksmiths, and two self-taught carpenters, the former paid by the quantity of work, and the latter at the rate of 1s. a-day and their victuals, and sometimes paid by contract. When farm-labourers are hired, which is not often the case, they receive 1s. per day in summer, and 8d. in winter, without victuals.

*Breeds of Live Stock and Husbandry.*—There is not the slightest attention paid by the people, to the improvement of their breed of cattle. They are satisfied if they multiply in proportion to the annual sale. Upwards of 2500 are reared in the parish, and fed in winter principally on ware or sea-weed. The sheep amount to triple that number, and are of a more improved breed than formerly.

In husbandry, there is hardly any improvement or deviation from the system which has been followed for centuries. Hitherto, they have not attempted draining or trenching, or to imitate in any respect a better mode of tillage,—owing to their indigence, and to the short duration of their leases, which vary from six to twelve years. The minister's plough is the only one in the parish, except we admit as such three or four machines so called, having but one handle, which the ploughman manages with both hands, standing sideways. A little refinement of taste, more than a sense of its disadvantages, has in some instances abolished the use of the crooked spade, a very indelicate tool for females; for which the common spade is now substituted. As there is no produce exported from this parish, its amount cannot easily be valued, but may be conjectured from the fact, that in no season is it more than bare-

ly sufficient, and sometimes not adequate, to supply the necessities of the tenantry.

#### V.—PAROCHIAL ECONOMY.

There are no towns in this parish, nor any market in the country, by which the people may be benefited, but that annually held at Stornoway in July. In severe seasons, the cattle are not, then, in a condition to be disposed of to advantage; and a loss is thus created, which could be remedied, did the markets occur more frequently. The parish has the benefit of two roads,—one along the coast, and another now much out of repair, to Stornoway, the only trading town in the island. The communication thither is sometimes interrupted from want of bridges, when the rivers are impassable during floods.

*Ecclesiastical State.*—The church occupies a central situation in the village, from which the parish derives its name, and is distant from the inhabited parts of the parish, five miles from one extremity, and seven miles from the other. It was built about forty years ago, and has been lately well repaired. It is a long narrow building without gallery, and affords accommodation for 300 persons, all of whom have their sittings free. The manse was built about sixty years ago, and has been also frequently repaired. The minister possesses a legal grass glebe, designed in 1815, which may, as an accommodation in so remote a situation, be worth L. 20 per annum. The stipend is L. 158, 6s. 8d. Sterling, including L. 8, 6s. 8d. for communion elements, of which L. 119, 16s. is paid by the heritor as parochial teind, and the balance, L. 38, 10s. 8d. is paid from the King's Exchequer. There are no dissenters in the parish, nor any other chapels or churches. About 180 families, and from 400 to 500 individuals, are in the habit of attending public worship, when the weather permits.

*Poor and Parochial Funds.*—The church collections, including fines for petty delicts, do not exceed L. 3 annually, which are distributed among 30 paupers. Exclusive of this little aid, the maintenance of the poor depends upon the liberality of the tenantry, who are ready to supply them out of their own scanty means. To this may be added the generous aid furnished by the proprietor's lady, the Honourable Mrs Stewart Mackenzie, who is always benevolent in ministering to their necessities as often as made known, by supplying them with food and clothing. The late Mr Angus Nicolson, merchant in Stornoway, has bequeathed L. 100, of which the interest is to be given to the poorest of those

next of kin to himself in the parish, and the principal to remain untouched.

*Education.*—The schools in the parish are 3 in number; one parochial, and two supported by the Edinburgh Gaelic School Society,—one in Shadir, and the other in Arnal.\* The parish schoolmaster is qualified to teach Latin, Greek, arithmetic, and the elements of English reading, and receives L. 28 of salary. School fees scarcely exceed L. 1. The Gaelic teachers are restricted exclusively to the Gaelic language or the Gaelic Scriptures. Their salary is L. 25.

It is much to be lamented, how little literary knowledge is appreciated by the people in general. The parochial school is thus rendered of less efficiency than it might be,—the abilities of an excellent teacher being as little valued as the branches in which he is fitted to give instruction. This apathy may arise from their inability to pay fees, and perhaps in some measure from being apprehensive that their children may become stimulated by the knowledge they acquire, to leave their native country,—a disposition highly disapproved of. In a country almost devoid of the slightest prospect of advancement, it certainly is, and might naturally be expected to be, the tendency engendered in an educated and cultivated mind, to go abroad where some field might be found for exertion. This deep-rooted prejudice, formerly a strong barrier to literary attainments, is fast losing ground. Itinerating schools have been occasionally stationed in various parts of the parish, under the patronage of the Gaelic School Society, Edinburgh, and the Inverness Education Society; and so great is the benefit derived from these valuable institutions, that the greatest number of the population have been taught to read the Gaelic Scriptures.

*Fuel, &c.*—There are no charitable institutions, prisons, inns or alehouses in the parish: and the fuel, which consists of peats, is perfectly accessible to all the inhabitants, and very abundant.

*September 1836.*