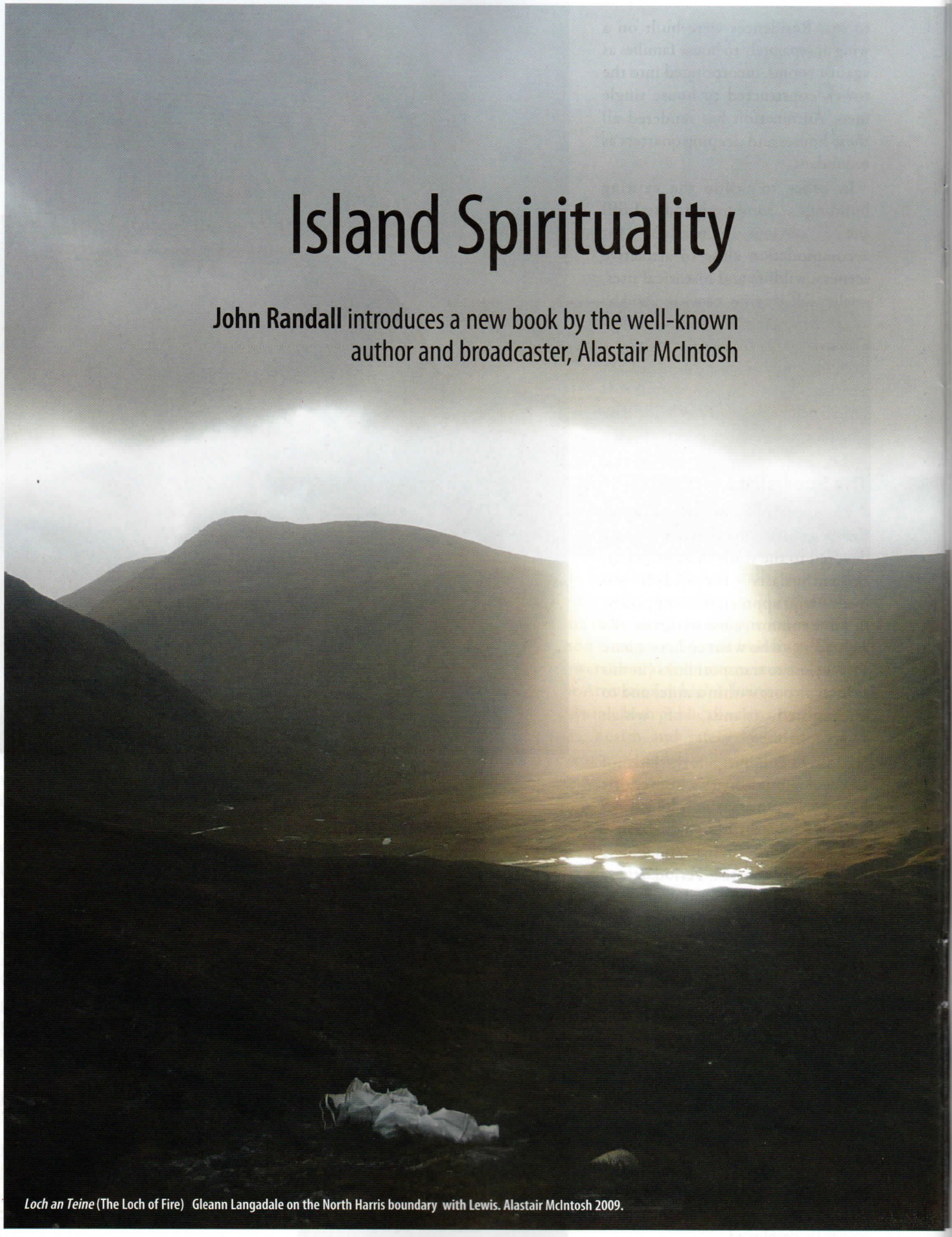
Island Spirituality

John Randall introduces a new book by the well-known author and broadcaster, Alastair McIntosh



Loch an Teine (The Loch of Fire) Gleann Langadale on the North Harris boundary with Lewis. Alastair McIntosh 2009.

The Outer Hebridean islands of Lewis and Harris are often caricatured for their strict religious observance. But, even among island residents who are not religious, there is an applied spirituality of community which makes the people and place special, and exemplifies values much needed by the wider-world today. This is the controversial claim advanced by Lewis-raised, Quaker thinker and writer, Alastair McIntosh.

Alastair covers much ground - from 16th Century Calvinist theology in Scotland to the Clearances, the coming of evangelical Presbyterianism to Lewis, second sight, and today's materialistic world.

Here is an **edited extract** from this fascinating and important book:

'A little while ago I was preparing for an interview in the BBC's Edinburgh studio. As the technicians waited for their equipment to warm up I was chatting about Lewis with the Sunday morning presenter, Cathy Macdonald from Earshader.

"You know," she said, "I think that the island has got a *religious* gene."

I don't think she meant it quite in the biological terms that Richard Dawkins might use, but there can be little doubt that in a cultural and environmental sense, the island does have a religious *genius loci* - a 'spirit of place' that runs through the people.

A Magnet

Such an observation is not original. Just a century after the death of the patron saint of Iona in 597, St Adomnán, by that time the ninth abbot, wrote the *Life of St Columba*. From this we can see that the Hebrides, even then, were a magnet for spiritual seekers. People came from afar to live, as Adomnán's Latin puts it, in *oceano desertum* - in 'desert' hermitages of the ocean, there to retreat and seek God in relative solitude.

This Celtic church took root around monastic settlements scattered all along the west coast. We see their mark in place names like *annat, annait* or *annaid*, meaning a mother church or monastery.

There is a tradition that the Hebrides were called *Eileana Bride* - the Isles of Bridgit or Bhrìghde. While there is no convincing scholarly evidence to link this to the name 'Hebrides', Harris certainly comprised the Parish of Kilbride - The Cell or Church of Bhrìghde. This name continued to be used for legal title at least until 1832. Such Gaelic place names carry us back to the days of early Christianity if not to the 'Druids' before. They also connect us to the days of the 'undivided church' before the Great Schism of 1054 between the eastern (Byzantine or Orthodox) and the western (Roman Catholic) churches.

The Rocks Remained

Time has now shed a shroud of mystery around the earliest religious sites of the Hebrides. Shortly after the Great Schism, the Normans swept into England and the Hungarian-born Margaret of Wessex or St Margaret began a process of Romanisation throughout the Scottish church. This brushed aside the old Gaelic liturgies and introduced the Latin formulations of European monastic orders. And yet, where people always went to be still, the rocks remained. •►

St Clement - whether of Rome, Alexandria or elsewhere - is the patron saint of the Macleods of Harris and Dunvegan. Three pre-Reformation temple sites in the Western Isles carry his name. To stand at the top of the *Tùr Mòr* - the Great Tower of St Clement's of Rodel at the foot of Roineabhal - is a remarkable experience. Here, 'within living memory the corpse of the dead was borne thrice sunwise round the church'. To gaze out across the Sound of Harris is to behold an *oceano desertum* that would have thrilled and, very likely, have been familiar to Adomnán as Abbot of Iona.

Here lies a sacred landscape once redolent with meaning - one that has known the *drùidheachd* or 'Druid' lore and still sustains the standing stones and cup marks of pre-history. It also knew the Celtic monks at a time when the Irish Sea, flowing into the Sea of the Hebrides, was the information-superhighway of an otherwise 'Dark Age'.

Bearing Witness

But it is the testimony of the rocks that remains ... Killegray, Ensay, Pabbay ... just so many of these tiny islands where stones can still be seen set purposively in the ground. Few, if any, do not host at least one temple, or holy well, *annat* place name, standing stone or cup-mark-incised rock, each bearing witness to some distant saint, portentous event or near-forgotten tradition of blessedness. From Roineabhal itself one can see north-east on a clear day to the Shiants - *Na h-Eileanan Seunta* or the Enchanted or Sacred Isles - and far west to St Kilda.

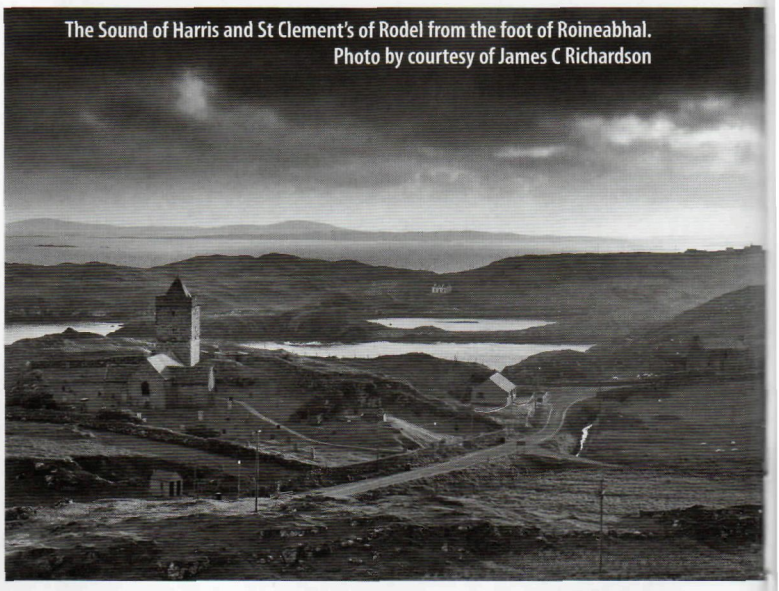
Early sources such as the Skye physician, Martin Martin, suggest that our temples were probably used in much the same way as can be seen to this day in the tiny antiquated chapels of rural France. These are often located on the edge of, or just outside, the village and in beautiful places, perhaps up in the cliffs or shouldering a cave where once the local saint lived out their hermetic life of presence, prayer and healing. Most remained in daily use for private prayer, and at designated times in the calendar became the focus of regional pilgrimages. Martin suggests that similar practices had been followed on Lewis until the clergy - Mr Daniel and Mr Morison - abolished them around the 1660s.

Mere Memory

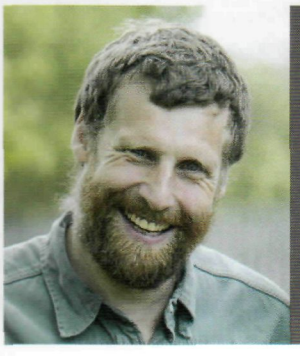
All that remains of most of these sites today are low walls (e.g. *Teampall nan Crò Naomh*, South Galson), a mound in a meadow (*Teampall Rònain*, Eoropie), foundation slabs exposed by coastal erosion (parts of *Teampall Pheadair*, Shader), foundations under or near more recent structures (*Teampall Bhrighde*, Scarista and *Teampall Mhicheil*, Little Bernera), a remnant cemetery (*An Teampall Ràmais*, Lochs), or a Papal indulgence and mere memory beneath sand dunes (*Teampall Mhoire*, Barvas).

The preservation of ancient sacred sites and their relics is now being embraced by communities all over the Hebrides. Comments in the local press reflect a renewed sense of pride and ownership. When I chanced to attend a Free Church service on North Uist a year or two ago, I asked the Revd Ewen Matheson what he made of local efforts to stabilise and restore parts of Teampall na Trianaid. "I just see it as a part of our long religious heritage," he said, shrugging his shoulders, but with a smile that seemed warmly receptive.' ■

Tobar Bhrighde St Bridgit's (or St Bride's) Well at Melbost Borve with Dr Finlay Macleod of Shawbost, author of guidebooks on the islands' wells and chapels. Alastair McIntosh 2009



The Sound of Harris and St Clement's of Rodel from the foot of Roineabhal. Photo by courtesy of James C Richardson



Further Information

Island Spirituality by Alastair McIntosh is available price £10 plus postage and packing from the Islands Book Trust at **www.theislandsbooktrust.com** or by phoning Margaret Macdonald on 01851 880737.
Alastair McIntosh pictured - by Murdo MacLeod