

1<sup>st</sup> September 2020

## Replicas

**"I'm a substitute for another guy.  
I look pretty tall but my heels are high.  
The simple things you see are all complicated.  
I look pretty young, but I'm just backdated, yeah."  
Pete Townshend, Substitute ('The Who', 1966)**

Guarding the west door of Iona Abbey are two spectacular medieval crosses – St Martin's and St John's. Iona is the island where St Columba landed in 563AD bringing Christianity to Scotland, and St John's Cross – *Crois Naoimh Eòin* to give it its ancient name – is an 8<sup>th</sup> century cross close to a small chapel, "St Columba's Shrine", reputedly built over Columba's burial place. But what countless visitors to Iona Abbey don't realise is that, unlike St Martin's Cross, St John's Cross is a replica and not the original.

Time, dodgy physics and the vagaries of west highland weather took their toll, and, after many attempts to save it, the original collapsed for the final time in 1957. Its remains have been reconstructed in the Abbey museum – well worth a look. The story of the birth, construction and raising of the replica in 1970 is told in a new book, *My Life as a Replica: St John's Cross, Iona*, by Sally Foster, a senior lecturer in Heritage and Conservation at Stirling University and former Principal Inspector of Ancient Monuments at Historic Scotland. She writes: "Today's visitor to the replica has no sense of what a highly engineered monument it is, and if they recognise it as being concrete, there is a tendency to diminish or dismiss its value."

The book of Ecclesiastes tells us, "There is nothing new under the sun." In one way or another we're all replicas, "a substitute for another guy", or "backdated", in Pete Townshend's words. But why should a replica have less value than the real thing? Why should we be diminished because we're copies of something greater? We're all replicas – of saints, martyrs, evangelists, parents, heroes, mentors, role-models and of Christ himself. That's why, in future generations, we hope there may be others who raise themselves up as replicas of what they see and know of the best of us.

### **A prayer for today**

*Lord, as I copy your love. let it grow in me today. And let me stand as an example to others, that they might copy your love through what they see in me. Amen*

*An original reflection by © Tom Gordon*

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