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The Lewisian Geology of Gairloch, NW Scotland

R. G. PARK

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Contents

Preface	vii		
Acknowledgements	viii		
Chapter 1: Introduction	1		
1.1 Background	1		
1.1.1 Wider significance of the Gairloch area	1		
1.1.2 Description of the study area	3		
1.1.3 Mapping history	3		
1.2 Summary of the Lewisian geology of the NW Scottish mainland	3		
1.2.1 Historical background to Lewisian chronology	3		
1.2.2 Subdivision of the mainland Lewisian outcrop	3		
1.2.3 The Scourian gneisses	4		
Origin of the gneisses	5		
1.2.4 Scourian deformation and metamorphism	6		
1.2.5 The Inverian event	6		
1.2.6 The Scourie dyke swarm	7		
1.2.7 The Loch Maree Group	7		
1.2.8 Laxfordian modifications and younger events	7		
The early Laxfordian	7		
The late Laxfordian	8		
1.3 Southern Region nomenclature	8		
 Chapter 2: The Early Stages - Scourian and Inverian	 11		
2.1 Petrography and distribution of the Archaean gneisses	11		
2.1.1 Quartzo-feldspathic biotite gneisses	11		
2.1.2 Hornblende gneisses	12		
2.1.3 Amphibolites of the 'early basic' suite	12		
2.2 Chemistry and origin	13		
2.2.1 Quartzo-feldspathic gneisses	13		
2.2.2 Amphibolites	14		
2.3 Structural chronology	14		
2.4 Scourian and Inverian structure	16		
2.4.1 Braigh Horrisdale	16		
2.4.2 Creag Mhor Thollaidh	17		
2.4.3 The Ialltaig block	18		
2.5 Metamorphism	18		
 Chapter 3: The Scourie Dyke Suite	 21		
3.1 Distribution and field relations	21		
3.1.1 SW of the LMG belt	21		
3.1.2 NE of the LMG belt	22		
3.2 Petrography	23		
3.3 Chemistry and origin	25		
 Chapter 4: The Loch Maree Group	 29		
4.1 Semipelites			
4.1.1 Distribution	29		
4.1.2 Petrography	29		
4.1.3 Geochemistry and origin	31		
4.1.4 Zircon age data	32		
4.2 Other metasediment types	32		
4.3 Carbonate (marble)	33		
4.3.1 Distribution and petrography	33		
4.3.2 Geochemistry	34		
4.4 Banded-iron-formation	34		
		4.4.1 Distribution and petrography	34
		4.4.2 Geochemistry	34
		4.4.3 Origin	35
		4.5 Graphitic pelite	35
		4.6 Quartz-chlorite schist	35
		4.6.1 Distribution and petrography	35
		4.6.2 Geochemistry and origin	36
		4.7 Garnet-biotite schist	36
		4.7.1 Distribution and petrography	36
		4.7.2 Geochemistry and origin	36
		4.8 Origin of the BIF-carbonate-graphitic pelite assemblage	38
		4.9 Amphibolites	38
		4.9.1 Distribution and petrography	38
		4.9.2 Geochemistry	40
		4.9.3 Origin	41
		4.10 Stratiform sulphide deposits within the Loch Maree Group	42
		4.11 Origin of the Loch Maree Group	44
		4.11.1 Semipelites	44
		4.11.2 Other metasediments	44
		4.11.3 Amphibolites	44
		 Chapter 5: Laxfordian Intrusive Rocks	 45
		5.1 The Ard-type gneisses	45
		5.1.1 Distribution and structural relationships	45
		5.1.2 Petrography	45
		5.1.3 Geochemistry	47
		5.1.4 Geochronology	47
		5.2 Granite sheets	47
		5.3 Granitoid pegmatites	47
		5.3.1 Distribution and petrography	47
		5.3.2 Geochemistry	48
		5.3.3 Geochronology	48
		 Chapter 6: Laxfordian Structure and Metamorphism	 51
		6.1 Introduction	51
		6.1.1 Structural overview	51
		6.1.2 Deformation phases and chronology	51
		6.1.3 Metamorphic conditions	51
		6.2 Early Laxfordian (D_1/D_2)	51
		6.2.1 Narrow marginal shear zones in Scourie dykes	51
		6.2.2 SW of the Loch Maree Group outcrop	52
		6.2.3 Supracrustal rocks of the Gairloch schist belt	52
		6.2.4 The NE limb of the Tollie antiform	54
		6.2.5 The western margin of the Creag Mhor Thollaidh block	55
		6.2.6 The Ard gneiss	56
		6.2.7 Relationship between D_1 and D_2	56
		6.2.8 Change in plunge of L_2 in the Ard gneiss outcrop	56
		6.3 Large-scale D_2 structure	56
		6.4 Late Laxfordian	57
		6.4.1 D_3 minor structures	57
		6.4.2 D_3 major structures	58
		The Tollie antiform and Gairloch shear zone	58
		The Mill na Claise fold	58
		6.4.3 D_4 structures	58
		6.5 Brittle-ductile shear zones	58
		6.5.1 Early (D_2) mylonitic rocks	60
		6.5.2 D_3 mylonites associated with the Gairloch shear zone	60

6.5.3 Later movements in the zones	60	Chapter 7: Tectonic Interpretation and Regional	
6.6 Summary of Laxfordian tectonic history	61	Significance	67
6.7 Faults	62		
6.7.1 Pre-Torridonian faults	65	7.1 The Archaean (Scourian)	67
The Flowerdale fault	65	7.2 The Inverian: earlier Palaeoproterozoic?	67
N–S thrusts.	65	7.3 The Scourie dyke swarm: events from <i>c.</i> 2.4 to <i>c.</i> 2.0 Ga?	67
N-trending strike-slip faults	65	7.4 The Laxfordian: later Palaeoproterozoic	68
NE-trending normal faults	65	7.4.1 The early Laxfordian: subduction–accretion–	
6.7.2 Post-Torridonian faults	65	collision model	68
The Loch Maree fault	65	7.4.2 Later Laxfordian structural history	70
NE-trending normal faults	65	7.4.3 Post-D ₃ tectonic history	70
		7.5 Palaeoproterozoic belts of the North Atlantic region	70
		References	73

Preface

For more than five decades, the Lewisian complex of NW Scotland has been a training ground for British geologists, particularly structural and metamorphic geologists, and a testbed for new models and methods of investigation of the deep crust. Successive generations of geochronological techniques were first used in deciphering the complex history of this region. Yet, despite its popularity with British geologists, and its world-wide reputation as the most intensively studied piece of Precambrian crust, there are no modern Geological Survey sheet memoirs for any part of the mainland Lewisian; the famous, and impressively detailed, NW Highlands memoir of 1907 still stands after nearly a century as the best descriptive account available covering all aspects of Lewisian geology of the mainland outcrops. In contrast, the Outer Hebrides Lewisian is well served by an excellent modern memoir, although the accompanying map, at a scale of 1:100 000, is insufficiently detailed to give a clear picture of the complexity of the more structurally interesting parts of that region.

This situation contrasts with the vast amount of published information about specific aspects of Lewisian geology – structural, metamorphic, igneous and geochronological studies, tectonic overviews, and so on. The combination of detailed, large-scale, geological map and accompanying descriptive memoir is a valuable basis for subsequent specialized studies, and the present memoir

is an attempt to redress a deficiency by providing a large-scale coloured map (1:20 000) of one of the most critical and interesting parts of the Lewisian outcrop, sufficiently detailed to allow the relationships between the various rock types and the complex structures to be clearly displayed, together with a descriptive account covering the different aspects of the Lewisian geology.

The Gairloch area, together with neighbouring Loch Maree, is the only part of the mainland Lewisian outcrop where Palaeoproterozoic supracrustal rocks and their relationships to the Archaean basement can be studied. Partly for this reason, it has been the subject of a considerable amount of research, spanning a period of more than forty years; it is readily accessible and frequently visited. The Lewisian crust represents a relatively small detached fragment of the Laurentian continent, yet it occupies a key position in the reconstructed jigsaw of a supercontinent made up of Laurentia, Siberia and Baltica, which existed at the end of the early Proterozoic period. The significance of Gairloch in this reconstruction lies in the Palaeoproterozoic rocks of the Loch Maree Group, representing an amalgamation of oceanic, trench, and arc assemblages with continental basement, which help to integrate Scotland into a Palaeoproterozoic collisional orogen stretching from the Torngat belt of Labrador through South Greenland and linking up with the Lapland-Kola belt of Scandinavia.

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the tectonic interpretation of the Loch Maree Group. The memoir itself has benefited from rigorous and helpful reviews by John Mendum, Clark Friend and Rob Strachan, and from the careful attention of the Book Editor, Bob Holdsworth. Any remaining deficiencies are solely my responsibility. Finally I would like to thank my wife who has accompanied me during much of my fieldwork in the last few years and who has borne my neglect during the writing up with equanimity.

R.G. Park, March, 2002.