

What is the meaning of *I birn quhil I se*, the motto of MacLeod of Lewis?

Short answer: *I burn while I see*¹

There is a difference in opinion on the translation². A frequently seen interpretation is *I burn while I shall*.

When Roderick XVII of Raasay asserted his claim to the name MacLeod of Lewis, the Lord Lyon based the grant of arms on those described in the *Workman Manuscript*, which was compiled about 1565-66, when Old Ruairidh, the last undisputed chief of the MacLeods of Lewis, was alive. The motto was given as *I birn q Ise*, an abbreviated form of *I birn quhil I se*.

The first four words seem to be universally accepted to mean “I burn while I ...” The final “se” causes the controversy.

The *Dictionary of the Scots Language* (www.dsl.ac.uk/), an online combination of the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue (DOST)* and the 10-volume *Scottish National Dictionary (SND)* lists nineteen meanings of the word *se*, as a transitive verb. “See” is quite clearly the sense of each of them, and numerous examples from the period encompassing the *Workman Manuscript*’s publication are cited. In a brief subsequent citation, it defines ‘se (with an apostrophe) as a reduced form of *sall*, the auxiliary of the future tense [shall], but with no examples. Definitions of *sall* or *sal* are given as the more common Scots word for “shall”.

As an example, in a bilingual edition of John Barbour’s, *The Bruce* (c. 1375), translated by A.A.M. Duncan, *se* is translated throughout as “see”, while *sall* is translated as “will” or “shall”. For example:

For gyff the formast egrely
Be met ye sall se sodanly
The henmaist sall abaysit be.

(For if the foremost be met fiercely, you will quickly see the hindmost be discouraged)
—Book 8, line 243-245

As far as the variations on the motto go, when the main line of the MacLeods of Lewis died out with Old Ruari, the Isle of Lewis was taken by the MacKenzies of Kintail. No doubt to legitimize the expropriation of the lands, they promptly started incorporating heraldic elements from the MacLeods of Lewis into their own arms. When the chief of the MacKenzies was created an earl in 1625, he took as his crest the burning mountain of Lewis and the motto *Luceo non uro*, variously translated as *I shine, not burn* or *I shine but am not consumed*. About the same time, MacKenzie of Tarbat in Easter Ross married a female descendant of Old Ruari, whom he put forward as Ruari’s heir. He too, incorporated the burning mountain of Lewis, as

¹ Ruairidh H. MacLeod and Aex C. McLeod, “The Heraldry of Clan MacLeod” *The Clan MacLeod Magazine* No. 54, 1982. P. 8.

² W. Jefferson Bryson and Harry Boyes, ed., *The First Forty Years* (Columbia, SC, 1995) pp. 70-71. From letters originally published in *The Clan MacLeod Newsletter*, Spring and Fall 1991.

well as the three legs of Man, in his own arms. He even went as far as naming his house Castle Leod.

In 1779 MacLeod of Raasay matriculated arms, differenced from those of MacLeod of Lewis by two crosses. These arms included the motto *Luceo non uro*, then in use by the MacKenzies. A rather contorted back-translation of this motto apparently forms the basis of the interpretation of *I birn quhil I se* as “I burn while I shall”.

A second cadet of the MacLeods of Lewis with registered arms is MacLeod of Cadboll, for whom the 1871 edition of Burke’s³ lists a motto of *Loisgim agus soilleirghim* [I burn and shine].

To recap the mottos of MacLeod of Lewis and various cadets:

Lewis	<i>I birn quhil I se</i>	I burn while I see
Raasay	<i>Luceo non uro</i>	I shine, not burn
Cadboll	<i>Loisgim agus soilleirghim</i>	I burn and shine

Raasay and Cadboll are both cadets of Lewis, so it makes sense that their mottoes are similar, but with differences that reflect different armings. Part of the problem is that for nearly 400 years, Lewis and Raasay were the same person (although unacknowledged by the Lord Lyon). They are now once more different people, so the mottoes on their arms (and those of their distant cousin, MacLeod of Cadboll) wouldn’t necessarily be the same nor direct translations of each other. The burning mountain, the sun in splendor, and similar mottoes are simply a reflection of their common ancestry.

As far as what *I burn while I see* signifies, “I burn (the beacons) while I watch (the coast),” would be proper responsibilities for a liege of either the Lord of the Isles or the King of Scotland in troubled times.

³ Sir Bernard Burke. *Genealogical and Heraldic History of the Landed Gentry of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol II. 5th edition. (London, 1871) p. 861.