

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SPIRITUAL AWAKENING/REVIVAL ON THE ISLE OF SKYE

BACKGROUND

It is believed Saint Columba first visited Skye about 585AD. He was the patron Saint of the northern part of the island. The number of places that bear his name indicates the strength of his influence. Portree Bay was previously called St Columba's Loch. A small island in the bay is called "*Eilean Chalum Chille*". It is said that in North of Skye there were some thirty places of worship as well as monasteries dedicated to Columba.

St Maelurba was the patron saint of South Skye. He founded a church in Applecross in 673AD and for 49 years it is reported he – "*carried the torch of Christianity in the Highlands and the Isles.*"

In 664AD the Synod of Whitney resulted in the disruption of the Columban Church. At that time it is reported that the Scottish Church, wishing to remain free from the domination of the Rome Catholic Church, went to Ireland and took with them "*the Columban clergy of Skye and returned two years afterward.*"

In 794 AD Skye was devastated by the invasion of the Norse. In common with the rest of the Western Isles monasteries were pillaged and manuscripts burned or destroyed.

About 875 the Norse came again – not as invaders but as emigrants fleeing the effects of revolution in their own homeland. These immigrants later formed themselves in to raiding parties to their old homeland. This culminated about 1098 when Magnus Barelegs, King of Norway reeked murder and mayhem among the people of Skye in revenge. The Skye/Norse connection can clearly be seen today in the abundance of place names with Nordic roots.

There is strong evidence to suggest that many Norse settlers were converted to the Christian faith and stood strongly for the fundamentals of a pure form of Christianity.

From 1098 the Hebrides, including Skye, Lewis, the mainland of Argyll and the Isle of Man, were ruled from Norway by vassal Kings and rulers until 1263 when Olave the Black, King of Man and the Isles, the vassal King, along with his superior King Haco of Norway, were defeated at Largs on their way to conquer of the whole of Scotland. The Hebrides, including Skye were ceded to Scotland in 1266.

After this time something of a mist descends on the religious history of Skye. There is however some evidence to indicate that pockets of the Columban Church remained active until the reformation although officially the Roman Catholic Church held sway. However little if any evidence remains regarding the influence of this church.

In 1501 the Church of St Columba, at the head of Loch Snizort was Cathedral Church for the island. As early as 1573 Protestantism was professed on the island but in reality this appears to have been a social and political attachment. Most, if not all ministers in Skye at that time were Episcopalian. The first minister to administer the sacrament according to the rites of the Protestant faith was the Rev. Neil MacKinnon of Strath in 1627.

For the following 150 years little seems to have been accomplished in relation to the progress of true religion. Apathy abounded. It appears that political repression was at the root of animosity to the Protestant faith. The people and their ministers appear to have had little time for religion - nominal or evangelical. Many ministers turned their attention to farming and extending their lands and glebes.

From about 1775 the Presbyterian form of worship began to dominate throughout the island and by 1791 in the parish of Bracadale, in common with most others, there were only two Episcopalian families left.

Some 25 years later the arrival of evangelical missionaries from other parts of Scotland began a process that would culminate in evangelical revivals that were to transform the island and its people.

EVANGELICAL MISSION

Among one of the first evangelical missionaries to visit Skye in more recent times was a man from Perthshire named John Farquharson and his most renowned convert was blind man – Donald Munro. Munro had been rendered blind at the age of 14 by small pox and in order to earn a living he learned to play the violin. His musical talent and pleasant character made him a popular figure in the community around Portree where he was also employed as Parochial Catechist.

As a result of Farquharson's brief visit and Donald's conversion, a prayer meeting was formed at Snizort in the north of the island. Donald would appear to have been the prime motivator in this gathering. Although only a few attended initially, numbers gradually grew and by the first year a few people had been converted. This prayer meeting, it is said, flourished for about two years. The practice was for *“two of its members to make remarks on a passage of scripture, which excited a few to prayer.... “*

During the early years of the nineteenth century a number of independent and Baptist evangelists were also active in Skye. As a result of the activities of one of these evangelists, some eleven of those who attended Donald's prayer meeting were baptised by immersion. It is recorded that a pool adjacent to the present Free Church in Snizort was used for this purpose.

It was also at this location that Donald Munro was later provided with a house and croft for life by Susanna MacAlister, the wife of Norman MacDonald, proprietor of Bernisdale. The present Free Church was built on the site of Donald's home in 1842.

The people from Donald's prayer meeting baptised at Snizort are believed to have become the nucleus of Uig Baptist Church, which was formed about 1808.

Soon after the events at Snizort, Donald appears to have turned his attention to north Skye where the Rev. Donald Martin, a man who had also been influenced by John Farquharson, was the local parish minister.

The people of Skye had an open heart to Donald - he was led by the hand from place to place or, when the situation so demanded, they carried him on their backs.

FIRST EVANGELICAL AWAKENING

An evangelical awakening subsequently occurred in North of Skye about 1812, seven years after the visit of John Farquharson and the establishment, by Donald Munro, of the prayer meeting in Snizort. It began in the parish of Kilmuir where Donald was still active. It is recorded that *"the meetings held under his management were the means specially employed in the work"*.

Meetings were held three times every Sunday - in open fields - in barns - or anywhere else that was available. Donald also held a weekday meeting in his own home as well as travelling to other parts of Skye for the purpose of preaching.

This awakening lasted for some two years. Although it had started in Kilmuir it spread, firstly to Snizort, then Bracadale and finally to Durinish. For a time at least, three or four people were converted at every meeting over which he presided. The converts of the revival, as might be expected, were looked upon as *"fanatics"* and it is reported, *"No gentleman associated with Donald Munro"*.

During these days and months even regular eating times were ignored and the people would go to extraordinary length to be at meetings where they could hear the Bible being read. Another reported feature of these days was the singing - the people did not know how to stop when they were engaged in praise. Yet another feature was that "*The utmost cordiality and brotherly love prevailed - every man feeling his heart more tenderly drawn out to his neighbour*".

Of these days it is recorded that "*several hundred professed to have returned to the Lord, and the genuineness of their conversion was evident by the change of life that had accompanied their profession*". It was also reported "*some who had been noted for their wickedness became eminent as Christians*". "*Bodily agitation's and crying out*" were not uncommon. Some, mostly women, were said to have had dreams and visions and knew beforehand who were to be saved and who were not. This was considered "*Marked fanaticism*" by later evangelical commentators.

Writing in 1836, of the wider awakening, one commentator noted: -

"In 1812 by means of these meetings, (Donald Munro's) an uncommon awakening took place among the people, which was attended with trembling and distress of body, and some were even constrained to cry out. These emotions were like summer showers, which move about, when the rain falls on one field without a drop on another. They were here today, and in another place tomorrow."

About 1817 the wife of the proprietor of Kilmuir granted permission for some the revival converts to erect a meetinghouse, "*contrary to the general wish of the clergy*". It is also reported: - "*About 1817 a gentleman who had a small tract of land in the parish of Snizort, divided it in to crofts, or small tenements, which were rented by several serious persons, who were attracted thither from the parish of Kilmuir. They were permitted to build a house for meeting, which will contain about 200 persons.*" Those who met here also reported to "*have other two or three meetings in farm-houses*". Such events were a prelude to the great "disruption" of the Church of Scotland, which was to occur some thirty years later.

The effect for good on the Island as a result of the revival movement appears to have been universally acknowledged. Even clergy who opposed the movement were forced to admit that positive results ensued.

RODERICK MACLEOD

About 1821 another Minister in the Island had a *"new birth experience"*. He was the Rev. Roderick MacLeod son of the parish minister at Snizort. At the time of his conversion Roderick was minister of the mission at Lyndale, part of his father's parish.

Following his conversion MacLeod became the butt of much ridicule, particularly in regard to his new friendship with blind Donald Munro whom previously, he himself had so often derided. The men became close friends and it is said that their relationship was as close as father and son. MacLeod's reply to one who mocked his relationship with Donald was - *"I expect to spend eternity in Donald's society"*.

In 1823, following the untimely death of John Shaw, Roderick MacLeod was appointed to the charge of Bracadale in north west Skye. He remained there for fifteen years and Bracadale, under his ministry, became famous as *"the birth place of souls"*.

Following his conversion experience MacLeod's preaching changed significantly. As well as being deeply evangelical he condemned any outward show of religion and maintained the necessity of genuine devotion, humility and restraint. He also condemned the oppression of the poor at the hands of the rich. Preaching such as this was sure to win him few friends in the classes amongst whom he had moved hitherto. Indeed, some of these were to become his bitter opponents and were to do all in their power to have him ejected from the established Church.

However, the poor and oppressed crofters who made up the bulk of the population had no complaint with their minister. Macleod's church was in fact crowded every Sunday and many came from neighbouring parishes to hear him. Some of the worshippers walked for 20 miles to be at his services. Even young mothers with babies and young children were known to travel such distances to hear him preach.

In a tract, written in 1839, telling the story of the earlier spiritual awakenings on the island there is an interesting reference to MacLeod's ministry in Bracadale at that time. It states: - *"Under Mr MacLeod's ministry the good work was prolonged. And, from time to time, through his instrumentality, many were added to the church of such as should be saved"*.

In 1837 the Parish of Snizort became vacant and the people of the area subsequently petitioned the Home Office to have Roderick MacLeod as their minister. After the usual formalities and a bit of string pulling by his friends, Roderick was inducted to the charge on 9th February 1838.

So large were the crowds that flocked to hear MacLeod in his new parish that it was necessary to extend the original Church at Kensaleyre, Snizort, which had been built by his

father. A new wing was built at the rear of the building in 1839 increasing the capacity from 500 to 750.

As Roderick started out on his work in Kensaleyre, the meetings, which had been initiated by Donald Munro some years before, still appear to have been flourishing a few miles away. Although Donald had died in 1830 it was noted in 1839 that "*the meetings are still maintained.... and that they prosper, through the blessing of God.*"

About three years after this was written a spiritual earthquake was to rock the island from end to end. Roderick MacLeod, would throw his weight behind the revival movement and be fully supportive of the laymen involved.

The years following the 1812/1814 revivals were, in many ways, years of steady growth and consolidation as far as evangelical religion in Skye was concerned. The next major evangelical awakenings would not begin to emerge until the late 1830's. Sadly, Donald Munro would not live to see them for he died in 1830 aged 57. However, his spiritual sons and daughters would be instrumental, not only in these awakenings, but in revivals throughout the Highlands and Islands and in the New World to which so many Skye men and women were to be dispersed.

EDUCATION

The Society for the Support of Gaelic Schools"(The Gaelic School Society), when it held its first meeting in Edinburgh on 16 January 1811, resolved –

"by the erection of circulating schools for the express purpose of instructing them (the people) in the Gaelic language.... to teach the inhabitants to read the Holy Scriptures."

One of the stipulations of the Society was that "*the teachers to be employed by the Society shall neither be Preachers nor Public Exhorters, stated or occasional, of any denomination whatever*". However this was a rule that was to be bent, broken and cause great problems from the very outset. The spiritual character of the teachers employed by the Society and the bleak spiritual condition of their pupils made it virtually impossible that some would not "*preach or exhort*".

By 1813 the Society would appear to have been operating three circulating schools in Skye, at Bracadale, Coshladder, and Kilmuir. At Coshladder there were 76 pupils, old and young. One of the scholars was aged 56! Another group of pupils consisted of husband, wife and three children. "*The teacher*", reported the Rev. John Shaw on 13th April 1813 - "*is employed, almost without intermission, from seven in the morning till ten or eleven at night.*"

During the years that followed these schools moved from village to village throughout Skye teaching the inhabitants to read. In 1835 Edinbane, which is said to have contained a population of 700 had 138 scholars of all ages attending, 48 of whom has learned to read the Bible. Culnacnoc, containing a population of 350, had upwards of 100 scholars, most of whom were able to read.

Writing to the Society in 1822 the Rev John Shaw, Bracadale had noted - *"I have reason also to believe, that it (the Society) has in an eminent degree the countenance of the King of Kings. It has had a principal lead, I am convinced, in promoting that sense of Divine things, and that attention to the Divine word and ordinances, which, I am happy to think, is beginning to pervade this part of the Hebrides, more especially those spots where the efforts of the Society have been longest and most powerfully exerted. I trust we shall yet see greater things than these"*. Shaw's observations were perfectly accurate - and prophetic.

SECOND EVANGELICAL AWAKENING

In 1836 Angus Ferguson, a native of the Ross of Mull, became minister of the Baptist Church at Uig, Skye. The following year Ferguson wrote –

"I am happy to state that I have more hope of this station than ever, and I firmly trust that my coming to Uigg was of the Lord. Our meetinghouse will accommodate more than 300, yet on Sabbath it does not contain the people.... Since the commencement of the year, I have visited Portree occasionally. The people come out in crowds, so that houses are not easily found to accommodate them...."

In March 1838, Ferguson and the Uig church set apart a day – *"For beseeching the Lord to pour out his Spirit upon ourselves and others."* *"We sought the Lord"*, he writes, *"by prayer and supplication, with fasting. We confessed our sins and backslidings, and pleaded forgiveness through the blood of Jesus"*. Ferguson records how, during this time they experienced much of the presence of the Lord, and although aware of their own sin and shortcoming, *"felt the spirit of adoption, and cried, Abba Father."*

Later in 1838 he notes –

"There is at present a great revival in Uig; the appearance is more promising than any I have ever yet seen. I saw a revival in Mull and in different other places, but although the appearance in Mull was truly glorious, and proved so, yet it was not so promising as the revival here.... Sabbath last we had three additions of young but married men. After preaching to an audience of about 400, we went to the bank of a small river in the

neighbourhood. The congregation stood silent and composed on both sides.... There is a great reformation in this place.... “

Towards the end of 1838, in common with the Uig church, numbers attending Broadford Baptist Church had increased dramatically. James MacQueen was able to report in December –

“As to the attendance through the station, I could not wish it better; there is a desire to hear, almost in every part. For six weeks back, our congregation has increased greatly. On some Sabbaths our meeting-house could not contain above one half of the people, and last Lord’s day, not more than one third of the hearers, so that we had to take to the field. The number of hearers was from 400 to 500; and in the evening, even after dark, many were about the door and windows....”.

During the same year two Baptist Society missionaries spent four weeks in Skye. They preached fifty-two times and travelled some 400 miles. On arriving in Uig they - *“preached upon the side of a hill, the meeting-house being too small”*. In the evening they baptised two women in the presence of a congregation of some 500.

It should be noted that these events were not restricted to Skye for when James MacQueen visited Lochcarron in December 1838 he noted – *“I have been through Lochcarron and Gairloch; where the people attended better than for years past. On the Lord’s Day many came from far to hear, and some appeared much impressed....”* In June the following year he reports of Lochcarron, *“600-800 attended on the Lord’s Day”*.

Angus Ferguson’s letters throughout 1839 continue to indicate that the blessing in Uig was still intense. He writes –

“Our congregation upon the Lord’s day amounts generally to about 400. Our Sabbath School is also doing well. It has already been a means of a great moral change among the young. Many of them carry their bibles to the fields, and commit passages of it to memory....”

Tragically Ferguson died in 1842 as a result of catching a bad cold while engaged on itinerant work in Skye. However the seeds he had sown would produce an abundant harvest.

TIDAL WAVE

In May 1839 Skye man Norman MacLeod, a retired soldier, was appointed Gaelic Schoolmaster to the teaching station of the Gaelic School Society, at Unish, Waternish. His salary was £25.00 per annum. He was also provided with a long thatched house, one half of

which was used as a schoolroom and place of worship, while the other was home to Norman and his family.

By 1842 Norman's period of service at Unish was drawing to a close. The apparent lack of spiritual success among his pupils caused him considerable distress. He confessed to having felt *"his spirit unusually moved regarding their state"*.

On the last day of the School session, Sunday, 15th May 1842, Norman gathered the people together. He *"experienced much tenderness of feeling towards them, and observed strong indications of the same among them"*. Among those present were some fishermen from the Island of Isay, opposite Lusta, Waternish. At 2pm that afternoon they met together for worship, during which there were *"appearances of unrest one individual having cried out during the service"*. Some of the fishermen were among the first to be affected.

In the evening another meeting was held. Norman read from the Gospel of Mark chapter eleven and made some remarks regarding the parable of the barren fig tree. In the light of his imminent departure he challenged his listeners regarding their spiritual fruit - or lack of it.

The Rev. Roderick MacLeod describes the scenes that followed –

"The most extraordinary emotions appeared among the people; some wept and some cried aloud as if pricked in their hearts, while others fainted and fell down as if struck dead".

The meeting carried on throughout the night and the people continued to be affected in a similar manner. Instead of leaving on the Monday as he had intended, Norman remained for a further sixteen days holding services – *"reading and praying almost continually"*. The people attended *"with so little intermission day or night, that he could get only about two hours sleep every morning"*.

What happened in the weeks that followed is again best described by the Rev. Roderick MacLeod, who was himself an eyewitness to these events –

"The state of things at Unish, as may be readily conceived, soon began to be noised abroad; and the consequence was, that numbers from various parts of the country were attracted to the scene, many of whom became similarly affected with the rest. It was now judged necessary that the people should have regular preaching, and the immediate vicinity of the village of Stein was the place fixed upon for preaching. The minister of a neighbouring parish, who had been applied to, (most likely MacLeod himself), accordingly went on the day preceding that appointed, and was not a little surprised, on coming in sight of the place, at seeing a dense body of people sitting down as if hearing the word. He proceeded to the spot,

and found a friend of the cause, an elder of the church, addressing the congregation, and on his concluding, he gave a short address himself, and dismissed them with an intimation that there would be sermon next day. It appeared that a report had gone abroad that that was the day appointed for the preaching. Next day the crowd was much greater, the appearance of the congregation, and the impressions on many most striking. At the conclusion, sermon was again intimated for that day week; and when that day came the crowd was immense, no fewer than 50 boats being hauled up on the beach that had come from various parts of the coast opposite and around. The impressions on the hearers still deepened; and sermon was again intimated for the following day. On that day the wind was high, and it was thought that the boats would not venture out, yet many did come; but such was the difficulty they encountered, that it gave rise to a suggestion for changing the preaching station, which was accordingly done, and a well known spot, called Fairy Bridge, where three roads now met, was pitched upon as the most convenient place for meeting, and continued to be the scene of a weekly preaching to thousands for about two months, when the advance of the harvest season rendered it expedient to discontinue it. Multitudes from all parts of Skye, excepting the distant parishes of Strath and Sleat, flocked to Fairy Bridge; and as a proof of one design of providence, in permitting such outward manifestations as took place under the word, it is a fact worthy of notice, that some who never went to hear the gospel in their own parish, were induced, by what they heard was going on, to go many miles beyond to hear it there.

Soon after the awakening broke out in Unish, it appeared also in Geary, another Gaelic School station in Waternish, under Mr Murdoch MacDonald, the teacher there, and also at Glendale in the parish of Diurinish, so that from that extreme and intermediate point, where it first commenced, it proceeded to the right and to the left, till now, in a series of regular successive movements, it has traversed the whole extent of the island, from north to south, yea and beyond, even to the islands of Eigg and Rhum, in the parish of Small Isles, the most distant bounds of the Presbytery of Skye.”

THE SMALL ISLES

In 1842 the Rev. John Swanson, an evangelical, was minister on Eigg, one of the small islands off the coast of Skye.

The population of Eigg was predominantly Roman Catholic. However there were also some 200 nominal Protestants. While Swanson was preaching on Sunday, 7th August 1842 a cry was heard in the congregation. A widow woman “*was impressed*” and the whole audience noticed her.

Donald MacKinnon, the GSS Teacher (a Gaelic School had been established in June 1842) was present on that occasion, and later wrote - “*I may say the awe of God fell upon all*”. That

same evening during the service three more women *“cried aloud for mercy”* and during the services the following Sunday, *“The cries from the meeting house could be distinctly heard at the distance of half a mile”*.

On Sunday 14th August 1842, Swanson preached from Acts 18:3 – *“Christ must needs have suffered”*. He later recorded –

“The whole congregation was moved, the house was a place of weeping, as if the promise was literally fulfilled, “They shall look upon me whom they have pierced and mourn”. It was an outburst of the whole, so that no mouth was silent, and no eye dry; old and young mourned together, and the blooming and withered cheeks were all wet with tears. The scene was indescribable, and I sat down mayhap to weep to.”

COMMITMENT

During 1842 and the years which followed, people would go to extraordinary lengths to hear the word of God being preached. What follows is the record of Rev. Donald Fraser of Kirkhill, near Inverness, who visited a remote part Bracadale in northwest Skye during that year –

“The day was so very rainy that we looked for a very small audience, but to our surprise we overtook group after group wending their way wet and draggled. We came to a rather broad and flooded stream, and for a little hesitated whether we should attempt to ford it through mounted on our horses. After crossing we waited to see what the pedestrians would do. They ingeniously formed a chain, linking arm in arm, the strongest men at the head of it towards upstream. They then stepped in, the men first, bearing the force of the stream supported by the rest, leaning against them. They thus diverted the force of the current from the women who formed the lower part of the chain. All got through slowly, but safely, and proceeded a mile further to the church, wet and dripping. The little Church was filled, and where there was such eagerness to hear the word of God, it was to be expected it would make some impression. So it was, for about the middle of the service, all heads were down, silently weeping, and wiping their eyes, but, one hard-featured old man who though he held up his head, had some tears running down his furrowed cheek.”

Referring to another occasion Fraser, continues: - *“On the same day (October 1842), we sent intimation that there would be preaching at Sconcer. The day turned out wet and there was no place for the people to sit with any degree of comfort, but on the shingle of the seashore, when the tide was out. For a shelter, and pulpit for the ministers, oars were set upon end and a sail thrown over them.*

ENDURING LEGACY

During September 1842 Dr John MacDonald, (The Apostle of the North), carried out a preaching tour of North Skye. It was his opinion that the awakening on the Island "*exceeded in intensity and extent anything of the kind in modern times.*"

The vast numbers involved are clearly corroborated in a report dated September 1842, written for the Baptist Home Missionary Society by the Rev. James MacQueen, of Broadford Baptist Church. Referring to a communion service that had recently taken place in Kensaleyre, Snizort, MacQueen writes -

"I suppose you have heard what has occurred at the other end of the Island. They had the sacrament last week, and, I hear, that between 12,000 and 15,000 attended, and that hundreds fell down as if they were dead. This usually commences with violent shaking and crying out, with clapping of hands. Those affected were mostly women and children. We have had two or three instances of it in this station, and it is likely it will go over the whole Island. I think it better to refrain from these men, and let them alone; if it be of man it will come to nought."

MacQueens own reservations appear to have melted away when the awakening touched his own congregations, for in December of that same year he reported -

"I never saw the church so lively and zealous as at present. The Lord has enabled me to labour more during the last quarter than I have done any harvest since I came to Skye. The fields were truly white, and no employment hindered the people from attending. I never saw such a general desire to hear in every part of the station, and, indeed, through the whole Island. Four persons were baptised since I last wrote to you. I cannot visit one half of the places to which I am invited. This awakening commenced in the north of Skye, by means of a Gaelic schoolmaster. It has extended to all the parishes of the Island. Some who are affected prove by their conduct that they have not known the evils of sin, notwithstanding their agitation. There is, however, a wonderful change in the conduct of the people, and much attention is paid to the word of God."

By 1843 it was judged that the results of the revival were "*real and enduring*" and that "*on the most reliable information, that there are few families in the whole Island of Skye, containing a population of 25,000 souls, where there has not been one or more individuals seriously impressed*".

The religious, social and educational effects of these evangelical awakenings/revivals were immense. As a result of emigration their influence was also to spread far beyond the shores of a small Inner Hebridean island – but that's another story!