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'Abounding with people of
dyvers languages':

The Church and Gaelic
in the Presbytery of Caithness
in the Second Half of the 17th Century

In the history of the decline of the Gaelic language within Scotland, the church is seen as a key element in the anglicisation process. But while both state and church in the seventeenth century favoured the suppression of Gaelic in the longer term, there was a recognition by the church that, if the Highlands were to be brought within a unified 'religious jurisdiction', then Gaelic had to be used for religious instruction. Such usage, however, took place within particular ideological and institutional contexts.¹ This article examines how the Church of Scotland attempted to accommodate Gaelic speakers during the second half of the seventeenth century within the presbytery of Caithness, an area which was then on the linguistic frontier between Scots and Gaelic.

In the mid-seventeenth century the presbytery of Caithness comprised not only the whole of the shire of Caithness, but also the province of Strathnaver in Sutherland containing the parishes of Durness, Farr and part of Reay. The presbytery of Sutherland was thus restricted to the south east of the county, equivalent to what is sometimes referred to as the ancient earldom of Sutherland, and the parish of Assynt. The presbyteries of Caithness, Sutherland and Orkney combined to form a 'northern' synod.

Most of the ministers in Caithness had been deposed for welcoming or failing to denounce the Marquis of Montrose during his ill-fated expedition of 1650.² The combination of the Cromwellian conquest, royalist resistance and divisions within the church took a severe toll upon the personnel and

administration of the church in Caithness. By 1654 there were only three ministers in the presbytery 'admitted to the exercise of ye holie function to particulare congregations', and one of the three was about to be deposed.³ There were, however, a number of young men acting as preachers in some of the vacant parishes. Ministers and preachers apparently met occasionally, continuing the presbyterial tradition, albeit on an unofficial basis. Eventually, at a meeting held in October, it was resolved that, as there were several 'young men resideing wtin the countrie preaching the gospell', there should be more frequent meetings of ministers and preachers 'for consulting about the affaires of the gospell wtin the severall congregations', until they were able to meet as a presbytery. At the next meeting in December, the ministers, 'haveing received adwyse from oyr reverand bretherne in the south', resolved to act as a presbytery, and admit such to the ministry as they should find qualified.⁴ Even so, the task facing the synod when it met in Thurso in August 1656 was enormous. The parishes of Olrig, Wick, Bower, Watten, Reay, Farr and Durness in the presbytery of Caithness were vacant, or as the presbytery optimistically put it, 'waiteth', and Lairg, Creich and Assynt in the presbytery of Sutherland were in a similar state. The position in Orkney was almost certainly worse, although this is not revealed in the synod's minutes as none of the island brethren attended.⁵

The pattern of language use within Caithness posed a particular problem for the emerging administration. While all parishes in Sutherland had a preponderance of Gaelic speakers who were unable to understand English or Scots, and thus clearly required ministers able to preach in Gaelic, the situation in Caithness was more complex. Broadly speaking, the presbytery was divided into three linguistic zones: parishes where most if not all parishioners spoke Scots; parishes where many spoke Scots but where there were also significant numbers of Gaelic speakers; and the parish of Reay and the rest of Strathnaver where Gaelic speakers predominated. This rather crude division ignores the possibility of bilingualism and assumes that Gaelic speakers could not understand Scots – or at least a sermon in Scots. It

does, however, broadly coincide with the line identified by place-name studies running through Caithness from the south-east to the north-west which is taken to mark the eastward extent of settlement by Gaelic speakers in Caithness. It appears that the line, which essentially defines highland from lowland Caithness, was of some permanence.⁶

Despite efforts to ensure a supply of Gaelic-speaking ministers, there was a serious shortage in the Highlands.⁷ In Caithness, those parishes which required a Gaelic speaking minister were a severe burden on the presbytery. In 1654 the parish of Reay had been served by a preacher, George Anderson, who was shared with Halkirk. He was admitted minister of Halkirk the following year and may be assumed not to have been a Gaelic speaker. The parishioners of Reay petitioned for the services of Andrew Munro, the minister of Thurso, who could preach in Gaelic. The request was turned down but the presbytery managed to persuade David Munro, whose father, John had been deposed as minister of Reay in 1650, and who had been preaching within the presbyteries of Sutherland and Tain, to return to Caithness. He was admitted to Reay in 1657.⁸ On the other hand, the parishes of Durness and Farr were to remain vacant for some years to come. In 1657 the presbytery agreed to send a minister to preach in Durness 'in regard to yr desolate condition'. In December that year, in response to a letter from Lord Reay, Andrew Munro was appointed to go to Strathnaver with all countenance. Thereafter ministers from Caithness appear to have visited Strathnaver on a more or less regular basis to preach and also to exercise church discipline.

Parishes where the church authorities had to take into account the needs of both Scots and Gaelic speakers were a particular challenge. At its meeting in 1656 the synod considered 'the Numerous congregation of Thurso, many of whom have not the Scotts Language, to whom the present Minister culd not doe duty, in respect of his being altogidder takin upe, with the rest, who are a great deale more numerous'. It was also observed, that 'those having bot the Irish Language culd not have rowm in thair Church to heir, though the Minister were in capacitie to speake to yair

vnderstanding'. The synod ordered that a letter should be written to the heritors and parishioners of Thurso, 'that thay goe about ye prowying ane helper for the vse off such within the Parisch, as doe not vnderstand Scotts.'⁹ However, at the synod's next meeting in June 1657, it was acknowledged that this attempt to provide for the parish, 'abounding with people of dyvers languages', had been ineffectual and a different solution was tried. The synod ordered that an area on the east bank of the Water of Forss should be disjoined from the parish of Thurso and added to that of Reay. Two other areas, one in the south east corner of the parish and the other comprising the detached lands of Dorrery, were to be disjoined and added to the parish of Halkirk. The location of these three areas makes it clear that this was not merely an attempt to reduce the number of parishioners which the minister of Thurso had to serve, but was an attempt to disjoin those parts of the parish where Gaelic speakers were concentrated and thus reduce the number of 'Gaelic' parishes in the presbytery. It did not augur well for these new arrangements that the ministers of Reay and Halkirk protested their 'inability to vndergoe the same'.¹⁰ Indeed, there is no evidence that the transfer of lands ever took place and it may be concluded that this attempt to deal with the Gaelic speakers of Thurso was never instituted.

The real priority for the presbytery was to find new ministers to fill the parishes which were still vacant, including Watten which contained a substantial minority of Gaelic speakers. In December 1656 the presbytery advised the parishioners of Watten to set about obtaining William Campbell to be their minister, 'and remove the Irish families out of yr paroch'.¹¹ Campbell was apparently not available – he later became minister of Odrig – and in November 1657 the presbytery asked their colleagues in Forres to send an 'expectant' or trainee minister, James Dunbar, to Caithness. A similar request was made of the presbytery of Elgin. Dunbar appears to have been employed in the parish of Watten, as the following summer the parishioners made a formal call for him to which the presbytery unanimously gave its consent. By November 1658, however, there had been no further progress

MALCOLM BANGOR-JONES

and the parish requested that Dunbar's trials be 'hastened'. A hint as to the probable reason for the delay appears in the minutes of the meeting held in January 1659 when the presbytery appointed two of their number 'to goe along wt tuo of ye parochiners of waddin to try what number of Irische inhabitants will be found wtin ye said paroche that it may be seine to before ye minister be admitted'. The two ministers reported to the next meeting of the presbytery on 8 February that 'they had fund the number of nyntie persones yt culd speik no Scotts but Irishe language'. The presbytery decided that Dunbar should be admitted but 'vpon ye heretors ingadgment to remoue thes yt hes ye Irishe tounge allanerlie and plant schooles in ye paroche'. At the same time, however, Dunbar did 'faithfully promisse yt he suld vse all diligence for attaineing the Irishe language' by February 1660. If the presbytery then found that he could not catechise the people in Gaelic, he would be removed from the parish to 'any other congregation whervnto he may be called in case ye parochiners performe not yr engagement foirsaid'.

The presbytery had not arrived at this decision unanimously. At the end of the minutes of the meeting it was recorded that 'notwithstanding of Mr Davaid monro his dissent protestation and reasons therof the bretherene ar resolved to goe on in admission of Mr James Dumbar'. Munro, the minister of Reay, clearly had sympathy for the Gaelic parishioners of Watten, and was unhappy with Dunbar's inability to speak Gaelic. The presbytery, however, was not persuaded. Watten and other parishes would remain vacant if the presbytery waited until a minister with Gaelic was found and the meeting concluded that 'it is better yt the major pairt haue ye means of edification yn that all continue destitute'. At a presbytery meeting held after Dunbar had been admitted the following month, 'ye parochiners of Waddin gaue in securitie for remoueing of ye communes that haue no scotts as wes required'.¹² This, however, was as far as the business appears to have been taken. Indeed the presbytery did not even consider the issue at a subsequent visitation of the parish in 1663.¹³ As will become evident, the Gaelic speakers of Watten were not disturbed and it is almost certain that Dunbar never

learnt Gaelic. The presbytery had other matters to devote their energies to, including the punishment of sexual misconduct and the eradication of superstitious beliefs – one man confessed to consulting with a witch, since dead (!), about burying a cock. Moreover, despite their own difficulties, the brethren also supported causes further afield and ordered collections for 'distressed protestants in Poleland and Bohemia' and 'ane distressed Inglishe knight called Sir Anthony Haviland'.¹⁴

The Restoration of the king also saw the reintroduction of bishops acting in concert with synods and presbyteries. Episcopalianism was accepted in Caithness, albeit reluctantly by some ministers. Patrick Forbes, consecrated bishop of Caithness in May 1662, was, like his colleagues elsewhere in Scotland, keen to accelerate the presentation of ministers to vacant charges. The Gaelic speaking parishes in Strathnaver were the first to benefit; Durness was provided with a minister in 1663 and Farr the following year. The bishop continued to be aware of the needs of Gaelic parishes as the minor dispute which arose in 1668 between the bishop and the Earl of Caithness over the presentation of a minister to the parish of Dunnet demonstrates. The Earl sent a representative to a meeting of the bishop in presbytery desiring the bishop to accept his presentation of Neil Beaton, the schoolmaster in Thurso. The Earl had apparently put Beaton forward previously but the bishop, 'having severall Irish kirks vacant, and not being able to find any having the Irish language to plant any of these Churches, but Mr Niel Beaton, and considering yt yr might be easily found oysrs for the Church of Dunat, having the Scotch language', had been unable 'in conscience' to accept the presentation. After debating the matter, the bishop and presbytery suggested that, after Beaton had been a year at Dunnet, he 'might be transplanted by the Bishop as he should think expedient in case of vacancy of Irish Churches'. The suggestion was not opposed and when Beaton had declared that he was minded to accept the presentation, the bishop, 'for peace's sake', allowed it to proceed. Dunnet was visited by the bishop and presbytery in 1670 but no mention was made that Beaton

MALCOLM BANGOR-JONES

should be shifted. He was, however, later translated to the Gaelic parish of Latheron.¹⁵

In 1669 the bishop had received a letter from the ministers of Sutherland expressing their dissatisfaction at a candidate for the parish of Creich, Charles Alexander's, 'abilitie in the Irish tongue'. This was not the first time that problems had arisen with regard to that parish. Almost 50 years earlier the minister of Creich had resigned, 'finding himself altogether unfit to serve at the said kirk because of his want of ye Yrisch tounge, and the whole people having no other language', and had been temporarily moved by the synod to the parish of Golspie, where there were 'some that has the Scotische language'. After the ministers of Caithness and Sutherland had met at Latheron to consider the matter, the members of the presbytery of Caithness declared that they had been satisfied with Alexander's ability to speak Gaelic. Whether the ministers of Sutherland were being cautious or whether their colleagues in Caithness were less exacting in their standards is difficult to judge. Alexander, however, transferred to Kildrummy after only a few years at Creich.¹⁶

Bishop Patrick Forbes died in 1679. He was succeeded by Andrew Wood who was to be remembered over 40 years later for removing the minister of Thurso, Andrew Munro, from his office for failing to swear the oath in the Test Act and replacing him with a kinsman, John Wood, even though the latter could not speak Gaelic.¹⁷ There is a gap in the presbytery records covering these years but in December 1681 the kirk session of Thurso noted that 'the Minister had sequestrate himself [from? the?] exercise of his function because he had not cleareness to take the oath of ye Test'. Munro had been minister of Thurso since 1655 and had been uneasy over the introduction of episcopalianism. With the re-establishment of presbyterianism in 1689, Wood was deprived of his office. The following year, Munro returned to his charge, having been reponed by Act of Parliament, 'and by the people of the parish'.¹⁸

The presbyterian church was extremely thin on the ground in the northern Highlands; it was not until 1697 that there were four presbyterian ministers in Caithness and a presbytery

could be formally established. Gaelic speaking ministers were in very short supply, although as several episcopal incumbents were to retain their livings for many years to come, this did not mean that parishioners were without religious instruction. This does form the background, however, to a very unseemly squabble between the presbyteries of Caithness and Dornoch over Mr Hector Munro, the Gaelic speaking minister of Watten who had in 1701 been called to the parish of Lairg in Sutherland. The presbytery of Caithness claimed that Watten contained over 200 Gaelic speakers; according to one statement there were 'two hundred examinable persons quho have only Irish', according to another there were 'above three hundred persons Come to the age of men and Women in that parish who understand only the Irish Language'. They had 'been always neglected, in the late prelaticall government by their planting Incumbents amongst them quho hade only English, quhich occasiond no small reflection on them, & would much more against us if so planted'.¹⁹ The previous incumbent had been 'Slaged befor the Committee appointed to visite these bounds for his want of irish in yr Charge' (the Committee of the General Assembly for the North). Since Munro's arrival the Gaelic speakers of Watten were 'the most exact and best keepers of ye Church and doe most dilligently attend all oyr means of edification'.²⁰ Although the presbytery had only one vacant parish requiring a Gaelic speaking minister, there were three others in the hands of episcopal incumbents and it was felt that Munro would have a good influence upon these 'most barbarous' congregations. The presbytery of Dornoch, on the other hand, claimed that while the people of Lairg, 'for the most part understand nothing but Irish, the parochiners of Wattin to a verie few scarlie to be named, have nothing of Irish', and 'for Severall centuries the paroch of Wattin had none yt preached irish'.²¹ The dispute was won by the presbytery of Caithness.

Allowing for the exaggerated and extravagant claims which were made, it is clear that Watten had certainly retained its Gaelic speaking population. Indeed, the numbers of Gaelic speakers could well have increased in line with a general increase in population.²² Statements made during the

dispute and in 1706 also reveal that there were 'severalls' or indeed 'many' in the parishes of Bower and Wick, who had only Gaelic. This, however, was contradicted by the statement that the people of Wick 'understand English also, So that they need not a Minister having Irish'.²³ In general the church recognised that there were five parishes in the county of Caithness where Gaelic speaking ministers were required: Thurso, Halkirk, Reay, Latheron and Watten.²⁴

Histories of the church in the Highlands have tended to take the reintroduction of presbyterianism as a start date and thus inadvertently allow the claims of the church establishment of 1689 to detract from the efforts of its predecessors.²⁵ The presbytery of Caithness in the second half of the seventeenth century – as presbytery alone or as acting in concert with a bishop – clearly followed the policy of the church in providing religious instruction for Gaelic speakers in their own language. The shortage of Gaelic speaking ministers was a major and continuing constraint. Vacancies were particularly common and several innovative solutions were sought for parishes where Gaelic speakers formed a minority of parishioners. In large measure these attempts either failed or were not implemented. Indeed, the presbytery took the line that it was better that the majority received religious instruction rather than all went without just because a minority could not be catered for. It is clear, however, that there was not complete unanimity within the presbytery; at least one minister felt that the Gaelic speaking parishioners of Watten deserved better. But it is very doubtful whether the marginalisation of Gaelic speakers in what Withers has termed 'transition parishes' contributed to the spread of bilingualism.²⁶ Contact with English took place in a variety of ways. With the possible exception of Wick, it does not appear that there had been any appreciable retreat of the Gaelic language in Caithness by 1700.

Notes

1. C.W.J. Withers, *Gaelic in Scotland 1698-1981* (Edinburgh, 1984), pp. 8, 31; *Gaelic Scotland: The Transformation of a Culture Region* (London, 1988), p. 112.
2. D. Stevenson, 'Deposition of Ministers in the Church of Scotland under the Covenanters, 1638-1651', *Church History*, 44, republished in D. Stevenson, *Union, Revolution and Religion in 17th-Century Scotland* (Aldershot, 1997), p. 332.
3. Scottish Record Office [hereafter SRO] (Caithness Presbytery records) CH2/47/1 p. 1. Original spelling has been retained in all quotes although abbreviations have been given in full.
4. It was noted that 'the members of the former standing presbytrie being all deposed by the generall assemblie of this kirk for yr compliyance wt James Grahame excommunicate in his rebellion & shedding the blood of his Countrie' (underlined phrase deleted by a later hand): SRO CH2/47/1. It is noteworthy that the official record begins after Monck had granted licence to the presbytery and synod of Caithness to meet following the ban on church meetings: F.D. Dow, *Cromwellian Scotland 1651-1660* (Edinburgh, 1979), p. 147.
5. SRO (Caithness Synod records) CH2/345/1 p. 1. Although not mentioned specifically in the synod minutes, the parish of Odrig was also vacant.
6. It is generally accepted that Gaelic had arrived in Caithness before the Norse and that not only was the language not wholly ousted but there was a subsequent expansion of Gaelic speakers into Norse territory. Later, there was to be competition from Scots. W.F.H. Nicolaisen, 'Scandinavians and Celts in Caithness: The Place-Name Evidence', in J. R. Baldwin, ed., *Caithness: A Cultural Crossroads* (Edinburgh, 1982); D. Waugh, 'Place-names', in D. Omand, ed., *The New Caithness Book* (Wick, 1989); 'Caithness: An Onomastic Frontier Zone', in C.E. Batey, J. Jesch and C.D. Morris, eds., *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and The North Atlantic* (Edinburgh,

MALCOLM BANGOR-JONES

- 1993); 'Settlement names in Caithness with particular reference to Reay parish', in B.E. Crawford, ed., *Scandinavian Settlement in Northern Britain* (London, 1995).
7. V. E. Durkacz *The Decline of the Celtic Languages* (Edinburgh, 1983, reprinted 1996), pp. 9-10, 17; Withers (1984), pp. 32-35.
 8. SRO CH2/47/1 pp. 11, 15-17. John Munro had remained in the parish despite being deposed.
 9. SRO CH2/345/1 p. 3.
 10. 2 SRO CH2/345/1 pp. 13-14. The townships named on 'the water syde of Fors' were: 'westir and Easter Brims, Thursater, Fors, Croskirk, Brabster, Lyth, Ouretown and Aust'. These are all identifiable on the 1st edition of the Ordnance Survey 6" map, with the exception of Brabster which may be Broubster on the west bank of the Forss, which in the past was known as Brabster. However, there may have been another Brabster within the estate of Forss. The townships to be added to Halkirk were 'Soirdill, hoy, Quecruik, and Dorarie'. Quecruik is now known as Quarrycrook.
 11. SRO CH2/47/1 p. 13.
 12. SRO CH2/47/1 pp. 19, 23, 26-29.
 13. SRO CH2/47/1 pp. 64-67.
 14. SRO CH2/47/1 pp. 23, 29.
 15. SRO CH2/47/1 pp. 114-115, 141.
 16. SRO CH2/47/1 pp. 130-31; C. Fraser-Mackintosh *Antiquarian Notes* (2nd edition, Stirling, 1913), p. 229.
 17. A. Mitchell, ed., *Macfarlane's Geographical Collections* (Scottish History Society, 1906), vol. I p. 174.
 18. SRO (Thurso Kirk Session records) CH2/414/1 pp.198, 269.
 19. SRO (General Assembly papers) CH1/2/5/2 f.129/1.
 20. SRO CH1/2/3/4 f.308v.
 21. SRO CH1/2/3/4 f.266.
 22. An account of 1726 suggested that there were 800 catechisable persons then in the parish and that there had been an increase of 100 since 1701: Mitchell, A. (ed.) p. 180.
 23. SRO CH1/2/5/2 f.129/1; CH1/2/25/3 f.285v. This

- statement suggests that there existed variations in the usage of Gaelic and English similar to what Withers found for the Port of Monteith in Perthshire, a parish on the boundary between English and Gaelic: C.W.J. Withers, 'Gaelic-Speaking in a Highland Parish: Port of Monteith 1724-1725', *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, 1982, 98, pp. 16-23.
24. In c1726 it was stated that the parishioners of 'Latheron, Watten, Halkirk, Thurso and Reay' were Gaelic speakers 'at least the greater part of the common people do [i.e. speak Gaelic], and these parishes must have Irish ministers.' A. Mitchell, ed., p. 151. Confirmation for Watten is provided by the fact that a Gaelic sermon was to be preached at the ordination of John Sinclair: SRO (Dornoch Presbytery records) CH2/1290/2 p. 9.
 25. J. MacInnes *The Evangelical Movement in the Highlands of Scotland 1688 to 1800* (Aberdeen, 1951); D. Ansdell *The People of the Great Faith: The Highland Church 1690-1900* (Stornoway, 1998).
 26. Withers (1984), p. 54.