

Gravestone in Old Lochcarron Churchyard. Drawing by John Hume.

THE CHURCH IN THE WESTERN PARISHES: KINTAIL TO LOCHBROOM

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In any discussion of life in Ross-shire, past or present, the great geographical contrast between East and West has to be borne in mind. In ecclesiastical affairs that contrast is seen in the thick cluster of parish churches found in the fertile and populous lowlands of the east coast, while on the other side of the watershed lie the huge parishes of the western seaboard [Fig. 6.1].

What we loosely call Wester Ross today first appears on record as 'North Argyll'. So it was named in King Robert's charter to Thomas Randolph as Earl of Moray, even though it was distinctly stated then to belong to the Earl of Ross. At various early periods the lands of Kintail, Lochalsh and Gairloch are all shown as lying in North Argyll. In history as well as geography, this is a place apart, worth studying for itself (*RRS*. V. 633, VI. 505; *OPS*. II(ii). 395; *RMS*. I. 437).

THE EARLY CHURCH

In trying to give some idea of how the church operated in these western parishes, I leave the story of the medieval church in Ross to be read in Dr. Ronald Cant's paper in *Firthlands of Ross and Sutherland* (1986. 47-58).

By way of prelude, however, something must be said, albeit briefly, of the place held by Applecross in the early Christian community [Figs. 6.2, 6.3]. We really know very little of the monastery of 'Apurcrossan' or of its founder, the missionary from Ireland named Maolrubha. According to the Irish annals, he founded his church in the year 673, and died there in 722 in his eightieth year. The Norsemen (or Danes) are blamed in the *Aberdeen Breviary* for his death, for the violation of the sanctuary and the robbing of priests — but their ships were sunk within sight of land with no storm blowing. The parish of Applecross is spoken of in Gaelic as 'The Sanctuary', *A' Chomraich*, and as we shall see some strange rites were performed in his name at Loch Maree even up to the 17th century (*OPS*. II(ii). 402-3; Watson 1904. 201).

The influence of various missionaries, and perhaps their actual wanderings, are recalled by the church dedications and associated names — *Clachan Mulrui* at Lochcarron (and perhaps also at Gairloch), *Killilan* and *Kilduich* in Kintail, *Cill-Chaointeort* and *Cill-Fhearchair* in Glenshiel, *Kilchaon* in Lochalsh, *Kildonan* on Little Loch Broom. Such names incor-

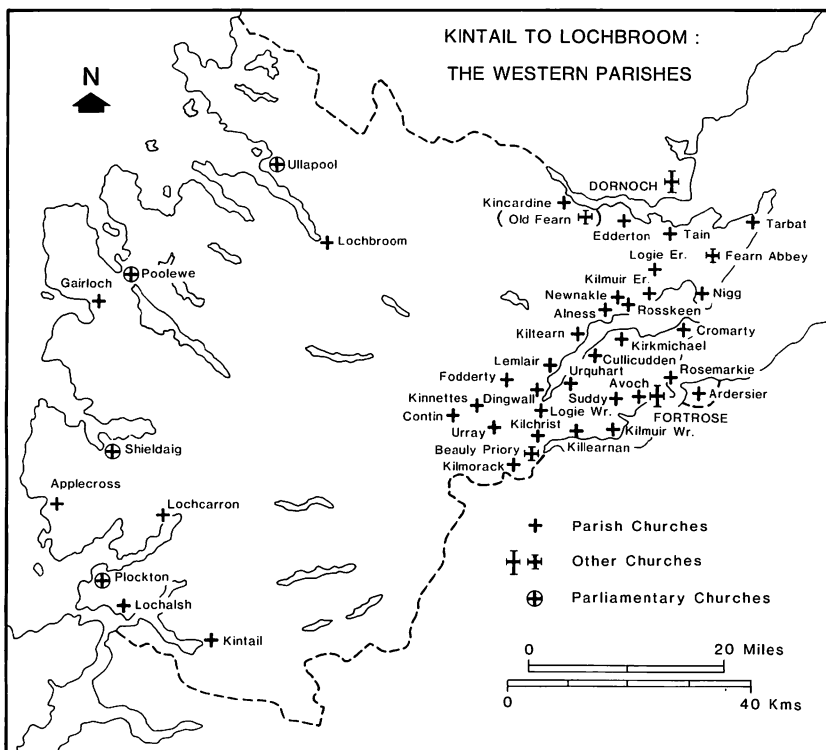


Fig. 6.1 The map of the former Diocese of Ross shows how few and extended are the parishes along the western seaboard (once 'North Argyll'), in contrast to the close cluster in the east. The frontier between 'highland' and 'lowland' Ross-shire more-or-less coincides with the north-south watershed, and some of the eastern parishes extend up to the headwaters of the longer rivers which flow eastward — e.g. Kincardine, Contin, Urray, Fodderty and Kilmorack. (Adapted from Fig. 4.8. in Cant 1986. 54).

porate Gael. *cill* (church) and *clachan* (stone church). Along with names incorporating Gael. *annaid* (church), *cléireach* (priest) and Old Norse *múnkr* (monk), and the many burying grounds scattered through these parishes, they point to a wide variety of church sites used in days gone by to the glory of God.

There are two periods of church life in Wester Ross on which I propose to concentrate — (1) Post Reformation and pre-Revolution, ca. 1560 to 1690, and (2) Post-Revolution, 1690 to modern times. These dates will be blurred because the catholic, episcopal and presbyterian periods and systems of church government inevitably overlapped. This was likely to be especially true in a rural and relatively remote area, and changes in both doctrine and organisation were bound to be slow to take effect in the Highlands, particularly in the north-west (Murchison 1962. 63; Craven 1886. 78).



Fig. 6.2 The parish church at Applecross, 1966.



Fig. 6.3 Part of an Early Christian cross-slab, Applecross church.

THE POST-REFORMATION CHURCH: ca. 1560-1690

Dr. Cant's paper left us with a picture of parish churches appropriated to the cathedral and its services . . . and other parish churches fobbed off with vicars (or deputies of the non-resident rectors) drawing only a pittance from the parish teinds. Evidence is thin or completely lacking for most of the western parishes, but it seems that the churches of Lochalsh and Lochcarron at least were served by a vicar (Haws 1972. 164, 165).

The Reformers inherited a parochial system whose boundaries can still be identified today, though there have been changes in detail. The diocese of Ross had six 'common kirks', whose revenues belonged to the canons or chaplains of the cathedral at Fortrose. Kintail, Lochalsh, Lochcarron, Gairloch, Applecross and Lochbroom were so listed in the Register of the Privy Seal in 1567. The 'haill commoun kirkis of the realm' having come into the sovereigns' hands, these six in Ross were in that year granted by Queen Mary and her husband to their new bishop, the famous John Leslie. In the accounts of ecclesiastical revenues to be devoted to the church, the 'common kirks' of Kintail and Lochbroom both figure, with the added words 'McKenzie intromitter' (Donaldson 1949. 4) — perhaps some 'sticky fingers' in Kintail may have seen that the proceeds got no further on their way to the cathedral, fifty miles off the east!

Highland parishes were — some of them still are — inordinately large. The biggest in Wester Ross was Lochbroom (273,000 acres: 110,483 ha), the third largest in Scotland, and Gairloch was not far behind (227,000 acres: 91,867 ha). It used to be thought that the Highlanders were at first untouched by the religious movement of the Reformation; but a closer study of the national records, led by the late Professor Gordon Donaldson, suggests that the apparent dearth of reformed clergy in parts of the Highlands, including the north and west, may have been largely illusory. Dr. James Kirk has found that in the diocese of Ross church appointments were made 'relatively promptly' in the east, and in the west by 1574 only the parish of Gairloch was without at least a resident 'reader' (Groome 1901. 625, 1092; Kirk 1986. 1-2, 10, 12).

The presbyterian system of church government was slow to emerge, and many years in growing. How far it commanded the support of the people when it was introduced is hard to judge. By 1618 episcopacy, with its dioceses and church hierarchy, had been fully restored, only to be temporarily overthrown in 1638 and revived again after the Restoration (1662 to 1689) — one of the 'outed' bishops was John Maxwell of Ross, the 'greatest Scottish prelate of the reign of Charles I' (Craven 1886. 62). The minutes of the Presbytery of Dingwall, which have survived for the years 1649-87, offer a detailed account of the changing church life in 17th century Ross-shire.

'Wise Men From The East': Presbyterian Visitations

The presbytery of Dingwall was acutely aware of the difference between its

eastern and western parishes — the ‘low country’ and ‘the hielands’ as they are called in the record. Meetings were nearly always held in Dingwall or nearby, sometimes two or three a month, which meant for the ‘hieland brethren’ a journey on horseback of 50 or even 70 miles over rough tracks and unbridged rivers. It was the Presbytery’s duty to carry out periodic ‘visitations’ of every parish within its bounds, and when a three-day round of Kintail, Lochalsh and Lochcarron had been completed in August 1649, a planned extension to Gairloch and Lochbroom had to be postponed to the following year ‘the way long, not rydable, and inability of brethren to goe afoot’ (Mackay 1896. xxvi, 147-52, 191, 192, 194-8).

What the Presbytery clerk noted on these ‘visitations’ gives some idea of what the brethren found — and what they thought should be done. These were troubled times, as the wise men from the east were more than once reminded. This was largely Mackenzie country, or at least Mackenzie-dominated. We are told by Mackenzie of Applecross that in the days before the two Covenants, Colin, first earl of Seaforth, lord of Kintail from 1611-33, ‘caused build a church in everie baronie of his Highlands, and left a donatione to ilk church to maintain a minister’ (HP. II. 65). But his successor had been excommunicated by the General Assembly in 1646 for producing his own ‘humble remonstrance’ against the Covenants, and raising men in defiance of the Government (Peterkin 1838. 445-6).

The ministers of the four parishes visited in 1649-50 were a varied lot, and it is worth noting that two of them had been more than 30 years in the same parish, and the other two over a dozen (*Fasti*. VII. 152, 155, 157, 160; Mackay 1896. 253):

**Kintail* — Farquhar Macrae, a son of Seaforth’s constable of Eilean Donan, educated at Perth Grammar School and Edinburgh University (Bishop Maxwell called him ‘a man of great gifts *but unfortunately lost in the Highlands*’), transferred to Kintail in 1618 after ten years as minister of Gairloch, succeeded his father as constable and founded a dynasty of Macrae ministers of Kintail which lasted until 1716;

**Lochalsh* — Donald Clark, MA of Edinburgh University, parish minister here by 1614, up to 1653 at least;

**Lochcarron* — Alexander Mackenzie, son of Seaforth’s chamberlain of Lochcarron, here by 1636 (when he was made JP), followed as minister by his son who died in 1721;

**Lochbroom* — Donald Ross (presumably from the east?), minister and JP 1636, suspended 1649 on accusation of immorality, drinking wine on the Sabbath, and other ‘unministerial carriage’ (sentence rescinded 1650).

Before a presbyterial visitation, ministers were supposed to intimate the date to their people, who were expected to attend along with their elders. In

Lochalsh and Lochcarron, it was found that all the elders were 'incapacitate' for office 'be reason of malignancie' (i.e. opposition to the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643 and thereby opposed to Government policy); at Lochcarron the 'late elders' declared that their minister had urged them to subscribe this Covenant, but they refused 'for fear of their superiors'. At Lochbroom there were seven elders present, but few people. One minister didn't know why his people were absent, and another had heard that *his* were in pursuit of stolen goods 'taken from several corners of the country'. When the Presbytery visited Lochbroom they carried out the full procedure of examining the minister and elders separately and then together, and also the people ('being few'). As well as cases of discipline, stress was laid on Sabbath observance, catechising on the essentials of the Christian faith, baptism and marriage, family worship, attendance at the kirk, and collections for the poor (Mackay 1896. 147-52, 194-8).

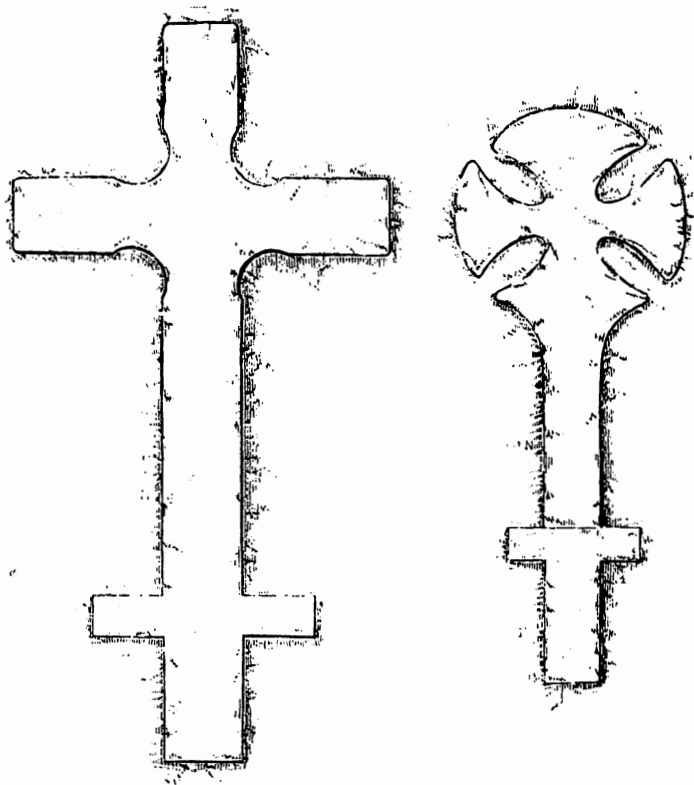


Fig. 6.4 Medieval cross-slabs on *Eilean Ma-rui*, Isle Maree. The stones have never been dressed or squared; they lie flat, next to each other and roughly east-west, and are traditionally said to mark the graves of a local Norwegian prince, Olaf, and his wife (*P.S.A.S.* vol. IV, 251 et seq.; Dixon 1886. 10).

The church at Kintail was found to be without ‘thacking’, and there was no pulpit nor precentor’s desk; at Lochalsh ‘nothing found in this kirk but the bare walls’; Lochcarron had a stool of repentance, but neither pulpit nor desks. Orders were given for remedying these deficiencies, with help from the parishioners. The General Assembly’s order forbidding burials within kirks was emphasised, and a Lochbroom elder was deposed for ‘presumptuously avowing’ his own resolve to ignore the ban (Mackay 1896. 147, 150, 195).

Strange Rites At Loch Maree

The Presbytery’s most startling ‘excursion’ to the west was made in 1656 to investigate reports of superstitious rites at Loch Maree — ‘the most extraordinary story of idolatry which we know in connection with the Highlands’, it has been called [Figs. 6.4, 6.5]. The loch and its islands are in Gairloch parish, but some of the ringleaders seem to have come from Achnashellach in Lochcarron, whose minister (Alexander Mackenzie) also served the parish of Applecross in the absence of a settled minister.

Next best thing to the actual words of the clerk’s minute of the visit is the summary by Dr. William Mackay (of Inverness) who edited the Dingwall Presbytery’s records:

The Presbytery found that the Protestant inhabitants of Applecross, Lochcarron, Lochalsh, Kintail, Contin, Fodderty, Gairloch and Lochbroom, were in the habit of sacrificing bulls to the saint (Maolrubha) on his annual festival day, 25th August; of giving the sacrificed meat and other offerings to those poor, mentally deranged persons who were known as St. Mourie’s afflicted ones — *derilans* — and who owned his special protection; of making pilgrimages to his monuments of idolatry in various places, including Isle Maree, to which as well as to Loch Maree he gave his name; of visiting and ‘circulating’ ruinous chapels associated with his memory — marching round them sunwise, no doubt; of learning of the future, ‘in reference especialie to lyf and death in taking of jurneys’ by trying to put their heads into ‘a holl of a round stone’, which, if they ‘could doe, to witt, be able to put in thaire heade, they expect thair returneing to that place; and faileing, they conceived it ominous’; and of adoring ‘wells and other superstitious monuments and stones, tedious to rehearse’ (Mackay 1896. xxxviii, 279-83).

As it turned out, none of the eleven men accused seems ever to have been brought to book. All were summoned to appear before a special meeting of the Presbytery at Applecross on 5 September, with Mr Alexander as their accuser. None appearing, they were summoned to Dingwall in October, along with two more men from Torridon and Applecross. The Presbytery decided that anyone found guilty of such ‘abominations’, especially sacrifices ‘of ony kynd’, must appear in sackcloth in six of the churches within the bounds on successive Sundays, and also be rebuked before the Presbytery. But again they failed to appear; and the records of the Synod of



Fig. 6.5 The 'wishing tree' on Isle Maree is now dead — killed perhaps by copper poisoning. Patients visiting the island to seek a cure drove in nails and attached pieces of their clothing. Countless 'old' pennies and half-pennies have also been wedged into the wood, many of them now concealed by the once-growing bark.

Other elements in the hoped-for cure of 'lunatics' required them first to be rowed several times around the island, plunged three times into the loch, made to kneel before an altar and then to drink some of the holy well water. Only then did they attach an offering to the oak tree. It was a process to be repeated every day for several weeks. By the 17th century the sacrifice of a bull (formerly quite unconnected with the cure) came to be seen as an essential preliminary (*P.S.A.S.* vol. IV. 253 et seq.; Dixon 1886. 150-153).

Ross (to whom they were referred) have not survived, so we do not know the sequel — if there was one. But future generations are surely indebted to the presbytery clerk for recording so much detail ‘with the relish of an antiquary’, as well as with ‘indications of horror at the darkness of superstition’ (Mackay 1896. xxxvii, 280-2, 287).

The Return (Again) Of Episocacy

After Cromwell’s usurpation (which incidentally brought General Monck with an army into the fastnesses of Kintail), episcopacy was re-established at the Restoration of Charles II. The bishop, archdeacon and others figure in the presbytery records, but there is little other sign of change, at least in the west. Of one minister (Roderick Mackenzie, son of a small laird near Dingwall), a parish historian once wrote: ‘When he came to Gairloch, Presbyterianism ruled; when Episcopacy was established in 1660, he conformed; and when the Revolution put an end to Episcopacy, he became a Presbyterian again’ (Dixon 1886. 65; *Fasti*. VII. 146).

References to the western parishes are fewer after the Restoration. In 1665 the minister of Lochbroom (Murdoch Mackenzie, younger brother of Gairloch’s ‘vicar of Bray’), feels ‘constrained to leave his ministry, for want of maintenance’ — his kirk is unthatched, and he has nowhere convenient to preach. On both counts he is referred to the Bishop and Synod — and as he is still here in 1681 we can only hope that conditions had improved. The old practice of bull-sacrifice in Loch Maree emerges again in 1678, when a Gairloch family tried to cure an ailing wife and mother; but the accused failed again and again to appear. Ministers from ‘highland’ parishes were sometimes excused from attending Presbyterian meetings at Dingwall, and some form of ecclesiastical devolution seems to have been tried out; but such expedients were soon overtaken by much wider changes (Mackay 1896. 292, 309, 323, 326; Craven 1886. 64, 66).

AFTER THE REVOLUTION: 1690 TO MODERN TIMES

The End of Episcopacy

Following the Revolution of 1688-89, when James VII abdicated and forfeited the throne and William and Mary reigned in his stead, episcopacy was finally dis-established by the Scots Parliament. Prelacy and all superiority of office in the Church were abolished, as being ‘contrary to the inclinations of the generality of the people’, and in its place Presbyterian church government by kirk sessions, presbyteries, provincial synods and general assemblies was ‘by law established’ in 1690 (APS. IX. 40, 133-4).

Many of the episcopalian clergy were deposed, not always on very solid grounds, but a considerable number of the old incumbents remained as *de facto* parish ministers. As well as those who were prepared to take the new

oaths and accept the presbyterian system, many retained their parishes simply because it proved impossible to dispossess them. Whether you read a presbyterian evangelical source like Dr. Kennedy's *Days of the Fathers in Ross-shire*, or Archdeacon Craven's history of the diocese prefaced to the *Journals . . . of Bishop Forbes*, the facts speak for themselves — the five great Wester Ross parishes still had the former episcopalian incumbents as their ministers, and no doubt the people remained loyal to them.

In *Gairloch* Roderick Mackenzie, over 60 years a minister, died 'Father of the Church' in 1710; *Lochalsh's* Finlay Macrae was deposed in 1717; in *Kintail* Donald Macrae, admitted in 1681, refused to conform and survived the Jacobite 'attempt' of 1719; *Lochcarron's* second Alexander Mackenzie died in 1721; and finally, in *Lochbroom*, the last survivor of the old incumbents (John Mackenzie) died in 1723, more than 30 years after the Revolution settlement (Dickinson & Donaldson 1954. 217-19; *Fasti*. VII. 146, 152, 155, 157, 160; VIII. 680-1).

Seaforth had supported King James, and Jacobite and episcopalian sympathies were strong in his 'country'. Mackenzie influence extended from Kintail to Lochbroom, and the chief was active in the cause. Both title and estates were forfeited after 1715, and with failure at Glenshiel there was a possibility that Wester Ross could be opened up to presbyterian influence and loyalty to King George. As has been said, the conflict was not so much between the 'old faith' and the 'new faith', as between two kinds of Protestantism, with political overtones and clan loyalties thrown in. According to Lord Tarbat 'The Presbyterians are the more zealous and hotter; the other [of which he was one] the more numerous and powerful' (MacInnes 1951. 36; Murchison 1967. 113; Dunlop 1967. 69).

A revived system of presbyteries was gradually set up in the North by the 'zealous few' from 1693 onwards. As the old ones died off, attempts were made to settle a new generation of ministers in Wester Ross — at first from an eastern base at Fortrose or Dingwall. In 1711, it was decided to appoint Mr John Morrison, former minister of Boleskine beside Loch Ness, to Gairloch; but when a brother minister was sent to prepare the way for him, he was forcibly prevented from reaching the parish church and kept prisoner at Kinlochewe (where he read the presbyterial edict 'before six or seven persons'). So the formal admission took place in the 'sure presbyterian refuge' of Kiltarn — but when Morrison went to his new parish he too was seized and kept under guard, and Sir John Mackenzie of Coul declared that 'no presbyterian should be settled in any place where his influence extended, unless His Majesty's forces did it by the strong hand'. The minister discreetly withdrew to Sutherland (Craven 1886. 76-7; *Fasti*. VII. 146; Dixon 1886. 65-6).

For the parish of Lochalsh, vacant since 1717, the Presbytery chose Mr John McKilligan of Alness, son of a redoubtable Covenanter. For convenience if not for safety, he was ordained at Dingall, but was never able to live in his parish 'by reason of the troubles in this country', as he told the Presbytery in 1719; he thought Seaforth's old factor (Donald Murchison) had something to do in turning the people against him. Any further attempt

to fill the vacancies by 'dictation' from the east was now abandoned, and replaced by a more localised approach (*Fasti* VII. 155; Craven 1886. 105).

The 18th Century Presbytery of Gairloch

In 1724 four new presbyteries were set up by the General Assembly in the north-west. One, comprising all our six parishes, was to be called the Presbytery of Gairloch; its minutes have survived and were the subject of two long papers by the late Dr. T. M. Murchison, former minister of Glenelg, published by the Gaelic Society of Inverness. On hearing about McKilligan's problems, they decided to go to Lochalsh and see for themselves. But no meeting there was possible, for — as the clerk minuted — 'the Presbytery had been *rabbled* at Lochalsh the 16th of September, being the day appointed for a visitation of the said parish'. They sent McKilligan and another minister to the next General Assembly, with instructions to report their failure 'because of the violent opposition given by the enemies of the present establishment' (Murchison 1967. 11-16).

Ministers from other presbyteries were now brought in to preach, visit, baptise and catechise, with probationers acting as itinerant missionaries. Some were rudely treated, and one 'episcopal intruder' (Alexander Maclellan) arrived to 'divert the people of Lochalsh and Kintail from hearing the brethren sent to supply these parishes'. The Presbytery complained to the factor responsible for uplifting rents on Seaforth's forfeited estate (Edmund Burt), to the sheriff-principal of Ross (Sir Robert Munro of Foulis), and even to General Wade, commander of the forces in Scotland — but I don't know of any action having been taken in Wester Ross by the civil authorities (*ibid.* 117-18; Craven 1886. 110).

By persistence and unflagging zeal, however, in a matter of eight years from its inception, the Presbytery was able to 'plant' all its parishes with ministers — mostly young men in their 30s. There were some stalwarts (still remembered) among them. Besides Gairloch and Lochalsh, the following were settled:

Lochcarron	Aeneas Sage (1726)	minister 43 years
Lochbroom	Archibald Bannatyne (1726)	minister 4 years
Kintail	John Maclean (1730)	minister 44 years
Glenshiel	John Beaton (1730)	minister 51 years
Applecross	Aeneas Macaulay (1731)	minister 29 years

It would be tiresome to recount the difficulties they met with and survived. Two ministers pled with the Presbytery in 1731, after four or five years at their posts, to be allowed to accept calls to other parishes; but Sage (who was one of them) stuck it out for a further 38 years — and an average of over 40 years for four out of these five pioneers says something for their staying powers once planted in Wester Ross (Murchison 1967. 118-32). The first invitation to a minister from within the parish itself came in 1732 from

‘the heritors and elders of Gairloch’, and was backed by a local Mackenzie elder — a sign of growing acceptance, whereas the previous appointments had all been made by the Presbytery itself (ibid. 125).

Coigach apart, Wester Ross was spared some of the worst ‘troubles and confusions’ of 1745-6. William earl of Seaforth had learnt caution since 1715 and 1719, and was released in 1736; his son took no part in the Rising of 1745, and most of the Mackenzies in the west stayed at home (including the lame laird of Gairloch, who had just built himself a new house there) (SP. VII. 512; Warrand 1923-30. IV. 111-12; Mackenzie 1949. 34).

Kintail tradition recalls the quaint story of how John Maclean, dressed in the homely garb of a Highland minister, shielded his loyal Macrae flock from the insults of Lord George Sackville’s government troops: to prove his status, Mr John was ordered to appear before Lord George ‘with his library’, and a successor tells how, by producing a copy of Matthew Poole’s *Annotations upon the Holy Bible*, the minister ‘convinced his lordship that the want of pontifical robes in the Highlands was no obstacle to veracity’. In Lochbroom James Robertson from Atholl — remembered as ‘the strong minister’ (*am ministèir laidir*) — early in 1746 received two notable visitors in his manse, Lord President Forbes and the Earl of Loudon, who had escaped from Inverness when it was taken by the Jacobites and were on their way to Skye. (Robertson earned his *soubriquet* from his tough way with difficult parishioners, and from having saved many lives by putting his shoulder to a weak lintel stone when the roof of the church at Fearn fell (1742) killing 44 worshippers). The minister later went himself to London to plead the cause of some of his ‘deluded’ flock after the Rising had been suppressed (OSA. 522n; NSA. 78-82; *Fasti*. VII. 157-8).

Contributions to Sinclair’s first *Statistical Account* show us some of these parish ministers at work, from the perspective of the 1790s. When Sage went to Lochcarron in 1726, he had to carry arms for his own defence, and after five years admitted that only one family regularly attended his ministry. But he had courage as well as faith and earned the respect, loyalty and affection of his people. His like-minded successor, Lachlan Mackenzie, described by Sage’s grandson as the only minister in the presbytery who ‘preached the gospel with purity and effect’, has a firm place in the evangelical folklore of the Highlands. At a time when drunkenness was all too common at Highland funerals, his people signed a pledge that they would take only one glass at the house of mourning, and none at all in the churchyard (in bad weather another was admissible ‘at a seemingly distance’). ‘The people seem to have a strong attachment to religion’, wrote Mr Lachlan, ‘and yet they would be the better for a little more’. He comments on the belief in his and other parishes that a ‘popish priest’ could cast out devils and cure madness, while presbyterian clergy had no such power (OSA. 573-5; Murchison 1967. 131; Sage (1840) 1975. ch. 2).

The belief that baptism was necessary for salvation long persisted in the Highlands, and even some who did not grudge paying the shilling registration fee imposed by the presbytery in 1778, might seek baptism for their children from the nearest priest. A Catholic mission had been established at

Dornie by Alexander Macrae (son of the last episcopal minister of Dingwall), and this is said to be one reason for a 'landslide to Rome' in Kintail, where several hundred converts were reported (*Fasti*. VII. 34; *OSA*. 528-9n; Maclean 1931. 232; Ritchie 1927. 236).

Emigration, Education and Communications

The ministers of this far-flung presbytery were not concerned solely with the spiritual welfare of their people, however.

Some deplored the tide of emigration which was beginning to strip the glens; a minister of Applecross was released in 1774 to go to America to fix a place for his emigrating parishioners to settle in; his successor complained in his published account of 'landlord oppression', and called for a stop to the 'sheep traffic' and the introduction of manufactures. Where hundreds of people could formerly be seen, he wrote, 'no human faces are now to be met with, except a shepherd attended by his dog'. The Kintail and Glenshiel folk might be 'extravagant' in their attachment to Seaforth, who ruled his restored estates from Brahan (when not in London as MP, or in Barbados as governor); but they were confident that he at least would 'never prefer sheep to men' (*OSA*. 408, 409, 524, 562; *Fasti*. VII. 144-5).

On the matter of communications, Kintail's minister noted that 'till of late' the maxim 'the more inaccessible, the more secure' had led to a strong aversion to roads. But now there was a demand for them, and the building of a good road from Dingwall to Ullapool led to a suggestion from Lochbroom that 'perhaps a few cross roads would also be proper' — for instance, if one from Ullapool to Poolewe were extended to Lochcarron 'an easy communication would be opened from one parish to another' (a minister of Lochalsh had been drowned in 1790 going by sea from his parish to Gruinard). Nor was travel within the parishes easy — a paper of 1709 giving a graphic account of the associated difficulties. The minister of Applecross officiated once a quarter in the districts of Lochs and Torridon and once a month at Kishorn, and there were six burial places apart from the parish churchyard; Gairloch had three additional places of worship (at Kinlochewe, chapel of Sand (Udrigil), and the croft of Tollie at Poolewe); and in Lochbroom Dr. Thomas Ross has seven public burying grounds in his parish in addition to eight places where he thought it his duty to preach, though not obliged to do so (*OSA*. 292, 402, 521, 558, 566-8; *NSA*. 73; *Fasti*. VII. 155; Dixon 1886. 70).

It should be noted, moreover, that the church's work in the western parishes included the difficult task of establishing schools in the area. To do justice to the subject would unduly lengthen this paper, but it is only right to refer to the importance that church courts attached to the spread of education, and to the efforts made to provide for it by the parish ministers.

The 'Parliamentary' or 'Telford' Churches

Wester Ross, with its large parishes, was helped very much by an important

government step taken ‘for the advancement of religion in the Highlands of Scotland’. Whilst several old parish churches were replaced in the first half of the 19th century — for instance Lochbroom 1817, Applecross 1817, Lochcarron ca. 1840 — in 1823 a grant of £50,000 was voted by parliament for building 42 new churches and paying for their ministers, in most cases also providing a manse. Four of these were in Wester Ross — Plockton (in Lochalsh parish) and Shieldaig (Applecross) both built in 1827, Poolewe (Gairloch) in 1828, and Ullapool (Lochbroom) in 1829 [Fig. 6.1] (see also Beaton, this volume). They are known as ‘parliamentary’ churches, or sometimes ‘Telford churches’. The basic plans and specifications, although actually drawn up by the Inverness architect James Smith, were approved by Telford, and the work carried out under the supervision of men like Joseph Mitchell, who had worked for Telford on the Highland roads and bridges. How useful these churches were is illustrated by the fact that exactly half the population of Gairloch parish was connected with the new church at Poolewe (Maclean 1889; *NSA*. 98, 104; Groome 1901. 1093, 1337, 1595).

Disruption and Reunion

The Disruption of 1843, which split the Church of Scotland in two, affected the religious life of Ross-shire deeply. The conflicting rights of patrons and congregations in the appointment of ministers led to controversy and litigation in the civil courts. In Wester Ross, it is true, the only parish minister to leave ‘the Establishment’ and join the new Free Church was the scholarly Dr. Thomas Ross of Lochbroom (and formerly of Rotterdam); but in three out of four of the parliamentary churches the minister ‘came out’ (the exception being Ullapool). Dr. Ross had foreseen the inevitable well in advance, and was followed by his people ‘almost to a man’ (he died soon afterwards); and the whole or most of the *congregations* of Applecross, Gairloch and Lochcarron also joined the Free Church. A young man from Lochcarron, Alexander MacColl, took charge of three parishes until new ministers were settled (he ended his days as Free Church minister of Lochalsh) (Brown 1893. 105; Ewing 1914. I. 217, II. 228-9).

New churches and meeting-houses were built wherever sites could be obtained — the laird and his family in Gairloch joined the Free Church, so there would be no problem there; but the Mackenzie proprietor of Shieldaig, though a near relative of the minister, refused a site and forbade his tenants to give lodging to any Free Church minister — presumably the kind of circumstance which produced the ‘preaching caves’ of Wester Ross (such as those between First Coast and Sand). In 1893, however, a substantial number of members from Lochbroom, Shieldaig and Lochcarron left the Free Church to join the Free Presbyterians (Mackenzie 1949. 156; Ewing 1914. I. 237, II. 228-9; Barnett 1930. 124-7) [Figs. 6.6, 6.8].

Though seriously weakened, the ‘auld kirk’ maintained its ministry in the parishes. When attempts to heal the old divisions were made, in the



Fig. 6.6 Free Church of Scotland, Achiltibuie, 1992. The slate roof was replaced with blue corrugated asbestos ca. 1990, when other repairs were made.



Fig. 6.7 The former Free Church Manse, Achiltibuie, 1992. A modern bungalow adjacent to the Church, now serves as a manse.



Fig. 6.8 The former Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, Achiltibuie, built of corrugated iron in the 1890s. Latterly a craft workshop, gallery and hay store. 1992.

Highlands particularly many congregations felt obliged to decline entering the union between the Free Church and the United Presbyterian Church in 1900, and also the larger union of the Church of Scotland and United Free Church in 1929. Thus there are still three distinct presbyterian denominations represented in Wester Ross (Church of Scotland, Free Church, and Free Presbyterian). In addition, there are Scottish Episcopal Church congregations and services by resident or visiting clergy, and a Roman Catholic priest and chapel at Dornie in Kintail.

The civil parish has for long been superseded as a unit of local government, and its boundaries have disappeared from official maps. And so also, it may be said, as each branch of the Christian Church tries to meet the needs of a shifting population and the changing ways of life which mark the later years of the 20th century, the ecclesiastical parish is not always seen as the key to current church history, as it was in the past.

Acknowledgement

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