

# THE BAPTISTS OF THE ROSS OF MULL: EVANGELICAL EXPERIENCE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN A WEST HIGHLAND COMMUNITY

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In December 1845, Alexander Grant, pastor of the Baptist church at Tobermory in the island of Mull, prepared to write his quarterly dispatch for the Baptist Home Missionary Society for Scotland. Perhaps because he was conscious that his dispatch would be published in the Society's Report for 1846, he realised that he himself would soon complete twenty-five years in Mull, where he had laboured as a missionary since 1821. As his pen scratched its way across the paper, he found himself in a mood for reflecting on the ways of God, and, as he wrote, he provided a brief sketch of the growth of Baptist witness in the island, with special reference to the church which was now meeting at Ardalanish in the Ross:

I spent the first Sabbath [in December] with the church at Penmore, and the church at Ross. I was much comforted and encouraged by seeing their order and steadfastness in the faith. My mind was naturally led to look to former times. I remember when there was not only no Baptist church, but no baptized individual in any part of Mull. This was in the year 1821. I remember afterwards, when the church at Ross consisted of seven or eight despised believers, scoffed at by almost all the rest of the people. I saw them, after getting a little more numerous, driven out of the meeting-house which [they] themselves, with the help of a few others, had built entirely at their own expense, after occupying it seven years. I saw them for several years worshipping on the sea shore, exposed to all weathers, with no other shelter than a hillock or rock. They have now got a comfortable meeting-house, capable of holding between three and four hundred; and the Sabbath I was there it was nearly filled with serious attentive hearers. On the whole, we have cause to thank God and take courage.

(BHMS Report, 1846, 22-3)

Changed days indeed. As Grant indicates, the Baptist cause in Mull, and especially in the Ross, had shown remarkable advance in those twenty-five years. By 1845 there were two flourishing churches in the island, at Tobermory and Ardalanish; and there was a further 'church' or out-station, now completely forgotten, at Penmore (probably in Mornish, not far from Dervaig). With typical self-effacement, Grant recognised the steadfastness of others, but quietly passed

over his own fundamental role as an itinerant missionary who had planted, strengthened and directed the two main Baptist congregations in the island. He continued to fulfil this role until his death in 1874, at the age of ninety (Yuille, 120).

Alexander Grant came to Mull in a round-about way. He was a native of Kingussie, where there was a small Baptist church, and he was baptised in 1808. He obtained his first employment as a teacher with the Edinburgh Society for the Support of Gaelic Schools. This society had a strong evangelical commitment, and its primary aim was to teach Highlanders to read the Gaelic Bible. Its teachers were to explain the principles of Gaelic reading, but they were forbidden to expound the meaning of the Scriptures, lest they give offence to parish ministers. Grant was posted initially to the island of Shuna (in the parish of Kilbrandon and Kilchattan) in 1819, but by 1821 he was in trouble with the parish minister for his preaching activities, and he was subsequently dismissed from the society. Disheartened, he considered emigrating to North America, but he was prevented from doing so by the generosity of James Alexander Haldane, who gave him financial support to work as a Baptist missionary in Mull. In sending Alexander Grant to Mull, James Haldane acknowledged the importance of having a missionary actually resident in the locality if Baptists were to make a lasting impact on the religious life of the island (EGSS Reports, 1819, 62; 1821, 65; Yuille, 119).

Baptist missionaries were active in the West Highlands from the opening years of the nineteenth century, and, as part of a vigorous home missionary movement, they were particularly concerned to bring the Christian gospel to remote and isolated districts which lacked regular provision by the Established Church. As early as 1812 a pioneering Baptist missionary, Dugald Sinclair of Lochgilphead, preached in various parts of Mull, including the Ross, and he crossed to Iona. Sinclair visited the island periodically thereafter, as did William Tulloch, the Baptist pastor stationed at Blair Atholl, Perthshire. In 1818 Tulloch's preaching attracted a considerable number of hearers, and aroused spiritual concern. Mull was obviously a promising field for Baptist activity, mainly because the provision of ministry by the Established Church was extremely poor. Baptists were well aware that, in the early 1800s, the whole of this large island, with an estimated population of some 10,000, was served by only three parishes. Nevertheless, Baptist missionaries from Lochgilphead and Blair Atholl, who visited the island in the course of preaching tours, could not make a significant contribution to long-term religious provision. They obviously stimulated interest in the Baptist cause, but the task of establishing indigenous churches could not proceed until there was a missionary residing in the locality. Baptists would also have acknowledged the strategic position of Mull relative to the other Inner Hebridean islands, and they would have been aware that, if the cause were established in Mull, they could in time evangelise the adjacent districts. This was certainly what happened after Alexander Grant arrived in the island (Sinclair, 1812, 28; 1814, 7; Thomson, 13-16; Meek, 1987, 1988a).

## Baptisms and Persecutions

Alexander Grant came to Mull at precisely the right time to encourage the growth of Baptist witness. The work of Dugald Sinclair and other Baptist itinerant missionaries was just beginning to bear fruit. In 1820 a young man called Duncan Ferguson (1800-82), the son of Malcolm Ferguson who is said to have been a 'farmer' at Tiraghoill (three miles west of Bunessan), experienced evangelical conversion. He had been roused to consider spiritual matters through an accident in which several of his companions were drowned when their small fishing-boat was overwhelmed by a squall. In 1821 Dugald Sinclair of Lochgilphead was visiting the Ross on one of his tours, and Duncan Ferguson began to attend his meetings. He was evidently captivated by Sinclair's preaching, and when Sinclair sailed on to Colonsay, Ferguson accompanied him as a member of the crew. A Baptist church had already been established in Colonsay about 1814 through Sinclair's ministry, and it was there that Duncan Ferguson was baptised by Sinclair in September 1821. On his return, Duncan Ferguson had the distinction of being the first native-born Baptist in Mull (MacDougall, 141).

Ferguson's example was followed a year later by six or seven young men from the Ross, who were baptised by Dugald Sinclair in their own locality. Among them was a certain Duncan McIntyre, born in Ardalinish in 1778. Along with Duncan Ferguson, McIntyre was soon to become a leader among the Baptists of the Ross (*ibid*; Maclean, 234).

It is perhaps difficult for us today to understand what a bold step was taken by those young men who formed the nucleus of the early Baptist cause in Mull. In the Highlands at that time, the act of throwing in one's lot with the evangelical faith was often regarded with disfavour by those who maintained a loyalty to the prevailing Moderatism of the Established Church. 'Joining the missionaries', as the process was called, marked one out at the very least as an oddity in the community, and perhaps even as a 'radical' who, by implication, challenged the 'normal' order of the nominal devotion to a time-honoured institution. The missionaries who visited the Highlands tended to be seen as somewhat subversive: they generally rejected patronage and all that it stood for, and many (including Baptists) advocated the setting up of independent churches or 'gathered congregations' whose membership was restricted to those who professed saving faith. One very obvious mark of such profession was baptism by immersion, one of the touchstones of Baptist orthodoxy. Since it was administered to believers only, it offered a direct challenge to infant baptism, practised by the Established Church, and those who submitted themselves publicly to being 'dipped' were often ridiculed and mocked. The Gaelic expression of condemnation for those who engaged in such action was that they were *a' cur an suarachas a' chiad bhaistidh* ('despising the first baptism'). Nevertheless, this act may have helped to demonstrate the religious cohesion and social distinctiveness of the new crofting community in the Ross of Mull; as a 'popular' movement, the Baptist

cause stood for independence of action and self-government, and its leaders were drawn from, or were closely identified with, the crofting class.

The first Baptists of the Ross of Mull had to contend with obloquy and derision within the community. They also had to face more destructive forms of opposition, particularly when their numbers grew and they built their first meeting-house. The construction of a meeting-house was a powerful symbol of Baptists' determination to remain in a locality; as a collective effort of devotion, it also helped to cement the bonds between believers, and it underlined their independence of action. We do not know when or where the Baptists of the Ross built their first meeting-house, but Alexander Grant informs us that they occupied it for seven years (perhaps from about 1823 to 1830). They were then driven out of it, and had to worship on the shoreline; this latter point implies that they were apparently meeting below the high-water mark, most probably because they were banned from the land by their feudal superior, the Duke of Argyll, acting through his chamberlain for Mull and Morvern. It seems likely that the first meeting-house was built on the land of a small tenant or crofter who had become a Baptist, and that the landlord or his agent intervened because of alarm at the growing significance and strength of the Baptist cause. Baptists were probably providing religious leadership and reinforcing group solidarity to an unacceptable degree within the emerging crofter class. Oral tradition, current to the present day, relates that, about the same time, the local schoolmaster was evicted from his house when he became a Baptist, and any who should come to his aid were threatened with eviction. Thereafter the schoolmaster held school in a cave on the shoreline, which was also used as a place of worship by the Baptist congregation. It is said that persecution diminished after the death of the chamberlain. By 1838 (and probably by 1835) the Baptists had procured a building in Ardalanish, a community of small tenants or crofters; it was a common dwelling-house situated on the farm of a tenant of the Duke of Argyll. One of the pastors of the church, Duncan McIntyre, had made a transaction with the tenant for using the house free of rent. Matters obviously improved subsequently, since the Baptists built a proper meeting-house, with accommodation for three or four hundred people, at Ardalanish about 1845. The walls of this building can still be seen on the west side of the road to Uisken (BHMS Report, 1846, 22-3; Royal Commission on Religious Instruction, Scotland, Fourth Report, 84-5).

Although persecution by people and landowners must have been difficult to bear, the Baptists in the Ross were not deterred from their main task of evangelisation. By 1822 Duncan Ferguson had gone to Ardnamurchan as a teacher, probably with the Edinburgh Society for the Support of Gaelic Schools, and in 1824 Duncan MacDougall, a native of Brolas, whose people came to be closely connected with the Baptists of the Ross, was residing in Tiree as a schoolmaster with the same society. Here we can undoubtedly see the influence of Alexander Grant, not least because Ferguson and MacDougall became preachers as well as teachers. Under Grant's watchful eye, MacDougall became the founder and first pastor of Tiree Baptist

Church (1838), and Ferguson laboured in both Ardnamurchan and Arisaig. Although Ferguson did not found a church, the Baptist cause gained much support in Ardnamurchan, and the district was regularly visited by Mull pastors until the early twentieth century (MacDougall, 140-2; Meek, 1988b, 5-10).

### **Revivals and Removals**

By 1828 there were still only ten Baptists in the Ross of Mull. However, in the period from 1830 to 1846, this small group experienced remarkable growth, and it was transformed from an insignificant minority to a church which had the backing of a very high proportion of the ordinary people of the community. By 1844 the church in the Ross had 73 members, and this number was maintained until 1846. Thereafter the church experienced a sharp decline to about 20 members by the mid-1850s.

The main factor in the growth of the Baptist body in the Ross was the spiritual movement known generally as 'revival' or 'awakening'. In the early 1830s a movement of some intensity began to appear in the island, and similar movements are detectable in other Baptist churches, noticeably at Lochgilphead and at Grantown-on-Spey. Religious interest was heightened generally in Britain in 1832, at the time of a cholera epidemic which was interpreted by some Christian people as God's judgement on their spiritual lethargy. The movement was, however, making a noticeable impact on Mull as early as 1830-31, and was probably one of the considerations which led to the constitution of the island's first Baptist church, that at Tobermory, in December 1830. Until that year there had been some uncertainty about maintaining Alexander Grant at Tobermory, but in 1832 he was ordained as pastor of the church, which was in a flourishing condition. Its membership had risen to 52, a gain of 21 on the previous year. As the Tobermory church was at that point the only formally constituted Baptist church in Mull, the Baptists of the Ross were included on its membership roll, so that they are represented in the figure of 52. The figure also includes the small representation of Baptists found in Tiree and Ardnamurchan, since Alexander Grant had pastoral oversight of these areas (BHMS Reports 1829, 31-3; 1831, 11-12; 1832, 12-13; 1833, 15; Meek, 1988b, 4).

There is good reason to suppose that the Ross of Mull contributed much of the growth reflected in the figures of the Tobermory church. Baptismal services attracting large numbers of curious onlookers were taking place in the Ross by 1832. In June 1832, for example, six young people were baptised at an open-air baptismal service which attracted 300 to 400 attenders who were mainly young persons. The service was conducted by Alexander Grant, who noted:

We afterwards met in a house, when thirty members, consisting of all the friends in Ross, and a few from Tiree, united in commemorating the dying love of Jesus [i.e., participated in the Lord's Supper].

(Ibid., 1832, 12-13)

As the Baptist body in the Ross grew, it was soon considered practicable to give it recognition as a properly constituted church, with its own pastors or elders. Thus in May 1835, as Alexander Grant records,

... it was judged proper that the brethren in Ross should meet as a church of Christ; and brethren Duncan McIntyre and Duncan Ferguson were unanimously chosen to be their elders. They were ordained on Monday May 31, with fasting, prayer and the laying on of hands.

(Ibid., 1836, 11-13)

In ordaining two pastors simultaneously, the church in the Ross was unique as a Baptist church in the West Highlands, since all of the other churches operated under the leadership of a single pastor, whose labours in remote areas were often eased by employing lay assistants. In 1842 the church acquired a third pastor, Charles Macquarie, a merchant in Bunessan. This pattern of ministry, with a plurality of elders, was known elsewhere in Scotland, but it was characteristic of the older body of Baptists, namely the Scotch Baptists, who emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century. It is fascinating to note that one of the principal founders of this earlier movement, Archibald McLean, was descended from the Brolas family, and the Baptists of the Ross may have been aware of the polity followed by his churches. On the other hand, the new church may have been responding to the immediate needs of a growing cause, recognising at the outset that one ordained pastor was insufficient to look after the various groups of Baptist believers who were emerging in far-flung districts of the Ross and other parts of Mull. Duncan Ferguson was maintained by the Baptist Home Missionary Society for Scotland, but Duncan McIntyre and Charles Macquarie appear to have supported themselves by means of their secular employments, as crofter and merchant respectively. The latter arrangement was not uncommon among Baptists, especially those of the earlier Scotch Baptist following (Yuille, 113; DNB, XII, 644; Murray, 21-4).

The revival experienced in those years touched several areas of Mull close to the Ross. For example, Iona was visited frequently by the Baptist missionaries, and the population showed considerable interest in their message; in 1838 the first public baptism in Iona, according to Baptist principles, took place, and by 1846 Duncan Ferguson was able to report that the people of Iona were more inclined to listen to him than they had been in the previous four years (BHMS Reports, 1839, 7-8; 1846, 24-5). Nevertheless, only three or four people from Iona became members of the Baptist church in the Ross, and one of them, Archibald MacDonald, was so conspicuous that he was labelled 'Am Baisteach' ('The Baptist') (MacArthur, 230-3). Another district visited by Ferguson and his colleagues was Torosay, in the south-east of Mull, at a very considerable distance from the Ross. In 1844-45 nine people were baptised there, and Duncan Ferguson ministered in the area for three weeks (BHMS Reports, 1845, 22). At Penmore, too, in the north-west of the island, a body of Baptists was meeting regularly, and was referred to by Alexander Grant as a

'church', although it was probably no more than a flourishing out-station. Church attendance and membership at Tobermory and Ardalanish were increasing markedly by the 1840s. In 1844 Alexander Grant reported that in June of the previous year he had preached to the largest congregations he had ever seen in Mull:

The meeting-house could not have contained more than one-third of the people, but the day was very favourable, and they sat in the field very comfortably, and listened with great attention.

(Ibid., 1844, 9-12)

This resulted in the building of a new meeting-house at Ardalanish in 1845. It was obviously a boom-time for the Baptists of the Ross.

The boom-time was, however, of comparatively short duration. In 1846 the Highlands and Islands were engulfed by the major subsistence crisis known as the Potato Famine, which struck at the heart of communities of crofters and cottars. In the Ross of Mull, the pattern of population growth during the first three decades of the nineteenth century was similar to that of other parts of the Inner Hebrides; the 'kelp economy' encouraged the growth of population and the emergence of crofting. In some areas, like the Ross, there was a high proportion of landless cottars who had an even less secure livelihood than the crofters. The Baptists of the Ross of Mull clearly drew their strongest support from the vulnerable crofter and cottar classes, and there can be little doubt that the emergence of the Baptist cause in the district was linked closely to the spiritual development and social aspirations of these groups. On the whole, the economic status of the majority of its supporters was very low, and it is stated in the 1926 account of the church (Yuille, 113) that it was severely depleted when the Duke of Argyll began to evict the poorer crofters from his estates in the Ross. In 1847 the Argyll estate served summonses of removal on 12 families at Shiaba, and in 1849-51 129 summonses of removal were granted against tenants in the parish of Kilfinichen and Kilvickeon, the total number of summonses in the Ross for these years being 154 (Devine, 330-1). As we shall see in the case of Mrs Mary MacDonald, the surviving evidence, scarce though it is, shows clear connections between Baptist families and the evicted crofters. In this period, however, the evictions were part of a wider pattern of social displacement, and were not aimed specifically at those holding Baptist beliefs. It was a matter of social class rather than religious persuasion.

The displacement of crofters and cottars in the years after 1846 swelled the current of emigration from Mull, which had already become noticeable after 1836. Emigrant ships took their poverty-stricken cargoes to Canada and Australia. Some of the Mull Baptists reach Greenock Township, Bruce Co., Ontario, where one gravestone records that Anne MacKinnon (died 1860) had joined the Baptists of the Ross in 1845. Among the emigrants to Australia were the deacons of the church in the Ross, who left their native district about 1850. The church was thus deprived of the office-

bearers who were next in rank to its pastors, and who were probably of a social standing slightly higher than that of the general membership. It was a devastating blow, and Duncan McIntyre, formerly one of the pastors of the church, was moved to commemorate the event in a Gaelic song which catches the poignancy of the occasion:

Gun d'fhalbh sibh uainn, cuid gu tuath 's Astràilia,  
'S gun tug sud fuar-dhealt mun cuairt 'nar caraibh-ne;  
Chan eil ar n-òrdugh mar bha e roimhe seo,  
'S luchd-éisdeachd féin 'sann tha iad ro-thearc againn.

Ged tha sinne brònach 'nur déidh 'san fhearann seo,  
Gur h-e mo dhòchas gu mór 's mo bharail e  
Gun dèan sibh lòchrain 'san àit an deachaidh sibh,  
'S mar bhail' air sliabh a bhios fhathast ri fhaicinn ann.

(‘You have gone from us, some of you to the north of Australia [i.e. the north of New South Wales], and that has caused mildew to come upon us; our church order is not as it was before now, and even our hearers have grown very scarce.

‘Although we are sad remaining behind in this land, it is my great hope and my opinion that you will be as lights in the place to which you have gone, and that you will be like a city set on a hill, which will yet be visible there.’)

(Mac-an-t-Saoir, 22)

By now McIntyre himself was afflicted with rheumatism, which had caused him to relinquish the joint pastorate of the church in 1845. Rheumatism was one of the reasons which prevented him from following the emigrants to Canada:

Nam bithinn-s' òg mar a bha mi roimhe seo,  
'S mo bhuill an òrdugh gu còmhnard, cothromach,  
Bhiodh m'inntinn deònach bhith thall an Canada,  
Far an éisd an sluagh ris an t-soisgeul bheannaichte.

(‘If I were young as I once was, and my limbs co-ordinating in a smooth, even manner, my mind would desire to be over yonder in Canada, where the people listen to the blessed gospel.’)

(Ibid., 23)

The church had reached such a parlous state by 1854 that the Baptist Home Missionary Society for Scotland was considering the possibility of transferring Duncan Ferguson to the station in Broadford, Skye. Once again, however, poor health intervened, since Ferguson was thought to be too weak to undertake such an arduous assignment (BHMS Report, 1855, 7-8).

The church in the Ross had fallen on extremely hard times. Reports from Duncan Ferguson and Alexander Grant in the mid-century have an elegiac tone, as they recollect past days and look across the oceans to the new homelands of their former flock (Meek 1988c, 32). As people continued to migrate from the area, church membership dropped as low as 16 in 1869. With the passing of Charles Macquarie (Snr) in 1861, the church lost a second member of its pastoral team, and Duncan Ferguson was left to struggle on, with the support of Alexander Grant of Tobermory. It might have seemed that the church would never recover from the devastation caused by the Potato Famine. Yet in 1875-76 it was revitalised by another revival, which increased its membership to 68. This revival was influenced by events in Tiree, where there had been a dramatic spiritual movement in 1874-75. Charles Macquarie (Jnr) crossed to Tiree to preach at the revival, and doubtless brought the impulses back to the Ross (Meek, 1988b, 16-20). With this impetus, the church faced the end of the century with some vigour, and moved its meeting-house from Ardalanish to Buessan, where a fine new chapel was built in 1891. Yet, this too was probably a reflection of declining fortunes, since the countryside had been depopulated to a significant degree, and Buessan Baptist Church, as it then became, sought support closer to the main village. It was a tactic which Baptists had already employed in other parts of the Highlands as demographic changes took place (Membership Statistics, *Scottish Baptist Year-book*, 1869, 1876; Brown, 141).

### Families of Faith

The Baptist church in the Ross of Mull could not have survived the great social upheavals of the nineteenth century had it not been for the resilience of its leadership and the key role played by certain families who remained in the district and consistently maintained the work. One of the fascinating features of the evidence surviving for this church is that it allows us to observe the contribution of three families – the Fergusons, the MacDougalls and the Macquaries – whose commitment to Baptist principles lay at the heart of the witness in the Ross of Mull and the Inner Hebrides. Through these families we can see how the church in the Ross was part of an evangelical Inner Hebridean culture-zone, which shared a rich tradition of teaching, preaching and poetry. Contacts were maintained not only by itinerating preachers, but also by the inter-island travels of the crofting population. The islanders of Tiree, for example, had no local peat, and they regularly crossed the water to cut peat in the Ross. In the 1820s and 1830s they had access to the Mull peat-banks through a croft owned by a certain Malcolm Ferguson of Tiraghoill (Mull and Tiree Accounts and Rentals).

The Fergusons, as we noted earlier, were classed as small farmers (in effect, crofters) at Tiraghoill, and they display pre-eminently those qualities of preaching and teaching which are important in the leadership of churches. Duncan Ferguson's ministry in the Baptist church in the Ross spanned some forty years, and he died in 1882. Such was his prominence that at some point his portrait was executed in oils; it

shows him in his long, white wig, which protected him from the extremes of Highland weather when preaching in the open air. His brother, Angus, born about 1810, had similar gifts, and in 1836 he became the pastor of the Baptist church in Uig, Skye, where he served until his death, as a result of a chill, in 1842. Both Duncan and Angus itinerated throughout the Inner Hebrides (MacDougall, 140-2; BHMS Reports, 1836, 22-3; 1843, 8-9).

Preaching and poetry were the hallmarks of the MacLucas or MacDougall family, who originated in Brolas, on the eastern edge of the Ross. The best-known member of this family is Mrs Mary MacDonald, Bean Néill 'Ic Lachainn, who composed the hymn *Leanabh an Aigh* which is now familiar throughout the world as 'Child in a Manger', a somewhat free translation by Lachlan MacBean. Mary moved from Brolas to the townships of Shiaba and Ardalanish, and she and her family were evicted from their holding in Ardalanish, probably at the time of the Potato Famine. They re-settled in Ardtun, where Mary ended her days. Her gift for poetry was shared by her brother, Duncan, who went to Tìree in 1824 as a Gaelic schoolmaster, and became the founder of Tìree Baptist Church. Both Duncan and Mary were wholly familiar with the secular tradition of Gaelic poetry, and they retained a warm, creative affection for it alongside their deep evangelical commitment (*Tocher*, 24 (1975), 304-5, 312; Meek, 1988b, 5-10, 24-9).

Duncan and Mary MacDougall represent the predominant crofter and cottar classes in the social composition of the church in the Ross; indeed, Duncan was gathering kelp in Oronsay at the time of his conversion. Yet we need to remind ourselves that the Baptist cause was not entirely the monopoly of these groups. This point is exemplified by the Macquarie family from Bunessan, who supplied both preachers and patrons for the church. Charles Maquarie (Snr), who became one of the three pastors of the church in 1842, and held office until his death in 1861, was a merchant in Bunessan. His father, Lachlan Macquarie, who died in 1821, was a Captain in the 86th Regiment. Charles Maquarie (Snr) composed religious poetry, and published a volume of verse in 1859-60. He found time to itinerate widely, accompanying other Baptist missionaries on their preaching tours. His example was followed by his son, Charles Maquarie (Jnr), known as 'Teàrlach Og', who was also a noted lay preacher, and treasurer of the church in the Ross for more than fifty years. When he died at the age of eighty-eight in 1916, he was described as one who 'to the end carried the love and esteem of the whole community'. His wife, Isabella Cowan Morrison, was equally active in the church, teaching in the Sunday School, and directing various organisations (Band of Hope, Christian Endeavour). According to her obituary, 'it was largely owing to her energy that the beautiful new chapel was built in the village' (Yuille, 113-4; Brown, 141; Maclean, 282-3).

### **Winds of Change**

By the opening years of the twentieth century, it is evident that the church in the

Ross was becoming increasingly dependent on outside support for the maintenance of the work. Indeed, we can see the signs of this change after the retirement of Duncan Ferguson in 1877. The subsequent pastors of the church were predominantly men from the island of Tiree, where the Baptist cause was still in extremely good heart; Allan MacDougall (1878-85), Alexander Campbell Brown (1892-1902), Archibald MacDonald (1906-12), Alexander MacArthur (1919-23) and Dugald Lamont (1928-30). However, the church was strong enough to produce two men for the Baptist ministry in this period: Francis William Taylor, a native of Ardchrishinish, who served in the Bunessan church (1913-20), as well as in Islay, Skye and Tiree, and Neil D. Graham, a native of Bunessan, who began and ended his brief ministry in Colonsay (1926-28). Almost all of the pastors of the Ross church until 1930 were Gaelic-speaking. After 1930, the church was served mainly by men who spoke only English. This transition, from Gaelic-speaking ministers to those with no Gaelic, indicated that the pool of Gaelic pastors in the Baptist churches of the West Highlands was coming very close to exhaustion, and the church had to rely on the services of men from the Lowlands. It was a pattern which was to spread to the other island churches, including Tiree, within a generation (Meek, 1988a, 297-301; 1988b, 21-3, 35-8; BHMS Reports, 1900-71).

Decline in the availability of Gaelic-speaking pastors was accompanied by decline in attendance at church services, especially during and after the Second World War. At the root of the problem lay the slow attrition caused by rural depopulation, and probably growing disillusionment with the Christian faith more generally, as a result of the war. In 1942 the church at Bunessan was linked with that at Tobermory for its pastoral supply, and in 1954 both churches were put under the care of the pastor of Oban Baptist Church. In 1964 the Tobermory church was closed, and the Bunessan church struggled on, its ministry supplied by preachers on holiday in the area, and by regular visits from the Oban pastor. Gradually, however, the vitality of the church declined, its core diminished in size, and eventually it ceased to be an integral part of its community. Occasional ministry from Oban, Lochgilphead or Glasgow, did little to halt its demise.

At present, the Bunessan chapel is the main building of what is now called Mull Baptist Church. Since 1986 it has been refurbished and modernised. Its role has been revitalised through the efforts and leadership of men and women who have come to Mull from the mainland, and who have bought permanent homes in the island. The church therefore owes its continuing existence, and in truth its new beginning, to the enterprise of an incoming, non-Gaelic-speaking population.

## **Conclusion**

The Baptist chapel which stands today in the village of Bunessan is a fitting testimony to several generations of men and women who, in difficult circumstances, struggled to maintain an evangelical Christian witness in a remote part of the West

Highlands. The pattern of that witness shows that the church in the Ross functioned initially on the 'Gaelic indigenised model' for Baptist churches in the Highlands. When the evangelical faith was brought to the district by missionaries, it became indigenised in the community, and was supported by men and women from that community, to the extent that for most of the nineteenth century the church was pastored by local men. The life of the church was best maintained in the nineteenth century, when Gaelic culture and the crofting community were relatively strong (Meek, 1989). The church had close links with other localities, such as Tìree, which had a similar social, cultural and economic structure. It was a means of spreading the evangelical faith, in its Baptist form, to these areas, and, until the early twentieth century, it supplied pastors for several of the other island churches.

The church in the Ross experienced growth of its membership in times of revival or spiritual awakening, most noticeably in the decade before the Potato Famine of 1846. This coincided with a period of population growth in the locality, when the economy of the community was sufficiently strong to maintain the people. Social instability and crop failures are, nevertheless, attested from 1836, and there may have been a cumulative awareness that the community was outstripping its resources. The famine could be seen as the culmination of a process of progressive impoverishment, although the potato blight, which brought about the final collapse, was an event which happened without warning. How should the revival in the church be viewed within this social context?

It needs to be emphasised that this revival movement owed its origin to the deep, Christocentric spirituality and dedicated labours of preachers whose devotion was underlined by their tenacity in the face of initial persecution. Such devotion would have 'rubbed off' on their congregations, and, within the relatively confined area of the Ross of Mull, it could, with time, permeate the community. The people lived close to the edge of distress, and spiritual response must always have been sharpened by an awareness of life's uncertainties. Social circumstances are thus to be seen as the catalysts, and not the first cause, in revivals (Meek, 1988c). The evidence from Mull, together with that from Tìree (Meek, 1988b, 5-10), suggests that revival movements in these West Highland churches were most likely to emerge when society was under stress, but still sufficiently robust to allow the continuation of an increasingly precarious lifestyle. In relative terms, however, those were the 'good' years, and it is significant that the first major revivals occurred before, not after, the Potato Famine.

It is thus possible to argue negatively that the movements were encouraged by a sense of impending cataclysm. This involves a considerable degree of hindsight, since we are unable to know what might have happened if the famine had not occurred: the revivals could have continued for several more years. On the other hand, the revivals could be viewed positively as an expression of the growing consolidation of the crofting community, which needed to define and defend itself in spiritual as well as social terms. The Mull leaders, such as Ferguson and McIntyre, who combined

crofting and preaching, would have been examples of this kind of self-definition. Deep spirituality strengthened group solidarity and brought optimism in the face of harsh circumstances. Severe circumstances could, however, overwhelm the whole community. In the event, the major dislocation caused by the famine removed people, halted the revival movements and destroyed temporarily the optimism of the remaining members of the Mull church. Revival appeared again in the Ross of Mull only in the mid-1870s, when the worst phase of emigration had passed, and when, one supposes, a more optimistic view of life had emerged. After this wave of revival the renewed vigour of the church was slowly sapped by a steady exodus to the Lowland towns and cities.

The gradual decline of the Baptist cause in the Ross of Mull, as in Tiree, has occurred mainly since 1900, as depopulation has taken place and the community has become progressively less self-sufficient, exporting its young people to find employment on the mainland and importing new lifestyles. It is probably significant that the Bunessan church has experienced few, if any, revivals in the twentieth century, whereas the church in Tiree was reinvigorated by revivals until the eve of the Second World War (Meek, 1988b, 30-40). In Tiree the resilience of the traditional community maintained a tense equilibrium between attrition and preservation. The community in the Ross had been opened more fully to the outside world, and the remaining embers of revival-based spirituality had been, to a large extent, extinguished.

The overall pattern demonstrates that Baptists in Mull owed their expansion, and eventually their decline, to their deep desire to take the Christian gospel to the most vulnerable classes in society. Their identity with these classes has perhaps made it more difficult for them to find an appropriate context for effective ministry in the period since 1945. In recent years the crippling effects of retrenchment and prolonged maintenance, at various levels, have reached the heart of the Bunessan church. It is only since 1986, when leadership has passed to an incoming group of people, that it has found a new identity, more in tune with the modern society of Mull. In all of this, the history of the church in the Ross is no more and no less than a picture in miniature of the many changes that have occurred in its own community and in that of the Inner Hebrides since 1800.

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I wish to dedicate this paper to the memory of the Rev. Neil Dan Graham, a native of Bunessan, whose tragic death, while in pastoral charge of Colonsay in 1928, was one of the great losses of leadership sustained by the Baptist churches in the Inner Hebrides in the late 1920s.

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