

Bishop Thomas Nicolson

In 1603 the last pre-Reformation bishop, James Beaton, died in Paris. For the next 92 years the Faith was kept alive by the heroic work of Jesuit missionaries and a very few secular priests.

Thomas Nicolson was born about 1645 at Birkenbog of Protestant parents, Sir Thomas Nicolson of Cluny (later of Kemnay) and Elizabeth Abercromby of Birkenbog, Banffshire. He attended Aberdeen University and for 14 years was a professor at Glasgow University. About 1682 he became a Catholic and went abroad to train for three years at the seminary at Douai and then at Padua. He was ordained in 1686 and returned to Scotland in 1687. After the Revolution of 1688, the Protestant Prince William of Orange and his wife Mary entered the country from Holland and the Catholic King James II fled to France. There followed severe prosecution of Catholics until the end of the century, particularly the capture and banishment of priests. Thomas Nicolson was captured, imprisoned but released (owing to the influence of his brother), provided he left the country and never returned. For the next three years he was chaplain to Benedictine nuns in Dunkirk.

In 1654, *Propaganda Fide* in Rome had given Scotland a prefect-apostolic. Finally in 1694 Rome conceded to the pleading from Scotland for a bishop; Thomas Nicolson was chosen and in 1695 was consecrated in Paris as Bishop of *Peristachium*. He was captured and imprisoned in London on his way back to Scotland, sent back to France, and eventually reached Scotland in May 1697.

He first met with his fellow missionaries at Gordon Castle, Fochabers; then for almost 20 years he travelled throughout Scotland, especially in the Western Highlands, where the majority of the Catholics lived, all Gaelic speakers. He pulled together the different strands of the Mission Jesuits, Benedictines, Dominicans, Vicentians and Irish Franciscans. He drew up his *Statuta Missionis*, which, once accepted, gave stability and order to what had previously been disorganised and chaotic. He also set fixed districts and was responsible for giving priestly facilities to all priests on the Mission, secular and regular.

In 1707, he asked for a co-adjutor bishop, to share the work load throughout Scotland and James Gordon was appointed. Bishop Nicolson made Preshome (between Buckie and Fochabers, Morayshire) his headquarters and James Gordon took over the most arduous journeys, mainly in the west. They were both determined to establish a seminary in Scotland for the training of Scottish priests. There was a desperate need for this, especially in the Catholic Gaelic speaking areas of the west, so badly provided with priests. The responsibility for tackling this problem fell to Bishop Gordon.

Bishop Nicolson was a Jacobite, as were most Catholics, but had taken no active part in the 1715 rising. He saw the establishment of the first small seminary on Eilean Bán on Loch Morar, by Bishop Gordon, its closure after the failed Jacobite Rising of 1715, and the setting up of its successor at Scaln. As a Jacobite, he was arrested and imprisoned at Fochabers, and on his release he returned to Preshome. He died there in 1718, aged 76 and was buried in St Ninian's Cemetery, Tynet.

By Ann Dean

Bishop James Gordon

James Gordon belonged to the Letterfourie family and was born at Glastirum in the Enzie in 1665. He was educated at Louvain and the Scots

College, Paris, and ordained there in 1692. He returned to work as a missionary priest in Banffshire and was also the procurator of the Mission. Bishop Nicolson sent him to Rome to assist William Leslie, the Roman Agent, working

there at the same time on Bishop Nicholson's *Statuta*, preparing them for submission to Propaganda in 1703. He was consecrated in 1706 at Montefiascone, north of Rome, and returned to Scotland with Bishop Nicholson's approved *Statuta* which were distributed to the clergy.

In 1707, while Bishop Nicholson made a tour of the lowlands, Bishop Gordon made his first Visitation of the Highlands. He utterly exhausted himself on his first tour when he confirmed over 2200 people. In 1708 he visited Angus, Perthshire, the Lothians, Nithsdale and Galloway.

Both bishops shared the view that the most pressing need for Scotland was the setting up of a seminary for preparing boys for the colleges abroad and for enabling others to be ordained at home. To them both it seemed that by the year 1714 it was safe enough to do so. During Bishop Gordon's Journey to the West that year, he set up a small seminary on Eilean Bán, an island in Loch Morar, with seven boys and George Innes, the priest in charge.

Bishop Gordon, although an active Jacobite, did not approve of the 1715 rising and its failure only resulted in an outburst of Protestant fanaticism and greater persecution. As a result he was forced to close the seminary on Loch Morar. In 1716 he found a new and safer home for the seminary at Scalán, in a turf hut where John Gordon, priest of Glenlivet, was hiding. The priest was persuaded to move to Mortlach, Huntly and the boys from the west, Hugh Macdonald one of them and their Master George Innes moved in.

At the time of Bishop Nicholson's death in 1718, Bishop Gordon was aged 54 and applied to Rome for a co-adjutor to assist him. In 1720, John Wallace, a convert and then already 60, was consecrated by Bishop Gordon in Edinburgh. John Wallace was given charge of the Southern Lowlands, everywhere else, mainly the Highlands, still the responsibility of Bishop Gordon. He loved Scalán, visiting it in the summer months; in 1722 he drew up his "few short rules" for the students and in 1725 ordained Hugh Macdonald and George J. Gordon there.

After another gruelling visitation to the Highlands, in 1726 he asked for Scotland to be divided into two vicariates or districts, Lowland and Highlands, with a Gaelic speaking bishop for the Highlands and Islands. This was granted and, eventually, Hugh Macdonald was consecrated as Bishop of the Highland Vicar. The aged co-adjutor bishop John Wallace died in 1733; his place filled by Alexander Smith, yet another priest from The Enzie, consecrated in Edinburgh in 1735.

Bishop Gordon was beset by many problems during his time as bishop, not only from the continual pressure he lived under trying to supply districts with priests he did not have and from lack of funds to pay his priests, but also from persecution, from Jacobite intrigues in which he was involved, and bitterest of all, from the in-fighting among his priests and their lack of loyalty to him, who accused him and many others on the Mission of being 'Jansenists'.

Jansenism was a movement among some very pious Catholics that placed a strong emphasis on personal unworthiness, the importance of frequent use of the Sacrament of Penance and infrequent recourse of the Sacrament of Holy Communion. It divided the clergy into roughly two parties, those Rome trained anti-Jansenists and those trained at Paris Jansenists, Highland versus lowland, and Regular versus Secular. Personal vendettas and issues of Church doctrine and church government were all intertwined in the problem—'schisms and most pernicious and scandalous division', as it was described by one priest on the Mission.

Between 1738 and 1746 Bishop Gordon continued to make visitations in the Lowland District. He arranged in 1738 to replace the original huts at Scalán with a decent house and bequeathed all his property for this purpose.

In 1745 he reached his 80th year. He was spared the knowledge of the Jacobite defeat at Culloden in 1746 and the destruction of Scalán. He died in April of that year and is buried at Thornhill in Perthshire.

By Ann Dean

[George Innes](#)

The first master appointed at Scalán by Bishop Gordon was George Innes in November 1716

George Innes was born in 1683 into “The Innes family” of Balnacraig near Aboyne. The founder of the Innes family was James Innes of Drumgask in the parish of Aboyne, Aberdeenshire. His descendants acquired the properties of Balnacraig and Ballogie. The mansion house of Ballnacraig was built in 1735 by James Innes grandson of the above. The house still stands today, Jan 2007, and one can see his initials and those of his wife Catherine Gordon carved above the entrance door. Ten members of the Innes family, Thomas, Louis and nephew George, became priests and three were closely linked with the Scots College Paris. There was also a close relationship with the House of Stuart at St. Germain.

At the age of fifteen years George entered the Scots College Paris in the year 1683. He was ordained in 1712 and returned to Scotland. In 1714 Bishop J. Gordon appointed him Rector of Morar, a position he gladly accepted. The seminary on Eilean Bán was closed owing to Hanovarian troop movements and the seven students eventually re-located. With great determination Bishop Gordon searched for a safe place to start again, he chose Scalán. In 1716 George Innes was appointed master, a position he didn't want to accept. His health was poor and Scalán was a humble dwelling in a desolate place. There is no record of him staying with his students Hugh Macdonald and George J. Gordon. He was replaced by Alexander Smith (who later became a Bishop) in November 1716. Innes returned in 1718 when A. Smith was sent to the Scots College Paris to become procurator.

George did not prove to be the ideal choice for a Scalán master. By nature he was quiet and retiring and liked nothing better than to study. He had no idea how to economise and Scalán was short of funds. He was a good teacher but lacked spiritual discretion. He must have found the winters horrendous having to cope with freezing conditions, endless snow and driving winds. His health was poor and how he must have longed for warmer parts.

He finally left Scalán in May 1722 being replaced by Alexander Grant, a priest of only three years.

George Innes returned to his parent's home in Balnacraig where he continued training boys for the priesthood. He is recorded as educating one boy for the Scots College Paris and helping at least two others.

Shortly before Christmas 1726 Alexander Grant was called to Rome and George Innes was re-instated as master at Scalán but living at Balnacraig. With no priest in residence the Hanovarian troops ceased harassing Scalán and by the following year things were returning to normal. Lewis Innes and the Duchess of Perth donated money to the seminary and thirteen students were in residence.

In 1727 the post of Prefect of Studies fell vacant at the Scots College Paris. George Innes was offered the post and readily accepted. He must have been relieved to be able to return to the congenial surroundings of the Scots College Paris. He took up the post in 1727 and continued as Prefect of Studies until 1735, he was appointed Procurator until 1738 when he was made Principal, a post he held until his death in 1752. Quite an impressive list of appointments for a man who felt he had let his Uncle Thomas down over his handling of Scalán.

George Innes steered the College through one of its most turbulent times. He, like most of the staff were sympathetic to the Jacobite cause. Many felt it would benefit Scottish Catholics to have a Stuart on the throne. This was not likely to happen so no one would know if it would have helped. There are still some who look back with nostalgia at the 1715 and 1745 rebellions; today it is thought of as a romantic period in Scottish history. The College played an active part in offering help and refuge to those with a price on their heads. It was certainly recorded that Bishop Hugh Macdonald stayed within its walls and there is strong evidence that Prince Charles found refuge on more than one occasion.

The next period in the College was anything but romantic, it was the Jansenist controversy. It spread to all those who listened causing bitter accusations affecting the guilty and the innocent. It spread from the Paris College to Scotland causing widespread upset; those accused of Jansenism were unable to completely clear their names. At one point, students travelling to Rome were told not to stop off at the Paris College in case they were accused of Jansenism.

Cornelius Otto Jansen 1585-1638 was a Dutch Roman Catholic theologian the founder of the reform movement known as Jansenism. He published a lengthy work in 1640 *Augustinus* which sort to prove that the teaching of Saint Augustine on grace, free will and predestination was opposed to the teaching of the Jesuit schools. The book was condemned by Pope Urban viii in 1642 but the controversy raged on in France for nearly a century when a large number of Jansenists emigrated to the Netherlands. Small pockets still exist today.



Balnacraig. The right wing, 17th century, preceded the main house built in 1735.



Door lintel showing the initials

By permission of the owners

In 1713 Pope Clement xii issued a Bull, *Unigenitus Dei Filius*, like previous Bulls it caused controversy which spread from the Paris College to Scotland and reached Scalán. On June 6th 1733 Bishop Gordon chaired a meeting of clergy asking all present to subscribe to the Bull in writing. All Scottish priests were asked to do the same as were those in the Paris College. George Innes signed but was neutral. By 1732 he was set against Jansenism as was Louis Innes. Thomas Innes didn't fully accept but was not asked to sign.

George Innes was fourteen years as Principal and steered the College through very troubled times. Only two boys were ordained but it is hardly surprising, funds were low mainly due to the support of the Jacobite cause. Morale was low due to the controversy of Jansenism. Some parents could have been reluctant to send their boys to Paris when Rome was available and this would have had a detrimental effect on the college funds.

George Innes kept the College going but did not have that special something to make the College shine when times were hard.

In depth reading about Jansenist controversy. "The Scots College Paris 1603-1792" Chapter 7 by Brian M. Halloran published by John Donald Publishers LTD, Edinburgh.

By S. Toovey

Hugh Macdonald

Student to Bishop

The first two students recorded as residing at Scalán in 1716 lived in a turf hut on the west side of the Crombie; they were Hugh Macdonald and George J. Gordon.

Hugh Macdonald was born in 1699, the son of the Laird of Morar, often classified as a branch of the Clanranald. Bishop Gordon had established a seminary on Eilean Bán, Morar and one of the first students enrolled was Hugh Macdonald aged 15. By 1714 the Seminary closed owing to Hanovarian troop movements and the pupils re-located Hugh to Scalán two years later. He spent nine years at the seminary alongside George J. Gordon Both were ordained on Ember Sunday 1725 by Bishop Gordon. These two students were the first to receive their complete training in Scotland since the Reformation. The Bishop had seen the fulfilment of a dream; two home grown priests.

Hugh Macdonald went to Paris in 1730 to prepare for his ordination which took place in Edinburgh in 1731. As bishop, he identified many problems in this wide scattered area, the chief being the lack of priests. For this he blamed the Scots Colleges abroad because a number of students

abandoned their vocations and returned home. To try to rectify this situation he advocated setting up a Highland Seminary. The place chosen was once again Eilean Bán where he had been a student. From 1732 to 1738 the seminary remained there, but in 1738, it moved to Guidal near Arisaig. In 1746 Guidal was abandoned after the defeat of the Jacobite rising and for the next 24 years there was no Highland Seminary.

At the start of the 1745 rising, Bishop Macdonald blessed the Royal Standard at Glenfinnan. In 1746 his home on Eilean Bán was destroyed by the Hanovarian Troops. As an active Jacobite he had to escape from Scotland and did so on a French ship, seeking refuge in the Scots College, Paris, which was known to be sympathetic to the cause. He returned to Scotland in July 1749 but in 1754 was arrested and served with a banishment order which he defied, living in hiding mainly at Shenval in the Cabrach. He could only serve his district from afar and a co-adjutor bishop, John Macdonald, his nephew, was appointed in 1761. Then Bishop Hugh moved quickly back into his district living at Aberchalder, south of Fort Augustus. His health deteriorated and in 1773 he died and was buried in Kilfinnan Cemetery. This cemetery was submerged at the end of the 19th century. A monument was erected to him by the people of Morar in the new Cemetery.



Killfinnan cemetery

The first Chapel of the Braes, 1829/30-1896

Scalan was closed in 1799 when students and staff moved to the purpose built seminary at Aquhorties, Aberdeenshire. The Rev James Sharp, who had been in charge at Scalan until the move, remained there until 1808, ministering to the population of the Braes and celebrating Mass in the former chapel. Sharp left in 1808 to teach at Aquhorties, and from then on the chapel was closed. The tenancy of Scalan (from the Duke of Gordon) was given up in 1823, after which it was actively farmed by local tenants.

Abbé Paul MacPherson, formerly Superior of the Scots College, Rome and a native of Wester Scalan, became concerned about the lack of a regular priestly presence in the Braes, where the population of around 1,000 was almost entirely Catholic. He appears to have returned there from Rome in 1827 (but found the winter too cold for permanent residence) determined to build a new chapel. A year later he was granted land by the Duke of Gordon at Little Town of Eskmulloch, as Chapeltown was then known.

Abbé Macpherson personally financed the new Braes chapel, accommodation for the priest and later the school (now Mont Abbe) at Chapeltown. Correspondence reveals that the architect of the church was William Robertson

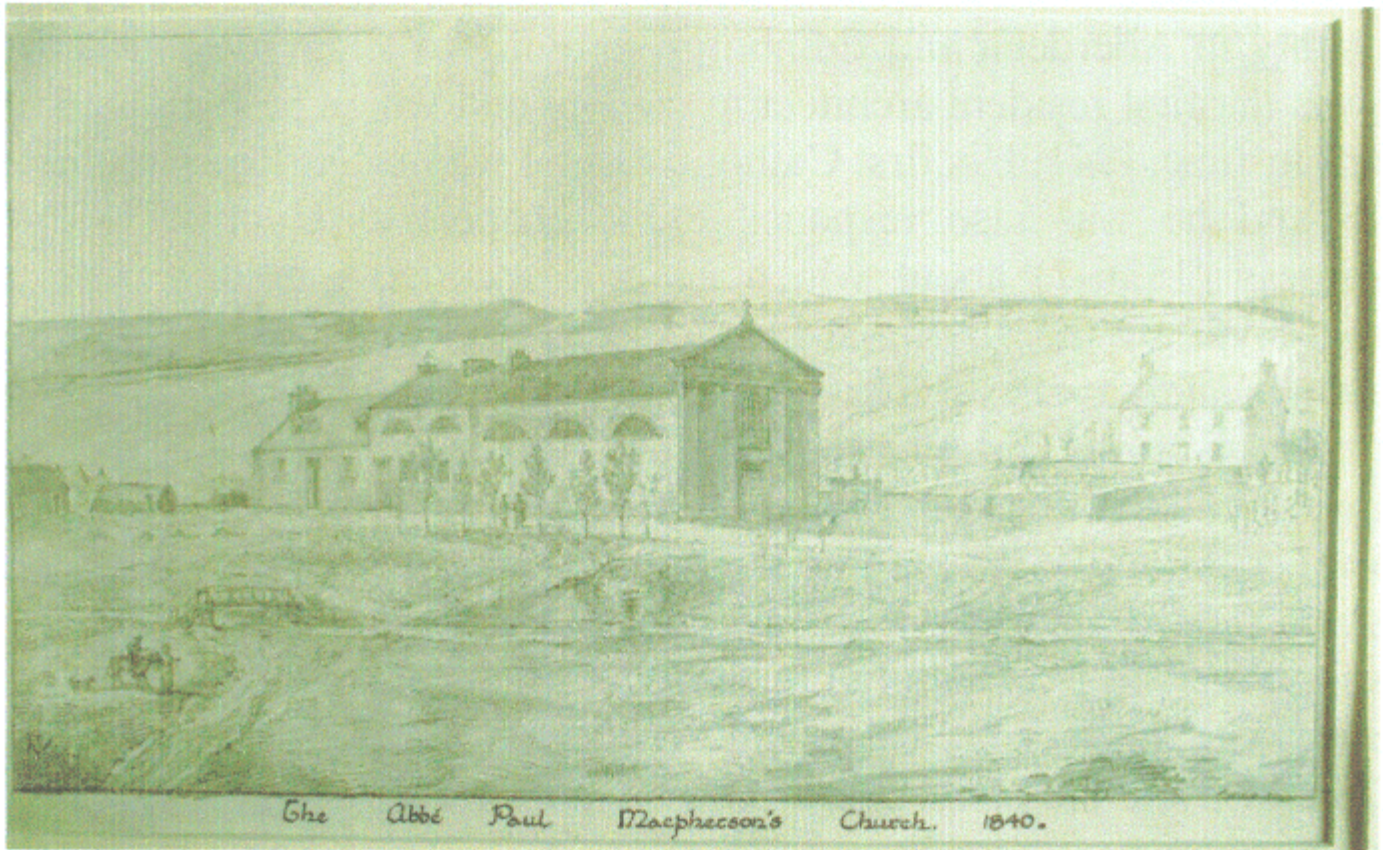
of Elgin.

Robertson was born in the parish of Lonmay, near Fraserburgh in June 1786. Where he undertook his professional training is not known, but probably in Aberdeen and Edinburgh, moving to Elgin around 1820 where he was the first resident architect in the city and where he remained until his death in June, 1841. His first Catholic chapel was at Dufftown, completed in 1825 and he was also responsible for chapels at Huntly (1833-4) and Inverness (1836-7) about which he corresponded regularly with Bishop James Kyle, by then living at Preshome, near Buckie. Few of Robertson's drawings and papers survive so it is revealing to read his letters (held in the Catholic Archives, Edinburgh) to James Kyle and through them to learn of his work and a little about himself.

However, James Kyle was still at Aquhorties when Robertson prepared his designs and estimates for the Braes chapel and these had to be sent to Bishop Paterson in Edinburgh for his comments. Paterson disapproved of the new site, preferring Scalan, but McPherson wrote movingly in June, 1828 that while the priest might have a warm fire by which to dry himself in the new chapel

‘turn your eyes to by far the greater part of the Congregation who in most stormy weather, would have to travel two or three miles to reach Scalan and sit down in a cold Chapel, however wet or cold they might be: or else frightened by the length of the way and badness of the weather, remain at home without satisfying a most essential duty. Your Lordship will see that this will be neither exemplary nor apostolic like.....’

MacPherson continued that in due course he would be making provision for a ‘snug house’ for the priest, which he did as well as financing the school. Robertson charge £5.5s for the plans and estimate of the chapel which was completed around 1829-30. His design was a simple rectangle with classical pedimented frontage surmounted by a cross. The building was lit by three lunettes (semi-circular windows) in the long side walls while at the rear there was a heated vestry (the chimney is revealed in the picture) which also provided accommodation for the priest until a cottage was constructed. The 2-storey Chapel House came later. A similar design by Robertson was used c1835 for the chapel at Pulteneytown, Wick, and Caithness where the priest Walter Lovie, normally in Keith, established a mission for itinerant fishermen and herring gutters during the summer season. This too has a classical frontage and accommodation at the rear where Lovie could live during his annual sojourns in Wick (which he seems to have preferred to Keith!). This chapel enjoys a site high above the harbour with panoramic outlook and is still in use.



Braes Chapel 1840 by unknown artist

An (as yet) unknown artist has left what appears to be an accurate drawing of the Braes chapel and school as it was in 1840, which now hangs there. It shows the church buildings and also the school (now MontAbbe) with children and school master. The school is fronted by what appears to be a garden enclosed by walls and to its left another walled enclosure which, though indistinct, appears to be the burial ground. Schoolmasters at this time were often provided with a garden in which they could grow potatoes and other vegetables.

The Braes chapel served its congregation until about 1895, when it was demolished, apparently because the building proved damp. It was replaced by Our Lady of Perpetual Succour built to a design by the well known Edinburgh architect, John Kinross and financed by the Marquis of Bute who was a generous Catholic patron. Consecration took place on 14 September, 1897. The story of this building must wait until another issue of the Scalan News.

By Elizabeth Beaton

[Points of Interest](#)

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1. A.G. M. 5th June 2007 in Braes Hall at 2 pm preceded by a Mass at Scalan at 12 noon
2. Annual Scalan Mass is on the 1st July 2007 at 4 pm

3. Scalan was cut off by snow at the end of January and on the 19th

to the 22nd March.

4. Two summers ago, I was asked by members of the Catholic Heritage Commission if I could help in any way with the interpretation and signage at Scalan so on the 7th June 2005, the day of the annual Mass I made my way up to Scalan where I met with Cannon Brian Halloran, Mgr. John McIntyre and Fr. Jim Thomson. A note in my diary reminds me that it was the warmest day recorded that year and I felt really privileged to be there as two previous attempts to visit had been abandoned due to poor weather conditions.

Blairs Museum has been successful in being given £4800 from Awards for All to create an exhibition. Following a request from Catholic Heritage to improve ways of interpretation of Scalan, the Museum Management Team has agreed to create an exhibition at Blairs Museum which will heighten awareness of the College throughout the North-East. As part of the project, the Museum Management team has enlisted the help of Ann Dean and Alasdair Roberts who come with considerable knowledge of the subject. Ann Dean will supply the text and illustrations for the exhibition while Alasdair Roberts will produce a thirty page book on the history of the College. In addition to the exhibition, it is planned to provide interpretation boards for display in the college building at Scalan along with a supply of books and leaflets. It is hoped the exhibition will be in place by 1st April 2007.

David Taylor, Blairs Museum.

5 If any readers would like to purchase a booklet please write to the Editor S. Toovey, Chapel House, Ballindalloch, AB37 9JS, enclosing £2.00 to cover cost and postage.

6 I am endeavouring to write a series of articles on anyone who was associated with Scalan Seminary from the day it opened to the day it closed. I am appealing for information on masters, students, housekeepers and farmers etc. In fact anything to help build up a picture of life at Scalan in the Seminary and surrounding area. No matter how small it will all help. If you do not want me to name names I will respect your wishes.

Very many thanks, Editor

[Scalan Seminary to the Clash](#)

I do hope you enjoyed your visit to Scalan, a peaceful place with its own unique atmosphere. Numerous visitors have commented on how welcoming the old college is.

If you wish to follow the track to the Clash it will take about thirty minutes each way. Up to about 80 years ago this area was inhabited and those wishing to attend Mass would probably have walked the same route as you will be taking. Abbé Paul McPherson's father farmed in the Scalan area and Paul was born in their croft in 1756. His uncle John McPherson farmed at the Clash.

Leave Scalan and turn left at the ruin. In the summer the tops of the walls are a mass of tiny yellow flowers with even smaller reddish scale-like leaves. These plants are members of the large Sedum family. Garden centres sell various Sedums as rock plants but none are as delicate as those growing at Scalan.

Beware of the stinging nettles growing profusely in the rich soil. These are a particularly vicious variety waiting to sting those who venture too close. The caterpillars of the small tortoiseshell butterfly find them a tasty meal. These butterflies hibernate in nooks and crannies in old buildings and on warm sunny days in April wake up and head for the nettles to lay their eggs. These pretty little butterflies have followed this routine for generations, long before

Scalan. [The Red Admirals](#) also use the nettles to lay their eggs and feed their caterpillars when they arrive from the continent.



Note the walled enclosure at the rear of the ruin, a pen for animals or a walled garden? Who knows? Pass between two posts and in the bend of the river are the remains of a building, croft or barn. Cross the Crombie by means of the two wooden sleepers, a Glenlivet Estate sign will point you to the track. It is a bit rough mainly because of the many little streams crossing it on their way to join the Crombie on your right

The ground on either side is high level moorland where red and black Grouse can be seen. When disturbed they take flight cackling and screeching, a unique sound. The track is gated to prevent vehicular access but there is an easy stile to the left, accessible to humans and dogs.

Look to your right and you will see a fenced and gated enclosure containing birch and eared willow (*Salix Aurita*). The latter is often found in upland areas where the ground tends to be wet and acidic. This area has been fenced to encourage regeneration. Looking towards Little Tom (hill) are the ruins of [Wester Scalan crofts](#), one stands alone and close by are two crofts or one croft and one barn. To your left, (in line with the larger building) and back from the track are the remains of a sheep fank; a walled enclosure, and ahead you can see a group of windswept larches. You have reached The Clash. The stream crossing the track used to feed the concrete sheep dipper unused for about twenty years; it now houses fence posts and the occasional rabbit. The modern wooden building is used by the shooting tenant and his guests.

On your right are the remains of The Clash House also known locally as the Drovers. In the 19th century sheep and cattle would have passed here on their way to southern markets; the route would have been via The Ladder or the Lecht. A similar route was followed by the whisky smugglers. Illegally distilled whisky was carried in stone jars known as "[grey ladies](#)" (not grey in colour) slung from the saddles of sure-footed pack horses. The spirit was transported during the hours of darkness to evade the "excise men"



A short step down to the Crombie takes you to a stone bridge, look down into the water and you may see on the river bed a glint of gold – "fools gold". Turn left and follow the river, it narrows quite quickly and you can cross and re-cross.

Note the healthy [juniper bushes](#) which give shelter to rabbits, hares and roe deer. You can see brown hares all the



year round but in the winter white hare are predominant ; these turn grey in summer and are hard to spot. Pass the ford and there is an old lime kiln which gives shelter for many ferns. Eventually you reach the remains of a building built into the right bank, this was a summer sheiling (a temporary structure built to provide shelter for those who grazed cattle in the summer). This is the last sign of habitation and a good place to turn back.

As you retrace your steps, give a thought to those hardy people who lived and worked in the harshest of conditions with no electric or running water. How they must have dreaded the onset of winter and prayed for the warmth of summer, when the walk to Mass at Scalan would have been a joy.



The ruined crofts are a memorial to those who endured so much to make a living from the land.

By S. Toovey

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Scalan from the track coming from the Lecht

Those who put their trust in the Lord
Are like Mount Sion, that cannot be shaken,

That stands for ever
Jerusalem! The mountains surround her,
So the Lord surrounds his people
Both now and forever.

Psalms 124 verses 1 & 2