

THE PRESBYTERY OF ROSS AND SUTHERLAND—1693-1700

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I

FROM the Restoration to the Revolution the true history of the Highlands discloses a religious life there that had in it all the elements of enlightened conviction which give to the history of the rest of Scotland its poignancy and glory during that tragic period.

The social and material progress of Scotland was a natural development from religious and educational foundations, and in the case of the Highlands these foundations can be traced to far distant antiquity. The remote hamlet of Applecross, for example, had its monastic school sadly depleted in 737 A.D.¹ when 20 of its scholars along with their *Fer leginn*, i.e. "man of reading," were drowned at sea as they were crossing to Bangor in Ireland to complete their training. As late as 1316 we find this *Fer leginn*, in its latinized form, *Ferlanus*, as principal or rector of the schools at Inverness. Alongside of this school education there was a stream of unique culture through oral tradition of folktales in Gaelic poetry and prose, which percolated through the entire community down the ages as a mountain stream, which is not infrequently hidden from view, but which bursts to the surface now and again in refreshing wells.

The northern soil on which the Reformers began to sow their seed had thus been deeply furrowed. In other words, a people whose age-long pondering on the mysteries of life in impressive surroundings were highly susceptible to the appeal of the new teaching, and were capable by training to appreciate its solemn and severe features. Under the influence of this teaching they shared to the full in all the blessings of personal religion and culture which flowed from the Reformation, making at the same time their own contribution to the culture of Scotland. In illustration of this it may be pointed out that by adapting the Reformed melodies to the intricate melodies of their Gaelic secular poetry, which in turn are traceable to a synthesis of the melodies of Roman and Byzantine hymns, they have contributed to Reformed church melody one of its few, though still unrecognised, unbroken connections with Christian antiquity. Further, nowhere else in Scotland did the doctrine of sovereignty in civil and

¹ See *Tighearnach* and *AU*, under year 367.

religious life receive such ready acceptance and evoke such abiding fidelity as in that northern society which was itself constituted on a paternal sovereignty with filial loyalty.

It should therefore come as no surprise that, among a people so reformed, the National Covenant was signed by every person of consequence. The joy of the community at this release of pent-up feeling and frustrated convictions is well indicated by the action of the school boys of Fortrose who, on Sunday, March 11, 1638, less than a fortnight after the signing of the National Covenant in Edinburgh, destroyed the much-disliked liturgy which the Bishop carefully placed on the desk in the Church that morning. But not only were the Highlands in line with the rest of Scotland in confessional loyalty, but in their social life also they made sacrifices that glowingly showed their sincerity. From before the Christian era, horse-racing in many forms was an outstanding feature of Highland social festivities.¹ For more than twenty years these races were suspended until they were again revived in the year 1661.

From 1660 to 1688 religious and cultural life received from the Government the same attention and treatment in the North as in the South. Where the Church was living with a throbbing piety and fine culture, as in Wester Ross, non-conformity was negligible, but in most of the North it was moribund in its clergy, and there dissent was strong and active. This dissent endured all the privations that loyalty to the Covenants entailed in the South. But there were no "killing times" in the North, and that was not owing to any tenderness in the Government nor inactivity of clerical informers, but largely to the intimate social bond which knit leaders and people into a unit. The former, even when they differed from the latter, felt the urge of mutual ties so strongly as to wink frequently at alleged infringement of law as imposed by distant authority.

It was also fortunate for the Highlands that their great contemporary military commanders, like General Hugh Mackay, Sir Charles Ross, Sir John Munro, and Major-General Robert Munro, sought and found military glory in fighting the battles of their religion abroad rather than in slaughtering their fellow-countrymen at home. Nevertheless the Highlands suffered severely for their covenanting faith. More than a score of their ministers suffered in varying degrees of intensity. The laity to the number of at least fifty-four, including chiefs, lairds and burgesses, were penalised to the extent of more than £109,200² for contumacy, for harbouring deposed ministers, and otherwise showing their sympathy with the people of the conventicles and private meetings. Equally impressive as evidence of the people's loyalty to the Covenants is the fact that at the

¹ See my *Law of the Lord's Day in the Celtic Church*, p. 44.

² Cf. Barron, *The Scottish War of Independence* (1934 Ed.), p. lxii.

peak of Montrose's fame, out of an available man power of over 20,000, less than 3,000 joined his forces, and most of these were levies driven from their burning homes by his brave but savage lieutenant, Alexander Macdonald. Furthermore, it is established beyond doubt that more Highlanders proceeded as volunteers in one year to fight the battles of Protestantism on the Continent than ever followed Montrose or Claverhouse.¹

It was in such Highlands that the Presbytery of Ross and Sutherland undertook the heavy work of re-building the Presbyterian Church of Scotland.

II

The Records of the Presbytery of Ross and Sutherland, which were considered as lost, were found among the books left by the late Dr Gustavus Aird of Creich, Sutherlandshire. They are the oldest of post-Revolution records in the north, and the most informative on the early struggles of Presbyterianism over the wide bounds of this Presbytery, which extended from Inverness and surroundings to the Pentland Firth. Its first minute² begins thus: "At Tain, 25th July, 1693, Sederunt, Mr. Hugh Anderson, minister of Cromartie, Mr. Walter Denune, minister of Golspie, Mr. William M'Kay, minister of Dornoch, Mr. William Stewart, minister of Kiltearn, The Laird of Balnagown, Sir Robert Gordon of Embo, Mr. Robert Gray of Tallach. Mr. Hugh Anderson, Moderator, Mr. William Stewart, Clerk."

These heroes of the faith, for as such they were regarded, ushered in the new dispensation, which was fraught with such beneficent results, spiritually, educationally and socially. They are worthy of a permanent place of honour alongside of the better known master builders of the Scottish Church.

Hugh Anderson,³ now suffering from the infirmities "occasioned by his age," and the hardships which he endured, was the only survivor present of the pre-Restoration ministry. He was the connecting link between the former and present Presbytery. He was the son of Gilbert Anderson, minister of Cromarty, and was promoted from being Regent in the University and King's College, Aberdeen. He was deprived of his living by Act of Parliament, June 11, and Privy Council, October 1,

¹ Cf. Barron, *Introduction*, *passim*.

² *MS Records*: Presbytery of Ross and Sutherland.

³ Scot's *Fasts*, v, 278; Wodrow's *History*, *passim*; *Religious Life in Ross*, p. 256; Miller: *Scenes and Legends*, p. 113; *Acts of Parl., Reg. Priv. Council*, *passim*.

1662, but was allowed to remain till after the historic communion at Obsdale in September, 1675. After that date he retired to Moray, but later he returned to his small estate of Udol in the western extremity of the parish of Cromarty. He was restored by Act of Parliament, 1690, died at Cromarty on the 3rd June, 1704, aged about 74 years. Wise and cautious, but brave and unflinching, his ripe experience was of invaluable help to the new Presbytery of which he was the "father."

Of the four ministers in the sederunt, none excelled Walter Denoon¹ in fearless devotion to principle, and none suffered as severely for conviction. He was especially obnoxious to the curates for his persistence in holding conventicles in Easter Ross, because of which they urged Seaforth and Bishop Paterson to invoke the aid of the Privy Council against him. Following on their urgent pleading, the Privy Council, on the 6th March, 1680, resolved as follows: "The letter underwritten is direct from the Council to Mr. Alexander Mackenzie of Findorne, Sheriff-deput of Ross, of which the tenour follows: Sir, The Council being informed that, notwithstanding of the many good laws against the field and house conventicles, whereby seditious persons doe begett and propagat seditious and pernicious principles amongst ignorant people, and albeit by His Majesties late gracious favour conferred on the deluded multitude in places where these seditious meetings have been already too successful, yet he hath been so careful to protect and preserve those places which as yet are in great measure safe from that growing mischieffe, in which number the shire of Ross is considered, yet some bold and presumptuous persons, setting aside all fear of God and respect to their sovereign and his ministry, and thereby to debauch weak men and silly women, drawing them into these impious and rebellious methods, particularly one Mr. Hepburne and Mr. Denoon, wee cannot but expect from the account wee have of your loyaltie, and fidelity, that you shall use all diligent endeavours to apprehend these pretended preachers above specified or others and transmit them to the Council; as also to dissipate any such meetings in fields or houses as is not allowed by the laws; which the Council doth desire you to goe about with all secresy and diligence. And at their command this is signified to you by your assured friend—subscribitur Rothes, Cancell. I.P.D."²

This resolution displays the characteristic ruthlessness of the Chancellor and his Council; but it does more. It shows how widespread were Covenanting loyalties in those northern parts. Six days later (March 12,

¹ *Records, Presbyteries of Inverness and Dingwall* (S.H.G.), pp. 339, 340, 345; *MS. Records of Ross and Sutherland*; *MS. Dornoch Record*; Scott: *Fasti*, V, 335; Wodrow: *History and Analecta, passim*; Brodie: *Diary*; Old Stat. Acct., XXI; Kirkton: *History*, p. 450.

² *Reg. Privy Council*, VI, 413.

1680) Rothes wrote also to the Earl of Moray to suppress conventicles in the shires of Moray, Nairn and Inverness, earnestly recommending his Lordship to order his deputies to "seize upon and secure any of these factious preachers who presume to preach either in the houses or in the fields in any place betwixt Spey and the Stockfoord of Ross, particularly one Mr. Walter Denoon and Mr. John Hepburne, and to detain them prisoners till the Councils furder order, and to dissipat all such illegal meetings in the said bounds."¹ As a result of earlier commands Denoon was arrested on February 12, 1679. He was driven from Sheriff to Sheriff, each hesitating, out of regard to this highly esteemed minister, to go to the extreme length which the law allowed and the Privy Council demanded. At last, however, he found himself incarcerated in the Tolbooth, Edinburgh. On being transported south he was rescued at the south ferry of Dundee, and preached on the 20th May of that year at Dupplin Mill.

Wodrow has a striking reference to the rescuing of Denoon which sheds light on the glowing piety of the ordinary people and their warm affection to Denoon. Walter Denoon, says Wodrow, "was pursued for preaching, &c, with the utmost violence, and reduced to great hardships. At lenth he is taken, and everybody expected he would dye. The honest people about [Kiltearn] came usually to John Caird² (John Munro) as their great support under their distresse and told him that Mr. Walter was taken. He was much affected when he heard it, but said nothing. One came in with the neuse after another, and they were all generally weeping; and one said he would be taken to prison; another that they would certainly kill him, and they would never see him! John continoued silent for a while till their din confused him, and at lenth he says, 'Be quiet Sirs, for I am perswaded, though Mr. Walter be taken, he shall neither goe to prison nor dye at this time, and (that) they should see him; God would rescu him out of their hands.' And accordingly the souldiers, after they had taken him, caryed him south to Edinburgh presently. And as they were going throu Fife, ane honest gentleman, Inchdarney, came upon the party, and by force rescued him out of their hands; and he returned about Kiltearne, and was very usefull."³ It was because of this usefulness that he was re-arrested in terms of the decision of the Privy Council already cited.

Denoon is mentioned as being in the bounds of Lothian and Tweeddale in 1687. He was a member of the first Assembly of 1690, and was one of the Commissioners appointed to purge the Church north of the Tay of "scandalous and supine" incumbents. He had great admiration for

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 431.

² See Kennedy : *Days of the Fathers in Ross-shire*, p. 104.

³ Wodrow : *Analecta*, II, 166.

the Earl of Sutherland, and the Earl responded with warm affection. Denoon is said to have reached the great age of 100 years.¹

He was a man who overflowed with enthusiasm for the Reformed Faith. His mental and physical vigour gave him a commanding position among all classes of the community. To this should be added a character enhanced by transparent piety. His long record of suffering and service secured for him a place of venerated respect, and to him more than to any of his contemporaries is due the wide and firm re-establishment of the Reformed Faith in the affections of the people of those northern parts.

III

William Mackay, who was the only son of John M'Kay² of the family of Achness, Sutherlandshire, was one of the Commissioners appointed by the Assembly of 1690, and settled down in Dornoch. He remained there till 1694, when he was translated to Cromdale. The Privy Council, on March 2, 1685, gave orders to apprehend and send Mr. William M'Kay, "a vagrant preacher in Sutherland, prisoner to Edinburgh."³ His mother was a daughter of the famous poet preacher of Durness—Alexander Munro. Munro translated large portions of Scripture and Apocrypha into Gaelic verse, so as to make them more attractive and more easily remembered by the common people. He died in 1653. M'Kay's father was a man of eminent piety, and in thorough sympathy with the oppressed Covenanters.⁴ In 1693 M'Kay was called to Alness and Fearn respectively. He declined both calls, but afterwards accepted a call to Cromdale, and died there in 1700.⁵

William Stewart,⁶ who was assisting at Inverness, became identified with the Presbyterian cause there which was espoused by Angus MacBain. MacBain, unlike Alexander Munro, already referred to, came under the indirect influence of the preaching of Rev. Robert Bruce during the latter's periods of banishment in Inverness. MacBain was a scion of the old Highland evangelical family of Kinchyle, and to him belongs the honour of being "the last of the martyrs" of the "killing times." Having been rigorously confined in the Tolbooth, Edinburgh, for more than a year, the sufferings which he endured issued fatally in less than two months after the Revolution had given him his freedom.

¹ Wodrow : *Analecta*, IV, p. 4, *Synod Record*, 1728.

² Scott : *Fasti*, V, 328. ³ *Reg. Priv. Council* ; Wodrow : *History*, IV, 193.

⁴ Mackay : *Book of Mackay*, 247. ⁵ Shaw : *Province of Moray*, 369.

⁶ See *Memoirs of Hog* ; *Fasti* ; *Religious Life in Ross* ; Wodrow : *History* and *MS. Records Ross and Sutherland*.

On the recommendation of Thomas Hogg, Stewart was elected and admitted as Hogg's successor at Kiltearn before July 1693. For at the first meeting of the Presbytery of Ross and Sutherland in that year, it is noted that Hugh Anderson, jr., was appointed to proceed to Inverness to give supply in the congregation there which "has been desolat" since Mr. Stewart was transplanted to Kiltearn. In 1705 he was translated to the third charge in Inverness, and in 1720 he became minister of the first charge there. He left Inverness for reasons that reflect creditably on his independence and high sense of the character required in a ruling elder. According to Wodrow, he opposed the election of John Forbes of Culloden as a ruling elder to the Assembly from the Presbytery of Inverness in 1725, contending that "he (John Forbes) was a habitual neglecter of family worship, and, they say, a knouen famed drunkard, and noted for it in England."¹ Stewart was outvoted and afterwards accepted a call to Kiltearn. The historian's accuracy in such intimate details is substantiated from an authentic contemporary source in which this notorious brother of the famous President is referred to under the apparently appropriate sobriquet of "Bumper John."² Stewart was settled for the second time in Kiltearn in 1726, and died there in October 1729.

Stewart was Clerk of the Presbytery of Ross and Sutherland, and discharged his duties with marked efficiency. He entered heartily into the heavy task of organizing congregations and keeping regular supplies in vacant charges. He contributed an account of the life and sufferings of Angus MacBain of Inverness to Wodrow's *History*.

His earnestness and success as a pastor are strikingly illustrated by his pleading with the despondent and dying Laird of Sowerdale. The pathetic struggle of the Laird issued in a complete calm. Of the incident, Stewart said to his own wife: "I saw a sinner in the kingdom of sin. I hope that I have seen that sinner in the kingdom of grace, and, I hope, ere I left him, that sinner was in the Kingdom of glory."

IV

The elders in the sederunt were equally distinguished in their own spheres of activity. The House of Balnagown, like the Houses of Sutherland,³ Foulis and Argyll, was a strong supporter of Presbytery and Presbyterian ministers, a support which the latter greatly valued. "This comes," wrote a correspondent to Balnagown, on September 2, 1709, "by our worthy friend Mr. MacKilligen [minister of Alness] who has been most active here in our concerns, and real deserves your thanks."⁴

¹ Wodrow: *Analecta*, III, 30. ² Stewart: *Letter Book* (S.H.S.), *passim*.

³ For striking example see *MS. Assembly Papers*, 1701.

⁴ M'Gill: *Old Ross-shire*, I, 281.

On "12th Aprill 1689," three months before the battle of Killiecrankie, General M'Kay wrote Balnagown: "The assurance I have for your concurrence for the defence of this kingdom . . . and above all of the Protestant Religion—the only ground for our hopp of eternal happyness . . . doth move me—as Commanding in chief our present King's force—to invite you to a conjunction . . . defence against . . . papists or . . . such as before God are more guilty and hatefull—protestant in name . . . betrayers of their country which they labour to enthrall under an unsupportable popish yock from which God in His infinite mercy . . . hath this far delivered us . . . but also [betrayers] of Christ."¹

Significant of the loyalty of the House of Balnagown and one of its offshoots is this letter of 4th March, 1710, to General Charles Ross already referred to: "We are sensible how successful your endeavours have already been for our support and the Revolution interest in this shyre . . . agreeable to us on all occasions to show how sensible we are of your friendship . . . every opportunity to advance your interest which we now look upon to be the common advantage of all our name and family. (Signed by) David Ross of Balnagown, John Ross of Achnacloch, D. Ross of Inverchasley, Hugh Ross of Braelangwell, William Ross of Easter Fearn, Thos. Ross of Callrossie, Arthur Ross of Toroye, Alexander Ross of Little Allan, And. Ross of Shanduake, John Ross, *duodem*, junr., David Ross of Kindeas, David Ross."²

Such were the ministers and some of the elders who formed this northern Presbytery, and successfully laid the foundations of re-established Presbyterianism throughout the length and breadth of their wide bounds.

V

These men, on entering on their re-building duties, were not unconscious of their heavy task and grave responsibility. But looking at their course of duty as stretching out on a spiritual plane, the corrupt life of the time was in principle barred from infusing their procedure with its method and spirit. For, as emoluments were attached to offices and not to officers in terms of the ecclesiastical settlement effected at the Revolution, their sole duty lay in determining that emoluments dedicated to the interests of pure religion would be drawn by occupants who conformed in confession and conduct to the requisite standard which the Church owned and proclaimed. The essence of that proclamation was piety and learning. Provided therefore that a minister had that qualification, even his former

¹ *Ibid.*, II, 22, 23. This religious letter supports Bishop Burnet's remark that General M'Kay was "the most pious man he ever met."

² M'Gill, II, 28.

adherence to a different polity or his implication in persecution in the past was not to stand as a barrier to a minister's request to be considered by the Presbytery. As a matter of fact there is not a shred of evidence in the records of this Court that they acted otherwise, or yielded even slightly to the vindictive spirit or ways of truculent victors.¹

The allegation that they directed their attention solely, and with prejudice, to the cases of incumbents of the disestablished Church is refuted by their searching and impartial enquiry into the qualifications of probationers of their own Church. The case cited hereafter is given because it is typical and casts an illuminating light on their rigorous orthodoxy. Here also we have a strong reaction from the quietism and universalism of the recent past in active exercise. Equally interesting is the apparent suspicion of southern orthodoxy disclosed by the following meticulous examination.

The case was that of John M'Killigan, who was born and bred in the evangelical atmosphere of the manses of Fodderty and Alness. He came before the Presbytery at its meeting held in Tain on May 13, 1701. He presented testimonials from the Presbytery of Dalkeith and Session of Newbattle. Was there suspicion of semi-episcopal leanings still in that session over which, not so long ago, Leighton himself presided? Or did the rustic Highlanders who bobbed their heads in southern pulpits during the defunct régime, and whom that ardent Highlander and Covenanter, Sir James Fraser of Brea, so scathingly lashed, lower the esteem of the north for southern theological discernment? Perhaps. In any case, this son of the manse was more closely examined than even his admitted defects might justify. On the date mentioned the Presbytery met at Tain and "Mr. John M'Killigan exercises"²; but the "Presbytery considering the exercise did find many things censurable in the same, both as to matter and method thereof, as likewise in his carriage in the delivery of it, which they signified to him, and in order to try his amending of those things for the future they appoint him to exercise next Presbytery on Gal. 2 and 19."

At Tain, June 11, 1701,³ "Mr. John M'Killigan having conformed to appointment on Gal. 2 and 19 was resumed. The Presbytry, taking the exercise to their consideration did find (omitting lesser matters) that in his exercise he did confound the work of the Law and that of the Gospel, in regard that expounding the Law mentioned in the Text, to the Law of works, he did attribute a two-fold power to the Law, viz., 1^c a convincing and 2^o a converting power, and whereas the Presbytry did

¹ For complete evidence see my article in *The Evangelical Quarterly*, April, 1934, p. 169 *et seq.*

² *MS. Records: Ross and Sutherland.* ³ *MS. Records: Ross and Sutherland.*

give him that Text for this verie end to discover his knowledge in the manner and way by which the Spirit of God brings the soul from under the Covenant of works, to be under that of Grace, and that the Text leads particularly thereto. Yet they did find him either not meddling with it at all, or verie Generall, and defective in what he touched of it. The said Mr. M'Killigan being called and this read to him, did answer to what was said of his attributing a converting power to the Law, that he did not understand it so as if the Law had any such power in itself, but only in the hand of the Spirit. It being told him that he was not charged therewith, but that he had attributed this power to the Law as the proper and Immediat mean of conversion of the soul to God through Christ, which properly belongs to the Gospell. For clearing hereof a sight of his papers were required; he answered that he used no papers that could be understood by any but himself, but that if he were desired he would give accoamt of his Judgement in the matter. And being desired so to doe he gave it in the following words, viz., That God doth make use of His Law or word in the hand of the Spirit for convincing of our lost estate and conditione and when he designes a thorough work that word in the hand of the Spirit is made use of for conversion of sinners from sin. Or (to be more plaine) God under the ministrie of his word doth open the heart by this Spirit to receive Jesus Christ freely in the Gospel. Being Interrogat if it be by the same Law whereby the soul is convinced of sin, that it is converted, Answered that it is by the same word and Law that the soul is converted. The Presbitry having heard his answer refers the furder consideration of it till afterwards."

"*Eodem die et loco, post meridiem*, The Presbitry considering what grounds of dissatisfaction they had in his exercises, and that he by his answers had no way taken off these, neither did they find him in converse convinced of any mistake, nor under any weight on his spirit thereanent, They doe therefore delay to give him any more appointments till they furder consider of it, and he being called this was instructed to him." He then was "asked categorically whether the Moral Law had a *converting efficacie* or not, and being enquired he answered that the Moral Law *quâ* moral had not a converting efficacie, and that he did not look upon himself as Infallible in his expression in the publick."

M'Killigan's haughty answers and his final sharp retort to the venerable Court failed to commend to them either Southern manners or Southern theology with which he had been in contact during the five years since they licensed him in 1696. At the same time, it must have been with a heavy heart that they felt obliged to curtail the preaching privileges of this son of a worthy father who was deposed for his faith in 1663 and was subjected to severe and cruel treatment in Edinburgh and on the Bass Rock which had a fatal issue in 1689. But they must be faithful and impartial; and they were both.

VI

The Revolution and the re-establishing of Presbyterianism were essentially popular movements. So heartily was the latter welcomed by the people that its opponents sneered at Presbyterianism as an unregulated expression of the popular will without any divine sanction or authority. But as the people were themselves convinced that a system which offered them the Gospel which they desired must have its foundation resting on something more stable than the laws of men, they appealed from all quarters to the Presbytery for "ordinances."

The piety of Episcopacy, now set free from politics and from a polity to which it was less attached than to Reformed doctrine, flowed as steadily into the re-constituted Church as curbed Presbyterianism once more in possession of freedom. The Presbytery manfully faced the serious duty of providing ministers and elders for the new organization. Acting sincerely according to the Reformed requisites of piety and knowledge in holders of both offices, the Presbytery laid carefully the foundations of the Church in the Highlands. With a spirit of firm resolution the Presbytery also faced the colossal task of making derelict Church fabrics habitable and suitable for the ordinances of religion. In a surprizingly short time their efforts in all these directions met with remarkable success.

Eminent theologians sprang up among them. In 1724 a revival with a deep and abiding influence began to spread over the whole of the eastern Highlands. In its religious, social and educational effect, there has been nothing comparable to this spiritual re-birth in the history of northern revivals. These changes came on without any straitening of conscience and without any intolerant forcing of a people into a new fold.

The Presbytery of Ross and Sutherland had done its work in laying the foundations so well and widely, that in 1700 it began to be broken up into the various Presbyteries that continued to function uninterruptedly for the following two centuries. In 1727 all these Presbyteries except Lewis were erected. In 1742 they were completed when the Lewis Presbytery was formed. At 1742, and indeed much earlier, post-Revolution Presbyterianism was as firmly established in the hearts of these northern people as it is to-day.