

THE SURVIVAL OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE HIGHLANDS.

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To explain the survival of the Catholic Church in the Highlands one should first consider the time and manner of the arrival of the first Missionaries in the area a millennium before.

St Ninian (early fifth century) is described as being 'the first and greatest of the British Missionaries' but little is known of him. Bede claims that he was 'regularly instructed at Rome in the mysteries of the Christian Faith'¹; making it clear that he had none of the particular ways of the Celtic monks of a later date. The differences between those of the Southern Mission from Rome and those of the Northern Mission from Ireland (who arrived in through Iona and Lindisfarne) were principally three: tonsure, the date of Easter and Church organization.

Although Iona, off the South Western tip of Mull, is a speck of an island just three miles from north to south, and one and a half miles across at its widest, the monks who settled there soon spread their beliefs together with the manner of their lifestyle to the mainland. Whilst working alongside the people they encountered, they toiled with them growing oats and barley and building coracles. Incorporating themselves into the social fabric of each place, they listened to and challenged superstitions, gathered many of their stories which they infused with new Christian meaning, thus creating tools for use in the propagation of their beliefs.

Many of the services held were Pagan in origin with only a thin Christian overlay. An example of this bonding of both local belief and religious instruction is recorded in the *Carmina Gadelica* as a chant evoked at milking time. This was intended to prevent the udder of the cow being invaded by evil spirits, which would result in the milk turning sour. Seated, the milking maid would chant as she milked 'the teat of Mary, Bridget, Archangel Michael and the Great God, bring forth abundance.' This satisfied her need to protect the food source, while giving praise to the Saints as well.²

The church found many reasons for retaining these local legends and heartily celebrating, along with their flock, the specific spiritual sites and festivals of Seasonal change. Their success in living and caring for their converts resulted in reverence and sainthood being attributed to them. The names and locations belonging to these early missionaries were given great reverence and these place names can still be found today around the Highlands and Islands of the West Coast giving strong validation to the stories of the arrival of these early missionaries of the Old Faith.

¹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* translated by Leo Sherley-Price revised by R.E.Latham (Penguin Classics revised edition 1990) p148.

² There are many such in the Western Isles collection *Carmina Gadelica Hymns and Incantations Ortha Nan Gaidheal* Volume 1 by Alexander Carmichael [1900].

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Local tradition shows that there were early settlements attributed to St Columba throughout Lochaber.³ It is said that a mission-station was built at Annat in the sixth century (the name itself meaning 'a place where relicts are kept). and St Munda built his Church early in the seventh century on Eilean Munda in Loch Leven, Glencoe. Later this isle became the burial island of the Macdonalds, Camerons and Stewarts. The last service was held there in 1653.⁴

In 1678, at the request of the Catholic population, stated to be very numerous and very fervent, there is a reported visit to Knoydart by their priest. The priest was required to bless the waters of Loch Hourn, and thereby bring back the herring to this loch which was formerly noted for its fishing, but for some years, had yielded no return.

Whereas, nowadays, these ceremonies are considered colourful or quaint, in those days, the supply of herring meant survival to the Highlanders and by association, their belief in their priest's power, was akin to survival. This imbedding and bonding between Church and Highlander was just beginning, but it was to become the foundation of the very survival of the Catholic religion.

In a Letter from Rev James Cahassy (Casey) 8th Nov 1685

I should be verie tedious to give you here a relation of the hardships of that place. In a word you shall know that the country is one of the roughest ... and without any exception the barest that is in Europe. They have no corn at all ...some little oats which they sowe in the little parcels of land which they commonly dige with spades; ...for no plough can stand where they have them.⁵

These priests mostly travelled the vast distances through the Highland Glens on foot. They conducted services within the Highlanders' dwellings, performing what was referred to as 'ordinary prayers' (a necessarily obscure way of referring to the Mass). They witnessed how their people lived, they slept and boarded among them and this strengthened the bond between Priest and flock.

To quote Rev James Cahassy again:

Of all men in the world there is no people that desire to be instructed more than they...They are not as people imagine them, so barbarous and wild, contrary to this they are naturally civil and they are imbued with a great deal of natural wit, had I but a competent means to live

³ Adomnan, *Life of Columba*, translated Leo Sherley-Price, A.O. and M.O. Anderson (Oxford Medieval Texts Clarendon Press; Rev Ed edition 10 Jan 1991).

But another fact must not be omitted, that by some poems composed in the Scotie language in praise of the same blessed man, and by the commemoration of his name, certain wicked men of lewd conversation, and men of blood, were saved from the hands of their enemies, who in the night had surrounded the house in which they were singing these hymns

⁴ Clan Donald Magazine No 12 (1991) Online. *Glencoe* By The Rev. Kenneth Wigston, Rector, St. Mary's, Glencoe, Associate Member of the Clan Donald Society of Edinburgh

⁵ W Clapperton, *Memoirs of the Scotch Missionary Priests I* (Elgin 1901) available in Scottish Catholic Archives.

here which would allow me to help. I would rather live with them in tribulation than to live at my ease elsewhere.⁶

Therefore although other areas fell into line with the Protestant dictates of Crown and Parliament, in this, the North West of Scotland, the Old religion was held secure in the hands of the Highland Clan and no such erosion of faith occurred.

As a result of their isolation, the North West Highlands of Scotland, especially the area of 'na Garbh Chriohcan' the Rough Bounds, and parts of Ardnamurchan, Morar, Moydart, Knoydart and the Western Isles, remained faithful to the Old religion and it was from here that Scotland's Highland families gave birth to, and sent out from the Clan those sons who would carry their faith to colleges in Rome and Paris for training. In later years Colleges and Seminaries were established locally at Loch Morar, Scalán, Samalaman, Lismore and eventually Blairs. John Watts, writing in 2002, describes how these past influences are still found in Parish attitudes present in this area to this day.

Take the Road to the Isles almost to its end; reach the West coast, with the dark saw-toothed mountains of Skye already in sight at the village of Morar. Here we are in a part of Scotland where the old Christian faith is still at the centre of most people's lives; This was, in Penal times one of the strongholds of the Old Religion, remaining unbroken and essentially unchanged since the time of Columba. If any one place in the West may be called 'the place of memory of the Penal church of Scotland' it is surely this⁷.

In the areas of 'the rough bounds', where arable soil was scarce, concentrations of families congregated around 'farm towns' and these nucleated farms farmed what arable there was largely communally. The Tacksman (roughly estate manager) of the chief paid rental for the whole direct to the Chief and in turn leased these farms to several tenants. These subsistence farmers worked the land in 'runrig', each holding a number of strips or patches, interspersed among those of his neighbours, either by a fixed rotation or by agreement.⁸ These along with a few Cottars, who in return for assistance and services to the landlord were granted houses, plots of land, and grazing rights, made up the social communities.⁹

⁶ In this he had his wish as he died in the Highlands. In 1701 he was at Morar. SCA John Thomson, *Some account of the state of religion and of the Mission in Scotland* p186. He died in 1704 hiding in the mountains when the soldiery tried to put the recent Act into force (see S. M Jack this volume)

⁷ John Watts, *Hugh MacDonald: Highlander, Jacobite and Bishop* (Edinburgh, John Donald, 2002) pp. 2-3. I am deeply indebted to this work for my understanding of the area and period.

⁸ For a brief account see Denis Rixson, *Arisaig and Morar a History* (Edinburgh, Tuckwell Press, 2002) pp96-7.

⁹ Robert A. Dodgshon *From Chiefs to Landlords. Social and Economic Change in the Western Highlands and Islands* Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1998; also for a detailed example E. Richards and M. Clough, *Cromartie: Highland Life 1650-1914*, (Cromartie, 1989) and Monica Clough, 'Early Fishery and Forestry developments on the Cromartie estate of Coigach' pp.227-243 in John R Baldwin (ed), *Peoples and Settlement in North-West Ross* Edinburgh Scottish Society for Northern Studies 1994. Robert A. Dodgshon, 'Modelling chiefdoms in the Scottish Highlands and islands prior to the '45' Part IV chapter 11 in *Celtic chiefdom, Celtic state: the evolution of complex social systems*

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All this interdependence created the ties that bound them. Even the way they worked the land, related historically back into the Clan system. The Clan was traditionally based on acquisition, defence, sharing of land, and production of food. Food was not primarily for the marketplace, but represented a recognised, mutual obligation and loyalty to people bound by real or imagined ties of kinship. It was a society in which the Chief traditionally offered protection and largesse to the clansman for his labour and manpower in battle. A Clan's wealth was always measured in its men not money.

At a broader level, the clan itself was jealously autonomous — autonomy indeed was the very basis of its existence. At the widest level, the whole of the North West of Scotland, where the clan system survived, was effectively detached from the rest of the country by fundamental differences of blood, language, custom and religion. This detachment was not to be permitted to remain.

Crown and Parliament had long sought to break the autonomy of the Gaidhlig Highlands and bring them under central control. This was finally achieved through the punitive laws enacted after the '45 rising but this was merely the end of a long process, the *coup de grace* for a clan system that had been under siege and in decline for a hundred and fifty years, since the beginning of the seventeenth century, when the 1609 'Statutes of Iona', first of the anti-clan legislation, were passed. These, along with subsequent legislation, struck at the power and life-style of the Clan Chiefs.¹⁰

The Government's bid to emasculate the clans had a particular point in the case of the Catholic Clans of Gordon, Stewart, Chisholm, Fraser, MacDonald, and Cameron. Their loyalty to the Catholic Church and the House of Stuart posed a special threat to the Crown and, in particular, the Protestant succession. The Catholicism of these clans was, in the Government's eyes merely another side of the Jacobite coin.

These religious affiliations in the Highlands, after the Reformation, very much centred upon the Clan Chief. At the end of the seventeenth century perhaps only 25,000 Catholics remained in the whole of Scotland out of a total population of around one million (in many places they had disappeared completely). At least ninety per cent of those who had survived were confined to a narrow swathe of country that ran from the north-east coast through Lochaber to the Outer Isles: one or two tiny pockets hung on in the south, but both north and south of this band there were virtually none.¹¹

In the lands of the 'Rough Bounds' lay the centre of the greatest concentration of Catholicism. The local Kirk synod reckoned that within this area all but five of an adult population of several thousand were Catholic and those who lived in this area are recorded by the priests who laboured among them 'as being as firm in their Faith as rocks.' They had remained staunchly Catholic and as a result earned any amount of abuse from eighteenth century Protestant writers. In general terms the Protestants

in prehistoric Europe ed by Bettina Arnold and D Blair (Gibson, Cambridge University Press 1995) pp 99-109.

¹⁰ Dodgshon *From Chiefs to Landlords*, passim.

¹¹ *The Church in the Highlands* ed James Kirk, (Scottish Church History Society, 1998) p. 61.

claimed that 'ignorance', 'thieving' and 'political disaffection' were inextricably linked to Catholicism and Knoydart (according to the Presbytery of Gairloch):

was the most unmixed nest of Popery in all the Highlands, requiring a particular regard be had to the manner of reforming and civilising it.¹²

Sadly, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the state of the local Catholic Church was parlous. The Scottish Mission had been formally established for less than fifty years. Its first Bishop Thomas Nicolson, appointed in 1695, had begun his episcopate in prison and by 1700 had not yet been able to visit the West Highland or lay down rules.¹³ There were far too few Priests to meet the people's needs, and it was in the hope of producing more that a small seminary was opened in Glenlivet in 1699. The dearth of Priests was mainly felt in the Highlands for lowland clergy were of no use to the Gaidhlig speaking Highlanders. To enable the faith to remain alive, priests from Ireland with Gaelic close enough to be understood filled the gap and without these priests, the religion would never have survived.¹⁴

It is almost impossible today to appreciate the extent and vehemence of anti-Catholic sentiment in most of Scotland by 1700. The 'First Book of Discipline', published in 1560, had enshrined the views of John Knox and his friends and a new Confession of Faith, adopted by Parliament; abolished the authority of the Pope and forbade the celebration of Mass. The Catholic Church of Scotland was extinct as far as human power could extinguish it, and the Protestant religion was established.

While initially this was rhetoric, the propaganda had been spread all over Scotland. Its repetition over two centuries had succeeded in creating a national obsession that Catholicism was an 'evil to be extirpated' and that its leader was 'the Man of Sin' its beliefs 'superstitions' and its Mass 'idolatry'. The reformers considered it their 'God given duty' to free those few who still lived in delusion in pockets of the Highlands and by the beginning of the eighteenth century attempts of infiltration into these highland areas by the SSPCK (The Society in Scotland for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge founded 1709) was considered difficult but a not impossible goal.¹⁵

¹² In 1823 Hugh Miller was sent to Gairloch village with a party of fellow-quarrymen, and chapters xii and xiii of *My Schools and Schoolmaster* (Edinburgh, George A Morton 1905), gives a graphic description of his sojourn there. 'The distaff and spindle was still in extensive use in the district, which did not boast a single spinning-wheel, a horse, or a plough, no cart having ever forced its way along the shores of Loch Maree. . . . They tell me, that, for certain, the fairies have not left this part of the country yet.

¹³ W. Doran, 'Bishop Thomas Nicolson: first vicar-apostolic 1695-1718' *Innes Review* xxxix (1988).

¹⁴ I am deeply indebted to Alasdair Roberts for many conversations and information on Catholicism in the Highlands. See his most recent work "Education and Faith in the Catholic Highlands of Scotland" *Recusant History*, 27 (October 2005) pp. 537-558.

¹⁵ James Kirk thinks that the kirk was holding its own well before this in *Patterns of Reform: Continuity and Change in the Reformation Kirk* (Edinburgh, T T Clark 1989) pp. 446-8; N. McD Wittory "'The encrease of popery" in the Highlands 1714-1747' *Innes Review* xvii (1966); Ewan J. Innes, MA(Hons Scot. Hist.) FSA *The Social, Economic & Political Reasons for the Decline of Gaelic in Scotland*. www. ScottishHistory.com

In a survey of the Parish of Glenelg under taken by the SSPCK we get some understanding as to why there was a reluctance by Presbyterian Clergy to enter the area:

The length of the parish of Glenelg, Knoydart & Morar except five miles, will be 14 miles rough and unrideable way. The breadth of this parish will be in some places 6 miles, in another 10 miles and elsewhere 5 miles. Besides this there are two ferries each about two miles broad — the *parish* is very rough.

The minister of that parish when he goes by land will have eight miles to travel to the Synod of Argyll, and a hundred and twenty when he goes by sea, which will require from him, a strong boat and four seamen. Moreover the minister of the said parish has twenty four miles and a ferry to cross when he attends the presb[ter]y, the miles are long and rough and the minister must attend the presbyterie very often by reason of the paucity of the number of the Brethren and the greatness of their toil beyond many presbyteries in Scotland.¹⁶

Although the years following William III's accession, particularly with the famines in the Highlands, were difficult for all Highlanders, Catholics were to suffer most bitterly, first by the restriction on any movements by priests and secondly by the edict to search out and arrest all Catholic priests on sight. To bring this about nine garrisons were sent into the Highlands areas.¹⁷ Priests only avoided capture by hiding up in the mountains and ministering to their people by night. If they ventured out by daylight they were forced to adopt disguise. Intelligence from the garrisons reported that:

they frequently changed their names and habits, and except at the time of their idolatrous (Mass) they go ordinarily in highland habit.¹⁸

An Act of 1700 strengthened the garrison stations hand. They were promised a reward of 500 merks for information leading to the conviction of a priest. It extended the punishments to the laity. This it was thought would bring about information of their movements. It was not successful, but it frightened the Irish priests serving in the Highlands and possibly speeded up the intent to create a Highland Seminary at the earliest opportunity.¹⁹

It had been accepted, even in far off Rome that the Highland church had its own unique needs. Historically, linguistically and spiritually it had more in common with Ireland than the Scottish Lowlands and in previous centuries, had been run from County Antrim. After various largely abortive attempts to set up a seminary in Scotland a Glenlivet house on Gordon land was acquired and Scalan was born.²⁰ Scalan, hidden in the heath and heather of the Gordon lands was to become a working

¹⁶ Kirk, *Reformation Kirk*, p.316

¹⁷ Bruce Lenman, *The Jacobite Risings in Britain, 1689-1746* (London, Eyre Methuen, 1980)

¹⁸ Quotation from Watts, *Hugh MacDonal* pp. 9-10.

¹⁹ John Watts, *Scalan: The Forbidden College 1716-1799* (Edinburgh, Tuckwell Press, 1999) pp. 12-15.

²⁰ Watts, *Scalan* pp. 21-28.

farm as well as a Seminary. From Scalán the Priests journeyed out, visiting places where people had not seen a priest in years. They discovered the people reduced to misery in the backlash that followed the '15 rising. All available funds were given out but these was never enough and although much poverty and unrest was still abroad in the Highlands, Scalán, at least, was now preparing home grown priests.²¹

The one re-occurring theme being taught these young priests during this period, was that they must be able to hold their own in disputation with the well-versed and informed ministers of the Kirk, for by 1723 a new law had been passed in Parliament requiring all citizens to abjure the rights of the Stuart line, and this in the case of Catholics required the abjuration of their faith. Most previous legislation had outlawed the practice of Catholicism but such charges needed evidence to be presented to be proven, the real damage of this new Act was that it put the onus on the Catholics themselves either to prove their innocence by forswearing their faith or admit their guilt by failing to do so.

By the autumn of 1726, troops were harassing the Gordon lands and the seminary at Scalán. The community provided 'safe-houses' nearby when required — but only after personal intervention of the Duke of Gordon, were the students safe to remain there, even though the constant threat was always present.²²

By the 1730s, the SSPCK had expanded into the traditional Catholic areas of Benbecula, Eigg, Canna, Barra & Knoydart — thus creating an urgency for opening a seminary in the West. This was being considered at a time when each move by the church was subject to Government suspicion. While bishops and priests moving between Rome and the Highlands were being monitored by British Government Intelligence, none were found to be carrying letters from the Old Pretender to supporters in Scotland. These letters were all carefully written in cipher.

By 1738, through the interests of King James, Pope Clement gifted money in support of the Scottish Mission and by 1739 the sons of Glengarry, Clanranald, MacNeil of Barra, and MacDonald of Kinlochmoidart were all being offered the opportunity to complete their education at the Scots Colleges in Rome and Paris.²³ Many of them took up this opportunity and being too young to be involved in Culloden lived, and survived their Jacobite fathers. When they returned to the Highlands, ironically some later established the Highland Regiments that served the Crown.²⁴

The aftermath of the '45 rising, brought about the forfeiture of the Highland Estates, the escape into exile of some of the Jacobite Clan Chiefs and along with them the Bishops associated with their forces. This prevented any hope of a return to the Highland seminaries. A short period of rule from afar followed. In 1746, Fr. Alexander Cameron, Lochiel's Jesuit brother, died a prisoner in the hull of a ship in the Thames. Chiefs like Lochiel died in exile in 1748 leaving a family line devoid of

²¹ Watts, *Scalan* pp. 39-43.

²² Watts, *Scalan* pp. 56-61.

²³ J.A Stewart 'The Clan Ranald and Catholic Missionary success 1715-1745' *Innes Review* xlv (1994)

²⁴ See in McCluskey (ed) *Scots College Rome 1600—2000* p. 58; also Rev. William James Anderson's edition of 'Abbé Paul MacPherson's History of the Scots College, Rome,' *Innes Review* xii (1961) pp. 3-172.

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leadership. Lovat was executed, and many lost all hope of returning to their Clan lands. It is thought that in all, up to 1,000 Scots Catholics either died, suffered banishment or fled the country during and after the '45 rising.²⁵

By 1756, however, there was a tradition of Catholics ignoring this ban and returning from banishment. By 1762, the troops were being withdrawn from the Highlands and Islands thus easing the situation and allowing the unimpeded progress of students into Glenlivet. This period, nevertheless, also introduced the events which would change the Scottish Highlands forever, events which would lead to what has traditionally been called the Clearances and to forced migrations of the Highland Clans. Religion played its part. For example, estates once held by the Camerons of Dungallon in Sunart were claimed by the Duke of Argyll and he required all those dwelling on land within his control to embrace the Presbyterian religion.²⁶

The persecution of the Catholics on the South Uist lands of Macdonald of Boisdale contributed to Macdonald of Glenaladale's purchase and transportation of his clan and those Catholics of South Uist who were no longer free to practice their religion, to St John's Isle (now Prince Edward Island) NS. In April 1772 Glenaladale chartered the vessel *Alexander*, crossed the Minch and personally saw to the loading of all those wishing to leave Boisdale's Estates for Nova Scotia. They set off in May 1772 into what they hoped would be a life of religious freedom.²⁷

Another case where the influence of anti Catholic prejudice appears to have been exerted was in the Forfeited Estates of Macdonald of Kinlochmoidart. These lands were not returned to the family for over 40 years, and only then at the conversion of the young Kinlochmoidart to the Presbyterian faith²⁸

Yet in spite of all this upheaval the Catholic Church managed to carry the load through these years until by 1793 the first repeal of the Penal Code was brought about by the Act for the relief of Scottish Catholics. This received the royal assent in May, 1793. Practically complete liberty was granted to them thirty years later under the provisions of the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829.

Was credit for the survival of the Catholic Church in the Highlands to be attributed to the early dedication of the Celtic missionaries who created the culture of living with, and for their flock, or was it due to the stubborn determined nature of the Highlander who would hold unswerving to a belief? Whichever is the case, the proof is still there, the Catholic Church has survived in the Highlands. The Old Faith remains.

²⁵ John S. Gibson, *The Gentle Lochiel: The Cameron Chief and Bonnie Prince Charlie* (National Museums of Scotland, 1995)

²⁶ See Dodgshon, *From Chiefs to Landlords*, passim.

²⁷ The story has been told in numerous Canadian histories as well as on South Uist itself.

²⁸ *Clan Donald Magazine* No 5 (1971) Online article on The Macdonalds of Kinlochmoidart