



The Practice of Medicine on Lewis (supplementary documents)

1. The Late Dr. Charles M. Macrae (from Highland News, Saturday May 8, 1909)

The Late Dr Charles M MacRae

Ablest and Most Popular of Lewismen

It is with feelings of deep regret that we read in this week's chronicle the death of Dr. Charles M. MacRae - Lewis's own grand old man. Born at the manse of Barvas on 18th February 1818 he had attained the ripe old age of 91 years, yet not till three years ago had to stop, owing to growing infirmities, to relinquish the active practice of his profession. Some two and a half years ago he had a serious illness, since when he was confined to the house, and his familiar figure disappeared from our streets and places of public meeting, leaving a blank that no man living could fill. In recent months he had been slowly but surely sinking, and the end which was thus not unexpected came about midnight on Monday. Lewismen everywhere will mourn the loss of our island's ablest and best loved son.

Dr. MacRae commenced the practice of medicine in Stornoway about the year 1819, entering at that time into partnership with Dr. Roderick Millar of revered memory. His university studies embraced arts, theology and medicine, and extended over twelve years. His medical course was taken at Edinburgh and was an exceptionally brilliant one. He was gold medallist in Sir James Y. Simpson's class, then one of the most renowned medical classes in Europe. In 1848, with three other graduates in medicine, he obtained a gold medal for his thesis. His subject we believe was the 'Antiseptic Properties of Peat Smoke'. Had he elected to cut out for himself a career in some of the large centres of population, his wide and deep culture, his rare talents and medical skill, would speedily have placed him in the front rank of his profession. With a Lewisman's devotion to his island home, however he chose to give his life to the service of his fellow Islesmen. Turning his back on the honours, the distinction, the preferment and the wealth that lay within his grasp he retraced his steps to his native island, where, as he well knew, there awaited him a life of hard toil in comparative obscurity. With at the best, but a modest subsistence. He knew the alternatives and he made the heroic choice. For that alone he deserved what was his in richest measure, the loving esteem of all true Lewis hearts.

For at least a quarter of a century Dr. MacRae shared with Dr. Millar the Herculean task of supplying the medical attendance called for by every parish in the Lews - a population of close on 30,000 souls scattered over an area of 650 square miles. For Dr. MacRae 'a special province' was what he used to term the western circuit - from the Butt to the Gallon - while he was also supposed to assist in the eastern circuit, extending from the Butt to Kebbock Head, and from that point westwards to Mealista in Uig! Little wonder that he ultimately went 'on strike' and declined any longer to cross professionally, *Roisuabhal*, *Eathcal* or *Alt Leirabha*, with the result which he intended that the Parochial Boards were forced to procure separate medical supply for each parish. Owing to the temporary illness of his colleague, Dr. Millar at the time of a terrible epidemic, which proved dreadfully fatal, Dr. MacRae had as we once heard him relate, to face the dreadful situation single-handed. Lady Matheson at that time placed her own coachman with her carriage at his disposal to expedite the visiting of the widely scattered patients.

There is consolation now in remembering that the community he served so splendidly took the opportunity during his lifetime of giving public expression to their sense of his worth and appreciation of his great labours for the benefit of the town and island. On Christmas day 1895 when he had almost attained his professional jubilee he was presented in presence of a gathered representative of all classes in the community, with an illuminated address and purse containing two hundred sovereigns, Mrs MacRae at the same time receiving a solid silver tray with a tea and coffee service. The address so well expresses the public esteem of the departed that we quote the following from it:

We, your friends far and near, fellow Islesmen and others, who have long recognised your worth and services to the community of Stornoway and the whole Island of Lewis, along with a more substantial token of our regard and appreciation, to present to you at this time our written congratulations upon your long period of service, now close on fifty years. A distinguished "alumnus" of Edinburgh University with a prospect and possibility opening up before you of a more lucrative and influential career elsewhere, you chose rather to devote your talents and labours towards the benefit of your fellow Islesmen. This you have done with a rare generosity and self-denial all these many years. Along with your colleague the late Dr. Roderick Millar,

another name honourable to the profession and dear to Lewismen, you toiled night and day through storm and shine, and often without any reward than that of the self-conscious happiness of those who do their duty, and the silent approval of all good men. Tributes to your character and to those self-sacrificing labours of yours have flowed from all quarters and classes. Too tardily, we feel has this expression of regard and appreciation come, but it comes, we can assure you, as the expression of long cherished thoughts, that now find utterance in however inadequate a fashion. In honouring you we are honouring a profession that has held, and still holds, among its ranks some of the noblest men of our kind. We know none nobler than yourself, and we feel that whilst others have by pen or otherwise been paying well-earned tributes to their unknown to us - Maclures we were called to do so to our well known MacRae. "But not by your professional services alone have you placed your countrymen and others under debt. A native of Barvas and a son of the manse you have upheld the best traditions of your native island and that of the manses of Scotland and of the Highlands. Beneath the garb of your accustomed modesty men have been forced to recognise a rare culture and breadth of knowledge. To you, those of your profession look for the adequate treatment of local questions affecting health and disease and men of science and research justly rely on you for information and questions of archaeological and topographical interest. As token of this, you have been worthily chosen to write on your own native isle in the pages of our Encyclopaedia Britannica. We are proud of one whom others than ourselves delight to honour and treat as our representative Lewisman. Nor is this all. You have ever placed yourself in the van in every movement for the good of the community and island. As well in your extra professional and social contact with us, as in your professional, you have ever shown yourself the same kind hearted, generous man. No one in the community holds the place you do. The poor bless you; we honour you. The friend of all, and the enemy of none, we regard you as an ornament to your profession an honour and pride to your island, a credit to the name of gentleman and Christian.

Returning thanks for the public testimonial, Dr. MacRae took the opportunity to pay a fine tribute to his former colleague, using words which, we think apply with equal appropriateness to himself. He said:

I have referred repeatedly to my late much lamented and greatly esteemed fellow labourer. I would fain recall a few of his beautiful traits of character and retrace in memory the many happy days in sunshine and shade we worked lovingly together. Of all the practitioners I ever knew he seemed to me best fitted by nature and habit, by mental and physical capabilities for the Herculean labour that devolved upon him nil unaided and alone in his manhood's prime. To me as to all others, he was ever gentle, genial and gentlemanly ever buoyant and ready for duty; ever conscientious and painstaking in its discharge ever choosing the hardest and most trying work, the heaviest labouring oar. To my thinking, none in his special sphere of labour in the performance of duties so varied and so best with difficulties, left a brighter record, or on the part of Lewismen merited a more loving remembrance and memorial than Roderick Millar.

These noble words, with no alteration but a change of name, all will concur and are true alike of Roderick Millar and his kindred spirit and fellow labourer, Dr. Charles MacRae.

The deceased took a deep and practical interest in everything that concerned the physical, moral or spiritual welfare of the people of Lewis. He was an Hon. Sheriff substitute and a Justice of the Peace and for some years was chairman of the Stornoway School Board. For the long period of 57 years he filled (jointly with Dr. Millar down till 1885) the office of Medical Officer of Health for Stornoway, resigning in 1906.

All that Dr Charles Macrae was in the life of our island community during his long and strenuous career no pen can record. The most distinguished Lewisman of his time, he was one of the humblest and most modest of men. He has left on the island not only the influence of his work, but the even greater influence of his character. His name will retain the fragrance for future generations. In an article entitled 'A Typical Highland Physician' which appeared in the 'Canadian - American' in 1897, the writer, referring to Dr Macrae concludes:

No man in the whole Island of Lewis was ever honoured and loved as he was. No man in the Islands, among clergy or laity, ever deserved to be honoured and loved as he was. No braver, truer, gentler, spirit ever animated a Highland doctor. His self-sacrificing heroism and his great, loving, sympathetic heart, will be incrustated and enshrined in the annals of this Island of the northern seas. All we Lewismen, scattered over the face of the earth, are better for having known him, and according to the measure of our love, for him, may be gauged our own capacity for right-thinking, right-doing, and right-living for evermore.

Dr Charles Macrae

We will not mourn as in defeat or gloom
The chant we raise hath triumph at its heart
For he whose dust we render to the tomb

Had lived right nobly and performed his part
He toiled unto the setting of the sun
He rest in peace, the long day's labour done

He was compassionate to human woe
Gave ready recognition to all worth
But vanity and folly moved him so
That softest laughter in his heart had birth
Like satire schooled to sweetness by the years
Or sportive sunbeams in some mist of tears

With him is hushed the last voice of an age
Whose men were valiant ion good or ill
They walked with God, or stormed across the stage
Resolved to have their day and work their will
Not always wise or good, they ne'er were small
Sinner and saint, they now are vanished all.

Our honoured Doctor! Lay him to rest
Beneath the rough and of the isle he served
In lent love, giving his ungrudging beat
He made his sacrifice, and never swerved
For deepest in his nature ruled his mind
Of Him who tells us, "They that lose shall find"

R.M.R.

2. Looking Back For Eighty Years (*newspaper article ref. to Dr Dugald Sinclair*)

There can be few people left in Lewis, if there are any at all who remember a young doctor who came to the island almost eighty years ago to take up practice in the parish of Lochs. But the doctor in question has very vivid memories of his time on the Long Island now in retirement at Balfon, he celebrated his 100th birthday on November 4th.

Dr Dugald Sinclair is a sprightly centenarian in the best tradition and though he admits to being unreliable on exact dates he has retained a clear memory of the different stages of his long life.

He was born at Melfort in Argyllshire where his father was employed in a gun-powder factory. As the demand for gun powder fell his father moved with the family to the Oban area. As a young lad Dugald learned Gaelic from the farm folk though 'we were not encouraged to speak it'.

After two years at Glasgow Academy he attended Glasgow University graduating in 1882 and now almost certainly the university's oldest graduate. Then came two years as assistant to a Dr. Anderson in Dennistoun where he worked without holidays for two years for £70 and his board and 'seldom the use of the good doctor's precious brougham mare'.

It was then that he saw the advertisement for the post in Lewis at £150 a year guaranteed and in addition what he could make from private practice. Memory fails him when he tries to remember where he stayed in Lochs parish, but it was 'Midway between Keose and somewhere that means in Gaelic the place where you get salmon'.

Dr Sinclair was surprised to discover when he arrived that there was no house for the doctor and he stayed with Mr Crawford in the school house. Mr Crawford was also an Argyll man but with longer residential qualifications and he was able to act as interpreter when Dr Sinclair's Argyll Gaelic was inadequate for understanding his patients' complaints.

One Lewis word for an embrocation puzzled him one day. He thought he had stumbled on a native cure until Mr Anderson enlightened him that the new word was merely vinegar spoken with a Gaelic accent.

Dr Sinclair was in Lewis when the crofters were agitating against the establishment of a deer forest on crofting land and I saw the crofters forcibly expelled from an estate which they had entered in protest. A 'man of war' was sent to investigate the rising with an official from Edinburgh on board.

'I can't remember the ship's name' says Dr Sinclair but the official was a McNeill. The local folk gave a ceilidh and the crew enjoyed themselves anyway.

Dr Sinclair stayed only a few years in Lewis returning to go onto general practice in Maryhill - then a separate burgh from Glasgow. He retired in the 1920's and lived by himself until he sold his house last year.

Now he is largely confined to his room. Asked if he would make any changes in his life if he had it over again, he says 'Well I would be a sheep farmer from my early kindly associations, that is what I always wanted to be.'

3. Extracts from the Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the Condition of the Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland 1884 - 1891

A. Special meeting of the Board held in Keose on the 10th January to confer with Sheriff Fraser and Mr. MacNeill.

Present: The Rev. Ewen Campbell Minister of the Parish.
The Rev. Roderick MacRae, F.C. Minister, Carlway.
The Rev. John McDougall, F.C. Minister, Leurbost.
William MacKay Esq. Chamberlain of Lewis.
Messrs. John MacLeod, Crofter, Cromore.
Alexander MacLean, Crofter, Leurbost.
Roderick Martin, Farmer, Crobeg.
Murdo Morrison, Crofter, Laxay.
Dr Sinclair, Medical Officer of the Parish.

The Rev Mr Campbell, Chairman

Mr McNeill laid before the meeting the following questions:

1. Is there, or is there likely to be before the close of the present winter destitution in the parish?
 - a) The meeting, after discussion resolved that there are at present some cases of absolute destitution in the parish.
 - b) In the opinion of the meeting, though they had no expectation of widespread destitution the condition of the people will be one of marked but not of unusual poverty during the spring and early summer.
2. What steps have been taken or are proposed by the Parochial Board to meet such destitution?
 - a) The inspector is fully empowered to relieve cases in which starvation is threatened and does frequently relieve such cases.
3. Is there some epidemic (either general or in any particular district) or such severity as to require special measure for its alleviation?
 - a) There has been a very general epidemic of measles in the parish, and there are cases of enteric fever, but the epidemic of measles is dying out. The disease has recently appeared in new townships, and may spread. The schools have been closed whenever the circumstances seemed to require it.
4. What steps are proposed by the Parochial Board as local authority?
 - a) The medical officer has full discretion and his orders are never disobeyed by the inspector except when his knowledge of the circumstances of a household causes him to modify them.
(signed) EWEN CAMPBELL, Chairman.

Extracted from the Minutes of the Parochial Board of the Parish of Lochs by H.M.L. Ross, Inspector.

B. Statement of Acting Medical Officer, Lochs

Mr. John Dewar M.B. C.M., being interrogated, replied:

I have been in practice since September, and came to the Lochs in October to supply Dr Sinclair's place during his temporary absence. When I arrived there was no epidemic disease in the parish but six weeks later measles appeared, of a mild type on the whole, but with occasional severe examples, the disease affected all classes; - cottars, squatters, and crofters - young and old, in fact all susceptible. In a township called Laxay it was stated to me that only one individual escaped. In all, I have attended quite 200 cases, and there have been seven or eight deaths, mostly of children, so far as my observation extended, the deaths were all among children.

I observed no sign of malnutrition and nothing, I can safely say, approaching to starvation. In one case my patients complained of having no food in the house. I privately assisted to supply their necessities, reported their case to the Assistant Inspector of the Poor who also relieved them and gave a line to the Inspector for stimulants which were promptly furnished. This family had potatoes.

I found no house without bedding, nor was any complaint of want of bedding made to me. I think it probable that I should have had complaints if bedding has been deficient.

The houses are very bad, having cattle under the same roof, and using the same door as the inmates.

I saw, of course, stories of destitution in the newspapers, but I heard nothing of it in the parish, there is poverty, no doubt and there may be destitution which I have not seen, but it did not come under my observation, nor did I hear it mentioned on the spot; I can hardly credit its existence. I did not apply for my medical fees, but in a few

cases they were tendered. The epidemic of measles has spread to new townships and several schools are closed.

Whenever I have had occasion to make orders on the Inspector they have always been instantly complied with; I am satisfied with his attention. I was acting as Poor Law Medical Officer.

John Dewar M.B. C.M.

C. Statement of Dr. Sinclair, Medical Officer, Lochs

Mr Dugald Sinclair, M.B. C.M. Glas, being interrogated replied:

I have been five years in practice and during the past two year's medical officer of the parish of Lochs, where I reside. I speak Gaelic, and know the people intimately. Their condition now is worse than last winter, notwithstanding the good crop they have less money and less credit; but for the crop, in my opinion there would have been starvation this winter, and I look forward with apprehension to the spring and early summer when the potatoes and corn will be exhausted and the failure of credit will be still more severely felt.

For the temporary relief of the people, I would suggest road making as a good form of testing labour on which large masses of men might be simultaneously employed; it would also be necessary to assist the parochial board in relieving those families which, though not strictly paupers have yet no wage earner. The sanitary conditions could hardly be worse, but the habits are ineradicable.

(signed) Dugald Sinclair M.B.

D. Statement of Medical Officer of Barvas

Mr Roderick Ross L.R.C.P. and S.Ed. being interrogated, replied:

I have been 13 years in practice and three years medical officer at Barvas. I was previously for 10 years medical officer of Lochs and I am a native of that parish. I am thus well acquainted with the circumstances and mode of living of the people. I look forward with great apprehension to the future because very soon the food will be exhausted, the people have neither money nor credit, and there is no prospect of a profitable herring fishing this year. Stock, such as is reared here, is unsaleable at any rate, till the beginning of July when the market is held. It is also a fact that much of the stock has been promised to merchants in payment of food already supplied. Unless some lucky chance befall, I do not see how starvation can be escaped. I attribute the present crisis to over population.

I observe in my practice frequent evidence of mal-nutrition, especially among children and old people. In the case of children the diet, mainly potatoes is unsuitable and inadequate; their appearance when young clearly indicated that they are insufficiently nourished.

(signed) Rodk. Ross

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