

# The Prophet of Waternish

The Rev. Donald MacCallum was one of the few Highland ministers who was unafraid to mix politics with religion at the height of the land agitation of the late 19th century. His unflinching support for the cause of crofters in his parishes in Morvern, Arisaig, Waternish, Tiree and Lochs earned him the respect of the crofters and the ire of the landlords.

DONALD MEEK, of the Celtic Department of Glasgow University, looks at the turbulent life of the minister who became known as "The Prophet of Waternish."

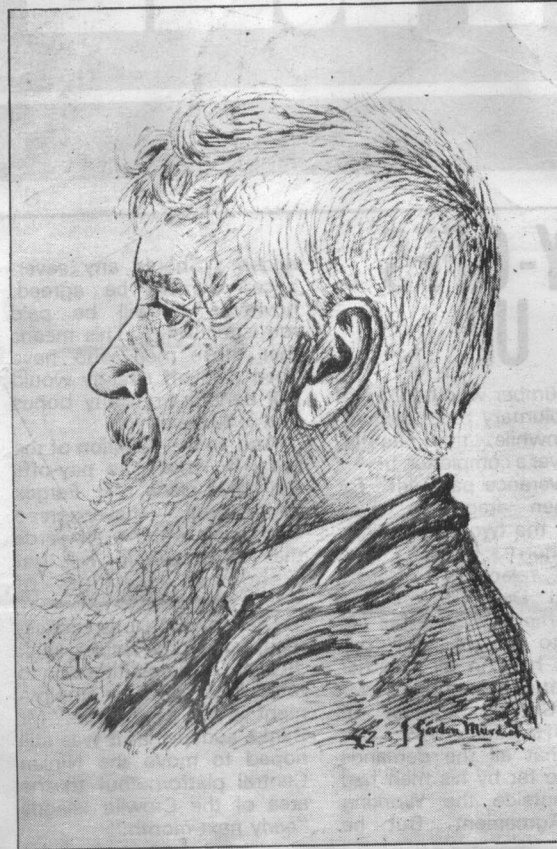
**M**INISTERS in the Highlands in the 19th century were better known for fire - and - brimstone sermons than radical political speeches. Many of them, in both the Free Church and the Church of Scotland, studiously avoided any overt political involvement, although there were numerous occasions when their political colours showed rather clearly.

One remarkable exception to this rule was the Rev. Donald MacCallum, who was quite unafraid to mix politics and religion, and who made little distinction between a sermon and a political speech. MacCallum was at the peak of his career between 1880 and 1890, one of the most important decades in Highland history, when crofters fought for security of tenure and fair rents, winning a major victory in 1886 with the passing of the Crofters' Holdings (Scotland) Act.

For more than a century the crofters' position had been consistently eroded by the clearing of people from the land and a steady increase in rent which had reduced many of them to poverty. Much of this was done in the interests of improvement, the term frequently used by landlords who were intent on making their vast estates commercially viable by introducing enormous sheep farms and deer forests, which often swallowed up large tracts of crofting land.

In view of the very thorough nature of this process (in areas like Mull and Morvern, for example, where there are few people left today) the resurgence of the 1880s was remarkable. It came mainly from districts where the old population had resisted clearing, or had managed to maintain a precarious existence.

As a Church of Scotland minister, Donald MacCallum served in five parishes in which the crofting population was still strong enough to put up a good fight. He himself was an unflinching and utterly committed supporter of their cause, and he eventually held the unique distinction of being imprisoned for the unministerial act of "inciting the lieges to violence and class hatred."



Rev. MacCallum: a committed supporter of the crofters' cause.

**D**onald MacCallum was born in Barravulin, in the Craignish district of Argyll, in 1849. The district had felt the effects of clearing and eviction a generation before he was born, but there was still a strong Gaelic community in existence. The community had many traditions relating to the atrocities of the evictions, and MacCallum was clearly influenced by these as a boy. His family as a whole seems to have been influenced by their radical background, since Donald's brother, Malcolm, himself a Church of Scotland minister, became an equally active politician, standing as

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Commission. The impact of his speech is reflected in a poem by the Skye poetess, Mary MacPherson (Mairi Mhor nan Oran) who was present at the meeting: "Chunnaic sinn bristeadh na faire Is neoil na trallealachd air chall, An latha sheas MacCaluim laimh ruinn

*Aig Beul-Atha-nan-Tri-Allt.*  
("We saw the dawn break, and the clouds of thralldom flee away, the day MacCallum stood beside us, at Fairy Bridge.")

One of the main reasons for MacCallum's prominence was indeed his ability to construct extremely eloquent, and often very moving speeches. Early in his career, he had embraced the socio-religious doctrine that God had given the land to the people of the Highlands, and that the landlords had come between the people and their God.

This line had been taken by John Murdoch, who in 1882 had published a pamphlet entitled 'The Land Question answered from the Bible.' The pamphlet was published in Gaelic and English, and consisted of a list of texts and passages mainly from the Old Testament, in which the relationship between Jehovah and His chosen people, the Israelites, is most clearly demonstrated. This could be extended to include the spiritual Israel,

become an important figure when agitation broke out in the 1880s, were in great demand as speakers at these meetings. It is apparent that MacCallum's view on the crofters' position owed a great deal to Murdoch.

MacCallum's first parish was Morvern, where he acted as assistant to the Rev. John MacLeod of Eumary, otherwise known as the "High Priest of Morvern." MacLeod was the brother of the famous Gaelic writer, Dr. Norman MacLeod 'Caraid nan Gaidheal,' and it may be that the young MacCallum was enticed to Morvern because of the high literacy reputation of the MacLeod family, since he himself was an inspiring, though not very successful, poet.

If MacCallum learned little about poetry, he certainly learned a lot about the history of the Highlands, and he was horrified at the extent of clearing and eviction in the Morvern district. Between 1802 and 1881, the population of Morvern had fallen from 2,083 to 819. MacCallum lost no time in setting to work to encourage the remaining crofting population to stand up for its rights. It was a slow process, probably because the man-power of the area had been severely depleted and had little initiative left.

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Still, there is evidence that MacCallum's efforts were appreciated by the people, although it was not until 1884, when he was minister in Skye, that he succeeded in getting the Morvern crofters to form a branch of the Highland Land Law Reform Association — a body later known as the Land League, which was the main pro-crofter party.

Arisaig and South Morar was MacCallum's next parish, of which he became minister in 1882. The position of the crofters on the Arisaig was little different from that in Morvern. There had been a succession of estate owners who seem to have cared little for the population. There was a lot of overcrowding on poor ground, and a lot of poverty. In 1883, the then proprietor of the estate had drawn up what MacCallum called the 'Seventeen Commandments of Arisaig' — a set of estate regulations which made his own position pre-eminent and unassailable. In later years, MacCallum was to claim that the 'Commandments' had made him take up the crofters' cause with even greater commitment.

When the Napier Commission visited Arisaig to enquire into

crofters' grievances in 1883, MacCallum gave evidence on behalf of the Arisaig people, fearlessly condemning maladministration of the estate, and singling out the 'Commandments' for special condemnation. His evidence was skilfully and eloquently constructed, and his brave stand was greatly appreciated by the crofters, the more so since MacCallum was not concerned with religious differences in an area which was predominantly Roman Catholic.

Early in 1884, MacCallum moved to the parish of Hallin, in the Waternish district of Skye. This move was scarcely accidental, since Skye was the focal point of the fight for crofters' rights. In 1882, the celebrated Battle of the Braes had taken place, when a group of crofters had clashed with Glasgow policemen who had been deployed by the notorious Sheriff Ivory to arrest some of their number.

From that point, the agitation had increased, and when MacCallum went to Hallin, the pot was well and truly on the boil. And he had no intention of cooling the fire. Indeed, it seems wholly likely that he was invited to Waternish by radical crofters connected with the church. The church at Hallin was very poorly attended, and had been since 1843, when the crofters in the Highlands, almost to a man, had followed the new, anti-landlord Free Church, but it still had sufficient energy, however unspiritual, to invite MacCallum.

The position was made easier since the parish was quoad sacra, and the church was entirely outwith the jurisdiction of its feudal superior, Captain Allan MacDonald of Waternish. MacCallum's arrival in Skye was viewed with dismay by his colleagues in the Church of Scotland, since his high level of

commitment to the crofters' cause highlighted their own pro-landlord interests. Indeed, in 1886, he was hauled before the Presbytery of Skye and severely censured for his part in creating unrest.

MacCallum was extremely active in Skye, in his own parish and throughout the island. On 23rd April, 1884, he was elected Chairman of the newly formed Waternish branch of the Highland Land Law Reform Association. On 13th May, he was principal speaker at a mass-meeting of crofters held at Fairy Bridge to discuss the recently published report of the Napier

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wherever they were, and in the Highlands of Scotland, the people were only too willing to accept arguments, even political ones, on this level. The revivals of the previous century had made them a devout people, well versed in their Bibles and aware of their inclusion in the spiritual Israel.

In his speeches, and in his sermons, MacCallum used many of the texts and illustrations in Murdoch's pamphlets, emphasising the language of the Old Testament prophets to convey urgency and an almost apocalyptic atmosphere. He became known, not without good reason, as the 'Prophet of Waternish.' Frequently he chose New Testament illustrations, drawing skilful, emotive parallels, as for instance in his speech to the Land Law Reform Conference at Portree in 1885: *"In your number, zeal and power I see darkness fleeing from the light, mercy in the place of oppression coming, and justice gaining the victory over tyranny. As Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha of Bethany, was held in the sleep of death four days, so for many years were the Highlanders, our brethren, held in the sleep of slavery. In the fearful darkness of the house of death, he that was dead heard the quickening voice of the Son of God saying to him 'Lazarus, come forth,' and he came out of the grave still bound with the grave-clothes . . . His quickening voice our brethren heard in the house of bondage, and they are coming out."*

Not altogether surprisingly, MacCallum's activities led to a head-on clash between himself and the proprietor of the Waternish estate, Captain Allan MacDonald. MacDonald was reckoned to be a good landlord in Skye terms, but the enthusiasm with which crofters formed a branch of the Highland Land Law Reform Association in the district after MacCallum's arrival was a

Donald MacCall

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portent of trouble.

Early in 1885, 14 men were committed for trial in connection with the deforcement of a sheriff officer when he attempted to serve writs on crofters in Waternish. By June, MacDonald had lodged a suit for slander against MacCallum in the Court of Session, in which he alleged that "particularly within the last year, he had endeavoured to disturb the good relations subsisting between the pursuer and his crofter tenants." MacDonald also accused Mac-

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Callum of calling him untruthful in slanderous terms.

MacCallum replied that he had found great poverty in Waternish, resulting from "the undue use of the power of the landlord," and that he had referred to this in speeches and letters. He claimed that his remarks about MacDonald's untruthfulness were prompted by the latter's allegations about his neglect of parish duties while preaching his "pernicious doctrine" in the islands, and promptly lodged a similar suit against MacDonald!

The two suits seemed to have cancelled one another out, as neither party appears to have proceeded much further. MacCallum's arrest and imprisonment came at the end of 1886, when a last minute attempt was made by the authorities under Sheriff Ivory to collect arrears of rent in Skye. Ivory probably "had it in" for MacCallum, since in 1885, MacCallum had ridiculed him publicly by making him out to

be a blasphemer!

Whatever the reason, MacCallum was arrested along with other crofter ring-leaders, and lodged in Portree Jail, where he spent Sunday, 14th November, thinking about his church in Waternish, bereft of its minister. He was released on bail the following day, but as he himself relates, "no evidence of my ever having incited the lieges to violence and class hatred was produced," and the case was dropped.

The attempt to collect arrears of rent in Skye in November, 1886, was the last major incident in the agitation there, and following the enforcing of the new Act, things quietened down. It meant, in effect, that MacCallum was not as busy as he had once been, and he seems to have looked around for other areas where he could exert his influence.

It would seem that he was in Tiree in 1885, possibly campaigning for the election of that year, and he was familiar with the situation there. In Tiree, the passing of the Act had met with disapproval, as it did in many other parts of the Highlands, because it neglected the large cottar population who had no land at all, and lived very

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precisely as fishermen. After the passing of the Act, Tíree cottars, incensed by land-hunger and pro-landlord in-fighting in the local branch of the Land League, occupied the farm of Greenhill, and had to be removed by the presence of Royal Marines, dispatched from Plymouth at the behest of the Duke of Argyll.

Late in 1887, with the land question still unresolved, a call was sent to MacCallum by the members of the quoad sacra parish of Heylipol. The call was rescinded on the instruction of the Duke of Argyll, who "felt it his duty to tell them that in his opinion it would be injurious to the moral interests of the people that Mr MacCallum should take the position of pastor to them." Having realised that a quoad sacra parish need not listen to its feudal superior, and in any case that patronage had ceased in 1874, the people sustained the call a second time, and MacCallum was inducted on 22nd December.

As was his custom, he immediately set to work to help the crofters and cottars, becoming Chairman of the local branch of the Land League, and being elected to the parochial board, much to the disgust of its pro-landlord members! At one of the first meetings of the League with MacCallum as Chairman, a resolution was passed protesting against "any scheme of emigration until all the land available for cultivation in the Highlands and Islands be used both to form new crofts for the landless and to enlarge the holdings of the crofters."

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crofters, based on the relative value of their ground. His involvement brought a new orderliness and sense of purpose to the local branch of the League.

By April, 1888, the League had secured a verbal promise from the Duke of Argyll that the land under lease to farmers in the island would be given to the cottars when the leases expired. In reply, MacCallum asked the very pertinent question, when this would be.

Unfortunately, reports from the Tíree Land League are not available after this point, but it is clear that the first tacks were not broken and given to crofters until the early 20th century, and agitation continued in the island until 1921.

MacCallum himself left the island in the summer of 1889, one of the reasons being the extreme poverty in which he found himself. As his church had gone against the wishes of its feudal superior, he was denied the very necessary supplement to his salary which the Duke of Argyll was expected to give if he approved an appointment. His

salary, claimed the Secretary of the Land League, would not have kept him in pocket-money. The crofters and cottars of the island showed their appreciation of his efforts by presenting him with a diamond ring, and preserved his memory by building a large cairn, 'Tur Mhic Caluim,' ('MacCallum's Tower'), in a prominent spot overlooking the townships of Moss and Kilkenneth, within his parish.

MacCallum's next move was to the parish of Lochs in Lewis, where he was to remain until 1920. While he was in Tíree, he had shown considerable interest in agitation in Lewis, and the local Land League had frequently made substantial gifts towards the relief of poverty in Lochs.

Early in 1888, hungry crofters had taken part in the legendary Great Deer Raid on Park deer-forest, killing a large number of deer, in an attempt to highlight their predicament. The ring-leader in this exploit had been the schoolmaster at Balallan, Donald MacRae, himself known as 'Balallan' because of his activities while he was there. MacRae's departure from Lewis coincided with a vacancy in Lochs Parish Church, and it was largely to fill the vacuum created by 'Balallan's' departure that MacCallum was called there.

The methods used were entirely unconventional, since the parish was strongly Free Church, and the Established Church almost devoid of support. Apparently at MacRae's instigation a large number of Free Church members rejoined the parish church, and sent out a call to MacCallum, returning to their own church when the call had been sustained! Such an ironic twist on the part of the seceders of 1843 evoked a great deal of cynical and amusing comment in the press and magazines of the time.

Yet, although great things were expected of MacCallum, he seems to have had a comparatively quiet time in Lochs. The agitation had died out by 1889, and MacCallum appears to have settled down to the life of a conventional parish minister, noted for his peculiar Argyllshire Gaelic! Occasionally, he left his parish to visit his old haunts in Skye and elsewhere. He spent some time composing Gaelic verse, which is strangely lacking in power and imagination, compared with the mighty speeches of his hey-day.

It is interesting to note that after MacCallum left the parish of Lochs the extensive glebe land attached to the manse was divided up into crofts. There is no record of other glebes being similarly converted in other parts of the Highlands. So it is very likely that MacCallum had an active hand in this land settlement. This would be a fitting and

enduring testimonial to his life-long struggle on behalf of the crofters.

In 1920, MacCallum retired to Glendale in Skye, where he lived beside his colleague in land agitation in the island, John MacPherson, the famous 'Glendale Martyr.' In 1926, he came out of retirement to unveil a monument to his fellow campaigner, Donald MacRae, 'Balallan,' at the Western Necropolis in Glasgow, and in 1928, he made one of his last speeches at a meeting of Labour Party supporters in Portree. He died at Glendale in 1929, and is buried in the cemetery there.

Donald MacCallum played a very important part in the land agitation of the 1880s. As a minister, he helped to give the movement respectability, and

the crofters themselves were encouraged by his fearless stand as a member of the establishment. There were one or two other ministers who helped the people in a similar way, but none was so utterly committed, and none endured so much hardship as he did.

The second paragraph of the printed address presented to him by Tíree crofters when he left the island sums up the impact which he made on crofters generally: "O eagal thrailleil smachd nan uachdaran, agus o shlat-sgiursaidh mhaoris mhinistearan, thug thu saorsa do mhoran." ("From the slavish fear of landlords' jurisdiction, and from the scourging rod of officers and ministers, you released many.")

DONALD E. MEEK