



Rev. Donald MacCallum - Rebel Minister and Crofters' Champion

The 19th century was an unhappy period in the annals of the Highland crofting community. Life was hard for crofter and cottar alike and many years of persecution and harsh treatment by unscrupulous landlords was bound, in the end, to lead to civil unrest and even open rebellion.

The Land League, a form of crofters union, began to spring up in many townships throughout the Highlands. The main aim of these bodies was to stiffen crofter resistance to the landlords' efforts to drive them from their small patches of land by the exorbitant rents and all other means at their disposal.

The Land Leagues in the main were made up of crofters and cottars and had little or no support from the middle classes or the Church. The Established Church did nothing to assist its poor and under-privileged parishioners for fear of offending the landed gentry. It enjoyed many privileges from the landlord and under no circumstances was it prepared to put these in jeopardy.

Inhuman

There is always the exception and in the 1880s there appeared a crofters' champion in the person of the Rev. Donald MacCallum, a Church of Scotland Minister from Argyll. Donald, a crofter's son from Craignish in the Parish of Kilmartin, was born in 1849 and died in 1929. He was involved in the crofter's cause in three islands, namely Skye, Tiree and Lewis. Very little has been written about his activities and most of what is contained in this article has been gleaned from oral sources.

As far as I could establish, he arrived in Skye in 1883 when he accepted a call to the Parish of Waternish. It was here that he became involved in the crofters' struggle against the inhuman conditions prevailing, conditions that had led to the famous Battle of the Braes in 1882.

On his arrival at Waternish, he found that most of the people had left the Church and all he could muster for a service was about a dozen souls. The building itself was in near ruins, and the condition of the parishioners' houses was even worse. Their dwellings were little more than hovels, black houses built of earth and stone - most of them without a chimney.

Little wonder that a great number of the inhabitants were victims of such diseases as tuberculosis, diphtheria and bronchitis. Sanitation was nonexistent and the lack of hygiene and medical care led to a very high mortality rate, especially among the younger population. The peasantry lived in abject poverty, without access to either common grazing or outrun.

This deplorable state of affairs must have left the young Minister a very disillusioned man. Anger and frustration boiled within him and he decided he could no longer sit on the sidelines while his parishioners starved and died. He would, as the servant of God, do his utmost to help his flock to break the chains of bondage that tied them to a callous landlord and uncaring Church. To him the Laird appeared to be leading a life of luxury while his tenants starved and died in his service. And the Church stood aloof, as if blind to the poverty that surrounded it.

At a meeting of the Land League, MacCallum was invited to speak on behalf of the crofters and this he did most eloquently. Quoting text after text from the Bible he made a scathing attack on both Laird and Church. 'It is the sacred duty of the Church to help the poor and needy', he cried. 'Yet it stands by and does nothing!' But his message fell on deaf ears, for the Skye Presbytery had no intention of getting involved in a fight with the landed gentry. The John the Baptist Church of Waternish was but a lone voice crying in a wilderness of greed and self-interest.

Nevertheless the wee Minister from Argyll was a doughty fighter, with an enduring belief that justice must prevail. He had a Master to serve and that Master was not in the Presbytery but the Lord Jesus Christ. Warming to his theme, and I quote from the Rev. Norman MacLean's book 'Set Free', he said:

We have among us those who have meat. They are the Lairds, the factors and the lawyers who neither sow nor reap. And who are they that have no meat? The toilers who produce it. They are the slaves of an unjust and iniquitous system.

Courage

It must be said that in spite of his fiery utterances Donald MacCallum was a man of God, a man without hatred or guile - a humble servant of the Master he strove so manfully to serve. He believed that it was the system, so unjust in all its complexities that had led to the situation now existing, not only in Skye but also in many other parts of the Highlands. It was a legacy from the '45 rebellion, when sheep and deer became more valuable than human beings. It certainly took courage, a virtue that MacCallum seemed to possess in abundance, for a Minister of a minority Church to speak with such ardour against those who held sway in Waternish. But mindful of his own humble beginnings and of the message of the Gospel, he was no longer prepared to stand aloof from the suffering and degradation that surrounded him. He came to the meeting as the Minister of a broken down Church but left it as a hero.

His fame soon spread to other parts of the Island where agitation was rife and he was invited to other townships to preach the gospel of equality. 'It is now time for the Skye crofters to throw off their yoke', he would exclaim. 'Slaves throughout the world are now free, yet there seems to be no freedom for the black house dwellers of Skye'.

But then the law stepped in and on a Saturday evening he was arrested on a warrant issued by Sheriff William Ivory. He was taken to Portree and locked up to await trial on a charge of inciting the lieges to violence. By arresting him Sheriff Ivory, no doubt with the Battle of the Braes still fresh in his mind, was determined to nip any further agitation in the bud.

Wisdom

News of the arrest spread like wildfire and excitement and indignation reached fever pitch. A man of God was languishing in gaol, when he should have been preaching the Gospel. Prayers were offered on Sunday from the Parish Church pulpit for his quick release. But the neighbouring Free Church and the United Free Church remained strangely silent and made no reference to the Minister now incarcerated in Portree.

However, this was not the way his arrest was viewed by the common people and on Saturday night in two hotels in Portree minds were agog. The Tory faithful felt that Sheriff Ivory was within his rights to authorize the arrest but at the same time they had grave doubts about the wisdom of his action. In Liberal quarters, condemnation of the decision was unanimous. This was not only an attack on the Church but also an attack on the right of the individual to free speech. Certainly the person involved was only the Minister of a minority Church and things would have been a lot more serious had it been a Minister from the all-powerful Free Church that had been arrested.

Early on Monday morning MacCallum appeared in court only to be released on bail put up by the Liberal agent in Portree. A report of the incident was sent to the Lord Advocate who decided that no further action was to be taken in the matter, as the charge was not supported in evidence. Another powerful factor was a change of Government at Westminster.

But Donald MacCallum still had accusers to face when he was called to appear before the Skye Presbytery to face a motion of censure. On the day of his appearance in Portree, he must have felt a complete outcast among those who were supposed to be his brothers in Christ. Not one voice was raised in his support and after much discussion on the transgressions of the young dissident he was instructed to go forth and sin no more. Before leaving he sought to speak on his own behalf, and this was grudgingly granted. After a short address as to how he saw the plight of the poor of Skye, he ended by saying, and I quote again from the Rev. Norman MacLean:

I have really said all I want to say. I must conclude, as I think how our Glebes and Manses are protected by law from the rapacity of the landlords, and how we are secured against the wrongs inflicted on others: blessed is the Lord who hath not given us a prey to their teeth.

And at the word 'teeth' he turned and bade his inquisitor's farewell.

Rebellion

He returned to Waternish where he laboured on until the end of 1887, when he moved to Tiree, taking with him his faithful servant, John Walker. Turning to John before their departure he said:

It is over a year since the rebellion in Tiree, but a lot remains to be done, and I will do my part when we get there. In Tiree I shall be 'Ministeir na Sgire' (The Parish Minister) for the Church of Scotland holds sway there.

To understand the reasons for the Tiree insurrection of 1886, it is necessary to go back as far as 1846. This was the year that John Campbell, 'Am Bàillidh Mor' (the Big Factor), arrived on the Island. This man was a tyrant, completely void of pity or compassion, and his reign engendered such bitterness that the 1886 rebellion became inevitable. It is fair to say that a lot of the deeds perpetrated by Campbell were carried out without his superior's permission or knowledge.

It will suffice to relate the following incidents (all from oral sources) as examples of his conduct while in charge of the Duke of Argyll's affairs on the Island.

On his arrival on Tiree he went round all the crofts with a petition in one hand and an eviction order in the other. If any crofter refused to sign the petition, which in fact was an oath of allegiance to the Duke and himself, that crofter was immediately evicted and left homeless.

Factor

Another story is told about the eviction of an old blind man from the village of Kilmoluaig. His name was John MacLean and he was known locally as 'An Dall' (the blind man). Without thought for either his age or his infirmity, Campbell ordered his eviction. As the day of the eviction approached, MacLean with help from neighbours barricaded himself inside the black house. When the factor's men arrived to take possession only to find access to the house barred, they proceeded, on Campbell's instructions, to remove the roof. It is said that this callous deed took place in the dead of winter.

In 1876 a new factor arrived on the Island in the person of Hugh MacDiarmid. But although he was more moderate than his predecessor, it should be understood that he did nothing to endear himself to the Tiresians, and his name is remembered only with distaste. Had he read the signs that were there for any reasonable person to see, the 1886 insurrection might have been avoided.

Arrested

In 1883 a branch of the Land League was formed and it soon had a membership of over 700 people. But early in 1886 it was discovered that their president, Neil MacNeill, a crofter from Ruaig, had been bought over by the wily MacDiarmid who promised him, in exchange for information regarding the Land League's plans, the lease of the farm at Greenhill. This was the spark that lit the flame of rebellion, for on the day that MacNeill and his brother Lachlan set out to take possession of the tack they were met and turned back by a party of crofters, who then proceeded to occupy the farm themselves.

MacDiarmid now faced a situation he could no longer control. Feelings against him and his henchmen now ran so high that an attempt was made to waylay his ground-officer. Oral sources say that, had the attempt been successful, the man would have paid with his life.

Thirty policemen from Glasgow were drafted in to restore order and prefer charges against the occupiers of the Greenhill Farm. But the determined rebels soon routed them. Having failed miserably in their mission, they left the Island by the first available steamer.

But the Land League knew that this was not an end to the affair. On the 31st of July two hundred and fifty marines were landed at Scarinish. On the following morning with bayonets fixed they arrived at Greenhill, and although the crofters were under orders from their leaders not to resist, it was touch and go that a fight did not ensue.

One week later six of the ringleaders were arrested and lodged in Inveraray Gaol. But they were soon released on bail of £20 each put up by Lachlan MacQuarrie, a local merchant. About a week later, another six were apprehended. The final outcome of the affair was that six were tried in the High Court in Edinburgh and were sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment. The trial of the Tiree Martyrs has been immortalised by John MacLean, the Balemartin Bard, in his poem 'Oran nam Priosanach' (Poem to the Prisoners). According to the poet, who appeared in court as a witness for the defence, justice was notable by its absence.

Although the Crofters Act was on the Statute Book before Donald MacCallum came to Tiree, much remained to be done to rectify the injustices that had existed over many years. Hugh MacDiarmid was not prepared to forget the indignities that had been inflicted on him. The wee Minister was a constant thorn in his flesh, for he was adviser and spokesman to the crofters in all matters relative to their rights and especially in obtaining fair rents. The factor was more or less powerless to take an action against him, for the Church of Scotland was very powerful in the Island and he himself was a member. Apart from this MacCallum had much influence with the common people and any wrong move might lead to further trouble. So great was his popularity that on his departure in 1889 the crofters erected a cairn in his honour. The cairn which stands on high ground in the village of Kilkenneth bears the inscription 'Bas no Bhuaidh' (Death or Victory). The cairn itself is known locally as 'Tur MhicCaluim' (MacCallum's Tower). There is also an adage on the Island that says: 'Is ann le Dia tha'n talamh air bheil Tur MhicCaluim' (the ground on which MacCallum's Tower stands belongs to God).

Courage

In 1889 he left for the Parish of Lochs in Lewis and, although the troubles at Park and Aiginish were over before his arrival, he still became actively involved in the crofters' cause. It is evident that he crossed swords with Mr. Platt, the leaseholder of the Park Estate, for he wrote a poem to 'Bodach Isginn', as he preferred to call the gentleman. It is very clear from the poem that he had very little respect for Mr. Platt.

In his book 'The Literature of the Highlands' Dr Nigel MacNeill makes the following reference to the Rev. Donald MacCallum, and I quote verbatim:

The Rev Donald MacCallum, a native from central Argyllshire, now a Parish Minister in Lewis, is the author of a small volume of songs and poems. His works evince a genuine poetic spirit, a quiet meditative mood and thoughtful observation that so many parts of the Highlands are well fitted to produce and nurse. Mr. MacCallum has a perfect command over language and the 'mechanic exercise' of verse, but he will probably be more remembered in Highland history as one of the three or four Ministers of the State Church who had the moral courage to stand up for the people in the crofter agitation of the 1880s.

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