

## **The Rev. Donald Macfarlane of Dingwall<sup>1</sup>**

### **A sketch of his life**

Free Presbyterian Magazine – December 1999

THE Rev. Donald Macfarlane, the founding father of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, was born in 1834 on the island of North Uist. He was the fourth of a family of six sons. His father, a Skye-man, managed the farms of the proprietor of the island.

In 1856, while listening to Rev. Alexander MacColl, the renowned Highland preacher, Donald Macfarlane was arrested. He was deeply impressed by Mr MacColl's fervent question, "Is there any young man in the audience who will come to Christ?" He did not know at that time what was meant by coming to Christ, but he was convinced that he ought to come. His impressions were deepened through reading some tracts, and he was led into a thorough conviction of his sinfulness. "As time went on," says his biographer, Rev. Donald Beaton, "he became more and more enlightened in the knowledge of Christ as the only Saviour of sinners. He could mention many passages of Scripture which gave him peace, but he was indebted to the whole history of the gospel in being enabled, as a lost sinner in need of God's great salvation, to close in with Christ."

After teaching in some schools on his home island for some years, he went to Glasgow to begin his studies for the ministry. After finishing his courses in both the University and the Free Church College (which later became Trinity College), Mr Macfarlane was licensed by the Free Church Presbytery of Skye and Uist to preach the gospel. His first charge, to which he was inducted in 1876, was Strathconon, Ross-shire, where he faithfully pastored his flock for three and a half years. Thereafter he was called by the congregation of Moy and Dalarossie in Inverness-shire, to which he was introduced, after his induction, by his friend, Dr Kennedy of Dingwall. Ten years later, in 1889, he became the minister of the Kilmallie congregation, near Fort William.

It was during his time in Kilmallie that the rationalistic party in the Free Church intensified their efforts to overthrow the Westminster Confession of Faith as the doctrinal standard of the church. This resulted in the Declaratory Act, with its liberal interpretation of Calvinistic doctrine, being put forward at the General

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<sup>1</sup> There is a more full biography on this website.

Assembly of 1891, in the expectation of it becoming law at the next Assembly. Mr Macfarlane held a meeting with the Church elders and others in his area to consider what they should do if the Act were passed. They agreed that they could not remain in a Church which would countenance the erroneous doctrines of the Act.

The infamous Act was indeed passed by the 1892 Assembly. Mr Macfarlane was not a member of that Assembly but he and his Kirk Session recorded their protest against it. In answering the accusation that he was under the Declaratory Act between the 1892 and 1893 General Assemblies, he said in a letter to the press: "Now, the truth is that I was not under the Act for one day. I was at Kilmallie in the year 1892, when the Act was passed into binding law. As soon as we heard that, our Session 'protested' against the action of the Assembly in doing that, and the protest was written in the Session record." At the same time he and his elders agreed to join with those opponents of the Act who were appealing to the 1893 General Assembly to repeal it.

It was shortly before that Assembly that Mr Macfarlane was inducted as pastor of the Raasay congregation. He made it very clear at his induction service that he was repudiating the Declaratory Act. He later answered the charge that he was inducted under the Declaratory Act in these words: "On the day of my induction I stated publicly before the presbytery and the congregation that I was not taking office as minister of Raasay under the Declaratory Act in any sense, or to any degree."

As the 1893 General Assembly drew near, Mr Macfarlane realised that those ministers who had been vehemently denouncing the Declaratory Act, and threatening drastic action if it was adopted, were now prepared to remain in the Free Church. It was obvious to him that, if the Assembly refused to accede to the requests to rescind the Act, he could not expect support from any of his brother ministers in the Assembly if he took the necessary step of formally protesting against the Act on the floor of the Assembly.

In the event, the General Assembly rejected these requests and thus confirmed the Act. The voices of all its opponents were now strangely silent – apart from that of Mr Macfarlane. He rose before the Assembly and read his Protest against the action of the Assembly in passing the Act. As his biographer observed, "It was left to Mr Macfarlane, a man of quiet, retiring and timid disposition, who had not

been heard boasting on the housetops what great things he intended to do, to step forward, and in the face of a hostile Assembly, table his Protest". He was not prepared to change his Protest into a Dissent and remain in a Church that was bound by the Declaratory Act, and having left his Protest in the hands of the Assembly he thereby separated from the Free Church. Thus began the movement which later took the name of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland.

He was in his seventieth year when he accepted a call to be the minister of the Dingwall congregation in 1903. For the next twenty-one years, until he was 90 years of age, he preached twice every Sabbath, as well as at midweek prayer meetings, but for the last two years of his life he preached only once each Sabbath. It was during his Dingwall pastorate that he wrote the biography of his dear friend and fellow labourer, the Rev. Donald MacDonald, Shieldaig.

On the fourth day of November, 1926, Mr Macfarlane entered into the joy of his Lord, having completed almost 51 years as a servant of Christ in the ministry of the gospel.

He kept a diary for some years until 1909, and the last entry in it may be aptly quoted at this point: "The day star arises inwardly in the heart of believers before they pass from time to eternity to give them light going through the valley of the shadow of death and to dispel their doubts and fears, and to enable them to say in the full assurance of faith: 'We are going to heaven to be forever with the Lord.' To die is a solemn thing even for the Lord's people. It is dreaded by many, sometimes by some to whom death is gain. I am a weak creature myself, often harassed by unbelief, but I would not dread to enter eternity this moment. But I wait the Lord's time."

Mr Macfarlane was a man who had a very deep sense of sin, and was no stranger to the harassing temptations of Satan. He therefore "lived in the atmosphere of prayer", and was a great help in ministering comfort to believers in their trials. His biographer says, "As an experimental preacher he knew the different phases of sin in his own heart, its deceitfulness, its depravity, its deadening effects, its determination to gain the mastery. Added to this was his knowledge of Satan's devices. The result was, when he preached to the tried and tempted heritage of God they felt they were listening to one who had been in deep places himself and who could tell them the way he got deliverance. . ." The extract from his diary found on page 370 of this issue bears out this fact.

With regard to his preaching, his biographer also says, “Mr Macfarlane had a place in the estimation of the Lord’s people that can only be accounted for by the fact that he was feeding them with the very finest of the wheat. It was not his oratorical gifts that captivated them, for, in the accepted sense of the word, he was no orator. Neither was it his lively manner in delivering his message that kept up their attention, for in presenting the truth he did so in a quiet, calm, deliberate way. But there was something in the message that excelled all these, and that was the unction that accompanied the truth delivered. It fell like the gentle dew from heaven upon the hearts of those who delighted in the message of the everlasting Gospel. . .

“Mr Macfarlane excelled as an expository preacher. He had a special gift in getting at the meaning of the passage he was expounding, especially in its relation to its context. No preacher we ever listened to excelled him in this gift, [which] enabled him to keep up the interest of his hearers while it instructed them. His preaching had always a sound doctrinal foundation even in his most experimental and practical discourses. . . A feature of Mr Macfarlane’s sermons which is worthy of notice is their remarkable clearness and simplicity. . . It was not the result of paucity of thought or mental poverty, but rather the reverse. . . The writer recalls a sermon he heard from Mr Macfarlane, preached in St. Jude’s, Glasgow, on the doctrine of justification by faith. It was one of the simplest sermons as far as the language and the treatment were concerned that he ever heard, but it was listened to with entranced interest by the congregation.

“He shunned not to declare the whole counsel of God. He believed the Bible to be the Word of God with all his heart; he received its truths unhesitatingly, and whether these were popular or unpopular with men never weighed with him as a servant of Christ. . . He never forgot in his preaching that he was only a servant in the Master’s house, that the message was not his, but that of Him whom he served. Mr Macfarlane was careful as a preacher to make pointed application to his hearers of the doctrine and experience he preached. He did not leave them with the impression that it was a matter of indifference whether they practised what was set before them or not. . . It was with no cold and indifferent heart he delivered his message, but as one that yearned that Christ would be formed in the hearts of his hearers as the hope of glory. . .”

During his whole course Mr Macfarlane was a faithful contender for the faith, and valiant for the truth, but in a humble and gracious manner. By his passing away

the church of Christ sustained a great loss. We cannot but reckon him among those who have received that word of commendation, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."