

Rev. John Macdonald D.D., Ferintosh,

“The Apostle of the North”

By Rev. Donald Beaton

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JOHN MACDONALD was born at Buolnabin, parish of Reay, Caithness, on 12th November 1779. A green spot at the foot of Ben-Freiceadan, near Brawlbin, marks the site of the house where the noted preacher first saw the light. He was the son of James Macdonald, afterwards catechist of Reay. Dr Kennedy, in his “Apostle of the North,” and Rev. Alexander Auld, in his “Ministers and Men in the Far North,” give biographical sketches of this noted catechist and Christian.

Dr Macdonald, in one of the finest and most spiritual of his elegies, has sung beautifully of the Christian graces of his revered and saintly father. Privileged though he was to have such a father, yet it required more than this to make him have a spiritual interest in the things of the kingdom of heaven. He had also the great privilege of being trained by a pious widow, who was the only one present at his birth and who took such a liking to the young stranger that she would needs take him to her home after he had been weaned. He remained five years under her care, and each night before putting him to bed she knelt beside him and in an audible voice prayed for the child.

The well-known incident of the manner in which he was baptised may be related at this stage of our narrative. The parish of Reay was vacant at the time, and so James Macdonald and his wife set off to Halkirk, but the minister, the Rev. John Cameron, was off on a shooting excursion. On the way back they met the minister returning home. He decided to baptise the infant on the spot, and so without more ado Mr. Cameron broke the ice on a pool of water with the butt of his gun and fetching water from the opening, baptised the infant. “The minister's conduct in this affair,” says Dr Kennedy, “may give an idea of his character.” The less, however, said about him the better, but those curious to know something about him will find in Sage's “Memorabilia Domestica” enough to show that this incident was quite in keeping with his student days.

In his early youth, John Macdonald had his serious impressions, and he has been known to gather his playmates and pray with them. Sometimes he would spend an hour in prayer, and on rising from his knees, says Dr Kennedy, “the

young Pharisee was disposed to say, 'What a good boy I am now. The Lord will surely be pleased with me to-day.'" In his ninth year he entered the parish school of Reay, then taught by Mr William Munro, for whom Dr Macdonald had the greatest respect and whom he regarded, as under Providence, his best friend in prosecuting his education.

The schoolmaster soon discovered he had a boy of more than ordinary ability, and after the honourable custom of the old parochial teachers, did everything to help the lad to climb the steep ladder of knowledge. Mrs Innes of Sandside took a great interest in young Macdonald, and on one occasion he was sent by this lady with a letter to a neighbouring proprietor, at whose house there happened to be a recruiting party. "There was music," says Dr Kennedy, "such as young Macdonald had never heard before, and dancing, in which he was not slow to join in the evening, and before the reels were over the catechist's son had the bounty money in his pocket."

The recruiting sergeant, on saying good-night to him, added - "You are now enlisted to serve your king and country, and in the morning, you must come along with me to a justice of the peace and be attested." The Laird next morning made reference to the new recruit obtained, and the minister of Orlig who was present, asked if it was the young man who came with the letter from the lady of Sandside. He was answered that it was. "He must be released," said the minister, "he is the son of James Macdonald, the Reay catechist, and his parents intend to send him to college." He then pled with the officer for the boy, and was successful "Thus narrowly," says Dr Kennedy, as it seems to us, did the Apostle of the North escape from being a soldier."

Young Macdonald had an intense love for music, and soon acquired great skill in playing the bagpipes. When leaving for college in 1797 the loved instrument was carefully packed in his trunk. On his way to Aberdeen for his second session he forgot the pipes, but on remembering them after reaching Thurso, he came back for them. But before next session a change had come over John Macdonald, and the pipes were left behind this time, but not through forgetfulness.

At Aberdeen John Macdonald took a very high place in his classes, excelling especially in mathematics. But the great change which altered his whole outlook on time and eternity took place between the second and third of his college sessions, and diverted his mind away from scholastic attainments to the more momentous matters of his soul's salvation.

It would appear that it was through reading President Edwards' works that the Holy Spirit wrought the conviction that ended in his conversion. He passed through a very fiery trial. In referring to this great change, Dr Kennedy says: - "It is impossible to trace with any distinctness the steps of his progress in the knowledge of Christ. He himself refrained from referring to his personal experience, regarding it as selfish and indiscreet to do so. He kept no record then of God's dealings with his soul. This much, however, is certain, that the works of Edwards, his father's wise and prayerful instruction, and the clear and unctuous preaching of Mr Robertson, then missionary at Achreny, afterwards of Rothesay and Kingussie, were the means employed and blessed by the Lord in guiding him into the truth as it is in Jesus."

On 2nd July 1805, he was licensed by the Presbytery of Caithness to preach the gospel. Soon after he started on a tour at the request of Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster, to ascertain to what extent traditions of the Fingalians existed in the Highlands, and whether Ossian's poems were still remembered. He made a collection of some of the Ossianic fragments that were afterwards printed in "Leabhar na Feinne" from MS. in the Advocates Library. After this tour he returned to Caithness and officiated as missionary over the Achreny and Halladale Mission. In September 1806, he was ordained missionary minister at Berriedale, where he laboured for a short time.

Mr Macdonald did not at this period give indication of the great place he was yet to occupy as a preacher. He received a presentation to the Gaelic Church in Edinburgh from the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge, and was inducted as minister in January 1807. He had uphill work to begin with, and there was much unpleasantness over the introduction of an English sermon. He preached two Gaelic sermons and one English sermon every Sabbath. As his fame spread demands were made on his services, and he preached occasionally in Greenock, Port Glasgow, Dundee, and Perth. He also preached frequently in Glasgow and Stirling, where Highland regiments of militia were stationed, and his labours were manifestly blessed to many of the soldiers.

It was while in Edinburgh that Mr Macdonald underwent what Dr Kennedy calls a "fresh baptism of the Spirit." His preaching now became searching and fervent, "he warned sinners in Zion with such faithfulness and power as excited the wonder and the awe of his hearers." His action in the pulpit now became vehement without being extravagant. It was soon after this change that Mr

Macdonald, on his way south from Caithness, preached for Dr Mackintosh in Tain.

There was one present that day who had walked sixteen miles to hear his beloved preacher, Dr Mackintosh, and he thus describes his feelings: - "I was greatly disappointed on seeing Dr Mackintosh walking towards the manse seat, and instead of him a smart-looking young man walking, as I thought, with too rapid progress and too light a step, towards the pulpit. I felt at once as if the day was lost. I expected no good, and shut up my heart against the youth who came between me and my wonted Sabbath fare. He gave out the Psalm. 'You can't spoil that at any rate,' I said to myself. The prayer began; but I scarcely heard the first part of it. Gradually my attention was attracted, but towards the manse seat I found my eye still wandering. Before the prayer was over I ceased to look away from the pulpit.

When the sermon began, I forgot all but the doctrine I was hearing. As he warmed up with his subject, the preacher became most vehement in his action; every eye was riveted on the speaker; and suppressed sounds testified to the effect which the sermon was producing. His second discourse was so awe inspiring that the audience became powerfully affected. Such was the awful solemnity of the doctrine and the vehemence of the preacher's manner that I expected ere he was done, every heart would be pierced, and that the very roof of the church would be rent. The sermon over, all were asking who the preacher was. 'A young man from Edinburgh of the name of Macdonald,' was the only answer that could be given."

On the death of the saintly Rev. Charles Calder, minister of Urquhart, Mr Macdonald was called to succeed him, and he was inducted on 1st September 1813. It was no easy task to follow such a minister as Mr Calder, whose holy life made a profound impression on his parishioners. In his Gaelic elegy on Mr Calder, Dr Macdonald very beautifully enters into the feelings of those who had been fed by this saintly pastor who had been taken from them.

Tha cuid co domhain chaidh a leon leath,'
A thaobh an ceangail ris gu sonruicht,'
'S nach creid gu'm faigh, an taobhs' do ghloir,
Na ni an leon s' a charadh!

("In some hearts the wound is so deep that on this side of glory, they cannot hope it shall be healed". - Dr Kennedy's translation)

MR MACDONALD was in his thirty-fourth year when he came to Ferintosh. Within the first year of his ministry there he lost his wife, and on his first Communion Sabbath he preached from the words "I will betroth thee unto me forever." The sermon made the profoundest impression on his hearers. "Few eyes," says Dr Kennedy, "were tearless in that vast assembly; and when in the evening he appealed to the unconverted, commending to them the love of Jesus, urging on their acceptance His offer of marriage, and warning them of the danger of refusing His advances, the hearts of many sinners were pierced. The excitement at last was very great, the groans and outcries of the stricken ones sometimes drowning the voice of the preacher. During the closing service on Monday the same scene was repeated" (*The Apostle of the North*, p. 80). This was the beginning of a revival which continued for some time.

Mr Macdonald's considerateness comes out very beautifully in the way he turned the despondency of Mrs Calder, his predecessor's widow, into joy. Mrs Calder, while rejoicing in the blessing that followed Mr Macdonald's preaching, was troubled at the thought of the comparative unfruitfulness of her saintly husband's ministry, and on expressing this to Mr Macdonald he said to her - "What you see now, my dear Mrs Calder, is the up springing of the seed which your husband was sowing. The farmer sends his best man to sow the seed; but, the field once sown, he sends any boy who may happen to be at hand, to harrow it. The field must be harrowed as well as sown, but the sowing is the more important work. It was thus 'the Lord of the harvest' dealt in appointing work for your husband and for me. He, the skilled labourer, was sent to sow the good seed, and I, a novice, was sent after him to do a lowlier work."

Mr Macdonald soon after this visited Breadalbane, and there was a great awakening there under his preaching. It was at this time, at Ardeonaig, that he preached what the Rev. D. Campbell, Kiltarn, calls "the most memorable sermon then and ever preached by him" on the words, "Thy Maker is thine husband" (Is. liv. 5). "The sermon," says Mr Campbell, "was accompanied with an extraordinary outpouring of the Spirit. Some cried out; others were melted into tears; while many laboured in vain to suppress their feelings. The place was then 'no other than the house of God and the gate of heaven.' The notes of this sermon were found written out in his own hand in English, though it was preached in Gaelic, and are given in Dr Kennedy's "*Apostle of the North*" and in the *Life of Rev. D. Campbell, of Kiltarn*.

The fame of the great preacher had now spread, and a desire to hear him became very evident. He had his opponents, however, in the Moderate ministers, who disliked the “wild” man of Ferintosh. On one occasion he was asked by the people of Dornoch to preach to them, and he consented to do so, provided they got the consent of Dr Bethune, the parish minister. Dr Bethune resolutely refused to grant permission. As the parish of Creich was not forbidden ground, Mr Macdonald and the congregation set off to a spot in Spinningdale, where the parish of Creich touches the western boundary of the parish of Dornoch. The people remained on the Dornoch side, and Mr Macdonald preached to them from the Creich side. “He never preached with greater power,” says Dr Kennedy, “ere the sermon closed, the spot on which he stood was worn down, by the action of his feet, into a pit, the form of which for many years could be pointed out to visitors.”

Mr Macdonald, nothing daunted at the opposition offered him, entered the parish of Strathbogie (Aberdeen), a stronghold of Moderatism. The droning Moderates, who delivered their sermons half asleep themselves to congregations which, they effectually put to sleep Sabbath after Sabbath, were very wide awake when the rousing preacher from Ferintosh appeared among them. A complaint was laid against him to the General Assembly. A motion was carried banning the liberty that Mr Macdonald had taken, though, as Dr Andrew Thomson pertinently pointed out, the same men who had done this had sounded the praise, and contributed to the acquittal of a clergyman who had neglected the duty of preaching to his people for seven months! Such were some of the high-handed dealings that headed the Evangelicals straight for the Disruption in 1843.

Something must now be said about Mr Macdonald's visits to St Kilda, that lonely island lying out on the wide Atlantic. Presbyterian ministers since the Revolution had attended to the spiritual needs of the St Kildians, but if one is to judge these pastors by the state of the flock as visited by Mr Macdonald in 1822 they certainly had not done much to enlighten the people in the things pertaining to the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. “It grieves me,” says Mr Macdonald, “to say and I took pains to ascertain the truth, that, among the whole body, I did not find a single individual who could be truly called a decidedly religious person; that is one who has felt the influence of the truth on his soul, and who exhibits that influence in his life and conversation.”

This visit to St Kilda was taken at the request of the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge. When he, left the island he could say, "A few, at least five or six, appear to be under serious impressions, while the general body seem to feel more than an ordinary concern about their eternal interests; and, I would fain hope, a greater degree of prepossession in favour of the gospel than has hitherto appeared among them."

The parting suggested to Mr Macdonald the farewell scene in the Acts when Paul bade farewell to the Ephesian elders. This is his account of it: -" When all was got ready, about nine o'clock, and we had been taking leave of the inhabitants, all of them in a body (children not excepted) followed us to the shore, and amidst cries and tears, in which my landlord and I were obliged to share, we shook hands with them and bade them a final adieu. The scene it is, impossible for me to describe, but it reminded me of Acts xx. 38 - "Sorrowing most of all that they should see his face no more." And they literally expressed themselves so. After we got under-weigh, they ascended the brow of a steep hill, and sat following us, with their eye, till our little bark, at the distance of fifteen or twenty miles, became no more, visible."

The St Kildians, however, were to see his face again, and if the parting was sad, the welcome was with tears of joy. When the time of the second departure drew near, the people gathered around him and begged for prayers ere they parted. Mr Macdonald read to them, Ps. cxxi. and then prayed with them. They followed him to the shore, and amidst cries and tears Mr Macdonald parted once again with the people whose hearts he had so deeply touched.

In the interval between this visit and his third to St Kilda, Mr Macdonald visited Ireland. In order that he might preach to the Irish in their native tongue he spent some time in studying Irish. He found the dialect spoken in the North more like the Scottish Gaelic than the dialect spoken in the southern parts of Ireland. As he became more familiar with Irish the wonted fire entered into his preaching and touched the hearts of his hearers. He set out on evangelistic tours, and Roman Catholics crowded to hear him preach to them in a tongue slightly different from their own but which nevertheless they were able to understand.

The priests, however, became alarmed, and they did all they could to interfere with his labours. On his return from Ireland Mr Macdonald visited South Uist, and then paid his third visit to St Kilda, which was to be his last visit to the island whose inhabitants had so much endeared themselves to him and him to

them. The other partings were sufficiently affecting, says Mr Macdonald, but the last exceeded them all.

In a brief sketch like this it is almost impossible to give an adequate idea of how manifold were his labours as an evangelist, though one may get some idea of what these were by reading his diary as printed in Dr Kennedy's life of the Apostle of the North. He was a man of strong physique, which stood him in good stead in his journeyings from place to place. He was very methodical in his habits, as the following rules for employment of his time when at home indicate: - "From 7 to 9 am. - Private devotion; 9 to 10 - Family worship and breakfast; 10 to 3 p.m. - Parochial duties, study, etc.; 3 to 4 - Dinner; 4 to 5 - Study; 5 to 6 - Tea and conversation; 6 to 9 - Private devotion and study; 9 to 10 - Family worship and supper; 10 to 11 - Private devotion; 11 to 7 a.m. - Sleep and dressing."

Mr Macdonald was twice married. He had ten children, three of whom were by his first marriage. John, the first born, was, according to - Dr Kennedy, his best beloved. He afterwards became missionary in Calcutta, and our readers have already made their acquaintance with him in the pages of the Magazine. In sending to his son when at college some books, including Edwards on the Religious Affections, he says: - "The work is worth gold - may the Lord bless it to my dear John, and enable him not only to understand but to Teach the attainments of Christian character, knowledge, and experience delineated in it." Edwards' works were specially blest to father and son.

When the Church of Scotland was split in two, Dr Macdonald (he received his doctorate in 1842) had no doubt as to his duty, and cast in his lot with the Free Church. Prior to this event, Dr Macdonald went from place to place in the Highlands explaining to the people the issues involved. It was a great drain on his time and strength, travelling as he did from place to place in all kinds of weather, but it was willingly borne for the sake of the good cause. After the Disruption he left the old manse of Ferintosh and returned to a small -cottage. In a few years afterwards a manse and church were built. In August 1844, the General Assembly of the Free Church met at Inverness. Dr Macdonald was appointed joint-moderator with Dr Macfarlane, of Greenock. Dr Macdonald preached the opening sermon in Gaelic from the words - "And those who have turned the world upside down are come hither also." "When he announced and read his text," says Dr Kennedy, "there were few Gaelic-speaking hearers in the hall who could refrain from smiling."

It was through a blister caused by his boot that the strong and powerful frame of Dr Macdonald was laid low. Mortification set in, and all that medical and surgical skill could do was unavailing. To a brother minister who visited him in his last illness he said - "There are three things which the Lord hath done for me; and may you have cause to praise Him for dealing so with you. He did not expose my heart sins to the world; He did not punish my secret sins in my public work; nor did He alienate from me the affections of His people during all my ministry."

Dr Macdonald passed to his, everlasting rest on 16th April 1849, in his 70th year. His remains were laid to rest beside those of his saintly predecessor, Mr Calder, in Urquhart Burying-ground, to await the call of his Lord on that day when the heavens will be no more and the earth shall pass away. A great concourse of people followed the remains to the place of burial.

Dr Kennedy, writing in 1866, says: - "A visitor of their graves [Mr Calder's and Dr Macdonald's] in the old church-yard of Urquhart shall certainly see nothing to indicate that the men of this generation are given to garnishing the tombs of the prophets." The same criticism applies to the tombstone erected over the grave of his saintly father, the Rev. John Kennedy, in Killearnan burying-ground. Surely there is still a few in the Black Isle who have as much love and reverence for these great men as to remedy this state of matters.

A word must be said about Dr Macdonald as a poet. His Gaelic poems as his elegies, "Do Mhaighstir Caldair" (to Mr Calder); "Air Mr Eoin Robison" (Mr Robertson, Kingussie); "Air Mr Iain Ceanadaidh" (Rev. John Kennedy, Redcastle), were very popular at one time and were recited at length by Gaelic-speaking people. But it is in his "An Criosduidh air a thurus gu Iordan" (The Christian on his way to Jordan). - "An Criosduidhair bruach Iordain" (The Christian on the bank of Jordan) - "An Croisduidhthall air Iordan" (The Christian across Jordan), that he excels as he sings in sweet strains of the experiences of a noted Christian - his own father-on his journey to the River and his feelings at the Jordan and when he had crossed.

Dr Kennedy remarks that while Dr Macdonald could admire genuine poetry, he could not produce it; "he had as much fondness for poetry as moved him to write it," he says, "but though he had poetic taste, he lacked poetic skill." We will not take upon ourselves to set aside the verdict of a master in Israel and a first-class judge of literary form, but one thing must be admitted, that Dr Macdonald has a very high place among the religious bards of the Highlands,

and it may be owing to Dr Kennedy's own high standard of what constitutes genuine poetry that he pronounced the above verdict.

We conclude with Dr Kennedy's tribute to, and characterisation of Dr Macdonald as a preacher: - It was as a preacher he attained his eminence. There have been not a few who could defend the doctrine of the gospel against learned disputants with greater success. Many have equalled, and a few have surpassed him, in the power to affect the feelings of an audience. In skill of illustration he was inferior to some of his contemporaries, and there were others who were more skilful casuists. But all the elements which combine to constitute a true preacher of the gospel were found in him in rare harmony and in excellent measure. His expositions were always careful, luminous, and exact; his statements of doctrine were marvellously precise; the arrangement of his ideas was always logical and textual; his facility of expression was singularly great; his illustrations, always apt, were often striking; his practical counsels to Christians, suggested by his own experience, were always wise and seasonable; and his appeals to sinners were most solemn and powerful" (*Apostle of the North*, p. 331).

Such is the tribute of one who, himself, was endeared to the Highland people as a preacher of the foremost rank, to one who by general consent occupies a place of special eminence among the great Highland preachers.