

REV. JOHN KENNEDY of KILLEARNAN OR REDCASTLE.

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OF all the northern ministers there is scarcely any name that stands higher in the estimation of the Church of God than that of the Rev. John Kennedy, minister of Killearnan. The profound regard in which he was held by the Lord's people of his own day was reflected in the deep respect in which his name was always mentioned by a generation that is now gone. His son, the Rev. Dr. Kennedy, Dingwall, has written an excellent biography of his saintly father¹, and in the preface he feelingly says: -" The minister of Killearnan was my father. I could not forget this while I was writing this memoir. In the only sense in which he was my father while he lived, I lost him when he died. But the memory of that loss I can bear to recall, as I cherish the hope that his death was the means of uniting us in bonds that shall never be broken." In the facts to be placed before our readers we are dependent on this biographical sketch written with all the warmth of a loving heart.

John Kennedy was born at Rissel, in the district of Kishorn. His father, Donald Kennedy, was the son of godly parents, and well-known throughout the surrounding district. He had studied with a view to the ministry, but never applied for license, though he lived; to see two of his sons ministers of the Gospel. He was a faithful attender on the means of grace under Rev. Lachlan Mackenzie, by whom he was greatly beloved and respected. He was a Christian of outstanding piety. Like many of the godly fathers of other days, Donald Kennedy followed an excellent custom which was not without a blessing to some. He was in the habit, when each of his children attained a certain age, of retiring with them to a quiet spot in a wood, and there, after spending some time in prayer, he explained to them the nature of his engagements on their behalf at their baptism, appealed to their conscience to realise their responsibility, and took them under vow to seek and serve the Lord. John Kennedy ever retained a lively recollection of this solemn transaction.

From his earliest years, even from infancy, John Kennedy gave evidence of a work of grace. One day, while he was four years of age, a woman, notorious for wickedness, heard his childish voice lisping his petitions to God. She was

¹ The Minister of Killearnan. It forms the concluding part of Dr. Kennedy's *Days of the Fathers in Ross-shire*.

arrested by what she heard and gave evidence afterwards of one who had passed from death to life.

At the age of six he was seized with small-pox, and for a time he lay at the gates of death. While his father was pleading at the throne of grace for his child, a man with the reputation of a seer entered, and the mother, deeply concerned as to the issue and not being free from superstition, consulted the man. The reply was soon given, "Ere the tide that now ebbs shall have touched the shore again, your child shall be no more." When Donald Kennedy came in he found his wife in tears, through the lying message of the reputed seer, and on asking her the reason she told him what had been said. "The messenger of Satan lies," said the God-fearing father, "the Lord hath given me the life of my child, the blessings of His right hand shall rest upon his head, and he shall yet serve the Lord in the gospel of his Son." The child revived, but the false seer, on meeting him, could never look him in the face.

But, on one occasion, while John Kennedy was on one of his journeys to college, the man suddenly appeared from behind a rock, and, rushing up to the young student, thrust a sum of money into his hand and departed as suddenly as he came, and without a word. Probably the gift was intended as conscience money, and as a small recompense for the pain he had given by his lying prediction.

In John Kennedy's student days, the long distance from the student's home was traversed on foot. The poor student had rarely to pay for a night's lodgings, as hospitality was generously offered to him on his journeys to and from college. John Kennedy went through the usual arts and theological courses at Aberdeen in five years, the time then required.

He was licensed to preach the gospel by the Presbytery of Lochcarron, 24th November, 1795, in his twenty-fourth year. Mr. Lachlan Mackenzie is reported to have remarked in connection - with others licensed: "The others are only preachers of our making, but the Lord made a preacher of John Kennedy." After being licensed he was appointed teacher of the parish school of Lochcarron and during this important period of his life enjoyed the ministrations of his beloved minister, Mr. Lachlan Mackenzie, the memory of whose preaching was cherished by him to his dying day.

Not long after he was licensed, he went to a communion at Applecross. "Mr. Lachlan," as he was affectionately called, had been appointed to preach on the

Saturday, but when the day came so great was his confusion of mind that he sent for John Kennedy and asked him to take the service. The young preacher naturally was reluctant to step into the breach, especially when it was to fill the place of such a preacher as Mr. Mackenzie, but he was told that there was no way out of it. Mr. Lachlan's advice to him was: "When you are asked to preach on an hour's notice spend one half of an hour on your knees pleading for a text, a sermon and a blessing, and the other half employ in studying the text and context, and in gathering as many parallel passages as you can find."

The service was held in the open air and the tent was constructed with oars in the form of-a cone, covered with blankets, with an opening in front where aboard was fixed for the Bible. While Mr. Kennedy was preaching, Mr. Lachlan, lifting one of the blankets at the back of the tent, entered unobserved. As the young preacher proceeded he touched on a case similar to Mr. Lachlan's with the result that the harassed saint could not help giving expression to his feelings to the no small discomfiture of the young preacher now made aware of Mr. Lachlan's presence. "Go on, John," was the kindly encouragement as the embarrassment was noticed, "I have got my portion and my, soul needed it, and other poor souls may get theirs before you conclude."

Two years after his license he was appointed to preach at Lochbroom where the parish minister had been suspended. This, according to Dr. Kennedy, was in some respects the happiest time of his life. "It was the season of his first love," he says, "as a preacher; the Lord was very near to his soul, and a manifest blessing rested on his labours. During that time many souls were truly converted unto God, some of whom, in Lochbroom, and some in other places, to which they were scattered, continued till their death to shine as lights in the world. Many a sweet hour of communion with the Lord he enjoyed in those days in the woods of Dundonnell!" - (Days of the Fathers in Ross-shire, p. 156, 1897 edit.)

In 1802 John Kennedy was appointed missionary at Eriboll. His first sermon at Eriboll was preached from Isa. xl. 11 - "He shall feed His flock like a shepherd: He shall gather the lambs with his arm," etc., and through the sermon several persons received their first impression of divine things. The mission of Eriboll had been highly favoured in its missionaries - Mr. Robinson, afterwards minister of Kingussie, and Mr. Neil Macbride, afterwards of Arran, being his predecessors. The labours of these true servants of Christ had been blessed to many. The bounds of his mission extended on the one side to Melness,

Tongue, and on the, other, to Kinlochbervie in the parish of Eddrachillis. The distances between the different preaching stations were considerable and Dr. Kennedy says his father often walked twenty miles over marsh and moor and preached in clothes quite drenched with rain.

Among the noted Christian men and women who sat under John Kennedy's ministrations, Dr. Kennedy mentions Major Mackay, "a gentleman, a soldier; a Highlander, and a Christian at once"; Mrs. Scobie of Keoldale, "a model of a Christian Highland gentlewoman, whose appearance and bearing were such as would befit one of the highest stations in society"; Mr. Mackay of Hope, "a man eminent for godliness"; Donald Macpherson, of whom Mr. Kennedy said, "Of all the Christians I have ever known, he was the man who lived nearest to the Lord"; Robert Macleod, a warm-hearted Christian whose heart was aglow with love to Christ; Mrs. Mackay (Peggy Macdiarmid), whose , "brilliant wit, exuberant spirits, intense originality of thought and - speech and manner, great faith and fervent love, formed a combination but rarely found." With such noted Christians it need not be wondered at that communion occasions were no ordinary events in the lives of God's people in the north-western corner of Sutherland.

Dr. Kennedy refers to one communion season in particular at Kinlochbervie. Mr. Kennedy preached on Monday, and this is his son's description of a memorable day: - "On Monday, in particular, so much of the Lord's presence was enjoyed by His people that, to many of them, it was the happiest day of their life. When the time for parting came, none had courage to say farewell to the minister. They lingered around him, and followed him to the house; and before they separated, he and they sat down together to a refreshment in the open air. That over, they walked together towards an eminence over which the people had to pass. On reaching the summit, they stood around the minister as he prayed and commended them to the care of the Good Shepherd of Israel. He then said to them as tears ran down his cheeks, 'This is pleasant, my dear friends, but it must end; we need not expect unbroken communion, either with each other or with the Lord, till we all reach in safety our home in heaven,' and, without trusting himself to bid them farewell, he turned away from them, and they, each one weeping as he went, took their respective journeys to their homes." - (*Days of the Fathers in Ross-shire*, p" 171.)

In 1806, Mr. Kennedy was appointed assistant to the minister of Assynt, the Rev. William Mackenzie, better known as "Parson William," one of those poor

unfortunates who never should be in a pulpit,² in fact, he was, as Dr. Kennedy says, "all that a minister ought not to be." The deep attachment of the people in his mission to Mr. Kennedy was shown in no unmistakable manner in the genuine tears shed not only by women but by strong men at the parting. His labours in Assynt were abundantly blessed, but it was while in this district he had to bear what his son calls in some respects the greatest trial of his life."

This arose through a movement led by Norman Macleod, who, before his conversion, had been known "as a clever, irreverent, forward youth," and who according to Dr. Kennedy, "began all of a sudden to join himself to the people of the Lord." Norman Macleod was a man of great driving force, and his "influence on some aspects of the religious life of Assynt is manifest to this day. The controversy was very keen, and rather than trust ourselves to describe it, we will fall back on Dr. Kennedy's account. In continuation of his description of Norman Macleod's conversion, he adds: -" Claiming to have been converted in a way at least unusual, if not miraculous" he all at once started in the course of profession at a stature and with a courage that seemed never to have known a childhood at all. He began at once to prepare for the ministry.

But Norman's ambition to preach outgrew the slow progress of the stated course of preparation, and cutting short his college studies, he separated from the Church, and began to found a sect for himself. His power as a speaker was such that he could not fail to make an impression, and he succeeded in Assynt and elsewhere in drawing some of the people after him for a time. His influence over those whom he finally detached from a stated ministry was paramount, and he could carry them after him to almost any extreme. A few of the people of Assynt were drawn into permanent dissent, and but for the influence that was brought to bear in counter-action of his movement, the whole body of the people would have been quite severed from, the Church. Some, even of the pious people, were decoyed by him for a season, who escaped from his influence thereafter³, and the people remained as a body unbroken" (*Days of the Fathers in Ross-shire*, pp. 17 5-6).

² Mr. Sage, in his *Memorabilia Domestica*, p. 69, 1st edit., gives a brief account of this notorious minister, of whose pulpit appearances he says that, "they were not only lame and unprofitable, but absolutely profane, calculated as they were to excite the ridicule of his audience.

³ Among these may be mentioned Rev. Alexander Macleod, a native of Stoer, afterwards minister of Uig, Lochalsh and Rogart, respectively, who, as a student, came under Norman Macleod's influence. The Presbytery of Tongue refused to license him until he acknowledged that he had "wholly renounced the party which he once had joined" (Tongue Presbytery Records, 19th October, 1818). Norman Macleod went to Cape Breton

Though Mr. Kennedy felt this controversy very keenly, the discipline, though trying, was profitable. He learned four great lessons, as his son indicates - it kept him humble; it sharpened his discernment; it doubled his watchfulness in his future dealings with professors of religion; and it gave him an opportunity of estimating the motives in which divisive courses usually spring. It was while assistant at Assynt he was united in marriage to Jessie, daughter of Kenneth Mackenzie, a lady who proved a true helpmeet to him. Concerning her, Dr. Kennedy says: - "The, partner of his temporal lot was one who, by her watchfulness, and wisdom, preserved him from many an annoyance that might have fretted his spirit and interfered with his work."

In 1813 Mr. Kennedy was inducted to the parish of Killearnan or Redcastle. His first sermon as minister was on the words: - "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." He preached three times every Sabbath, held a fortnightly meeting on Monday, and a monthly meeting on Thursday. He catechised his people every year, and visited the sick. He delighted in preaching and remarked on one occasion to a brother minister: - "No wonder though I should enjoy it, for if ever I, had a foretaste of heaven's own joy on the earth, it was while, preaching Christ crucified to sinners;" "and never," he said on another occasion, "did I truly preach the Gospel but while I felt that I myself was the greatest sinner in the congregation."

Many souls were given Mr. Kennedy for his hire, and some of these were men and women of outstanding attainments in the Christian life. Dr. Kennedy mentions quite a number of these in his biography, but there was one in particular, "Foolish Mary," as she was called, that showed as clearly as any what grace could do. Dr. Kennedy says he used to wonder why his father admitted this witless woman into his study, but the time came when he himself accounted it one of the highest privileges of his lot that he could admit

about 1817. He was ordained by the Presbytery of Geneva, New York. In 1851 he sailed in a vessel, built by himself and his followers, for Australia, where he remained for about two years. He then sailed to New Zealand and finally settled in the district of Waipu, about 70 miles north of Auckland, where he died in 1866 at the patriarchal age of 86. It is said that the life and doctrines of a certain class of ministers in the Church of Scotland, and the teaching of some of his college professors, were the cause of his separation from the Church of his fathers. There is a short account of his Cape Breton ministry (with 'portrait) in the *Presbyterian Witness Diamond Jubilee Number* (December, 1908, Pictou, Nova Scotia). Reference is made to his New Zealand ministry in *History of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand*, pp. 78-8b. Mr. Macleod was an ecclesiastical warrior who gave an open ear to the injunction "spare not," and specimens of his controversial style are preserved in a number of badly printed tractates which were collected in a small volume: *The Present Church of Scotland and a Tint of Normanism contending in a Dialogue*. No date, nor publisher's name is given, but the preface is dated from Cape Breton, 30th October, 1841. Among those who come under his lash in these tractates are Rev. Lachlan Mackenzie, Lochcarron, and Rev. Archibald Cook, Inverness.

her to his own. "Of all I ever knew," he says, "she was the one who seemed to enjoy the greatest nearness, to God in prayer." "Foolish Mary" (Mary Macrae was her name) was a native of Lochcarron, where she lived until she was fifty years of age. She was regarded as a simpleton and good for nothing. One Saturday a thought came into her witless mind that she should go to Killearnan, and, without more ado, she threw on her cloak and set out on her journey. When she reached the end of her long and lonesome walk, the people were assembling for public worship and she went in with them to God's house and heard Him for the first time speaking to her. Killearnan became a Bethel to her, and she made a resolve that she would remain the rest of her life in that place. "Every fear was met," says Dr. Kennedy, "every difficulty solved, that distressed and troubled her; and she, whom the 'wise and prudent' would despise, seemed the special favourite of heaven among all the children of Zion who were fed in Killearnan."

Mr. Kennedy was now drawing near the end of his earthly journey, deeply respected by his hearers and having an innermost place in the affections of God's people. For a few weeks before his death he preached every Tuesday evening from the words, "We are come to God, the Judge of all." His last sermon was preached on the Tuesday evening before his death, and it closed the series of discourses on this text. At the close of the service he intimated, says his son, that on Thursday he would preach in the schoolhouse in the eastern district of the parish in order to take a "last opportunity of wiping off his skirts the blood of the people who resided there. The congregation then was dismissed by him under the assured persuasion that he and they would never meet again on earth. On coming out of church he stood for a few minutes looking to the people as they were retiring under the clear moonlight. 'My poor people,' he was heard exclaiming by one who had come up beside him, and whose approach caused him to turn away, and to hurry on to the manse" (*Days of the Fathers in Ross-shire*, p. 231).

At this time there was no indication of approaching death. He preached on Thursday with great unction. On Friday his throat was pained, inflammation set in and continued. But his family had no anticipation of danger. When asked as to how he felt he always answered, "I'll soon be quite well." On Sabbath, 10th January, 1841, he fell asleep to enter into the rest that remains for the people of God. Great crowds attended the funeral and many lingered around the closed grave. Dr. Macdonald, Ferintosh, knowing well their feelings, said "You will never see John Kennedy again, till you see him on the last day." So ended

the labours of one of the most saintly and honoured of God's servants in the northern Highlands.

On his tombstone it is recorded: -" The ministerial gifts and, graces of primitive times, when on the glory of Zion there was defence, in his person were seen realised, attracting the love of believers, and in every utterance refreshing their souls. They were glad in his light. In every ordinance of the sanctuary richly replenished in spirit, close communion with God, of intimate standing in the mind and counsel of Christ, with holy unction, fervour, wisdom and love, he watched, warned, and nourished the heritage. Sinners in Zion were afraid. Full of faith and the fruits of the Spirit, abounding in labours and ripened for glory, he fell asleep."