

Religion in the Highlands after 1688¹

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A passing reference was made in my last paper to the religious destitution of the Highlands after the Revolution. The few clerical survivors of the killing times were most cordially welcomed back to the churches out of which they had been tyrannically thrust in 1662, but in most parishes the curates remained in undisturbed possession. Many of the influential proprietors regarded the old regime with favour. The sons and grandsons of earnest heritors who, in 1638 and succeeding years, had eagerly signed the Covenant had in too many cases gone with the prelatic tide, and did not welcome the re-establishment of Presbyterianism.

In looking over the Presbytery Records of the northern districts, one can hardly read a page without seeing the enormous difficulties the Church courts, weak in numbers and influence, but strong in faith and unflinching in devotion to the good cause, had for long years to encounter. Here and there ministers of apostolic zeal laboured on in the full assurance that God would build up the waste places, and they were not disappointed. Unwearied in ministerial duties, they toiled on cheerfully through good report and through bad report, undaunted in rebuking sin and spending much of their time in Presbytery meetings – which, of course, none of the Episcopal incumbents attended. When the careless curates ceased to occupy their manses and lift their stipends, the Presbyteries forthwith took steps to proclaim the neglected churches vacant, but very often the deputy appointed for this duty had to report that he could not obtain access to the vacant kirk, and had to encounter considerable opposition.

From 1690 to 1712 things were trying and perplexing enough, but patronage, then forced upon the Church in flagrant violation of the Treaty of Union, introduced a new hampering element. Sometimes for years two rival patrons battled as claimants for the obnoxious right of presenting a minister to a vacant charge, and thus prevented any settlement. The Highland presbyteries deplored the fatal Act of Queen Anne, and it is affecting to read the earnest words in which they annually enjoined their Commissioners to each successive Assembly “to move and press that the Assembly use all endeavours to get the great grievance of patronage, which is attended by so many evils, redressed”.

¹ This article, one of a series “by a Highland Minister”, appeared in *The Original Secession Magazine* in 1890. It has been slightly edited.

There was another Act of the dark year of 1712 which grieved our Northern presbyteries – the legal toleration of Episcopacy, and its exemption from the jurisdiction and discipline of Presbyterian church courts. The Jacobites, hoping to prostrate the national Church, now rising from the dust and putting on her beautiful garments, secretly and suddenly introduced this measure. A Highland minister, Mr Baillie of Inverness, had the high honour of being selected to accompany the eminent Carstairs, and Blackwell of Aberdeen, as a deputation to London to watch over the threatened interests of the Church, and to oppose the Toleration and Patronage Bills. Next year the Synod of Ross and Sutherland enjoined the presbyteries within their bounds to urge upon their Assembly commissioners as follows:

“In regard a great many erroneous and licentious persons, ill-affected to the present establishment in Church and State, do take occasion from the late toleration to disseminate erroneous principles to fortify persons in their wickedness, impieties and licentiousness; and to alienate the hearts of Her Majesty’s subjects from their affection to her person and government, that they move and press the Assembly to make application for having these grievances redressed. That in regard of the many signs of impending wrath which threaten the land, therefore that the Commissioners move and press that the Assembly appoint a National Fast, and that the fore-mentioned evils, together with the breach of our Covenants, be insisted on as some of the causes and grounds for the said Fast. That in regard of the many desolations of this Provincial Synod, the spaciousness of the bounds, the hardships under which the ministers planted here do labour, and the difficulties of getting young men to be planted among us because the legal allowance is taken away. Therefore that the Commissioners do move and press that the Assembly fall upon some method for encouraging young men to come to the bounds, and appoint for us some probationers, especially Messrs Robert Kirk and Walter Ross, and other young men well reported of.”

The probationers named were duly settled in Dornoch and Kilmuir-Easter respectively. Patronage is mentioned by the Synod as the foremost grievance in the list of evils affecting the welfare of the Church in the north, and complaints are made that men having the Gaelic language are settled in the Lowlands, contrary to Acts of Assembly. Reference is also made to the necessity of applying to The Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge for having some of “their free schools” settled in populous districts remote from the parish schools.

In Inverness, on the death of the persecuting curate, Gilbert Marshall, in 1691, "the magistrates would not suffer the vacancy to be declared; all avenues to the church were beset with armed men, and double sentinels placed at the doors that no minister might enter; and when Duncan Forbes of Culloden (father of the famous judge) sought to open the doors he was thrust back and struck with violence. This made him and others represent the case to the Privy Council, so that Lord Leven's regiment sent north to protect the well-affected . . . but for ten years no admission was effected."

In former papers we mentioned that the magistrates were powerful enough to resist the desire of the congregation of Inverness to have McKilligan and Fraser of Brea settled. Two other ministers similarly called failed to obtain admission. At length, in 1701, Mr Robert Baillie, translated from Lamington, was inducted. His influence for good was immense and during his 25 years' ministry he received calls from Keith, Gladsmuir, London and Rotterdam. The call from the last place was before the Assembly of 1714. So strongly did the Assembly feel on the occasion (in refusing the call), that they requested their Moderator (Mr. William Mitchell) to intimate their resolution to the Consistory of Rotterdam, stating, "Such are the present circumstances of Inverness and of the country about, and such is his influence and usefulness there, that they could not, without great prejudice to the interests of religion in that country, remove him from that important post". The Church in Rotterdam called him again without success in 1724. "He had indeed few equals then in the Church, was a solid, judicious, worthy man, so that he was exceedingly regretted in that town, and an extraordinary concern appeared at his death." Along with Carstairs and Blackwell, he wrote *The Humble Representation Concerning the Bill for Restoring Patronages*.

Not a few of the Highland lairds in the neighbourhood of the town of Inverness were, for some time after the Revolution, largely imbued with the same Jacobite spirit as the town magistrates. They were content that the old curates should continue in undisturbed possession of their benefices, and that the Lord's Day should be desecrated by gatherings in the churchyard or neighbourhood for athletic sports. Their influence with the common people was too often strong enough to induce them to prevent the settlement, after a vacancy of several years, of an efficient and faithful minister although many in the district hungered for the bread of life.

Thus in Petty, a few miles east of Inverness, the curate, Alexander Denoon, was deposed on 19 June 1706 for the rather common prelatial sins of swearing and drunkenness, but he disregarded the sentence and was allowed "to continue"

until his death in 1719. In a list of curates continued after the Revolution, held in the Advocates' Library, Wodrow, amid other notable characteristics, frequently affixes the epithet of "scandalous drunkard".

At Moy, 12 miles south of Inverness, Alexander Cumming, the presentee of Bishop Falconer and a bigoted Jacobite, continued in full possession of the charge until his death in 1709. A long vacancy of seven years followed. Efforts were made to obtain the faithful services of Daniel Bethune, but they were unsuccessful. In 1716 worthy James Leslie, a licentiate of the Presbytery of Elgin, was called by the Presbytery, and inducted on August 23.

The following Sabbath Mr Leslie walked up along the banks of the Findhorn to preach at Dalarossie, the other church of a united parish, in the face of strong opposition. Within two miles of this place of worship, at a wood overhanging the river, he encountered a crowd of women with aprons well filled with stones. Blocking up the narrow way, they bade him return and excitedly assured him that if he proceeded further they would certainly stone him. Mr Leslie, nothing daunted, replied to the angry clamour: "Let the greatest witch among you throw the first stone!" No one among them cared for so unhappy a pre-eminence and, in the confusion that ensued, the valorous minister was allowed to proceed.

Arriving at the church, he found it empty. There was a multitude in the graveyard engaged in "putting the stone" – the husbands, brothers and sons of those women from whose hands the preacher had so happily escaped on the way. Leslie urged the athletes to leave their sport and attend his service, but they emphatically refused and in return urged him to take part in the game. Thereupon he offered to throw the stone (the test of physical strength) once, on condition that if he surpassed them they would adjourn to the church. Being a very powerful man, his one throw far exceeded the mark reached by the foremost of the company. The new parson at once rose in their estimation, and they readily acknowledged his superiority and followed him into the church. The "strength-stone" lay for many long years untouched on the spot on which it had fallen from Mr Leslie's hands; and the sermon preached on that bright autumn Sabbath of 1716 was the beginning of a great moral revolution and blessed revival in that beautiful strath.

Nearer Inverness, in the parish of Daviot, the erratic curate, Michael Fraser, succeeded the worthy Alexander Fraser, who had been deposed for non-conformity in 1672. The outed minister survived the Revolution, but not being comprehended in the Act of Parliament of 1690 restoring the survivors of the

persecution, he remained at Abbotshall. Michael seems never to have shown any concern for the spiritual interests of his parishioners. As early as 1675 he was enjoined by the Synod that in time coming “he abstain from all limning and painting which hitherto has diverted him from his ministerial employments”. He continued in Daviot till his death in 1726.

When Mr Shaw, minister of Cawdor, went to declare the church vacant soon after, he reported to the Presbytery “that he found great numbers, some in the churchyard, others in the open fields, with the kirk door locked, the key carried off and could not be found; while the people behaved so rudely that he could not worship in the churchyard without being disturbed by them, and so returned home”. Mr Leslie came to preach and found numbers “sitting at a hillside near the church” – probably engaged in some of the games sanctioned by the “Book of Sports” of King James, of worthless memory. He gained admission into the dilapidated church and, more fearless than his brother of Cawdor, continued the service amid much peril from “the throwing of stones at the door, windows, and through the open roof”.

Verily, the Presbyterian ministers of those times in the north required great tact, energy, prudence, physical strength and courage, and the Head of the Church raised up many such men – ministers whose names are fragrant in many a remote and lonely Highland glen.

In Dingwall, the incumbent John MacRae died in 1704, and there was a vacancy for 12 years. The pious Mr Stuart of Kiltarn was deputed by the Presbytery to declare the church vacant, but he was attacked by “Highlanders with loaded pistols when occupying the pulpit”. In 1707, the bailies of Dingwall stated that “they know not what is become of the keys of the church, and cannot give access, and refuse to do so, under the authority of a considerable proprietor”.

A year after this, Mr Daniel Bayne (probably a native of Dingwall and one of the influential Baynes of Tulloch), chaplain to General Murray’s regiment in Flanders, was called by the majority of “the magistrates and heritors”. The Presbytery took the steps needed for the settlement of the chaplain at very great inconvenience to themselves, but when the heritors were called upon to give reasons for his translation to Dingwall, “they declined to draw up any reasons, pretending several excuses”. The Presbytery then drew up the requisite reasons and forwarded them to the Commission of Assembly but, after a vexatious delay, the settlement did not proceed. It is certain that many Dingwall parishioners were anxious for a minister, but the Episcopal influence

of the “considerable proprietor” thwarted their wishes. In 1716 the Presbytery succeeded in settling Mr John Bayne, a member of the Tulloch family.

Killearnan, on the north side of the Beaully Firth, owing to the opposition of the lairds, remained vacant for 19 years after the death of the curate. About the middle of the long vacancy, Mr Campbell of Kiltearn “reported that, according to appointment, he had supplied at Killearnan and that he was rabbled there in time of divine worship”. At the same time the Presbytery were “well informed that a considerable number of the common people there are desirous to have the gospel planted among them, notwithstanding the disaffection of the heritors”. In some cases, after long vacancies, the sheriff of Ross was applied to “for giving patent doors”², and settlements were made in the face of lengthy protests from Jacobite dissentients.

The barbarous treatment to which certain Ross-shire ministers, settled in 1711, were subjected, aroused the indignation of the General Assembly of that year. The loudest complaints were over the hardships endured by worthy John Morrison on being inducted to Gairloch. Mr Morrison had all along, from his youth, a sore battling life. Licensed by the Presbytery of Inveraray in 1698, he was sent in the following year to North Uist to supply the vacancy, but when he went to preach he was hindered and threatened by the mob and forced to leave. We then find him labouring for some years in Glenelg. In 1706 he translated to Boleskine (on Loch Ness). It was not a pleasant place to sojourn in, for Popery prevailed in the neighbourhood. When his predecessor, Thomas Houston, was asked in 1677 why he did not take part in the exercises held before the meetings of Presbytery, he replied that he was so troubled in watching by night, and with fear of robbery by day by the Lochaber robbers that were so numerous and broken out, that he could scarcely have so much time as to provide a discourse on the Sabbath day. “The brethren”, aware of his difficult condition, excused him from taking his share in those Scriptural expositions and exercises which still, even under Prelacy, were survivals of better days.

After labouring for four years in Boleskine, Morrison received an apparently harmonious call from Gairloch. Mr Thomas Chisholm was appointed to preach and serve the edict; but at the next meeting of Presbytery he reported “that after he was come near to the church of Gairloch he was seized upon by a party of men and carried back again about six miles, and that being let go by

² That is, to have the doors of the church opened.

them he had essayed again to go to the said church another way, and that he was again seized upon, by another party of men, and carried back by them to Kinlochewe. There he was detained by them for some time as prisoner, and thereafter by other parties coming successively was carried back till he was a great way out of the parish, and not let go till Sabbath afternoon; but that while he was detained prisoner, understanding that he was designedly carried back lest he should preach at Gairloch, he had read and intimated the said edict before six or seven persons within a house at Kinlochewe, which is one of the preaching places of the said parish. And he returned the said edict endorsed by him with the attestation of his having executed the same in the foresaid manner.”

It was no ordinary courage to serve the edict in such circumstances, and Mr Morrison at his induction to such a lawless parish must have had sad forebodings of sufferings in store for him as he listened in the church of Kiltearn, 60 miles from his charge, to our old Covenanting friend, Mr John Fraser of Alness, preaching in Gaelic from Song of Solomon 8:11, and in English from Colossians 4:17. The settlement, on 1 March 1711, took place at Kiltearn because “most of the brethren, at a previous meeting, gave very weighty reasons showing why they could not undertake to go up to Gairloch at this time and season of the year”.

Morrison forthwith proceeded in the direction of his new charge, and his reception by the parishioners may be best described in his own graphic words: “After two days’ journey he was interrupted at Kinlochewe (at the east end of Loch Maree) by the tenants of Sir John MacKenzie of Coul, who laid violent hands on him and his servant, rent his clothes, made prisoners of them, and kept them three days under guard in a cottage full of cattle and dung, without meat or bedding the first two days, the tenants relieving one another in turn by a fresh supply every day. On the third day a short supply was allowed, but they were yet kept prisoners in the same place, without other accommodation. When the fifth day came he was carried to Sir John’s house, who declared no Presbyterian should be settled in any place where his influence extended, unless Her Majesty’s forces did it by the strong hand.” This was but the first instalment of the harassing to which Morrison was subjected for years after.

At the ensuing Assembly, Wodrow, with that swift and accurate pen of his, sends his wife an account of Morrison’s “very inhuman treatment”. He tells how Carstares, the Moderator, “fell very brisk upon the dreadful barbarities in the North to the ministers in Ross. . . . After which the Commissioner made a speech and said that, unless he had heard it, he could not have believed such

inhumanities could have been used to men, let be ministers, in Scotland, and he was persuaded so to represent it to the Queen as never the like should be heard again.”