

KEEPING THE FAITH: THE CATHOLIC MISSION IN THE HIGHLANDS

1560-1800

Sybil M. Jack

Introduction

The best method of propagating the Faith in these Islands is, first to send there missionaries knowing the Gaelic language, well grounded in virtue and inflamed with zeal for souls

wrote Oliver Plunkett, archbishop of Armagh in 1671, of the Hebrides which he had just been asked to oversee.¹ Fifty years after the establishment of *Propaganda Fide* and nearly a hundred since Gregory XIII (1572-85) had established a congregation to oversee the needs of Christians in areas subject to heretical or non-Christian rulers, the provision of help to the Catholics in Scotland was still unsatisfactory — particularly in the Highlands.² In the Lowlands, although Catholics were everywhere in a minority, there were still a few priests available. Significantly, when the division between the two areas was made in 1732 was linguistic.³

The Gaelic language, virtue and zeal were not the only requisites for a Highland priest.⁴ Indeed, qualifying took many years, depending on the level of education that the candidate had attained before his clerical training, and was a major undertaking at any age. It is no wonder that most of the priests were the offspring of at least moderately well to do families. Those like James Grant in 1724, whose family was too poor even to pay his *viaticum*, that is to say, the provision for the journey, needed some sort of scholarship to help them study. After 1560 for many years such study could only be done abroad and that required considerable funding. The overseas Scottish colleges received

¹ P.F.Anson, *The Catholic Church in Modern Scotland* (London, Faith Press 1937) p.30.

² For earlier accounts of the missions in Scotland see A.S.MacWilliam 'A Highland mission in Strathglass 1671-1777' *Innes Review* xxiv (1973); D. Szechi 'Defending the True faith: Kirk, State and Missionaries in Scotland 1653-1755' *Catholic Historical Journal* 1996 vol 82, pp397-411; Douglas Ansdell *The people of the Great Faith: the Highland Church 1690-1900* (Stornoway 1998)

³ The papal decretum assigned to the Highland vicariate. the town of Inverness, Badenoch, Lochaber, and whatever other districts lie within the shire of Inverness, Ross, Sutherland, Strathnave, Caithness, the Orkney and Shetland Isle, Argyll, Kintyre, Lorne, Cowal, Atholl, Breadalbane. Menteith, Strathearn, Glenurquhart, Glen Lyon, Strath Ardle, Rannoch, Balquhiddy, and the highland parts of Dunbartonshire, Angus, Perth, Stirling, Marr and Moray in which the inhabitants normally use the Highland language with the Isles of Bute and Arran and all those others which are called Western or Hebrides. It omitted Banffshire, which included Strathavon and Glenlivet where the college of Scalán lay. Quoted in John Watts, *Hugh MacDonald Highlander, Jacobite and Bishop* (Edinburgh John Donald, 2002) pp 99-100

⁴ Donald E Meek *The Scottish Highlands: The Church and Gaelic Culture* (Geneva, CC Publications, 1996)

endowments from a range of people, including various popes and the later Stewart monarchs as well as James Gordon, marquis of Huntly, Thomas Innes, the rector of the Scots college Paris, and others. The boy, however, had also to get there, and eventually back and be clothed and provided for. He had moreover, to have passed a series of tests of suitability and, even if he got himself to a college under his own steam, might be rejected because there was no letter of recommendation from the prefect of the mission or later the Vicar Apostolic. In 1798, for example, the Rev Angus MacDonald, the rector in Rome, wrote enquiring about a Gillis boy who wished to be admitted to the college.⁵

There was no guarantee that a boy once accepted would be permitted to stay if he was found unsuitable. Allan MacDonald who went to Rome in 1715 was dismissed there, refused admission at Madrid, entered Douai and was dismissed from there, returned to Scalán and was dismissed there in 1730 and was obliged to teach in the Catholic schools in the West Highlands.⁶ Other boys found they had no vocation, 'seduced' perhaps by 'the world's vanities'. The whole formation of the priest was affected by which college he attended and this led to internal squabbles. The Jesuits managed to run most of the colleges except Paris and they had their own personal agenda for them. Many of the boys who attended their colleges, particularly the brighter ones, were enticed into joining the order and sent to serve elsewhere. They had an enviable reputation for scholarship and virtue but this was no direct help to the Highlands. While Mr Strachan (in Aberdeen in 1699) thought 'our chief dependence ought to be on prayer, mortification, vigilance and a deportment suitable to our sacred character' (virtues that were not tied to any particular place), on the spot preaching and service was probably more immediately useful.⁷

One of the problems was that more critical than a clear vocation to start with, was the boy's status. As the bishops wrote to the Cardinal Protector in 1730 they considered it useless to send poor boys because without a good background the people to whom they were to minister would despise them.⁸ As a result there were often few boys in training, and the problem was compounded at times by the poor quality of the teaching and supervision.⁹ Moreover those sent abroad even if of Highland origins, forgot their language in the many years of foreign study.¹⁰

There had been a Scots College in Paris since 1326 when it was founded for students from the Moray district. Highlanders were always a small

⁵ Scottish Catholic Archives (hereafter SCA) Obán Letters 1/5, 6.

⁶ Watts, *Hugh MacDonald*, pp. 94-5.

⁷ John Thomson, *Some account of the state of religion and of the Mission in Scotland* p.182 (Manuscript in SCA)

⁸ John Watts, *Scalan, The Forbidden College, 1716-1799* (Edinburgh Tuckwell Press 1999) p 65.

⁹ Watts, *Scalan* p.71.

¹⁰ O Blundell, *Catholics in Highlands of Scotland* Vol II (Edinburgh and London, Sands and co. 1917) p. 90 quoting a letter from Nicolson to the cardinal prefect 1732.

percentage of the students.¹¹ Paris was an unhealthy place and several of the students sent there died before they could return. It had avoided being Jesuit run only to become suspect of Jansenism in the eighteenth century and after an enquiry by Dr Lercari in the mid 1730s found guilty. There were other colleges. In 1576 Dr. James Cheyne had founded a college to educate clergy for the Scotch Mission, at Tournai; and after being transferred to Pont-à-Mousson, Douai, and Louvain, it was finally fixed at Douai where Edmund Hay, one of the first Scots to be educated abroad, was professor of theology. Pope Clement VIII founded the Scots College at Rome in 1600. The Bull of Foundation conferred on the college all the privileges already enjoyed by the Greek, German, and English colleges. The pope also bestowed various endowments on the infant college. The first students arrived in 1602.¹² The college for education of Scots clergy at Madrid, endowed by Colonel William Semple in 1627 and opened in 1633, was later moved to Valladolid. Run by the Jesuits, most of the students were siphoned off and only five returned to Scotland as secular priests. For years after 1734 there were no students until it was reopened at Valladolid. In 1773 Ranald MacDonald who was later the priest at Morar for fifty years was a student there. After the Reformation the Scots abbeys at Ratisbon and Würzburg likewise became a nursery of Scottish missionaries. For instance, in 1713 eleven boys went to Würzburg accompanied by Fr Maurus Stuart from Boggs in the Enzie district beside Fochabers. Then another eight students came out with Fr George Cruickshanks. The abbot was able to raise money for the support of the college. The Bishop of Eichstadt assigned it 1,000 florins per annum the duke of Bavaria 16,000 florins and so on.

Nevertheless, unless they were taken very young there was a problem with the preparation and suitability of these youngsters for a task that required years of study followed by an austere, if not deprived, life style in which the priest was isolated for most of the year from men of like mind and training. To bridge the gap, Thomas Nicholson when appointed the first Vicar Apostolic made it his priority to establish a preparatory college in Scotland. He chose Scalan, a remote Highland district near Glenlivet, for it and it flourished for a hundred years despite the animosity of the Kirk and the Military, providing the boys with a foretaste of a life of poverty. They would study, pray and eat in the large room to the right of the entrance, sleep in the room above the attic, and play their games on the green beside the Crombie burn. Rising at 6 am, the students washed in the Crombie. Then, dressed in black and blue tartan, ate a frugal meal of oatmeal porridge and began their rigorous day. They managed to have meat two or three times a week, and supper was again the inevitable porridge. One of them, Alexander Geddes, wrote to a fellow student, who had obtained leave to visit his friends,

¹¹ Brian M Halloran, *The Scots College Paris 1603-1792* (Edinburgh, John. Donald. 1997) p.16.

¹² In 1604 they moved to the Via Quattro Fontane, close to the Quirinal Palace. Among the benefactors of the college were Father William Thompson, the first Marchioness of Huntly, Cardinals Spinelli and Sacripanti, and Henry Cardinal Duke of York.

...make particular inquiries after the health of the sun. Fail not to present my compliments to him, and tell him I still hope I shall one day be able to renew the honour of personal acquaintance with him.

The Highland and Lowland students there were frequently at odds, and when Hugh MacDonald was made bishop of the Highlands in 1732, he established a separate college, on an island in Loch Morar, later moved to Salaman.¹³ When some of the older students arrived like Allan MacDonald who had returned from overseas, there were further divisions.

Propaganda Fide

The formal structure underlying the missions must be borne in mind if the position of the priests in the Highlands is to be understood. Rome had taken nearly sixty years from the end of the Council of Trent (1563) before Gregory XV (1621-23) established a permanent and well-organized congregation for the propagation of Catholicism. Funding was provided for it by assigning to it the ring-tax assessed on each newly appointed cardinal (500 gold scudi, later 600 silver scudi). The congregation was also granted ample privileges and immunities in order to facilitate and accelerate its labours. Scotland was not high on its list of priorities. In the general congregation —meeting on 8 March 1622 when all the provinces of the world were divided into groups and put under a nuncio — the fifth group put England, Ireland, Denmark, Norway under the nuncio of Belgium (but made no mention of Scotland) and provinces were assigned to cardinals of the congregation, but again no mention of Scotland. Scotland was as an afterthought put with England under its new prelate, William Bishop, but the English prelates had their hands full with England, and the Scots were not about to be united by default to the English. The position in Scotland as a whole, and especially the Highlands, remained anomalous. Usually, regions without an ordinary Catholic Church hierarchy, that is principally missionary regions, fell under the ordinary and immediate jurisdiction of the pope and were governed by a delegate who received Episcopal consecration to some titular see, that had fallen away from the Catholic faith (such as Dianopolis). This bishop was designated a Vicar Apostolic whose jurisdiction comes directly from the pope as 'universal bishop.' Unlike the jurisdiction of a Diocesan Bishop, whose jurisdiction derives directly from his office, all his powers were delegated, not ordinary, and since they were not diocesan bishops, they have neither cathedral nor chapter.

Episcopal powers are critical to the continuance of a catholic community since there are many things that ordinary priests cannot do. For instance they have no power to confirm; they cannot consecrate priests, not can they consecrate holy oils, chalices, patens, and portable altars. In the Highlands there was also the problem of obtaining wafers for the hosts, since wheat was not

¹³

Watts, *Scalan* passim.

available. Before 1697, the hosts came from Edinburgh but holy oils, necessary for baptisms and extreme unction, had to come all the way from London.¹⁴

The vicars apostolic had certain limitations on their power. Without special concession from the Holy See, they might not dispense from the prohibited degrees in marriage. For an area like the Highlands where interbreeding was common, this was a major problem. Scotland, however, did not get a bishop or Vicar Apostolic until 1694. Even then there were endless discussions about the faculties granted to the vicar apostolic. Did the bishop's faculty extend to dispensing in the second degree of consanguinity marriages already contracted? They did not get a full response on marriage laws until 14 Jan 1767.¹⁵ Meanwhile, however, Scotland had at least acquired an agent or representative at Rome who could present its case directly to the authorities. William Leslie, who served from 1649-1708, was a chaplain in the household of Cardinal Charles Barberini, (d. 1704) from 1649 when Barberini returned to Rome from France. This presumably provided for his lodging and sustenance. The successive Barberini cardinals had been the Scottish Cardinal Protectors for most of the 17th century until succeeded in 1679 by the English cardinal Philip Howard.

Sixteenth Century

The later sixteenth century was a period of confusion for the Catholic Church in Scotland. The central hierarchy had no confidence in any system that did not depend upon a chain of command. The idea of unsupervised itinerant priests, probably in secular dress, horrified them. This extended to the Jesuits where several of the Generals such as Everard Mercurio (d1580) hesitated to send priests back to countries with no proper hierarchy to guide them and so were reluctant to dispatch missionaries. The Highlands were not the main focus of Catholic pre-occupations in the sixteenth century. Although the six young Scots who left Scotland with the papal envoy Gouda¹⁶ and Edmund Hay of Megginch in 1562 were of good family and nearly all northerners, their future did not lie in the Highlands¹⁷ but in Europe or the Lowlands¹⁸. The Hay family, indeed, typifies the chequered clan history of religious affiliation. Edmund's nephew Sir George Hay after studying for six years in at Douay, returned to Scotland about 1596, obtained the office of a gentleman of the bedchamber to King James, and subsequently stayed a loyal protestant. Sir James Hay headed James VI and I's espionage system and was one of those put in charge of a fleet to subjugate the Isles in 1608. On the other hand, Francis Hay, 9th Earl of Errol, was early converted to Roman Catholicism, was an associate of Huntly, turned protestant and then reverted to catholicism. The other emigrés from families that

¹⁴ Propaganda Archives Acta 1687 cited in A Bellesheim, *History of the Catholic Church in Scotland*, tr. Blair, (Edinburgh, 1890) vol IV p133n.

¹⁵ SCA, SM 4/13, 14, 15.

¹⁶ J.H Pollen, *Papal Negotiations with Mary Queen of Scots* (Edinburgh, Scotland Hist. Soc, 1901), pp..113-16.

¹⁷ J H Pollen, *Counter-reformation in Scotland* (London Sands and Co.1921) p18.

¹⁸ Hay himself (d 1591) technically perhaps a Lowlander and related to the earls of Erroll became a Jesuit, had a distinguished career on the continent and becoming rector of Clermont college, Paris, and Professor of Civil and Canon Law.

were more tenacious Catholics, included William Crichton,(from a Border family) James Gordon fifth son of the 4th earl of Gordon, James Tyrie, Robert Abercrombie and William Murdoch¹⁹. James Gordon became the Jesuit superior for Scotland, but was distracted by other demands on his attention.²⁰ After Mercurio's death some Scots priests did return but almost without exception to the Lowlands. Crichton was sent back in 1581 but was mainly involved with Border Catholics.²¹ William Murdoch was in and out of Aberdeen and Edinburgh The Scots Jesuit priests were hard headed in their approach to their task, starting a tradition that was to last for two centuries of behaving like merchants with a trade and describing themselves as *operarii* — workers. Between 1580 and 1600, Strathglass in the eastern Highlands, whose lord, Thomas Chisholm was brought to court for his Catholicism and whose family remained Catholics, became a focal point and a mission station for the Jesuit priests but it was mainly a refuge and one that was shut down for half a century after 1600.²²

Seventeenth century

The Scottish parliament throughout the seventeenth century was extending and reinforcing the laws against Catholics. Those who heard mass, let alone those who celebrated it, were subject to the loss of property and children. Nevertheless, the more remote areas managed to avoid the enforcement of these acts. The centre of Catholic survival in 17th century Scotland was the remote parish of Rathven (on the north coast to the east of Elgin), which was also to become the nursery of its priesthood.²³ The Gordon clan provided a refuge for the few priests that existed there. Gordon protection was vital for much of the area down to 1728. Nathaniel Hookes wrote in 1707 that the duke of Gordon (at the time Alexander 2nd duke)

... is absolute master of the Highland. To protect the Catholics ... he has given a house to the bishops three miles off from Gordon castle where the prelate lives with his priests. The Catholic Religion is exercised pretty much all over.²⁴

There too, in the Churchyard of St Ninians in the Enzie, in 1688 a large Chapel was being built, capable of containing 1000 people. When the infant Huntly was forcibly converted in 1728, the duty of protection passed to a junior branch of the family, the Fochabers.

¹⁹ Michael Yellowlees 'So strange a monster as a Jesuiste' — The Society of Jesus in Sixteenth Century Scotland', Colonsay, House of Lochar, Scotland 2006; John Durkan, 'William Murdoch and the early Jesuit Mission in Scotland' *Innes Review*, xxxv (1984) pp 3-11.

²⁰ Durkan, 'William Murdoch' pp. 3-11.

²¹ Pollen *Counter-reformation in Scotland* p. 48.

²² For its reappearance see A. S. MacWilliam 'A Highland mission: Strathglass 1670-1777' *Innes Review* xxiv (1973)

²³ O Blundell, *Catholics in Highlands of Scotland* Vol I Central Highlands (Edinburgh and London Sands and co, 1909) p 2.

²⁴ Blundell, I pp. 5-6.

Keeping the Faith

Elsewhere, before the Civil war, a few Franciscans served as peripatetic priests maintaining a minimum of services in the face of considerable difficulties. In 1638 Father Cornelius Ward, the poet, who had been a missionary from 1624-30 when he was captured, wrote in Latin to the Bishop of Down and Connor of the (literally) uphill battle they faced, stressing how inconceivable this must seem to the Romans:

The labour of the mission in those remote and barbarous spots is almost indescribable, and beyond the belief of the Romans. Sometimes the same missionary has been there in different years for six months together, without tasting any kind of drink except water, arid milk ... in summer they can hardly procure bread.⁷

He went on to write of a problem that might not occur to people who were used to the availability of basic necessities:

... at length when the aforesaid missionary found himself without wine or hosts for the holy sacrifice, he betook himself by long and circuitous routes, and not without great toil and hardship, to the city of Edinburgh. And when he at last made his way back to the mountains with the bread and wine, he fell into a very serious illness.²⁵

Although Fr William Crichton had advised as early as the 1580s that friars should be disguised and go about without their habits and be given a pension²⁶ and many arrived in the guise of servants or merchants, it added to their difficulties that Rome did not approve of disguises. The priests were supposed to be in clerical garb. This was not always observed. A 17th century priest of Glengairn went about as a strolling musician.²⁷ The 17th Highland clergy also affected the long hair and moustaches of the Gaelic learned orders²⁸—perhaps to conceal their true vocation.²⁹ The clergy, however, had to carry with them the necessary tools of their trade. They needed vestments, chalices and other vessels, candles, bread irons for shaping the hosts, breviaries, reliquaries, portable altars, all of which had to be consecrated. These were the first things to be taken, and it was put to David Burnet's credit in 1688 that when the mob attacked he saved the chalice, ostensory and the incensory of the king's chapel in Edinburgh.³⁰

Living also required other resources that were not at first forthcoming. On October 28, 1652, Father Duggan wrote to St Vincent de Paul:

²⁵ Patrick Conlan, *The Missionary work of the Irish Franciscans* (Veritas 1996) pp. 11-12.

²⁶ Pollen *Counter-reformation in Scotland* p.48.

²⁷ Blundell, Vol I p.77.

²⁸ J.L.Campbell *Canna: the story of a Hebridean Island* (Oxford, Oxford University Press for the National Trust for Scotland) 1984 p. 8.

²⁹ James Kirk, *Patterns of reform and Continuity. Change and the Reformation Kirk* (Edinburgh T & T Clark) 1989.

³⁰ Thomson, *Mission in Scotland* p.188.

Keeping the Faith

We have accepted no recompense from the people for the services we have rendered. I have to employ two men; one helps me to row when I travel from island to island, and carries my Mass-box and my scanty luggage overland, for sometimes, before Mass, I have to travel four or five leagues on foot over wretched roads. The other man helps me to teach the Pater, Ave, and Credo and serves my Mass, for I have nobody else capable of doing so. He later added It would indeed, be a great service to God to send to this country good apostolic workers acquainted with the language and prepared to bear with hunger and thirst and sleeping upon the ground. They should have an annual subsidy too; otherwise they would have nothing to live on.³¹

The regular clergy (that is the monks and friars) were supported by their orders and obedient to their monastic superiors, but, to start with, any secular clergy had no obvious hierarchy, or source of funding. It was not until 1653 that, by a decree of Propaganda, the Scottish secular clergy were incorporated into a missionary body under William Ballantyne, the first Prefect of the Mission (1653-6). In 1652 Propaganda funded the mission in terms of 50 crowns each for ten missionaries — a wholly inadequate number. They were to have settled districts and fixed residence in intervals of persecutions and regular meetings on Sunday.³² The subsidies did not arrive regularly and the clergy were often in distress which could be aggravated when it was rumoured that ‘some people at Rome had said that it was needless to allow them any subsidy because they ought to imitate the apostles’ manner of living if they were such as they ought to be’. For men who were every hour in danger of having their throats cut by the insolence of the mob (27 Nov 1688) this was hard counsel. Propaganda provided 500 crowns a year. The nine Highland missionaries (when there were so many) received 28 crowns each and the Lowland clergy where the cost of living was much higher, 50 crowns. The money from Rome had to be supplemented if a priest’s body and soul were to be kept together.

In 1657, Dr Alexander Winster (or Winchester) became the second Prefect Apostolic of the Scottish Missions, which he remained until 1697. On 11 July 1656 Alexander VII issued a further document about the Scottish secular clergy. It concerned the strict visitation and allocation of priests to specific provinces:

... so that the prefect can call to Scotland those who have not come...for there are some who have attached themselves to great personages and are more occupied with acquiring temporal goods for themselves than spiritual goods for others.³³

They were to obey the prefect and so were those in regular orders who must communicate their letters patent to the vicar Apostolic, and in the cure of

³¹ Thomson, *Mission in Scotland* pp. 188-90.

³² Thomson, *Mission in Scotland* p.17.

³³ Josef Metzler, *Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide Memoria Rerum*, 3 vol. (Roma-Friburgo-Vienna 1971-1976) vol I p 499.

Keeping the Faith

souls were subject to his authority. This injunction was not obeyed for half a century or longer, as the Jesuits held that their Faculties (permission to operate as priests) came from the General of their Order and gave them wider authority than the prefect could.³⁴ The problem with the regulars concerned the source of their authority. The fight over the Jesuits' faculties went on until 1740 when Propaganda finally enforced the rule that regulars obey the vicars apostolic.³⁵ Before this the Jesuits were so important of to papal diplomacy that it was impolitic to insist on strict obedience to the rules.

In the dispute between them, they described the seculars as ignorant and silly persons, nay as heretics and schismatics.³⁶ But at this point, almost any priest was better than no priest. Winster wrote to Propaganda in 1669 that

[the Highlanders] untiring constancy in all matters is truly surprising and is admitted and extolled even by their enemies, particularly in regard of religion, which they continue to profess as much as the severity of the persecution and the total want of priests permit. No greater favour can be conferred on them than to educate their children and render them suited to become priests or ecclesiastics.

When Alexander Leslie (brother to William the procurator) held a visitation in 1677 he found that there were 12,000 Catholics in the Highlands and Islands with four priests, three of whom were Irish. Like many reports of the time, his object was to show that there were Catholics expiring without the sacraments for want of a priest, and also that those not formally catholic were still practicing the remnants of their faith. His account of his visit to Barra is designed to this end.

Here we stayed thirteen days, treated right royally in various parts of the island, hut particularly by the chief in his strong castle of Kismula. This is a huge building reared on a great rock and completely surrounded by the sea. Whatever member of the family is in possession of it, even though not the eldest, is regarded as chief of the whole island. I visited every district, and the Sacraments were administered and all the services held for the benefit of the Catholics, who gathered round us every day with equal joy to them and to us. When we were on the point of leaving the inhabitants showed themselves much displeased with Munro because he would not remain with them, and if I had not been with him I firmly believe that they would have kept him by force. Indeed they had some idea of keeping me, imagining that as I was an official of the Pope, if they detained me in their power they could make a treaty with His Holiness to obtain priests from him as a ransom for his delegate. I had as much as I could do, even backed by the laird, to escape from them, and then only by promising to go to Rome and throw myself at the feet of His Holiness and put before him their neglected condition

³⁴ Thomson, *Mission in Scotland* p 363-4.

³⁵ Metzler *Sacrae Congregationis* Vol I, p 504; Vol II p 618-9.

³⁶ Thomson, *Mission in Scotland* p. 91.

and their spiritual needs. At length after much weeping and many laments they agreed that I should depart, and Munro with me, but they swore blood-curdling oaths that if they did not get a priest of their own, and Munro or any other came to the island he would not be allowed to leave except by swimming, as he would get no boat. They swore that they would sooner burn their boats than let another priest leave in one. Indeed, it would be quite in keeping with the character of these islanders that they would send an expedition to steal the priest of a neighbouring locality, and this would be the cause of deadly enmity between them.

Leslie also reported that the Jesuits refused to show the Prefect their faculties claiming that their faculties then included the faculty of consecrating chalices and portable altars. Leslie suggested that the catechism should be taught (the Jesuits did not, but read out the answers) and preaching and addressed the vexed question of Catholics attending heretic services and heretic schools. He said that fixed missionaries needed 50 crowns and those who go from place to place need 60. Maybe, in fixed locations, Catholics might contribute³⁷ but this was uncertain. The report had little effect. Obedience to the Prefect Apostolic of the Scottish mission was not widespread. It is typical that Father Robert Munro, the first native Gaelic speaker ordained since the Reformation, became involved with Lord McDonnell's fight against the earl of Argyll despite the written instruction to the contrary from the Prefect.³⁸ The Jesuits remained peripatetic and also the preferred priests of the major Catholic clans like the Gordons, This was a source of friction. Propaganda required every missionary to obey supervisors, to stay where they were sent, to confess their sins each year, to spend fifteen days a year in spiritual exercises, to observe their rule as far as possible, to teach the children Latin, and to send Propaganda information about the state of religion, the salvation of people, the numbers of Catholics and heretics and schismatics. There were also rules designed to arbitrate between bishops and missionaries. In 1668 it was deemed that letters from Scotland were not necessary because it was so difficult to convey them. In 1687 there had been a meeting of the secular clergy in Gordon castle. They were pressing for a bishop. At this time seven Irish priests were in the Highlands and five more expected.³⁹ In 1688 there were 22 clergy missionaries 11 in the Highlands in Lewis, Uist, Sleat Knoydart, Strathglass, Inverness, at Gordon castle, Glenlivet and Strathairn and two as yet unassigned. All, at this point, were Irish with one Jesuit serving Braemar.⁴⁰ The numbers were slowly increasing. In 1698 it was reported that there were 10 Jesuits, 4 Benedictines and 23 secular priests, [37 in all] 10 in the Highlands and the rest in the Lowlands.

³⁷ SCA SM3/2 Thomson, *Mission in Scotland* pp. 30-2.

³⁸ See G FitzGibbon *Innes Review* xlvi (1997); Metzler, *Sacrae Congregationes* Vol I, p 74.

³⁹ Thomson, *Mission in Scotland* p. 157.

⁴⁰ Thomson, *Mission in Scotland* p.186 says that Mr Coen and Mr Carolan [were] in Lewis Mr Hammal in Uist, Mr Devoyer in Sir Donald's country about Sleat Mr Munro in Knoydart, Mr Bias in Strathglass, Mr Cahassy at Inverness to Lea at Gordon castle, Mr Tremar at Glenlivet and Strathairn and 2 Irish as yet unassigned. All in fact were Irish at this point. Fr Fordyce SJ served Braemar.

Keeping the Faith

When they were under attack (as in 1689) the suffering and hardships of these priests especially in the 'desert and uninhabited mountains' could be considerable. David Burnet was obliged to shelter in

...a hut built of rough stones...where wind and snow came in between the stones and many times they were all covered with snow in the morning.

Like their temporary supervisor, Oliver Plunket the Archbishop of Armagh in Ireland a cutting north wind, snow and hail nearly blinded some and they were in danger of being lost and suffocated in the snow. Often sympathizers did not dare shelter them. But like Plunket they prayed:

May it redound to the glory of God, the salvation of our souls, and of the flock entrusted to our charge.

Finally, in 1694 Scotland acquired a Catholic bishop. Innocent XII nominated as Vicar Apostolic Thomas Nicolson, a Protestant by upbringing, who had been a professor at Glasgow University for fourteen years. Becoming a Catholic in 1682, he was ordained priest in 1685 and was working as a Missionary in 1688. He was imprisoned in Stirling, but after some months he was allowed to leave the country. Consecrated as Bishop of Peristachium in 1695 he was detained in Holland, and when at last William gave him a licence to enter England on his way to his duties he was nevertheless arrested on landing and kept in prison for some months.⁴¹ When Nicolson was released he started on a reorganization of the mission notwithstanding periodic outbursts of persecution in the Highlands. Now that things were regularised, annual letters from the clergy to Propaganda were again required.⁴² Sending letters safely was difficult however, as persecution was active. In 1699 even the duke of Gordon was imprisoned for having mass said in his lodgings at Edinburgh.⁴³ The priests who resided in towns were the most at risk of discovery. James Christian Abercrombie, a Scots monk from Wurzburg, was nearly taken in Aberdeen when the magistrate's men broke in when he was hearing confession. He had to hide in the priest's hole and the altar fittings were hastily burned. Another time he was taken when a protestant who was at law with a catholic widow decided under pretence of friendship to betray the missionary whom he thought was responsible for her obduracy. Luckily he was released.

For a time at the end of the 17th century there was only Thomas Innes to serve the whole of Braemar, Glengarry Strathean and Glenlivet. Relief for the Highlands was pressed. The Highland mission, it was said, would never prosper being served only by strangers who either would perform their duty negligently or, overcome by sickness and fatigue, would soon be frightened by the roughness of the country, the misery and hardships to which they were daily exposed and would abandon the country.⁴⁴ The end of the seventeenth century

⁴¹ W Doran, 'Bishop Thomas Nicolson: first vicar-apostolic 1695-1718' *Innes Review* xxxix (1988)

⁴² Metzler, Vol I, p. 503.

⁴³ Blundell, Vol II, p. 7.

⁴⁴ Thomson, *Mission in Scotland* p.260.

was particularly hard with garrisons in gentlemen's houses, bad seasons and scarcity of victuals, downright famine, and fear of plague. In the north there was neither meal nor seed nor money. Two thirds of the land was left untilled and two thirds of the people died of famine or of distemper contracted by it. The newly appointed Vicar Apostolic did not stay in any one place but was continuously on the move assisting, exhorting and encouraging the clergy and laity and administering the sacrament of confirmation.

Eighteenth century

When the 1700 storm was over, Nicolson's first move in 1701 was a visitation of the whole kingdom including the Highlands, which he described to Propaganda in terms of mixed admiration and horror. He speaks warmly of the people, but his account of the paths, if such they could be called, and the housing — Creil houses for winter and sheilings or summer lodgings which were even less solid — 'little cabins of earth, four or five feet broad and six feet long, into which one enters by crouching to the ground, nor can one stand upright when arrived inside' and food, was appalled. After travelling by

rough and almost impassable paths, in order to avoid the soldiery, towards the west coast, which is inhabited by Catholics, he crossed to Eigg, where he found all Catholics, 300 in number, very constant in the faith, and always loyal to their sovereigns.

On Canna he found 130 Catholics, and passed from there to South Uist, where he found 1500 Catholics. He reported there were three schools in the Highlands one in Uist, one in Barra and one in Morar in Arisaig.

The following shows the form of their pilgrimage.

About mid-day of June 23rd, which was Sunday, we landed at Loch Eynort in Uist, where Mass was said in a tent which we erected on the beach. Towards evening we went to the house of the laird at Ormaclate and were received with many marks of kindness by his lady in the absence of the chief of Clanranald, whom we had left on the mainland. In South Uist all the people were Catholics, except about forty persons who attended the minister's chapel. At twelve stations such as presented themselves were confirmed, the numbers reaching over 800. We were greatly pleased with the kindness of the chief of Clanranald and of his lady.⁴⁵

Nicolson well appreciated at the end of the trip what the early missionaries had written — that the remoteness of the Highlands and its poverty were a deterrent to even the most committed of missionaries. The position of priest in such a place was a burden for, as well as knowledge of the language, they needed to be able to be prepared to bear a frugal and primitive lifestyle. The peripatetic age was, however, largely over and the seculars were each

⁴⁵ Quoted I Denis Rixson, *Arisaig and Morar: A History* (Edinburgh, Tuckwell Press, 2002) p. 99.

Keeping the Faith

assigned to a station — admittedly not always one that they liked. Nicolson called the priests to Eilean Ban and allocated to each a fixed station, in accordance with the wishes of Propaganda, and gave them the statutes he had established. Antony Mongan who had been his interpreter on his trip was made a pro-vicar for the Highlands.⁴⁶ At the same time the parliament in Edinburgh passed yet another Act ‘for preventing the growth of popery’ and when Antony Mongan was captured some of the Irish priests once again threatened to quit the Mission. James Cahassy, old and weary, was dying of consumption although the soldiery could not capture him. In 1704 when there was an attempt to put the Act into force in the synod of Argyll, the priests had to take to the hills again, which was the death of Cahassy. Robert Munro was caught and gaoled in Invergarry Castle where he soon died.

By 1704 the kirk had identified several catholic districts. Three parishes in Ardnamurchan, the Braes of Lochaber, the parish of Kilmonivaig, Knoydart and Morar, Moidart, Arisaig, the islands of South Uist, Barra, Canna, Rum, Muck, Eigg, Coll and Tiree and the north east.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, despite the periodic resurgence of persecution particularly in 1715 and 1745, the Catholic Church in Scotland was getting on a more stable footing, indicated perhaps by the fact that in 1700 Alexander Winster, Alexander Leslie, Robert Munro, Robert Strachan, Alexander Drummond James Carnegie and James Gordon were appointed to assist the bishop with temporal affairs. On 12 May 1703 there was a report to Propaganda of things pertinent to the mission in Scotland.⁴⁸ There were 37 priests in Scotland, five Franciscans, four Benedictines, ten Jesuits, and eighteen secular. fifteen of the latter educated at Scots college Rome. When James Gordon was consecrated as a co-adjutor bishop for Nicolson his principal responsibility was the Highlands and he visited them several times despite the steep paths and poor sustenance available, became enamoured of them and attempted to learn the language. In 1709 there were seven Jesuits in the Lowlands and 4 in the Highlands. Over the century there were an average of 30-45 priests, normally two thirds in the Lowlands. This was way below the 3-400 priests present in England although the percentage of secular priests was about the same.

Although the Jesuits made a formal submission to Nicolson in 1701, after James Forbes had written an apologia for Jesuit missionaries,⁴⁹ the disputes between secular and regular continued and occasionally blew up. Nicolson was, however, establishing his authority. In 1704 he rewrote the statutes of the Scottish mission including the rules for bishops, vicars apostolic and missionaries and these were blessed by Rome in 1707 and lasted for nearly two centuries.⁵⁰

By Nicolson’s time the need for Irish priests was petering out and the last one in the Highlands died in 1738. Of the sixty one priests who served the

⁴⁶ Watts, *Hugh MacDonald* p 15.

⁴⁷ Mary McHugh, ‘The religious Condition of the Highlands and Islands in the Mid-Eighteenth Century’ *Innes Review*, xxxv (1984) pp. 12-21.

⁴⁸ SCA SM3/8)

⁴⁹ SCA SM3/21; SM3/10/10-11.

⁵⁰ Metzler, III pp. 660-2, 672-3, 676, 692-705.

Highland vicariate and who began their training after the first Highland seminary was opened only two, both Irish, are known to have been other than native Highlanders. The eighteenth century saw a number of families regularly producing candidates for a Gaelic speaking priesthood. Leading them in numbers were the MacDonalds, and the MacDonells, then the Gordons, Campbells, Crichtons, Chisholms, Guthrie, Geddes, Innes, Ballantine, Drummond, Blackhall.⁵¹ The position of the regulars in all this was difficult. By 1781 the Highland priests consisted of one MacGillis, one Chisholm and thirteen MacDonalds. 75 % of those in training at this time were MacDonalds.⁵²

Because the local heritors were hostile or indifferent the Kirk made little headway before Culloden, and surprisingly little after. By 1774 the catholic mission still held the old Catholic districts as the numbers of acknowledged Catholics counted in the various Kirk surveys showed. Kilmonivaig was equally divided between Catholics and Protestants but the division persisted. In other areas like Strathglass the Catholics were a significant minority. The claims of the mission, in their letters to Propaganda, of inroads into protestant areas must be taken cautiously. Some of the areas seen in the 1720s as recently won back, such as the Braes of Lochaber with 400 people baptised by the Irish priest Peter MacDonald,⁵³ were areas seen as Catholic only a quarter century before. Colin Campbell's work in the protestant areas of Ardamurchan where his family lands lay, were probably ephemeral. The kirk was reorganising itself the better to combat the Roman missionaries, however, and managed to curtail the expansion of the mission into new areas.

The problems of being a priest

Although the priests were largely protected, except in the periods after the risings in 1715 and 1745 when they had to retreat to the hills and manage as best they could, they were mostly able to reside in their parishes. They built themselves houses probably very similar to those of the local farmers although Alexander Cameron spent his first winter in a shieling hut and nearly died of exposure.⁵⁴ Of course they had to be on their guard. They moved around under false names. Hugh MacDonald was Scott. In George Hay's letters with Mr Geddes, a secret code was used: Rome and the Pope were 'Hilltown' and 'The old gentleman'. More generally, Propaganda was 'the Exchange', the Mission was 'the company', the bishop was 'the physician', students were apprentices, colleges were 'the shop' and communicants were 'the customers'. The merchants at Hamburg were the cardinals in Rome. Occasionally the letters say that hiding the names of people or places are not presently necessary but letters are usually directed to friends who are not suspicious. Thus in 1733 all Carnegie's letters from Paris were addressed to Mr Burnett to the use of Mrs Wallace in Falconers Lane below the Canongate Cross, Edinburgh.⁵⁵ In 1766,

⁵¹ F. Forbes and W.J. Anderson 'Clergy lists of the Highland District 1732-1828' *Innes Review*, xvii (1966)

⁵² *Scots College Rome 1600-2000* ed McCluskey (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2000) pp. 41-45.

⁵³ Watts, *Hugh MacDonald* pp. 46-7.

⁵⁴ Watts, *Hugh MacDonald* p. 98.

⁵⁵ SCA Blairs Letters BL3/6

Keeping the Faith

Aeneas McGillis letters were addressed to Mrs Jean Innes in Blackfryers Wynd, Edinburgh but were actually for the bishop.⁵⁶

After students had gone to the continent for education, returning to Scotland was sometimes hard. Abbot Fleming of Ratisbon, a regular, wrote rejecting an urgent summons to return in 1689:

I am of another body of another professione, that stands in need both of dispensatione and divorce and besides having these twentie years past enjoyed the pleasures of a solitarie lyfe where a man can shut his doores, denie audience to everybody and sweetly hug himself in his own laziness for some houres together which surpasses all earthly contentment to quyt such a pleasant port and Elysian calme and to lance forth againe into the oceane, and to be exposed to stormes and tempests, to follow new modes and fashions and to begin in ane old age to learn to steer a new course amongst a thousand rocks and sands were a perfect madness.⁵⁷

The Scots who had spent some years in Rome, knew how the men who ran the central government of the Church lived. They had seen the grand palaces of the cardinals like the Barberini, their galleries full of works of Art, their chambers the focus for music and scholarship; the huge and ornamented churches with their shrines and painted altars; stately papal festivals and the many other festivals and feasts and processions that passed through the streets, in the provision of which money was no object and they were returning to employment where a chapel 80 foot long was amazing and their house was probably built of wickerwork. They would share the sparse food of the Highlands: 'only one meal a day, consisting of barley bread or oaten bread with some cheese or salt butter.' They would minister to people who lived constantly on the verge of famine since shortage of suitable agricultural land meant that what corn they could grow was cultivated on the runrig system. The remains of such rigs and lazybeds can still be seen on the inland from Arisaig and Morar. They did not take their corn to the mill but 'burned' it (graddan meal) and ground it in querns. Mostly, churches were non-existent although meeting-places or Tighean-Phobuill (houses of the people as they were called) were to be found throughout the glens.⁵⁸ Other places held services in barns.⁵⁹ When they returned from abroad or came from Scalan they spent a year or so with a seasoned priest to learn the practical business of being a parish priest.

The Highlanders were becoming unhappy with their lot. In the past — before the 1730s — it was thought that the Highland priests had been provided by the people with 'every article of consumption' but now the Highlanders were moving to the Lowlands, a more market economy was developing and the

⁵⁶ SCA Blairs Letters BL3/ 183

⁵⁷ Quoted in A Roberts: *Regensburg and the Scots*, (Aberdeen, Aberdeen University Press, 2005) p. 8.

⁵⁸ Denis Rixson, *Arisaig and Morar: A History* Edinburgh, Tuckwell Press 2002 pp. 96-99; P. Galbraith, *Blessed Morar (Morair Bheannachte)* (Fort William, 1989, 1994), p.5.

⁵⁹ A. Roberts, 'Mass in the kiln', *Innes Review*, xli (1990), pp.227-29.

chieftains were growing greedy. The total annual allowance from Propaganda was 570 crowns. The problem was not simply one of amount. Particularly in times of persecution, it was difficult to transfer the money from Rome to the Highlands. In 1733 there is a series of letters to the Abbé Stewart who was the agent in Rome at the time recommending that bills be sent to London to Mr Robert Gordon and from there to Edinburgh as the Exchange from Paris was low 'so something will be lost of it by sending it here' but a profit might be made on the London to Edinburgh route.⁶⁰

Additional moneys were essential if the mission was to survive. Some came from private donations but they were not always easy to access. There had been various bequests. Francis Irvine of Drum had left 16,000scudi to Propaganda for Scottish missions and this was in the charge of the baron of Roslin.⁶¹ There were legacies but these were not always paid. John Thomson wrote of 4,000 marks left for a missionary in Aberdeen and £1,000 Scots in the hands of the Lord of Drum and other larger sums. The clergy themselves often left bequests. John Farquharson for example left moneys for the poor priests of the Highland and Lowland districts in 1808.⁶²

We have some of the priests' reports to Propaganda to show us how they lived. Although some of their writing must be tempered by the knowledge that it was intended to stir up the sympathies of the far away reader, most of what we can learn tends to confirm the basic nature of the life. One parish, Shenval, known as the Siberia of Scotland as it was 1200 feet above sea level, was bishop Hugh MacDonald's centre for visiting the area. The Abbé MacPherson who was priest there for a while has an account of how, being called to assist a dying person in the middle of winter when the snow was deep, he was warned by his guide against falling down a chimney as the path along which they were walking led them over the top of the dwelling.⁶³

Fixed stations may have been the form, but often was hardly the substance. William Harrison, originally at Morar and Arisaig and then technically at Moidart, was for many years after 1744 the sole priest in the whole of North and South Morar, had to borrow a boat in order to travel, had no table or proper ink and on one occasion was not sure whether he had celebrated Easter on the right date.⁶⁴ He was evidently a prudish and difficult man who is said to have caused the great Gaelic poet, Alasdair MacMhaigsir Alasdair (Alexander MacDonald 1695?-1770?) to be ejected from his farm because of the salacious nature of some of the poems he had published.

There was a problem of contact even with fellow priests. The bishop thought himself very happy when he could hear from the Highlands and remote isles once in six months and at that only in summer, so great was their distance and the difficulty and expense of communication with Edinburgh. Propaganda wanted receipts for money sent but it was difficult to send them. The Highlands

⁶⁰ SCA Blairs Letters 3/1-6.

⁶¹ SCA SM 3/10/9

⁶² SCA Oban Letters 1/17.

⁶³ Blundell I pp 45-6.

⁶⁴ Watts, *Hugh MacDonald* pp. 94-5.

Keeping the Faith

had 10-12 'labourers' and the cost of provisioning them with necessary materials was insurmountable. They had only six sets of vessels. The acquisition of bread irons to make the host was a great matter.

Providing even the minimum number of priests to serve the catholic community, let alone the prospective converts, was a struggle. The Highland priests resented the better conditions of the Lowlanders and, in 1732, with the appointment of Hugh MacDonald as Highland Bishop, hoped for improvement. The representatives of the Highlands at the meeting, Colin Campbell, Alexander Paterson and Bishop Hugh, however, had to be content with the status quo.⁶⁵ Some good priests like George Douglas suffered from chronic ill health. Bishop Hugh MacDonald, in a Report to Propaganda of March 18, 1732, has to lament:

In the place of certain deceased priests, necessity has compelled the appointment of others from districts further south; and these, although of Highland family, want of practice has rendered almost useless at our mountain language, which they lost when studying at the colleges abroad. The faithful grievously deplore this scarcity of pastors; and while others enjoy in abundance every convenience for their spiritual welfare, they constantly complain that their souls are starving, by reason, not of the negligence, but of the fewness, of labourers in the vineyard. A great number of the heretics lament, in presence of the bishop or priest, with groans, tears, and words that might move stones, over their own unhappy errors and blindness; and having at length discovered the impiety, avarice, and carelessness of their ministers, and had their eyes opened to certain enormous errors, implore the help of Holy Mother Church, and ask with continual and unspeakable eagerness for Catholic pastors. Hence the greatest sorrow is kindled in my heart, seeing as I do that the number of labourers amongst us who are versed in the Highland tongue is so scanty, that they are not only insufficient to assist Protestants of the kind I have described, but even the very Catholics themselves.

What he does *not* say here was how even the few priests were divided theologically over Jansenism and practically over how their pastoral duties should be performed, and who was important in this. The Jesuits stressed certain external practices and devotions and admitted converts rapidly while the secular clergy spent a long time over instruction in matters of faith, piety, morality. The Jesuits converted the rich and noble, the clergy the poor and the lower class. The Jesuits acted as factors, stewards and accountants to the rich and meddled in affairs of state.⁶⁶ The mere production of a teaching aid such as the catechism devised by Fr Halkett in 1725 was likely to raise accusations of Jansenism.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Watts, *Hugh MacDonald* pp.78-9.

⁶⁶ Thomson, *Mission in Scotland* pp. 343-50.

⁶⁷ The theological position known as Jansenism was probably the single most divisive issue within the Roman Catholic Church between the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution. The doctrine took its name from the Flemish theologian and bishop of Ypres, Cornelius Jansen (1585 - 1638), who summarized his ideas on Grace and Free Will in his posthumously published treatise, the *Augustinus* (1640). Relying on the strictest possible interpretation of one aspect of Saint Augustine's

One loose cannon like the ambitious Colin Campbell, who was related to the protestant Duke of Argyll could upset the entire group. Thomson explains that bishop Gordon, in 1729, had some thoughts of proposing Campbell as bishop 'both on account of his birth, the great power and opulency of his family, his numerous relatives and connections in the Highlands many of whom if he was chosen, it was thought would become Catholics or at least favour and support them'. But he was, according to Thomson, too unreliable. He had a drinking problem (a grievous distemper was the euphemism) and appears to have eloped at one point. In 1728 he had returned repentant to the Mission with two of his younger brothers who had converted. After three or four years however he once again began intriguing to be made bishop, playing the 'poverty stricken Highlands' card with those in Europe. He was also trying to wrong foot his opponents whom he described as 'a rabble',⁶⁸ The charges of Jansenism against the Lowland clergy were largely promoted by him and he had a significant following amongst the Highland clergy.⁶⁹ When it was reported that the Scots College in Paris was a hotbed of Jansenism he suggested that all the mission priests be required to subscribe to the bull *Unigenitus* (1711). Careful manipulation by Campbell's brother James ensured that the 'Lowland' clergy who attended the 1733 meeting at Scalán were from the North East, and John Tyrie from Huntly. George K Gordon and his assistant at Scalán George Duncan and the Benedictine Thomas Brockie could be relied on to oppose Jansenism. In fact most of the clergy signed without serious reluctance although George James Gordon of Scalán had reservations.⁷⁰ The two bishops penned letters to Rome asking for reform in Paris. Campbell had, however, outsmarted himself and a clique in the Lowlands in 1733 wrote against his being appointed to replace the co-adjutor bishop in the Lowlands, Wallace, who had just died.⁷¹ Alexander Smith was appointed and Campbell, infuriated wrote to Hugh

philosophy, Jansen argued in favor of absolute Predestination, in which humans are perceived as incapable of doing good without God's unsolicited grace and only a chosen few are believed to receive Salvation. In this respect, the doctrine closely resembled Calvinism, although the Jansenists always vigorously proclaimed their attachment to Roman Catholicism. D Van Kley, *The Jansenists and the Expulsion of the Jesuits from France* (New Haven, Yale University Press 1975).

⁶⁸ They included Alexander Drummond, Andrew Hasset, Patrick Augustine Leith, George Duncan, John and Robert Gordon.

⁶⁹ They included Aeneas McGillis, John Gordon, William Henderson (or Harrison) Charles Cruickshank and William Reid (nephew of William Shand)

⁷⁰ James F McMillan 'Jansenism-anti-jansenist in 18th century Scotland: the Unigenitus quarrels in the Scottish Catholic missions 1732-1746' *Innes Review* xxxix (1988). The lists for 1733 start with James Gordon bishop of Nicopolitanus Vicar Apostolic in Lowlands. Hugh MacDonald Vicar Apostolic in the Highlands, John MacDonald, John Tyrie, Alexander Grant, Colin Campbell, George James Gordon, James Leslie, Thomas Brockie, George Charles Duncan, William Grant OSB Ratisbon, Marianus Brockie OSB Ratisbon, Antony Stuart OSB Ratisbon John Seton, SJ John Innes SJ Hugh Strachan SJ William Shand, John Godsmán, John Trotter alia Dunbar SJ, John Innes (bis) James (?Gray or Giog) true name Donaldson preist fr clergy of missionum Decanus) James Tyrie, Gordon (no doubt Kirkhill) George Leith order Cistercians, Alexander Macla (sic but also McGra MacRae a pseudonym of Forbes) SJ; Alexander Paterson, Alexander Forrester, Antony Kelly order of St Francis., Aeneas McLachlan, Neil McFie, Ambrosius Oocar order of Preachers, Andrew Hackett, William Stuart, James Hudson SJ Robert Gordon, John Maxwell SJ, Patrick Augustine Leith.

⁷¹ SCA SM4/1/5

MacDonald threatening to denounce him as a Jansenist to Rome if he attended the consecration.⁷²

Campbell by insisting that a deputation be sent to Rome to plead for an improvement in the Highland priests' conditions was able to rally the Highland priests behind him and went with John Tyrie (who had been sent to the Highlands to distance him from an *affaire* with a lady) carrying a petition to the Pope, the Cardinal Protector and the agent at Rome about the temporalities issue but able, of course, once there to raise their own agenda verbally. Once in Rome, with the appearance of speaking for MacDonald, they accused Bishop Smith and other Lowland clergy of heresy, sought Smith's removal and the re-amalgamation of the vicariates.⁷³ In 1736 Mgr Nicolo Lercari after examining the Paris College recommended the removal of the Innes brothers for their Jansenism and a complete reform. He repeated Campbell's accusations. All of these people he thought might damage the Mission. Propaganda subsequently required all mission priests to sign the Bull *Unigenitus*. once again John Tyrie wrote in Italian his own report on the Highlands for the pope in 1737. By this time, however, the Cardinal Protector had become aware of Campbell's agenda, and did no more to disrupt the Mission. Propaganda's final response was merely to issue a decree in 1738 requiring all to use the Roman breviary.⁷⁴ In February 1739 on his return from Rome, Campbell preached a sermon in which he claimed the right of all missionaries to choose their own mission station and serve where they liked. This was a red rag to the hierarchy, who thought that the Jesuits did harm when they ignored the rights of the parish clergy and celebrated marriages or granted penance to those they did not know. Settled residences meant that the pastors knew their flocks and resided among them, preached and instructed them; the flock knew their pastors and knew to whom to apply in time of need. The myth was that a wandering ministry was in the old Celtic tradition.

When in 1740 Tyrie came back he was under express orders from Rome nevertheless in 1740 there was an unauthorised meeting of priests at Shenval against which bishop Gordon protested.⁷⁵ The squabble escalated. Mr James Leslie was forced to write on 5 May 1740 to deny the charges of Fr Riddock SJ and Fr Patrick Gordon SJ that he had taught errors and that he had stolen a libellous sheet of paper. Fr Patrick Gordon in August made a statement vindicating himself against Mr James Leslie. In November Fr John Riddock was suspended.⁷⁶ He, and other Jesuits like Fr Dunbar had previously been very inquisitive about the books in use at Scalán.

The perils of being a priest

Whilst in ordinary times, the clans could protect the clergy, it could not always be done when the army was on the march. In 1745 the Chisholm of the

⁷² Watts, *Hugh MacDonald* pp. 90-1.

⁷³ Watts, *Hugh MacDonald* pp. 87-91.

⁷⁴ SCA SM 4/2, 4/3 especially 13 which is an account of proceedings at Morar 15 April 1735 and /16 a representation of the state of the Mission to the pope. 1737 SM4/10.

⁷⁵ SCA SM 4/1/16.

⁷⁶ SCA SM 4/1/17, 18, 19.

day, nominally a Protestant but with strong Catholic sympathies, did his best to protect Fr. Farquharson of Strathglass from the oppressors by conducting him out of the immediate district to a safe place where he might conduct services. This ruse was soon discovered. He was dragged away from his congregation by the redcoats, an act that would have led to some serious resistance had Farquharson not pacified the congregation by promising to return to them. He returned more as a fugitive than a religious leader, going from place to place under cover and holding services as and when he could. Nonetheless, two other priests, his brother Charles, and Fr. Alexander Cameron retired to Strathglass — although, in the aftermath of the '45, no priest was safe even in Strathglass. Farquharson eventually gave himself up and was arrested and imprisoned on a hulk in the Thames. After his capture Fr. Farquharson somehow managed to get a message over to the Glengarry Mission with a request for them to cover Strathglass until he would be able to return. Eventually he did this and ministered to his flock for a few more years, before retiring back to Braemar where he died about 1750.

Dissension within the fold continued even though there were only eight priests and four of them had serious illnesses. Regular and secular missionaries remained at variance on the question of jurisdiction; and some probably continued to lean towards Jansenism. The Scottish clergy remained for many years divided into the so-called liberal party, trained in France, and mostly Lowlanders, and the more strictly Roman section, for the most part *alumni* of the Scots College at Rome where most of the Highlanders had been trained.

Problems of being a clergyman

Inevitably not all the missionaries were selfless in their pursuit of a vocation. As can be seen from the story of the Jansenist confrontation the virtues of humility, charity and obedience were not their strongest points. They were quite capable of refusing to obey their superior's orders. George Innes left his job at Scalán against bishop Gordon's wishes to go to his family home at Balnacraig,⁷⁷ William Harrison was noted for his quarrels with his parishioners. The clergy also had more obvious scandals. Apart from ambitious men like Colin Campbell, others, like Neil McFie, became drunkards as whisky soothed their stresses. Some had serious character defects, like the Benedictine Gregor McGregor who seems to have been affected by damage to his brain after a blow.⁷⁸ Not only were there individuals like Kilian MacGregor, who after his return to the Highlands accused the bishops of Jansenism but there were one or two like Walter Elliott in 1733. He seduced his first cousin, who subsequently died in childbirth. It was described as a 'scandalous shameful story' by bishop Gordon who suggests he makes himself a soldier abroad or go to the Capuchins or some strict order and do penance all the rest of his life.⁷⁹ He was believed innocent by the Jesuits, refused to retire to a convent, returned to Scotland and apostacised. A worse scandal attached to Francis MacDonell who had been allocated to Moidart. He brought his sister there, co-habited with her and after

⁷⁷ Watts, *Scalan*: p. 56.

⁷⁸ He was removed and sent abroad in 1732. Watts, *Hugh MacDonald* p. 74.

⁷⁹ SCA Blairs Letters 3/no 5.

Keeping the Faith

the birth of two children and his condemnation by a series of Episcopal courts went to Edinburgh and again apostacised and was appointed by a jubilant Kirk to a position in the West Highlands, then in Sky and finally in the Orkneys as the story came out.⁸⁰ Edinburgh itself had a scandal that eventually involved the Highlands. Peter Fraser in the absence of Gordon who had gone north for his health set himself up and became

‘on a sudden an extraordinary orator, and formed a party of admirers among the lowest class of the people. At first a proposal was set on foot to petition Mr Smith to get him settled in town and when this failed the rabbles of whom his partisans were comprised soon took another still more daring step, called some ruffians even of a different principle who then wrote endless letters to Mr Smith full of slanders, calumnies and lies horrid oaths and imprecations and the most nauseous obscenities of stews and bawdy houses. The purpose was to get Fraser settled in town, or if not the town was to be made ‘too warm’ for poor Mr Smith — the magistrates informed, the penal statues put in execution. Frazer denied any part in this, but none but fools believed him. He was sent to Angus (and also accused of fornication) and clerics wondered whether his faculties should be withdrawn. The problem with drastic action, however, was all too familiar. The bishop feared *that he may tell his story his own way to our disadvantage with our patrons*.⁸¹

The problem was exacerbated by a scandal at Rome about which Smith wrote to Castelli.

The case of Alexander Geddes, (1737-1802), born in Rathven, and trained at Scalan and at the Scottish College in Paris was more complex. He was a significant theologian, was probably unsuited to the mission life and remained a priest to his death. In 1764 he officiated as priest in Dundee, but in May 1765 accepted an invitation to live with the earl of Traquair on the Borders, where, an adequate library enabled him to pursue his biblical studies. When tempted to break his vows of celibacy he left for Paris where he had originally been trained. Here presumably he renewed his acquaintance with the ideas of the philosophes, Montesquieu and Rousseau. In 1769 he became priest of Auchinhalrig and Preshome where he struggled with what we would deem bigotry on all sides. He also gravely overspent his budget on rebuilding the chapel and his own house. He was a moderate who thought the ceremony of Rome excessive and believed that all should read the Scriptures. In an ecumenical spirit he became friendly with his Presbyterian neighbours and even attended a Presbyterian Church service.

George Hay, his superior and bishop, threatened him with suspension if he did not behave with greater circumspection, and the costs of his building works, were another problem to a Mission already in debt because of the late Vicar Apostolic Smith’s inability to keep his records straight. The Duke of Norfolk

⁸⁰

Watts, *Scalan*, p. 59.

⁸¹

SCA Blairs Letter 3/183/3.

paid the first set of Geddes debts, but Geddes was constitutionally unable to live within his income. Against clerical rules, in 1775 he took a small farm at Enzie, borrowed to stock it, built another chapel upon it and by the year 1778, was in even greater debt than before. At this point he published in London *Select Satires of Horace, translated into English verse, and for the most part adapted to the present times and manners* which brought him a clear profit of upwards of one hundred pounds. He now seriously thought of trying his fortune in London and was employed by Lord Findlater to teach English to the new Lady Findlater. Hay sent him an angry letter and suspended him from all his ecclesiastical functions in 1779 replacing him by Mr Mathison. Geddes hung on for some time claiming he was due compensation for improvements he had made.⁸² The issue of re-admitting him if he was properly reformed was submitted to all the Highland clergy in a circular letter. The response was mixed⁸³ and his letter of retraction was judged inadequate. Hay blamed his Paris education for his causing scandal.⁸⁴ In 1780 he went with his friend Lord Traquair to London, where he was appointed to the chapel of the imperial ambassador, and was also helped by Lord Petre in his scheme for a new Catholic version of the Bible.

Priests and politics

Although the rules laid down by Propaganda required the mission priests to remain neutral in political matters, many in the Highland mission, including Hugh MacDonald who blessed the Princes banner in 1745, paid no mind to this. Colin Campbell went as a chaplain and died at Culloden. Allan MacDonald went as the prince's confessor. James Grant as a chaplain. Alexander Gordon who was on the field died in Inverness gaol. Aeneas McGillis was chaplain to MacDonell's regiment. Alexander Cameron went likewise and although he returned was captured and died in prison. Thirteen priests were in captivity including John and Charles Farquharson and Alexander Forrester. It took years for the structure to stabilize even after they were released. Alexander Forrester, when despite banishment, he returned to Uist was obliged to hide in caves in the eastern mountains of the island and eventually to flee to Ireland. The young Alexander MacDonell just returned from Rome to join him died from illness after being imprisoned. His successor and fellow student at Gaotal and Rome, John MacDonald, called Uist, *ultima thule*. Illness also struck down his young colleague on Barra, Angus MacDonald. Isolation was one of the problems for the untried newcomer.

The priests might be isolated but they clearly kept in touch. They were a small band and all too often knew too much about one another. When they became ill provision was made for them and there was discussion of who should replace them. When they were dying if at all possible one of their number went

⁸² SCA Oban Letters P3/6/3/14.

⁸³ Charles Maxwell, Huntly, Mr Duthie Mr Oliver and Mil of Smithtown said perhaps but Mr John Reid of Preshome, Mr John Paterson, James McGillvray of Scalán, Alexander Menzies, William Guthrie, William Reid and Paul Mac...of Aberdeen were dubious and George Mathison, of Auchinhalrig and William Guthrie of Mortlach said no.

⁸⁴ SCA Oban Letters P/6/18,19.

to ease their last moments. While Hugh MacDonald was hiding out in the Highlands he had the further worry of the terminal illness of some of his most stalwart missionaries, but was able to stay with the dying Thomas Brockie and to visit several others who were caught up in the epidemic of 1758-9. In 1761 with Iain Mor MacDonald dead Hugh MacDonald had only four missionaries left and one of them., Aeneas MacDonald also died in his thirties. That left the aging William Harrison, Alexander Forrester, Aeneas McGillis and the newcomer Alexander MacDonald, (Mr McFie had finally been suspended for his intemperance and drinking) plus three Jesuits. Harrison, finally worn down, abandoned his charge in 1765. 1766 was a low point in the priesthood in the Highlands. George Gordon was ill and 'Mr Missioners' had agreed to install Mr Charles Cruickshanks *quo interim* in his room. This was agreeable to Aeneas McGillis, and he said to all in these parts as George Gordon's state of health rendered him incapable of serving any longer in his former stations. Cruickshanks (who was in Edinburgh) should replace him or if that was not possible Mr Haryson, but, Gillis writes, not M Genafer who was 'quite a stranger to me.'⁸⁵ Two Irish priests came to help out. In 1769 George Gordon died.

With John Godson dead, and William Reid retired, Austin MacDonald and Mr Roy from Wurzburg joined the mission and the numbers began to creep up again.

Financing the mission

The problem of annual income remained and the priests were often in dire straits. The failure of just one overseas grant could reduce them to penury and the priests were chronically in debt. Bishop Smith had been a poor manager of money and George Hay was attempting to put the Lowland finances on a more secure basis. MacDonald asked him to sort out the Highlands also where the position was even more straitened. Aeneas McGillis, who had been the unofficial procurator since bishop MacDonald was in exile and then undercover because banished, wrote in Dec 1766

tis a sad matter we should be so much neglected and forgotten ...what had we done to deserve it. We were never so treated before. ...I am really sore pinched for the very necessities of life.

He went on to write of two gentlemen of Mr Diana's name put out of their tacks in Brae Lochaber' another worry for priests who still depended on local protection against the Kirk and the Military. By the 1760s the cost of living had risen substantially and Hugh MacDonald writing to Propaganda thought that £20 a year was the least that would enable an 'any way respectable' life.⁸⁶

Peter Grant, the Scottish agent in Rome since 1737, was responsible for distributing the money from Propaganda and from time to time there were crises. On 20 Nov 1767 he was sent a frantic letter from Hay at Glengarry

⁸⁵ SCA Blairs, Letters 3/183

⁸⁶ Watts, *Hugh MacDonald* pp172-4.

against 'friends abroad' advancing so much money to the young concerning the debts of others and the need to draw on the addressees. The fear was clearly that they would not be able to repay. The two named were Alexander McDonald and Allan MacDonnell. 'Mr Alex' the letter continues 'has a small patrimony but Allen has none and is as poor as Job as well as lying sick since he came home in his sister's house in Knydart.' Grant is not to give any more money to young gentlemen coming home otherwise they may spend company money at pleasure and the labourers at home want.⁸⁷ Hay's letter to Charles Cruickshanks — second turnpike down Chalmers Cross Edinburgh — suggest that Cruickshanks was part of the complicated financial network.

William Harrison wrote from Keppoch in Arisaig 15 Oct 1767 about the 'pensions' praising Hay's worthiness in taking the affairs of the company to manage in time of need. He asked that in Martinmas term he should give the quotas of eight Western 'labourers' including Mr Wynn and Mr Kennedy (which made £43 sterling or £5.7.6 each) in a bill to be drawn on Glenaladale the clan's factor, payable to Mr William Harrison at Keppoch. Send the same by post '...which I'm sure will be punctually honoured but at next term of Whitsunday please mind to deduce from the quotas of the said term to sum of 100 marks Scots money in Glenaladale or Scothouse hands at 5 per 55 marks.'

James Grant wrote from Edinburgh in the same year depressed about a crisis at Scalán, talking of 'our time of apprenticeship' as better and the deprivation of the poor boys from some of the known advantages of education because of a vacancy at Scalán that could not be filled.

Our present situation affords every way a most gloomy prospect and most troubling any heart that is not entirely void of all manner of regard for religion...I'm glad I'm writing to one who knows the country and has been upon the spot...the state of the mission in general, of the fewness of hands, of the age, habitual ailments and bad state of health even of those few and little prospect ...of their being able to hold out...overpowered and oppressed with labour and fatigue far above their strength is now a crisis...many areas 'destitute' — Angus, (where he speaks of a considerable number of 'customers') Mortlach and Stratglén.⁸⁸

Nevertheless, they had to 'sack' Peter Fraser and Kennedy and there was a unanimous bad opinion of four worthy young gentlemen who had been his comrades. A reluctant candidate for the Scalán vacancy was found and a year later the progress of the two senior boys at Scalán could be praised 'one is Mr Alexander McDonald a nephew to Mr Diana and the other Roderick, the son of John McDonald of Leek in this country.

⁸⁷ SCA Blairs letters 189.

⁸⁸ SCA Blairs Letter 3/183/3.

Conclusion

As the century progressed, although the enmity of the Kirk was not abated, the interest of the central government in pursuing the Catholics was diminishing. The fall of the Jesuits in 1773 merely meant that the ex-Jesuits, now secular, took their oath to the bishop.

In 1766 there were 13,166 baptised Highland Catholics a reduction from 1700 though not a drastic one, and the numbers remained approximately the same to 1800 despite the departure of some congregations en masse for Canada and the USA. In 1780 the mission bishops changed their attitude to the government and accepted the status quo, enjoining their parishioners to pray for the Royal Family and civil magistrates and to obey the civil law as long as it was not against their religious duties. In 1793 the benefits of this were reaped in the granting of limited toleration, the Catholic relief act.