



The Village Prayer-house and the Voluntary Gaelic Schools

The village prayer house has long been an established institution in the life of the community in the Scottish Islands and through it lay members take a very active part in the affairs of the Gaelic Church. That came about through the instrumentation of the Edinburgh Gaelic School Society, which had a tremendous impact on the outlook of the people both in the field of religion and education in the 19th century.

The voluntary Gaelic School Society was founded in Edinburgh in 1811 with the object of teaching the people of the Highlands and Islands to read the Scriptures in Gaelic, their mother tongue. The first of many Gaelic Schools set up in Lewis by the Society was in Bayble in 1811, and there were at least four or five small Gaelic Schools in Pairc in the 1820s. One was set up in Gravir in 1822, one at Loch Shell (probably Lemreway) in 1828, one in Marvig in 1829, as well as one in Kershader in 1832, and perhaps more.

These schools were built and maintained by the community and were of simple construction. The walls were of undressed natural stone with a thatched roof. They were sparsely furnished with home-made stools, and the lighting and heating was poor. Teachers were appointed for their Godliness rather than their academic qualifications. They were referred to as 'Sgoilean Chriosd', the Schools of Christ, and these buildings became the forerunners of the present sophisticated village Prayer Houses.

In some places these schools were called 'Tighean Leughadh', Reading Houses, or 'Tighean Sgoil', School Houses. The walls of the original Gaelic Schools in Calbost and Marvig and doubtless many other places may still be seen.

The Calbost 'Tigh Sgoil' was in use as a Prayer House until the early years of the 20th century, but we only know of one Gaelic resident teacher. His name is given in the 1851 census figures as Malcolm Morrison, 'Mac Thormoid Shaighdear', born in 1815 in Kneep, Uig, Lewis, and his family is given as wife and four children. At various times he served at Carnish, Inaclete, Kershader, Laxay and Branahuie.

The Calbost community built a new sophisticated purpose-built Prayer House in the mid-1920s. It was renovated several times and it is still in good condition, but alas the people have left and the Prayer House is out of use at present.

The Gaelic Teachers Guidebook stated that a Sabbath School for the children was to be held in the forenoon and on the Sabbath afternoons there was to be a one-hour session of instruction for adults. On the Sabbath evening after 6pm a Prayer Meeting was to be held in the school building for the benefit of all who attended. In that way the institution of the village Sunday School as well as the village midweek and Sunday evening Prayer Meetings were first introduced by The Gaelic Society. The origin of Sunday School is much older and can be traced to the pioneer work of Robert Raikes in Gloucester, England.

The New Testament first appeared in Gaelic in 1767, but the whole Bible was not translated into Gaelic until 1801, yet it was a closed book to the people of Lewis because they could not read Gaelic or English. It is said that the Scriptures were not available in Lochs in the people's language until the 1820s when 4 copies of the first edition of the full Gaelic Bible came to the tacksman in Crossbost, Valtos, Crobeg and Lemreway.

Even as late as 1843, the second statistical account for the Parish of Lochs states that there were only 12 people in the Parish that could write (presumably English) and a few males that could speak broken English. We may be sure that these 12 people were of the tacksman class. It was through the medium of Gaelic instruction that real progress was achieved in educating the people of Lewis, and that was through voluntary organisations. At the time of the 2nd Statistical Account, half the inhabitants of Lochs between the ages of 12 and 24 could read the Gaelic language, all because of the Gaelic Society Schools.

There was a magnificent response to the opportunity for the first time to read the Scriptures in their own tongue. Adults as well as children attended the Gaelic Schools and the treasure house of the Scriptures soon influenced the minds and outlook of the people, and dispelled the superstitions in which the people lived. In that way the manners and culture of the people were improved. We owe a great deal to these simple Gaelic Schools.

The Gaelic Society Schools were circulatory, which meant that they moved from place to place, usually every three years, but the period varied and every village, however small, would have a School for at least a year.

There were five classes in each school as follows:

1. The alphabet class.
2. Syllabus of two or three letters.
3. Reading and spelling book in Gaelic.
4. New Testament and Psalm book.
5. The Bible in general.

From about 1820, a religious revival took place in Lewis. It began as a lay movement before the first Evangelical Minister, Rev. Alexander Macleod came to Uig, Lewis in 1824. Later on the Ministers became the leaders of the movement. The first ever question meeting in the Outer Hebrides took place about 1825 in Stornoway. By that time lay people took an increasingly more active part in the life of the Church. Question meetings were held on the Highland mainland long before that.

The crofters were ruthlessly removed from Eishken in 1833, and they were dealt with like a flock of sheep driven by dogs into a fank, observed one of their number. In 1831, two years before that event, the first Evangelical Minister that came to the Parish of Lochs, Rev Robert Finlayson came to Keose. Rev. Finlayson discovered that there was no Kirk Session and no Kirk Session records, so he set about at once putting that right, and he included in his Session some Gaelic schoolteachers. He went round catechising the people regularly and holding Prayer Meetings in the various villages throughout his scattered Parish.

When he came to Eishken he found the Prayer House in a poor state of repair, and Rev N.C. Macfarlane in his book 'Apostles of the North' tells us of the novel way Rev Finlayson appealed to the Eishken villagers to repair the leaky roof of the Prayer House. He told them:

As I was walking out I met the Bible from the Eishken Prayer House and I said, O Bible, why are you so sad and where are you going? Oh, I am leaving Eishken Meeting House. The big drops of sooty rain that fall on me there blacken my pages and waste me badly.

That week the roof of the Eishken Prayer House was thoroughly overhauled.

The Edinburgh Free Church Ladies Association was established in 1850 with the aim of the religious improvement of the remote Highland and Islands. The Association opened schools in various places and they were popularly known in the Highlands as 'Sgoilean na Ladies', the Ladies Schools. The first schools opened by the Association in Lewis were in Uig and Gravir, and later on they opened a school in Cromore.

The superintendent of the Ladies Association Schools in his report for 1858 mentions that at Cromore there are 4 people in the Latin class, one of them a girl, the first female classical scholar he encountered in the Hebrides. It is quite remarkable that classical scholars were found in a small voluntary thatched school in a remote crofting village in less than 30 years after the people were first introduced to elementary education.

[ends]

AN ARCHIVE RECORD FROM THE ANGUS MACLEOD ARCHIVE www.angusmacleodarchive.org.uk

Author: Angus Macleod

Date: 1997

Original document title: The Village Prayer House and the Voluntary Gaelic Schools

Location in physical archive: Series K, File 1, Section 17

NRAS reference: NRAS 4336/1/9/1

© Angus Macleod Archive