



## The Drowning of Rev. Robert Finlayson's Two Young Sons (1859)

The tragic drowning of the two young sons of Rev. Robert Finlayson, Crossbost, Donald aged 17 and Robert aged 14, in 1859, in Loch Erisort, made a deep impression on the folk memory, and 150 years later the people of Lochs still talk about it. The two boys are buried in the cemetery in St. Colms Island, Loch Erisort, and the grave is prominently marked and enclosed within iron rails. Many children in Lochs were named Robert after young Robert Finlayson.

Local oral tradition in Lochs usually maintains that the two boys were alone in a small boat on Loch Erisort and that they sailed the boat out to Tabhaidh in the mouth of Loch Erisort on a fine sunny day and rested in a cave. They failed to realise that the tide was rising and the mast of the boat caught in the roof of the cave and eventually forced the boat under the water. Although grief stricken, Rev. Finlayson preached as normal on The Sabbath after the drowning, even though the funeral had not yet taken place. When a Church member said to him, 'This is hard on flesh and blood,' he replied, 'It is hard on Grace itself'.

Folk memory can sometimes be misleading, as indeed can newspaper reports. James Barron in 'The Northern Highlands in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century', page 186, states that six young men lost their lives in Lochs, in the Lews, by the upsetting of a boat belonging to Rev. Robert Finlayson, Free Church Minister there. Two of the young men were sons of Mr and Mrs Finlayson, and there was a son of Captain Macaulay, Stornoway. It is difficult after such a long lapse of time to be sure of the facts, other than that certainly the Minister's sons drowned in 1859.

At that time Mr Finlayson was the only Minister in the whole of Lochs. There were a small number of people in the Parish Church of Keose. He came to Keose Parish Church in 1831 and left the established Church at the Disruption in 1843, together with the whole congregation, and joined the Free Church of Scotland. Arrangements were made to build a new church and Manse in the newly established crofting township of Crossbost.

Our host, Angus Morrison, in the village ceilidh house often told us the story of the drowning of the Finlayson boys, and he would then go on to tell us about the so-called outlaw 'Mac an t-Stronaich'.

Apparently Mrs Finlayson, Lily Macaulay, was a descendant of the celebrated Domhnuill 'Càm' Macaulay, from Uig in Lewis, and her mother, Catherine Morrison, was a daughter of 'Iain Mor a Mhinisteir'. Catherine's sister was married to Alastair Stronach in Garve on the Scottish mainland. Their son was 'Mac an t-Stronaich', the so-called Lewis outlaw, and therefore a near relative of Rev. Robert Finlayson's wife Lily.

There are many unconfirmed stories told about the exploits of 'Mac an t-Stronaich'. One of the favourite stories we heard in the ceilidh house was that 'Mac an t-Stronaich' said he was sorry for only one of his victims, a baby in a cradle who smiled and laughed at him as he was about to kill him. We don't believe that he ever killed anyone.

Mrs Lily Finlayson is said to have harboured him and fed him in outhouses etc. A prominent citizen in Keose told us that there is a room in the Manse in Keose called 'clòsaid Mhic an t-Stronaich', where he used to lodge. Parents in the Keose area disciplined their misbehaving children by threatening to put them into 'clòsaid Mhic an t-Stronaich'.

### First minister at Crossbost

|                       |           |  |
|-----------------------|-----------|--|
| Rev. Robert Finlayson | 1793-1861 | son of Rob Finlayson, Clyne, Caithness     |
| Lily Macaulay         | 1801-1887 | sister of D. Macaulay, Tacksman, Linshader |
| Donald                | 1832      | drowned in Loch Erisort in 1859            |
| Robert                | 1835      | drowned in Loch Erisort in 1859            |
| Catherine             | 1837      |  |
| Margaret              | 1840      |  |
| John                  | 1842      |  |

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