
The Awakenings in Skye (1812-1814)

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1. Background

The course of Christian faith and life in the Island of Skye up to the end of the eighteenth century is about as misty as the name commonly given to the island on account of the prevailing climatic conditions – the “Misty Isle”. A form of Celtic (?) Roman Catholicism prevailed before the Reformation, and still does in various islands and pockets on the mainland of the West coast, apparently little touched by evangelical or reformed religion. The impact of the Reformation, so profound in the lowlands, was not so strong in the Highlands and Islands. It seems that there was a somewhat weak transition to a Protestantism, the influence of which on the people depended largely upon the particular predispositions of the heritors, lairds, chiefs or landowners. There is no doubt, however, that the Protestant faith was established in Skye before 1590. In that year the then chief of the Macdonalds on Skye, Donald Gorm Mor, was commanded by James VI and the Scottish Parliament to suppress Jesuit activities in Skye and to “punish those adversaries of the true religion presently professed within this realm”.

Alexander Nicolson provides a useful summary of the religious situation in the wake of the Reformation, insofar as it affected Skye:

. . . the Protestant faith was professed in Skye as early as 1573; but, as a result of the transitionary phase that succeeded the Reformation, the Church and its affairs were much neglected. For many a year the fire of the new faith burned but low in Skye, as in the rest of the Highlands; for none had arisen there with the

enthusiasm of Hamilton, of Knox, and the other Reformers, to fan it into flame. No martyrs had been called upon to seal their beliefs with their blood; and nothing, indeed, had been done to arouse the imagination of the people, who had been actuated in their conversion more by policy than by principle. They had discarded the old faith, but they failed to be influenced by the new. The churches were allowed to fall into a state of disrepair, stipends were not regularly paid to the incumbents – were, indeed, sometimes withheld altogether – and there supervened a callous indifference to sacred things, so that we need not wonder at the prayer of Bishop Knox to the king to establish order among “folk devoid of the true knowledge of God”.¹

It appears that most if not all the clergy belonged to the Episcopalian Church. A “Presbytery of Skye” is mentioned for the first time in August 1642 when it was joined by the Assembly to the Synod of Argyll.² However, Episcopacy prevailed more or less into the third quarter of the eighteenth century, but was not particularly associated with a robust evangelical or evangelising faith or church life. On account of the prevailing nominal Episcopalianism in the island, support was given to the Stuarts in the ’15 and ’45 Rebellions. It was after the demise of the Jacobean cause with the defeat of the Stuarts and the exile of “Bonnie Prince Charlie” that there was a notable swing to Presbyterianism in the latter half of the eighteenth century so that the former Episcopalian hegemony, considered to be the “English Church”, was almost completely displaced in the adherence of the people to a Presbyterian “Scottish Kirk” before the end of the century.

It would be wrong to say that the form of ministry and church life was altogether of a nominal or moderate sort over that period, even though the impact of such ministries as were faithful was obviously limited, as ignorance and superstition were still widely evident. Dr. Samuel Johnson wrote in 1773 about the claimed insufficiency of pastors in the Western Islands, including Skye, that with reference to ministers of religion, “I saw not one in the islands, whom I had reason to think either deficient in learning, or irregular in life; but I found several with

¹ Alexander Nicolson, *History of Skye* (Glasgow, 1930), p. 131. The reference to “Bishop Knox” is to Thomas Knox, the then Episcopalian Bishop of the Isles. It refers to a report concerning the state of the [Episcopalian] diocese in 1626.

² *ibid.*, p. 133.

whom I could not converse without wishing, as my respect increased, that they had not been Presbyterians”.³ That is not the same, it has to be said, as saying that these men were full of evangelical zeal for the spread of the gospel. For it is quite clear that they were largely imbued with the spirit of moderatism as the nineteenth century dawned. At the same time the difficulties for church life should not be minimised, for ministers or people, for communications were extremely difficult with no real roads in the modern sense and meeting places rather few and far between. Apparently the first road contemplated for Skye was not decided on until 1799 and was not completed till some years into the nineteenth century.⁴

2. Christianity in Skye at the beginning of the nineteenth century

As to the state of vital Christianity in Skye around the turn of the century and into nineteenth century, a none too sanguine view is given in a work produced under the supervision of the “Glasgow Revival Tract Society” in 1839. This work is entitled, *Narratives of Revivals of Religion in Scotland, Ireland and Wales*.⁵ The “narrative” concerning Skye stated that: “The ‘spirit of slumber’, which pervaded Scotland in the latter portion of the last century [i.e. eighteenth], exerted its most powerful influence over the whole of the north-west Highlands. . . . Bibles until very recently, there were none; and the power to read them, had they existed, was possessed by few of the common people until the Gaelic Schools Society commenced its operations. . . . The more remote the Highland districts from the counties above referred to, the deeper the darkness; and of these none perhaps, exceeded the northern portions of Skye indeed the whole of that island.”⁶

It appears that in 1800 illiteracy was the norm in the Highlands. As a result there was no great demand for texts and books printed in Gaelic, far less in English. A few had been printed before 1800, mostly on

³ Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (London, 1816), p. 131 (p. 242 of the original 1775 edition of the work). Dr Johnson undertook his journey in 1773.

⁴ Nicolson, op. cit., p. 305.

⁵ This was reproduced under the title *Restoration in the Church, Reports of Revivals 1625-1839*, by Christian Focus Publications in Scotland and Ambassador Productions in Northern Ireland in 1989.

⁶ *Narratives of Revivals of Religion in Scotland, Ireland, and Wales* (Glasgow, 1839), No. X, Skye 1812-14, p. 1. The Edinburgh Society for the Support of Gaelic Schools held its first meeting in Edinburgh on 16th January 1811.

religious topics and themes. But due to pervasive illiteracy even these books were not widely read. It was in order to counter this lamentable state of affairs that the Edinburgh Society for the Support of Gaelic Schools was founded in 1811. According to its foundation document, “the sole object [was] to teach the inhabitants of the Highlands and Islands to read the Sacred Scriptures in their native tongue” – a rather admirable object! These Gaelic schools apparently proved popular and successful and, because of the desire to enable the reading of Scripture, they clearly served in the providence of God to prepare the ground for a revival of true Christian faith and life. However, that is jumping the gun, because at the beginning of the nineteenth century the situation was dire.

The situation, however, was dire not just because of illiteracy, but principally on account of a want of faithful evangelical doctrine and life. It is clear that a question arose: “What had been proclaimed and taught in the Kirk to challenge and instruct the people in Christian truth?” There seemed to be no significant tradition of evangelical teaching or preaching or reformed doctrine. It appears that the people had been largely if not wholly deprived of the invitations and exhortations and expositions of the gospel. There was a prevailing deadness of moderatism, though not necessarily universally on the island. But even where some evangelical opinions were found among the clergy they appeared to be held covertly rather than overtly, for fear of disapproval or scorn. It took someone raised up by the Lord who would not be sensitive to such a reaction, but who was simply concerned for the souls of his hearers and their eternal welfare, to bring about a mighty change. This is what happened in 1805.

3. John Farquharson visits Skye (1805)

At the end of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, the Haldane brothers, Robert (1764-1842) and James (1768-1851) under God did an immense work to propagate the gospel in Scotland and beyond. Though originally members of the Established Church of Scotland, they became Independents and undertook both itinerant ministry and evangelism throughout many areas of Scotland, and established educational initiatives to train others in such ministry.⁷ These men were

⁷ Both Robert and James later (1808) became Baptists, though it appears that they were more concerned with winning souls and encouraging gospel work than maintaining denominational or “sectarian” positions.

distinctly Calvinistic in their outlook and maintained the doctrines of grace in an age in which they were largely denied or forgotten in the Kirk. One student who went in to their Seminary at Dundee around 1800 was John Farquharson. Because of his lack of academic aptitude he remained at the Seminary for only six months. However, on account of his clear piety, knowledge, zeal for Christ, and passion for soul-winning, he was sent by James Haldane to Breadalbane, Perthshire, where under his instrumentality there was a real spiritual awakening. This is told in the *Memoirs* of the lives of Robert and James Haldane:

That [awakening] in Breadalbane was entirely begun by a devoted catechist of lowly origin, a Mr. Farquharson, who had been recommended on account of his earnest zeal and godliness to Mr. Haldane's class at Dundee, but whose capacity of learning seemed, on trial, hardly to warrant his persevering in academical studies. He was therefore sent away to Breadalbane, at the end of his first six months, with the view of trying whether he might not be of use as a Scripture-reader amongst the poor and uneducated Highlanders. The district was at that time destitute of Evangelical preaching. There were actually no Bibles, scarcely any Testaments, and the people lived without prayer. So great was the opposition to the devoted catechist when he commenced his labours, that, in a circle of thirty-two miles round Loch Tay, there were only three families that would receive him, whilst every inn or public-house was shut against him. But it often pleases the Lord to work by the feeblest instruments, and "to choose the weak things of the world, and things which are despised, to confound the things that are mighty". Despite opposition and neglect, he went from village to village during the winter, reading the Bible, and speaking the words of salvation to all who would listen. In the spring of 1801 there was some awakening, and early in 1802 so extraordinary a revival took place, that in a very short time there were about one hundred persons, previously ignorant of the Gospel, who seemed to be truly converted. These conversions produced a great sensation, and occasioned much opposition.⁸

What was said of Breadalbane when Farquharson went there would have been equally true of the Island of Skye at that time. This

⁸ Alexander Haldane, *Memoirs of the Lives of Robert Haldane of Airthey and of his brother James Alexander Haldane* (London, 1852), p. 316.

“humble and holy man”, in the course of his travels around the country, visited Skye in 1805. It seems that Farquharson did not land on Skye by design but rather by force of circumstances in providence. It was said that, in fact, he was the passenger on a ship bound for America, but owing to the wind – no uncommon feature of life in the Western Isles – the ship anchored for some time in Uig Bay. Being set on shore he went about spreading the word through open-air preaching, to which the people flocked.⁹ It is a remarkable phenomenon how great spiritual movements can turn on small events and apparently obscure or unsung human instruments. Certainly, the Lord used John Farquharson for the advance of the work of the gospel of Christ in Skye. And yet, it was not that there were many conversions under his ministry, but then a great interest was created in his clear and powerful message and, crucially, there was fruitfulness through the seed planted in one particular soul.

As to his brief labours on Skye, the *Narratives of Revivals* stated that:

The novelty of field-preaching on week days, as well as Sabbaths, by one who held no communion with the clergy, attracted the notice of the people, and they flocked in crowds to hear him. His sermons consisted of powerful and faithful testimonies against the abounding sins of the country, clear and energetic illustration of evangelical truth, solemn protests against the soul-destroying doctrine of justification by human merit, with affectionate and solemn warnings and invitations addressed to his hearers as lost sinners. His appeals excited great attention and produced no small inquiry among the people. . . . In Portree and Snizort, Kilmuir, Duirinish, and Bracadale, Mr. Farquharson itinerated for a considerable time – the people heard, and deep seriousness marked their whole demeanour under the word of life.¹⁰

The one great fruit of Mr Farquharson’s labours was a man called Donald Munro. As for Farquharson, “he soon after emigrated to America, and his ministrations had no further connection with the revival which took place in Skye”.¹¹

⁹ From Glen Tilt in Perthshire, Farquharson was a Gaelic speaker. The “lingua franca” in Skye at that time was Gaelic.

¹⁰ *Narratives of Revivals*, No. X, p. 3.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 4.

4. Donald Munro, the “father of evangelical religion in the Isle of Skye”

Roderick MacCowan¹² described Donald Munro as “the father of evangelical religion in the Isle of Skye”.¹³ He was a trophy of grace and a powerful example of the effectiveness of personal witness when accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit. He was a fruit of the brief itinerant ministry of John Farquharson on the northern part of the island. He was greatly used by the Lord in establishing evangelical faith and life, though he was not a clergyman, had no formal training and had what might appear to be serious limitations.

Donald had been born at Achtealean in the Parish of Portree in 1773. When he was fourteen years of age he contracted smallpox as a result of which he lost his sight permanently. He was raised in humble circumstances. However, as a boy he learned to play the violin (“fiddle”) with a view to securing a livelihood. It was said that “the calamity of his blindness engaged the sympathy of all, and his other qualifications secured their patronage”.¹⁴ One such act of “patronage” was his appointment as Parish Catechist by the then Portree minister, the Rev. John Nicolson, who was described as a good man but a dry preacher.¹⁵ Donald had a retentive memory, was able to master the various questions of the *Shorter Catechism* (in Gaelic) and some New Testament passages, and so, without regard to his spiritual state he was able thus to supplement his income.

It was in his official capacity that Donald went to hear John Farquharson. Hundreds came to hear the preacher and, though some serious attention was given to the ministry, there was no evident pouring out of the Spirit or ingathering of souls. Yet it pleased the Lord to deal savingly with Donald Munro. “To me he [Farquharson] was a messenger of God,” he said later. After he was converted he had no more time for his “fiddle”, associated as his work in that connection was with excess, and he did not after his conversion wish to give any occasion of stumbling

¹² MacCowan was Free Church of Scotland minister in Kiltarlity, Inverness-shire, 1908-1937.

¹³ Roderick MacCowan, *The Men of Skye* (Portree, 1902), p. 1. This statement is found inscribed on Munro’s headstone in the Snizort Cemetery where his mortal remains were laid to rest after his death on 1st October 1830. *The Men of Skye* was reprinted by the Scottish Reformation Society in 2013.

¹⁴ *Narratives of Revivals*, No. X, p. 3.

¹⁵ MacCowan, op. cit., p. 3. Nicolson was called “Mr. John gun searmoin”, i.e. “Mr. John without a sermon”.

to weaker brethren, young believers, or provide cause for the world to reproach him, and therefore the cause of His Lord, for his inconsistency. As the *Narrative of Revivals* commented:

The Catechist of Portree was no longer a pluralist. He had got new views, to use his own language, of “Scripture truths, of himself, and of the practices of the inhabitants of his island”; and the light which had been given to him he did not put “under a bushel”. His official situation afforded him opportunities of speaking in the name of Jesus; and, before he had been himself a convert for a year, he was made the instrument of turning three or four from the error of their ways to the faith and obedience of the glorious Gospel.¹⁶

This, as it happened, was crucial in the movements which, under the sovereignty of God, led to the more general awakening which took place later, in 1812 and afterwards. These were links in a chain of the divine purpose for the spiritual good of the island, and this blind Catechist was an unlikely instrument in these events.

5. Links in the chain of the divine purpose

Immediately after Farquharson’s work, Donald established a Prayer Meeting at Snizort. Initially only a few attended. In time the number increased. This became a harbinger of blessing, as such meetings always will be. Without such concern for prayer the cause will not prosper. The beginnings may be small, but when the issue is with the Lord, then a people exercised before Him can have a realistic optimism concerning spiritual renewal and awakening. In Skye there was prejudice against such an “innovation”. But there was perseverance and for two years it flourished. Sadly division was caused when a Baptist preacher appeared, drawing away a number after him, and the meeting was dissolved.

By this time, however, the Lord had worked in the heart and life of the Church of Scotland minister who was then the parish minister at Kilmuir-in-Trotternish in the north-eastern area of Skye. Donald Martin had been minister there since 1785. He was, however, a rather typical moderate minister with no zeal for the gospel. In relation to

¹⁶ *Narratives of Revivals*, No. X, p. 4.

Farquharson's preaching it was said of Donald Martin by the Rev. James Ross, Bracadale,

that he happened to be passing that way and was attracted to the place where the people were assembled. While listening, he became deeply interested, admiring the zeal and earnestness of the preacher, and, without any further ceremony, Mr. Martin invited him to his manse, where he remained while preaching in the surrounding districts. The Scripture which says, "Iron sharpeneth iron, so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend", seemed to be fulfilled in their mutual experience. Through their short intercourse, Mr. Martin was stimulated into further exertion, seeing more clearly that every faithful minister is virtually an evangelist.¹⁷

This was a crucial factor in the movement towards revival in Skye. In relation to the change in Martin, Roderick MacCowan cites the biographer of the Rev. Roderick Macleod as saying that,

After his conversion, he laboured for two years with great acceptance in Kilmuir. The change in his life and preaching soon attracted attention, and he was sought unto by those who feared the Lord. A desire after Christ was created in many. The world became little in their estimation, and their minds were set on their eternal interests. Mr. Martin favoured the cause of Donald Munro's prayer meeting.¹⁸

Martin also secured Donald Munro's services as Catechist in Kilmuir. However, in 1808 Martin was translated to the East Church in Inverness. The situation in Kilmuir changed when the congregation, sadly, elected a new moderate minister, Donald Ross.¹⁹ The new minister gave no encouragement to the Catechist. However, undaunted, "he did not cease his efforts; and though under many inconveniences, this good man persevered in holding the meetings, encouraged by the great numbers who came desirous to listen to the word of life".²⁰ It is said that

¹⁷ James Ross, *Life of Donald MacQueen*, quoted in MacCowan, op. cit., p. 11. Ross (1828-1892) was Free Church minister in Bracadale, Isle of Skye, 1877-1892. His mortal remains were interred in the Bracadale Cemetery a few yards from those of John Shaw and Roderick Macleod.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁹ Donald Ross was minister in Kilmuir between 1809 and 1820.

²⁰ *Narratives of Revivals*, No. X, p. 6.

his labours were signally blessed to many souls in Kilmuir, notwithstanding the opposition of the moderate ministers. In 1810 Donald was formally appointed as a Catechist by the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge (SSPCK). This was a position he lost, however, a couple of years later after the intervention of Donald Ross with the SSPCK, complaining that Donald was not attending his services.

There was at least one minister on the island who was not, however, a moderate. This was the then assistant minister of Duirinish (Dunvegan, in the north-west of the island). John Shaw (1784-1823) had been ordained to the ministry there in 1811, before the full flowering of the revival the following year. He was subsequently translated in 1813 to Bracadale (Struan), the neighbouring parish to the south of Duirinish. By all accounts Shaw was a holy and humble soul, though a man of some diffidence who shrank from controversy. He admitted his failure to take a stand as he ought against the prevailing want of evangelical spirit among colleagues and of the prevailing nominality in the membership of the congregation. This made things frankly difficult for his successor at Bracadale, the redoubtable Rev. Roderick Macleod. The membership in Shaw's time amounted to 250 in Bracadale, whereas after Mr Roderick put the membership and access to the sacraments on a spiritual footing, there were (it was said) only ten left. That number, however, increased significantly before he left Bracadale in 1838 as a result of a powerful evangelical ministry with firm attention to credible professions of faith.

Shaw was a good man who on the one hand was instrumental in the continuing encouragement of Donald Munro in his evangelistic work after 1809 and, on the other hand, was a crucial influence in the conversion of Roderick Macleod from a time-serving moderate to a powerful instrument under God in the work of gospel ministry after 1819. Macleod was greatly used in the work of revival in many parts of the northern part of the island as the cause of Christ was strengthened in the wake of the revival of 1812. Though he had been born in Skye (Snizort, 1795) and his father, Rev. Malcolm Macleod, had been minister in the parish of Snizort from 1788 until his death in 1832, there is no evidence that his father was anything other than a moderate minister, for Roderick stated that he had not heard an evangelical sermon until he went to university in Aberdeen, whence he graduated in 1815. There is no evidence that Roderick himself had any real evangelical convictions prior to 1821, notwithstanding that he entered the Church of Scotland ministry, being ordained a missionary of Lyndale and Arnisort, within

his father's parish, in April 1819. The crucial influence in this change, humanly speaking, was John Shaw. Inscribed on Shaw's gravestone in the old Bracadale Cemetery are these words: "As a Christian minister he was well known in devotedness to God. In zeal for the salvation of souls, in humility, meekness and long-suffering." His mortal remains lie only yards away from those of Roderick Macleod.

6. The awakening of 1812

However, we turn to the events leading up to the awakening of 1812. This was what might be called the first evangelical awakening in Skye, though, as we have seen there was a distinct spiritual impetus after Farquarson's visit to Skye in 1805. This awakening in 1812 really began in Martin's former parish in Kilmuir. This is where Donald Munro was most active and best appreciated. Although he was not an ordained minister, it is clear that he had gifts for evangelism. As the *Narratives of Revivals* put it, "considering the circumstances which gave them birth [the deadness of the prevailing church life] and caused their continuance, he will be a bold man who maintains that they ought to have been suppressed or that they are now to be condemned".²¹ The *Narratives* describes how his meetings were conducted:

The services, on the solemn and happy occasions of which we speak, began with praise and prayer [all in Gaelic of course]; . . . the reading of Scripture followed the opening of the meeting, large portions of which were read aloud without note or comment. The works of such authors as were to be had in Gaelic came next, viz., translations of [Joseph] Alleine's *Alarm*, [Thomas] Boston's *Fourfold State*, [Richard] Baxter's *Call [to the Unconverted]*, [John] Bunyan, [John] Willison, [Andrew] Gray and [Jonathan] Edwards. Then a passage of the word of God was selected for exposition. Munro usually had this part of the service allotted to him: but although few, when he was present, were willing to occupy the place which became him so well, others also, at times, opened up the truths contained in the passage thus commented on.²²

Though blind, Donald Munro did not need the help of a reader. His memory was stored with Scripture and he clearly made effective and

²¹ *ibid.*, No. X, p. 6.

²² *ibid.*, No. X, pp. 6-7.

judicial use of it. "His style of address was solemn and deeply impressive." He often spoke feelingly as one who was a brand plucked from the burning and he invariably pressed his hearers to flee to Christ from the wrath to come.

Three times every Sabbath day at that time meetings were held in the open air, in fields or barns or under such shelter, as was available. It is evident that the power of God attended this work. To Donald Munro and others who were supportive of him, this was the Lord's doing and wondrous in their eyes. For it was clearly a ministry of sovereign grace. They witnessed the irresistible power of God's grace bringing souls to confront their sins, melting their hearts with convicting, moving preaching and warm invitations for souls to come to Christ in haste. Very often in the course of these meetings people were reduced to tears of shame and repentance. It was no light work, this work of Donald Munro. He had unction. It was clear that the Spirit had come in power on evangelist and hearer alike. Again the *Narratives*:

We have called those occasions happy. They were truly so; for there is no joy like that which is felt when a sinner, melted under a sense of sin and of the mercy of God, learns to weep from "godly sorrow" and a blessed persuasion that everlasting love is manifested towards him in the dealings with his soul which he experiences when at one and the same time "repentance towards God and faith towards the Lord Jesus Christ" are produced within him by a power which he knows is divine. One striking trait, accordingly, in the character of the meetings was the life felt and manifested in singing the praises of God. The assembled multitudes engaged in the duty as with "one heart and one soul"; and often seemed as if they knew not how to stop. The utmost cordiality and brotherly love prevailed, every man feeling his heart more tenderly drawn out to his neighbour, and such as were savingly affected experiencing a holy influence leading them to testify for Christ, in the house, and by the way, in private conversation and by a devoted public profession.²³

The awakening lasted for two years and many people were savingly affected, not only in Kilmuir, but also in Snizort, Bracadale, Duirinish and, indeed, most parts of the north of Skye. The impact was felt farther

²³ *ibid.*, No, X, p. 8.

afield when people, hearing of a time of spiritual refreshing, came to taste of the heavenly influences.

7. The effects of the Revival

There were several evident immediate effects of the awakening in Skye in 1812-14.

1. The first direct effect was *the conversion of sinners*. The *Narratives* records with some caution that “in such a matter it is difficult, and may be dangerous, to speak of numbers: but it is well known that, during the general awakening, several hundreds were brought ‘from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God’. The genuineness of their conversion was evidenced by the change of life which accompanied their profession. Persons who had openly served sin, with their whole heart, did truly abandon it, embraced the cause of godliness, and walked as those of them who still survive do [1839], so as to ‘adorn the doctrine of God their Saviour’ by a life and conversation becoming it in all things.”²⁴

2. The second effect was *the suppression of openly sinful practices which had tended to prevail before the awakening among so many*. It seems that there was an impact on care about the Sabbath, less excess of drink and revellings, and a turning from superstitions. It was, however, evident, as referred to in the *Narratives of the Revivals*, that where the Lord had moved among so many, the devil was active in sowing tares among the wheat. No doubt this, too, is an evidence of a genuine awakening among a people, and the reason for so many apostolic warnings about resisting the evil one and being aware of his devices as a spoiler in the vineyard. However, there was a third result which was surprising though also understandable.

3. There followed from the awakening *an abandonment of ordinances on the part of many converts*. This is how the *Narratives* expressed it:

All the professors of religion both real converts and others remained devotedly attached to the national establishment, and resisted efforts made to draw them aside in which mind they continue. But the evident and striking countenance granted to the meetings attracted the people to them, and secured their reverence for their services. The churches were, in consequence, very much

²⁴ *ibid.*, No. X, p. 9.

forsaken. In these circumstances, the clergy began to refuse sealing ordinances to those who did not hear them; and, on the other hand, the “professors” lifted their protest against the clergy by refusing to accept ordinances as by them administered, Mr. Shaw being the only minister excepted.²⁵

This is frankly a difficulty in relation to this period of awakening. So many of the converts were not prepared to sit under a ministry in which they did not receive the gospel and received stones for bread. The Church no doubt seemed to them like the Church at Sardis – the Church with a name that it was alive but was dead (Revelation 3:1-6). They would not support the moderate or liberal ministry. We may be aghast that they abandoned the Church. Inevitably it created the impression that there was no reproach in living in the non-enjoyment of ordinances, and even considering it a mark of grace to do so. Yet the impact of this was to heighten expectations of the Church in maintaining without compromise a whole-hearted evangelical faith. The unfortunate spin-off from a “broad Churchism” tolerant of nominality, based on moderatism – or liberalism in the twentieth century – is the development of a church-life which compromises the very foundations which make a church a beacon of light in the world. When a church becomes a “synagogue of Satan” (Revelation 2:9, 13) is a debatable matter. Yet churches do become apostate and become a reproach to Christ and the gospel. The interesting thing in the case of Skye – and arguably also Lewis – is that the expectations of what the Church should be tended to prevail so that not long afterwards, with continuing awakenings touching the churches in the islands in 1821, 1842, and 1860 and thereafter, a predominantly conservative, evangelical and reformed religion tended to prevail, against trends in other areas of the country. In this respect the revivals of 1821 and afterwards were more associated with regular ordained men and did impact on mainline Churches. This put the Churches, shaken by the events of 1812-14, on to a good church footing.

8. Implications of the awakening of 1812

On the face of it there were several implications of the revival in Skye in the period 1812-14.

²⁵ *ibid.*, No. X, p. 10.

1. There was evidence of a work of divine grace

The situation in the early eighteenth century was none too encouraging. Christianity was at a low ebb, with a prevailing nominality in church life. Various forms of superstition were widely found. Who would have given any hope, humanly speaking, for the growth of a vital living Christianity in the island? Yet, through unusual and surprising means, the seed of an evangelical faith based on the doctrines of grace was planted and a vital living Christianity did begin to flourish in that very remote area where traditionally the Church had hitherto been limp and rather ineffectual. One thing that helped – it may be argued – was the fact that what literature that was available in Gaelic, including, crucially, the *Shorter Catechism*, was of an explicit evangelical and reformed nature. The development of education, sponsored and developed largely by Christian agencies and organisations, was also a crucial factor. All these things came together for the gathering in of many into the Kingdom of Christ. The movement from 1805 on showed, humanly speaking, the “power of littles”.

2. There was a robust evangelical faith based on God’s Word which was fruitful spiritually in the context of ignorance and declension

The impact of the Church in the Isle of Skye before the first quarter of the nineteenth century was limited and feeble. It is evident when a Church is no longer faithfully proclaiming a prophetic, challenging, Bible-centred message, as from God and not from man. Where people have any serious thought about their souls and seek peace for their souls, they will not be satisfied with the lacklustre, lukewarm and insincere, or man-centred brand of nominal Christianity. This note – notably – began to be heard with greater clarity and insistence in the revival work in the first two decades of the nineteenth century in Skye and elsewhere.

3. There was persevering faithfulness to the principles and work of the gospel

It is no doubt surprising, if not controversial, that the revival work in Skye between 1805 and 1820 was so bound up with the actions of laymen who tended to labour against the flow of the “official church”. Certainly eyebrows are raised when we hear that so many converts stopped attending the “official church” (though they did not generally go off at a tangent in establishing independent separatist alternatives). Men like Donald Munro were powerful examples of persevering in convictions of the truths of the gospel, of the necessity of the new birth, repentance, faith and perseverance in devout and holy lives. Was the “official church”

shocked into examining itself and its message? Did it begin to see in itself shades of the churches in Sardis or Laodicea? Were these “laymen” not simply “being watch[ful] and strengthen[ing] the things that remain[ed]” (Revelation 3:2)? It seems undeniable that what happened in the 1812-14 period was a re-awakening and even “revolt” that shook the complacency of the churches and was a link in the chain which resulted in the blessing of the Lord being poured out, especially in the northern part of the Isle of Skye.