

**‘FALLING DOWN AS IF DEAD’:
ATTITUDES TO UNUSUAL PHENOMENA
IN THE SKYE REVIVAL OF 1841-1842**
DONALD E. MEEK, UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

Recently the so-called ‘Toronto Blessing’ has focused considerable attention on supernatural phenomena in the context of Christian worship, especially of a charismatic nature. The appearance of the phenomena – falling down, crying aloud, shaking, weeping – has led to discussion of the relationship between the ‘Blessing’ and what the Protestant churches have historically recognised as ‘revival’. A wide range of views has been expressed, few of them new.¹ In the contexts of most revival movements which have swept the northern hemisphere in the course of the last three centuries or so, similar phenomena have manifested themselves, and have generated expressions of approval, scepticism, guarded acceptance or outright rejection (and variations of these) among those who have witnessed their presence.² So it has been with the manifestations of the ‘Blessing’.

Given the surprise with which the phenomena of the ‘Blessing’ have been received in some quarters, it may be useful to draw attention to the appearance of supernatural phenomena in Scottish revivals of the past. Within certain sectors of Evangelicalism, there is a convenient tendency to ignore, or overlook, the physical impact of revivals, in such a way that the reconstructed model of revival fits the present paradigms of churches which are now anxious to preserve their spiritual decorum.

¹ The ‘Toronto Blessing’ is described in a rash of ‘instant’ books, most of them covering much the same ground and seemingly concerned to establish the authenticity of the experience. These include Guy Chevreau, *Catch the Fire* (London, 1994) and Patrick Dixon, *Signs of Revival* (Eastbourne, 1994). The latter is more interesting than most because of the author’s ability (as a doctor) to assess the human factors which may contribute to, or create, such phenomena.

² See Michael A.G. Haykin, *Revival, Signs and Wonders: Some Evangelical Perspectives from the Eighteenth Century* (Richmond Hill, Ontario, 1994).

Present-day definitions should not, however, blind us to past realities. Revival movements which led to a dramatic increase of congregational size without some measure of disturbance have been comparatively rare. Nowadays, we may not readily associate supernatural manifestations with the more conservative churches of Scotland, particularly in the Scottish Highlands, but, as this article will demonstrate, some religious bodies, even in the Highlands, have had considerable experience of such phenomena.

If there is a tendency in some quarters to make revivals respectable, there is also a propensity to believe that revivals have a uniform morphology. Such movements may, in fact, vary their style as they develop. As the present article hopes to show, there is some evidence that a revival movement may go through different phases; unusual phenomena may be present at one stage, but not at another. As a revival movement progresses, it may be transformed from an initial phenomenal outburst, with overtly physical manifestations, to a quiet but steady flow of responses. It is also possible for a movement which begins relatively quietly to display more 'extreme' manifestations in the course of its development.

This article offers a tentative case study of the unusual phenomena accompanying one major Highland revival (or awakening), namely the revival that occurred in the Isle of Skye in 1841-2. It will consider how the revival, and particularly its physical manifestations, were portrayed and assessed by contemporary observers. It will also look briefly at a later account of events which scarcely mentions the phenomena which were so evident to the first observers.

Baptist Perspectives

A fascinating and (hitherto) little-known description of the Skye revival by a contemporary observer was provided by the Revd James MacQueen, pastor of the small Baptist church at Broadford. Writing his dispatches to the Baptist Home Missionary Society for Scotland, MacQueen gave the following account of events in the late autumn of 1841 and the spring of 1842:³

³ *Reports of the Baptist Home Missionary Society for Scotland, chiefly for the Highlands and Islands* (Edinburgh, 1829-46), 1843, pp. 8-9. The volume is held in Glasgow University Library. For

September – I suppose you have heard what has occurred in the other end of the island. They had the sacrament last week, and, I hear, that between 12,000 and 15,000 attended, and that hundreds fell down as if they were dead. This usually commences with violent shaking and crying out, with clapping of hands. Those affected were mostly women and children. We have had two or three instances of it in this station, and it is likely it will go over the whole island. I think it is better to refrain from these men, and let them alone; if it be of man it will come to nought.

December – I never saw the church so lively and zealous as at present.... I never saw such a general desire to hear in every part of the station, and, indeed, through the whole island. Four persons were baptised since I last wrote to you. I cannot visit one half of the places to which I am invited. This awakening commenced in the north of Skye, by means of a Gaelic schoolmaster. It has extended to all the parishes of the island....

March – Ten persons have been baptised and added to us since the beginning of winter.... As to the revival, things are more moderate. The crying and fainting are dying away in most places, but the desire to hear is the same. The revival has extended to the mainland; in some parishes it is at its height, and the people are carried home in carts.

Independent confirmation of the phenomena described by MacQueen is provided by another Baptist minister who was visiting Skye in 1841. Duncan Ferguson, who was stationed in the Ross of Mull, went to Skye on the death of his brother, Angus, who was the Baptist pastor at Uig. According to Ferguson, he too experienced 'those contortions and screamings which have been so frequent'. When preaching one evening, presumably in the Baptist chapel at Uig, he had to conclude early, because he was unable to hear his own voice above the noise caused by the supernatural manifestations among his listeners.⁴

James MacQueen (c. 1801-54), a native of Cromdale, Strathspey, see Donald E. Meek, 'The Independent and Baptist Churches of Highland Perthshire and Strathspey', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 56 (1988-90), p. 322.

⁴ *Baptist Home Missionary Society Reports*, 1843, pp. 10-11.

Presbyterian Perspectives

In the 1843 Report of the Edinburgh Society for the Support of Gaelic Schools, the Revd Roderick MacLeod of Snizort provided the following account of the Skye revival and its origins:⁵

Mr Norman MacLeod [a Gaelic schoolmaster] was appointed to the station at Unish in May 1839, and opened a school there on the 15th of June following. In April 1840, a few individuals appeared to be awakened to a sense of their lost condition by nature. Towards the end of August of the same year there seemed to be an unusual concern among the people relative to their spiritual interests; and many cried out at the meetings in apparent distress of mind. The effect of these impressions continued in an increased attention to the things that belong to their peace. Symptoms of declension, however, began to appear; and the period for the teacher's removal drawing near, he felt his spirit unusually moved regarding their state. Under these circumstances he met with his scholars on the morning of the 15th of May last, being the Lord's day, and the last day of the Session, and experienced much tenderness towards them. About two o' clock in the afternoon he met with the people for worship, when an individual cried out. They met again at night, when he read the 11th chapter of Mark, and made some remarks on the parable of the barren fig-tree, and in conclusion adverted to his three years' residence with them, and asked, now that he was about to leave them, what fruit they had brought forth. On his asking that, the most extraordinary emotions appeared among the people; some wept, and some cried aloud as if pricked in their hearts, while others fainted, and fell down as if struck dead. In this state they continued together the whole night; and instead of the teacher's going away on the morrow, as he had previously intended, such was the awakening that he remained sixteen days, reading and praying, – the people

⁵ *The Thirty-second Annual Report of the Society for the Support of Gaelic Schools* (Edinburgh, 1843), pp. 16-17. On the Revd Roderick MacLeod (1794-1868), revered for his evangelical austerity and known in Gaelic as *Maighstir Ruairidh*, see Roderick MacLeod, 'The Bishop of Skye', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 53 (1982-4), pp. 174-209.

continuing to assemble with so little intermission, day or night, that he could only get two hours' sleep early every morning. The state of things at Unish, as may be readily conceived, soon began to be noised abroad; and the consequence was, that numbers from various parts of the country were attracted to the scene, many of whom became similarly affected with the rest.

Immense crowds began to gather at Unish, but, because of the dangers inherent in travelling to the area by sea, the venue was changed to the more accessible location of Fairy Bridge:

[A] well-known spot, called Fairy-Bridge, where three roads now meet, was pitched upon as the most convenient place for meeting, and continued to be the scene of a weekly preaching to thousands for about two months, when the advance of the harvest season rendered it expedient to discontinue it. Multitudes from all parts of Skye, excepting the distant parishes of Strath and Sleat, flocked to Fairy Bridge; and as proof of one design of Providence at least, in permitting such outward manifestations as took place under the Word, it is a fact worthy of notice, that some who never went to hear the Gospel in their own parish, were induced by what they heard was going on, to go many miles beyond to hear it. Soon after the awakening broke out in Unish, it appeared also in Geary, another Gaelic School station in Waternish, under Mr Murdoch MacDonald, the teacher there, – and also at Glendale in the parish of Diurnish: – so that from that extreme and intermediate point, where it first commenced, it proceeded to the right and to the left, till now, in a series of regular successive movements, it has traversed the whole of the island, from north to south, yea and beyond, even to the islands of Eigg and Rum, in the parish of Small Isles, the most distant bounds of the Presbytery of Skye.

In the parish of the Small Isles, the impact of the revival produced physical manifestations, as the parish minister, the Revd John Swanson, pointed out:⁶

⁶ *Thirty-second Annual Report*, p. 21. For John Swanson (1804-74), a native of Gravesend, Kent, who learned Gaelic in the course of his Highland ministry, see *Disruption Worthies of the Highlands* (Edinburgh, 1886), pp. 127-36.

Considering the elements which the Word had to work on here, that when its power was first felt, there was a good deal of physical excitement, will not surprise you. But this is gradually subsiding, as the judgement is becoming more enlightened. Of the general result of the work among us, I cannot yet speak decidedly. I doubt not that there are many cases in which it will be good and glorious, and as yet I have no reason to despair of any awakened soul.

Donald MacKinnon, Gaelic Schools Society teacher in Eigg, reported in November 1842:⁷

About the revivals in this island: it is generally known that this was the most benighted parish in all Scotland, in regard to the gospel; half the population are Roman Catholics and the Protestants are almost Papists at heart; although Mr Swanson laboured among them for about nearly three years, yet little or no saving effect was visible upon any of his hearers until the 7th of August last, when the first cry was heard. As our minister was preaching, a widow woman was impressed, the whole audience noticed her, and arrested their attention: I may say the awe of God fell upon all. We met again in the evening of the same day when three more women were impressed with a sense of their sins and misery, and crying aloud for mercy; upon Thursday evening following, Mr Swanson's ordinary week-day for lecturing, I cannot remember any more being impressed but the above four, but next Sabbath the cries from the meeting-house could be distinctly heard at the distance of half a mile.... At the meeting-house there are generally two kinds of weeping, *viz.* weeping for fear of hell, by those who are under the spirit of bondage; and others weeping for joy, which is more desirable, and which some of them count their life and health. The Roman Catholics are not ashamed to call this work 'the work of the devil', and calling that kind of temporary sickness which accompanies it 'the braxy', and some such names in contempt and ridicule.⁸

⁷ *Thirty-second Annual Report*, pp. 30-31.

⁸ 'The braxy' was a bacterial disease which affected sheep, particularly in autumn and winter. The bacteria acted very quickly, and sheep collapsed, usually being found as corpses which were carried home by the shepherd. The sarcastic humour of the term in

By the autumn of 1843, the awakening evident in Skye and the Small Isles had spread to the Outer Hebrides, notably to North Uist, where, by September, Norman MacLeod, the former Gaelic Schools Society teacher at Unish, was now itinerating as a catechist and exhorter. MacLeod's impact was immediate, as the Revd Norman MacLeod of Trumisgarry, North Uist, reported to the Edinburgh Gaelic Schools Society in January 1844:⁹

He had scarcely set his hand to the work when several, especially among the young, became sensibly distressed at his meetings under conviction of sin, and their lost condition. From this, as a centre point, the revival has been spreading south and north.... Persons of all ages and sexes are affected; but the majority of them are within the period called the prime of life. In this parish particularly, numbers of children, from eight to fourteen years of age, are impressed; and it would be an affecting sight to see their parents, as I have more than once seen them, carrying them out of the meeting-house, apparently lifeless with exhaustion and overpowered feelings. Respecting the bodily emotions exhibited by the impressed, I would only observe, that they are similar to those of such as were visible subjects of revival lately in Skye, and in several other parts of Scotland, in recent as well as in more remote periods. We have every reason to hope, that many, besides those visibly impressed, are partakers of the spiritual benefits of his merciful visitation. There is reason to fear, however, as has often been the case in times past, that numbers of those who now seem promising will fall away; yet the practical effects of the work are highly gratifying, and unquestionably evidence of its heavenly origin. Gross sins are abandoned – carnal levities are given up. A deep and general interest is felt and shown in what is important and saving in religion.

this context is obvious. It should be noted, however, that name-calling of this kind, equating a revival with a disease, is not restricted to Roman Catholics; *cf.* the 'Stewarton Sickness' of 1626 and the 'Toronto Sickness' of 1994!

⁹ *The Thirty-third Annual Report of the Society for the Support of Gaelic Schools* (Edinburgh, 1844), pp. 17-18.

Commentary

The Baptist and Presbyterian accounts of the 1841-2 revival in Skye and beyond share a number of common perspectives. As both accounts indicate, the principal trigger in the movement was the Gaelic Schools Society teacher at Unish in Skye, and the context of the initial phase (the impending departure of the schoolmaster, a major authority-figure in the community) demonstrates that human emotions contributed significantly to the 'excitement'. Young people, including children, were among the first to display the unusual physical phenomena. Women were also particularly strongly affected. The intensity of the phenomena is clear, as is their nature – prostrations, shouting, weeping – though the Baptist account gives more specific details (shaking, clapping *etc.*) Baptists and Presbyterians indicate that the phenomena were most evident at the beginning of the revival, and that matters gradually became 'more moderate' as 'enlightenment' (as Swanson calls it) increased.

Where the accounts differ most obviously is in their attitude to the phenomena. The Baptist preachers show the higher degree of caution in accepting them, especially in the initial stages. James MacQueen's entry for September 1841 contains more than a hint of disdain towards the movement, together with a profound scepticism: 'I think it is better to refrain from these men, and let them alone; if it be of man it will come to nought.' His attitude becomes more positive, however, as he observes later that, because of the energising effect of the awakening, his church is 'zealous and lively', and the people's desire to hear the Word has increased. The yardstick being applied is that of spiritual interest, which counterbalances MacQueen's initial view that the movement, at least in its first phase, is superficial and emotional. The contribution which the revival makes in the longer term to the spiritual vitality of his own church allays his fear that it is natural rather than supernatural.

The Baptists' (initially) rather dismissive approach is particularly interesting since it might be expected that they would have been more willing than Presbyterians to welcome the appearance of revivals exhibiting strong supernatural phenomena. They were by no means strangers to revivals, as most Baptist churches in the Highlands and Islands were built on localised revival movements, but it does seem that the

phenomena in the Skye revival were quite different from anything they had previously experienced.¹⁰ With Baptist leaders elsewhere in Britain, it is likely that MacQueen and Ferguson shared a disaffection towards 'enthusiasm', and that they were anxious to test the reality of the experience in the longer term at the level of lasting and demonstrable spiritual commitment. Even so, their response may have been shaped by more down-to-earth considerations, affecting the survival of their churches. By the 1840s, the Baptist missionary outreach to the Highlands and Islands was in what might be termed broadly a stable phase, and it is possible that the outburst in Skye was seen as a threat to that stability – particularly since the revival might be seen as an indication of the forces that were at work beyond the confines of these small Baptist churches. Even the Establishment itself was now showing signs of divine visitation.

For Presbyterians, the evangelical currents which had swept through the Highlands and Islands, and had affected other parts of Scotland, were reaching the intensity of a tidal race, soon to be directed into the Disruption of 1843. The Skye revival was seen by the Revd Roderick MacLeod of Snizort as an indicator of the success of evangelical Presbyterianism, but more particularly as a vindication of the policy of placing Gaelic Schools Society teachers in Highland parishes. MacLeod and other writers who were in contact with the society thus tended to speak in much broader terms which did not give a central position to the phenomena. They were, nevertheless, well aware of their existence, and MacLeod was prepared to accept them as a way of attracting the attention of those who had no previous contact with the gospel. The success of 'outward manifestations' in bringing such people under the influence of gospel preaching was regarded as an indicator of providential intervention. It is especially noteworthy that Roderick MacLeod himself was the main preacher at Fairy Bridge, and that, despite his enduring reputation for immense spiritual seriousness, he did not try to suppress the phenomena. A degree of sensationalism could aid the evangelical cause, and the revival as a whole could be

¹⁰ For a general discussion of Baptist work in the Highlands and Islands, see chapter 15 of David W. Bebbington (ed.), *The Baptists in Scotland: A History* (Glasgow, 1988).

employed to give maximum publicity and local focus to a populist religious movement which would soon follow himself and other evangelical leaders into the Free Church of Scotland.¹¹

Other commentators were more guarded about the significance of the phenomena. John Swanson, parish minister of the Small Isles, does not entirely conceal his unease when he feels it necessary to define the 'excitement' as deriving from the nature of 'the elements which the word had to work on here', hinting perhaps that the phenomena are explicable as a kind of exorcism required to cleanse a 'papist' parish, or as the product of some sort of confrontation between the forces of deep darkness and spiritual enlightenment.

But could the 'excitement' be taken as proof that the Word was working in those individuals who were 'visibly impressed'? Norman MacLeod of Trumisgarry appears to have thought that it could not, and he at least was prepared to accept that there could be seeming 'conversions' which would prove to be fruitless:

We have every reason to hope, that many, besides those visibly impressed, are partakers of the spiritual benefits of this merciful visitation. There is reason to fear, however, as has often been the case in times past, that numbers of those who now seem promising will fall away; yet the practical effects of the work are highly gratifying, and unquestionably evidence of its heavenly origin.

In responding to the phenomena in such a manner, the Presbyterian ministers whose comments have survived show a breadth of understanding which is not evident in the response of the Baptist ministers. The basis of their understanding is apparent in their references to unusual phenomena in previous revivals in Scotland and in their

¹¹ It is significant that Skye was visited in September 1841 by the Revd John MacDonald of Urquhart (more commonly associated with Ferintosh), and it seems likely that it was he who conducted the communion service to which James MacQueen alludes; see *Thirty-second Annual Report*, pp. 18-19. MacDonald was seldom far from any of the main Highland revivals of the early nineteenth century, and he had a particularly important role in preaching during communion seasons which were focal points of revival (and of 'phenomena').

willingness to assess the present phenomena and their significance as part of a general 'visitation' which, though potentially flawed in some respects, was overall a work of 'heavenly origin'. It would seem likely that they were familiar with the writings of Jonathan Edwards, and that they derived their perspectives from him.¹² Baptists, on the other hand, were reacting 'on the hoof', so to speak, and one can see their responses being hammered out as the revival went through different stages and phases. Baptists and Presbyterians were, however, at one in regarding spiritual fruit, represented in changed lives and 'lively' churches, as the chief product by which the reality of the revival could be tested.

The Revival in Retrospect

The contemporary accounts of the Skye revival can be set alongside a later description, from the work of the Revd Alexander MacRae, who quoted the following (unattributed) summary in his book, *Revivals in the Highlands and Islands in the 19th Century*:¹³

In 1839 Mr McLeod was translated to Snizort, his native parish. It was now the period of the Ten Years' Conflict, and into that movement he threw himself with his whole heart and soul. His sympathies were entirely on the side of the spiritual independence of the Church, and the spiritual rights and privileges of the Christian people. The circumstances of the time called for a large amount of extra parochial duties, for in 1840 another extraordinary revival movement began in Skye, which agitated the island from end to end, and extended even beyond it. It commenced at Unish, a hamlet near Waternish Point, under one of the Gaelic School Society teachers, Norman MacLeod, an old soldier who had served under General Abercromby in Egypt, was severely wounded at Alexandria, and retired on a pension. He was a single-minded, humble, earnest Christian man. The evening before his intended removal from Unish to occupy another station – a Sabbath evening

¹² For an introduction to Jonathan Edwards' perspectives on revival, see J.I. Packer, *Among God's Giants: Aspects of Puritan Christianity* (Eastbourne, 1991), pp. 408-32.

¹³ Alexander MacRae, *Revivals in the Highland and Islands in the 19th Century* (Stirling, 1905), pp. 75-7.

– he assembled the people for a farewell service. He read to them the 11th chapter of Mark, and made some remarks on the barren fig tree. He referred to his three years' residence among them, and asked what fruit they had brought forth. At this a most extraordinary emotion was manifested. The people would not retire, but continued there all night; and instead of the teacher leaving on the morrow, as was intended, such was the thirst to hear the Word that he remained with them for several weeks reading, praying and exhorting. Day and night the services were continued, with little intermission. The state of things at Unish was soon noised abroad, and many from other parts were drawn to the scene, and were similarly affected by the Word. As the parish minister was unfavourable, Mr MacLeod was invited to come and preach to them. This he readily agreed to do, and on the day fixed for the service a vast crowd assembled. Full fifty boats had come with people from the various parts of the coast around, and the impression made was remarkable. It was then thought advisable to change the place of meeting from Stein to Fairybridge, where three roads met, for it was central, though not near any dwelling. For many months a weekly service was conducted there by Mr McLeod, and crowds resorted thither from all parts of Skye.

Here the focus has moved perceptibly from the revival itself to the role of Roderick MacLeod as the main preacher of the movement. There is no direct allusion to the physical manifestations which had so concerned the contemporary writers, perhaps because they were – in the long term – of little significance. The experience as a whole is used to reinforce the picture of an emerging Presbyterian evangelical leadership in the Highlands and Islands in the early 1840s.

Conclusion

The contemporary evidence of the 1841-2 revival in Skye and surrounding districts shows that 'outward manifestations' were well known in the context of Highland revivals of the nineteenth century, although later accounts tended to reduce their significance. These manifestations posed the same range of problems for their observers as comparable phenomena do today. The view that 'the revivals of the past' were 'pure' is challenged by such evidence. Even 150 years ago, the

'blessing', when it came, was essentially 'mixed', and required to be handled with care.¹⁴

¹⁴ I am very grateful to Dr Murray Simpson, Librarian, New College Library, Edinburgh, for providing photocopies of the relevant sections of the Annual Reports of the Society for the Support of Gaelic Schools.