
Notes on the Literary Labours of the Apostle of the North

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John Macdonald, the Apostle of the North, lived from 1779 to 1849. He was successively missionary at Achreny 1805-6, ordained missionary at Berriedale 1806-7, minister of the Edinburgh Gaelic Chapel 1807-13, and minister of Ferintosh 1813-49. He is well known as a powerful preacher and bold evangelist but little known for his literary work, other than his poetry. In a preface to his solitary published Gaelic sermon he says, "The author seldom appears before his countrymen through the medium of the press; and he confesses that at any time he would rather use his tongue than his pen".¹ Dr Macdonald did, nevertheless, leave considerable literary remains, and his activities in this sphere were more extensive than one first realises. Some of the material was employed by Dr Kennedy in *The Apostle of the North* (first published in 1866), and much fuller information was given in Rev Donald Beaton's *Some Noted Ministers of the Northern Highlands* (Inverness, 1929), pp. 157-170.

The following list includes all that we have come across from Dr Macdonald's pen. It will be seen from the miscellaneous nature of the list that we have probably missed several items. For convenience we divide our notes into "English", "Gaelic", and "Translations into Gaelic", and we follow a roughly chronological order.² In an Appendix we reproduce an interesting letter of Dr Macdonald's, and discuss some recent unfavourable comments on it.

¹ *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 4 (1899-1900), p. 103.

² I am grateful to Norman Campbell for help with the Gaelic in this paper.



Portrait of Dr. J. MacDonald in 1813, taken from Kay's Original Portraits.

I. English

1. The first English publication in which Dr Macdonald was involved was an edition of Thomas Shepard's *Sincere Convert and Sound Believer* (Paisley, 1812), with notes by Dr John Love (1757-1825).³ The publishing of this was a joint undertaking with David Carment (1772-1856), then minister of the Duke Street Gaelic Chapel, Glasgow, and later of Rosskeen. Like Dr Macdonald, he was a native of Caithness.

Unusually, the venture was profitable; Carment spending his share of the profits on silver communion cups for his congregation.⁴

2. The next publication in which Dr Macdonald was at least partly involved was Thomas Bell's *View of the Covenants of Works and Grace* (Glasgow, 1814). This carries a "Recommendation" signed by John Brown of Whitburn, Dr Macdonald, David Carment, John Colquhoun of Leith, and Dr Ireland of Leith. Thomas Bell (1733-1802) was an ardent proponent of Marrow doctrine, and it is interesting to see Dr Macdonald adding his endorsement to this: "We cordially wish this scriptural view of much important truth may be the ministration of grace to saints and sinners."

3. [Diary] The next item to mention is Dr Macdonald's diary. In his opening entry for the beginning of 1816 he expresses regret for not

³ Extracts from Dr Love's Preface and Notes are given in *Memorials of Dr Love* (2 vols., Glasgow, 1857-8), Vol. 1, pp. 278-82.

⁴ Samuel Carment, *Memoir of Rev James Carment of Comrie* (Dalkeith, 1886), p. 226.

having kept a diary previously, resolving to do so henceforth. Dr Kennedy states that this resolution “was carried out to a certain extent during all his subsequent life”, but of the diary “only fragments remain”.⁵ We wonder if any of these fragments survive. Though a native Gaelic-speaker, Dr Macdonald kept his diary in English, as Dugald Buchanan had done before him.⁶ Numerous extracts from the diary are given in *The Apostle of the North*.

4. [Sermons] Few of Dr Macdonald’s sermons survive. His most famous sermon was on Isaiah 54:5, “Thy maker is thine husband”. This was an action sermon preached at Ardeonaig on the south side of Loch Tay in 1816. It was delivered in Gaelic but a skeleton of the sermon in English was found among his papers and included in *The Apostle of the North*, pp. 66-9. The English skeleton of another Gaelic sermon, on 2 Timothy 4:7, “I have kept the faith”, preached after the death of Angus Mackintosh, Tain, in 1831, is in *The Apostle of the North*, pp. 219-223.

His only English sermon published during his lifetime was on Romans 3:21, “The Righteousness of God Manifested in the Justification of Sinners”. This was preached on Thursday, 2nd June 1825, at the High Church (St Giles) in Edinburgh as the annual sermon for the Society in Scotland for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SSPCK), and was published soon afterwards (Edinburgh, 1825), 33pp. It was reprinted in the collection of sermons entitled *Precious Seed: Discourses by Scottish Worthies* (Edinburgh, 1877, pp. 139-155; 2nd edition Birmingham, AL, 2007), and was included by Rev Donald Beaton in *Sermons by Noted Ministers of the Northern Highlands* (Inverness, 1930; second edition Glasgow, 1997).

Notes of another sermon, on Jeremiah 3:15, “And I will give you pastors according to mine own heart, who shall feed you with knowledge and understanding”, preached in the Inverness Chapel of Ease on Sabbath evening 23rd October [possibly 1836], are given in D. A. Macfarlane, *Miss Harriet Macdonald, Dingwall, and her Father* (Inverness, 1941) pp. 12-16. The sermon was preached in support of the Society for Improving the System of Church Patronage in Scotland, and the notes

⁵ John Kennedy, *The Apostle of the North* (Inverness, 1932), p. 60.

⁶ Dr Macdonald’s English was imperfect until he went to university in Aberdeen, see *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 113 (2008), p. 271.

appear to have been taken by Harriet Macdonald's father, Alexander, who was brought up under Dr Macdonald's ministry.⁷

In Duncan Macgregor's *Campbell of Kiltearn* (Edinburgh, 1874) there is reference to a manuscript volume of Dr Macdonald's sermons. "Soon after [Dr Macdonald's] death, his son, Kenneth, gave me a volume of his manuscripts, which is among my sacred possessions. It contains Lectures on Luke, from chaps 6-15 inclusive, written between April 1832 and March 1837, with Sunday sermons upon miscellaneous subjects. Both the Lectures and Sermons are mere outlines, short, terse, unadorned; but they have the true ring in them. They remind you of the strong timbers of a man-of-war. They go at once to the heart of the subject – there is not an unnecessary word – the logic is invulnerable – the lines of thought are as straight as a needle. Here and there you have fine spiritual gleams – touching allusions to current events, such as the outbreak of cholera, religious awakenings in different places, collections, etc.; the whole interspersed with notices of preaching tours in all parts of the Highlands. They ought to be published" (p. 130). Macgregor then provides a single specimen, on Exodus 32:26, "Who is on the Lord's side?" , preached on 28th June 1835 (pp. 130-1).⁸

5. Dr Macdonald made four trips to St Kilda – in 1822, 1824, 1827, and 1830 – and on each occasion an account of his visit was written for the SSPCK, at whose request the visits were made. The accounts for 1822 and 1824 were published; that for 1822 in *Journal and report of a visit to the Island of St Kilda* (Edinburgh, 1823) 36pp., and then the two accounts together in *Report and journal of two visits to St. Kilda, 1822 and 1824* (Edinburgh, 1825). Dr Kennedy quoted from the accounts for 1822, 1824, and 1830 in *The Apostle of the North*, but seems not to have had access to

⁷ The day and month of the sermon are given, but not the year. The 23rd October was a Sabbath in 1831, 1836, and 1842. Alexander Macdonald was born in 1819 or 1820 so 1836 and 1842 are the probable years, if he was indeed the note-taker. The Society was formed in 1826 and from Sage's account it seems unlikely that it was still active in October 1842, when the Disruption was so near, see D. Sage, *Memorabilia Domestica* (2nd edn, Wick, 1899), p. 322. The *Inverness Courier* for 24th October 1832 records that "the Rev. J. Macdonald, of Urquhart, preached in the Chapel of Ease for the benefit of the Society for Improving Church Patronage in Scotland. The collection amounted to 8 17s 4d. The annual meeting of the Society was held, and resolutions passed in favour of delivering the Church from the grievances flowing from patronage." J. Barron, *The Northern Highlands in the Nineteenth Century* (3 vols., Inverness, 1903-13), Vol. 2, p. 120. The 23rd October was a Tuesday in 1832, but perhaps this was in fact the occasion of the sermon.

⁸ The late Rev Hugh Cartwright, Edinburgh, informed the writer that he had an envelope with sermon notes of Dr Macdonald's on the back, but that this was missing.

the 1827 account. This was included as an appendix in the 1932 edition of *The Apostle of the North*, pp. 275-293.⁹

6. In May 1826 Dr Macdonald delivered a speech at the General Assembly in the case of Rev Roderick Macleod, Bracadale, later Snizort. This speech was subsequently published in Mackintosh Mackay, *Brief Memorials of the Life, Character, and Ministry of Rev Roderick Macleod* (Edinburgh, 1869) pp. 16-17.¹⁰

Roderick Macleod (1795-1868) was inducted as minister of Bracadale in September 1823. He almost at once found himself in conflict with the Moderate-dominated Presbytery of Skye over his refusal to give baptism and the Lord's Supper to certain people in his parish. His case first came before the General Assembly in May 1824, and it thereafter it came up, either to the Assembly or the Commission, nearly every year until 1840. It was effectively brought to an end by his translation to Snizort in 1838. He was the Moderator of the Free Church of Scotland in 1863.

7. [Letters] The earliest surviving letters of Dr Macdonald are seven dating from between May 1797 and December 1798. An account of them is given in *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 113 (2008), 268-74, where one of the letters is printed in full. Two letters dating from 1812 and connected with his call to Ferintosh are given in M. Macgregor, *Three Sermons by Rev Charles Calder* (Edinburgh, 1877), pp. 12-13. Various further letters are included in *The Apostle of the North*: a reply to the Secretary of the London Missionary Society in 1823, p. 102; a reply to Dr Dewar regarding a proposed trip to Ireland in 1827, pp. 124-5; several letters to his son John dating from about 1824 to 1847, pp. 188-214; and a fragment to Alexander Sinclair, Thurso, written about 1816, pp. 218-9. A short extract from another letter to his son John, written in February 1824, is in W. K. Tweedie, *Life of Rev John Macdonald of Calcutta* (Edinburgh, 1849), p. 23. Two further letters of Dr Macdonald's are included in John Mackay, *Memoir of Rev John Macdonald, Helmsdale* (Edinburgh, 1856), pp. 41-3. The first, dated 18th January 1827, gives an account of catechising

⁹ Other items by Dr Macdonald can probably be found in the SSPCK records but we have not had an opportunity of examining these.

¹⁰ *Brief Memorials* has its own title page and pagination, but it forms the second part of M. Mackay, *Sermon preached in the Free Church, Snizort, Skye, on occasion of the decease of Rev Roderick Macleod, minister of the Free Church, Snizort; with Brief Memorials etc.* (Edinburgh, 1869).

children in the Gaelic school at St Kilda.¹¹ The second, dated 28th April 1834, relates to a call to John Macdonald, Helmsdale, to go to Canada.

8. In October 1838, Dr Macdonald contributed a two-page “Recommendation” to the *Letters of Dr Love* (Glasgow, 1838) in which he says, “I have perused a considerable number of the following letters in manuscript”. The *Letters* were published by a Committee, of which Peter Macbride, Rothesay, who wrote the Preface, was presumably a member.¹² The Committee had been entrusted by Mrs Love with Dr Love’s papers after his death in 1825. They published his *Discourses* in two volumes in 1829, his *Letters* in 1838, and his *Memorials* in two volumes in 1857-8.

9. Dr Macdonald’s most substantial English writings were his notes on the Gospel of Matthew. These were issued in two separate publications in the early twentieth century. They were both taken, it seems, from the same manuscript, presumably in the possession of someone in the Inverness/Dingwall area. Both publishers withheld their names, and our enquiries regarding their identities have drawn a blank.

The first part to be issued was *The Sermon on the Mount* (Inverness, [1908]), vi+31pp. This consists of notes beginning at Matthew 5:1 and breaks off abruptly in the middle of Chapter 6:9. The second part, issued twenty years later, was entitled *Commentary on Matthew* (Dingwall, 1928), 40pp. This contains some introductory remarks on the Scriptures and on the practice of lecturing, followed by Dr Macdonald’s notes on the first four chapters of Matthew, delivered as lectures to his congregation at Ferintosh. The 1908 publication begins with the words “Having, for several weeks past, discoursed on the glorious Preacher, let us now consider His sermon”, which strongly suggests that what was then being published was the second part of a manuscript of which the 1928 publication was the first part. One wonders what has become of the manuscript.

10. Dr Macdonald left a single surviving English poem. This untitled poem was published by Dr Kennedy as the conclusion of *The Apostle of the North*, p. 271.

¹¹ See the Appendix, where this letter is reproduced and where Michael Robson’s comments on it, *St Kilda, Church, Visitors and ‘Natives’* (Ness, 2005), p. 300, are discussed.

¹² It would be interesting to know the other members of this Committee. The “Advertisement” to the *Discourses* in April 1829 expresses the Committee’s thanks to Angus Macmillan of Kilmorie, Arran, Gavin Parker of Dundee and Aberdeen, and James Paterson of Harbottle, Northumberland.

II. Gaelic

1. Dr Macdonald was licensed in July 1805, and in September and October of that year he went on an “Ossianic tour” through “the western parishes of Strathnaver, Ross, and Inverness-shire” at the instance of Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster. In 1760 and the following years, James Macpherson had published what purported to be English translations of Gaelic poems by an ancient poet named Ossian. On being challenged, however, he failed to produce his manuscripts, and a controversy had been raging ever since over the genuineness of his translations. It is now usually supposed that he employed authentic sources but substantially embellished them. The purpose of Macdonald’s tour was to gather evidence on the distribution of Ossianic traditions and poems in the Highlands. Sir John Sinclair’s *Dissertation on the Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian* was published in 1806.

Dr Macdonald collected nine poems, the contributors being as follows: Captain John Macdonald of Thurso; George Mackay, Dalvighouse, Parish of Farr, Sutherland, aged 55; Alexander Mackay, Ribigil, Parish of Tongue, aged 63;¹³ John Mackay, Knockbreac, Parish of Durness, aged 50; Donald Mackenzie, Duartbeg, Eddrachillis, aged 61; John Mackenzie, Duartbeg, Eddrachillis; and Alexander Macrae, North Erradale, Parish of Gairloch, aged 80. Dr Macdonald’s manuscript collection is in the National Library of Scotland. Some of the poems were published in *Leabhar na Feinne* (London, 1872) and the whole collection appeared in *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, Vol. 13 (1886-7), pp. 269-300.

2. The next Gaelic publication in which Dr Macdonald was involved was the *Spiritual Songs, Laoidhe Spioradail*, of Donald Matheson, published in 1816. Donald Matheson (1719-1782) was a native of the Strath of Kildonan in Sutherland, not far from John Macdonald’s own birthplace. A brief but interesting account of his life appears in John Rose’s *Metrical Reliques* (Inverness, 1851), pp. 245-9. The first edition of

¹³ David Mackenzie, Free Church minister of Farr, Sutherland wrote: “I remember quite well at that time Mr John Macdonald taking down some of these poems in writing from an old blind man in Tongue manse: but I remember also what is much more refreshing, how the worthy old minister of Tongue [William Mackenzie] welcomed the young preacher of the Gospel to his house, and how he made him take part in family worship”, Donald Munro, *Records of Grace in Sutherland*, ed. Kenneth MacRae (Edinburgh, 1953), p. 250.

his poems carried a preliminary “Advertisement”, signed by Dr Macdonald and John Kennedy, Redcastle, which concludes as follows:

Though destitute of the advantages of education, he was one of the most celebrated Christians in that or perhaps any other country. He possessed a clear and comprehensive view of Divine truth, and discovered a deep and practical experience of its power on the heart and life. It will be seen from the following pieces that he was also a christian poet, and that in no ordinary degree. They were composed on various occasions, and most of them relate to occurrences in the ways of Providence, of which he was not an inattentive observer. . . . The work necessarily labours under the disadvantages of a posthumous one; and the dialect in which it was written, but which it was not thought proper to alter, may not be quite intelligible to those in the more southern districts of the Highlands. It is hoped, nevertheless, that its circulation may be attended with no small degree of usefulness; and under this impression we most cordially give the publication our humble sanction.

A second edition was issued in 1825.

3. Dr Macdonald’s only published Gaelic sermon was his “Cholera Sermon”, *Daoine air an Comhairleachadh an Aghaidh bhi deanamh cron orra fein* (Men advised against doing harm to themselves) on Acts 16:28 (“Do thyself no harm”), preached at Dingwall in August 1832 during the cholera epidemic, which shortly afterwards killed Rev Robert Findlater, Inverness, among many others. It was published at the “earnest and urgent request” of the Dingwall Board of Health (Inverness, 1832), 64pp., and was reprinted with a preface by Dr Kennedy (Dingwall, 1878), 56pp., and again in *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 4 (1899-1900), p. 102ff. We have not been able to locate an English translation, though it is probable that one has been made.

4. As a writer, Dr Macdonald was best known for his Gaelic poetry. His Gaelic poems are as follows:

(1) “Elegy on Charles Calder”, *Marbhrann do Mhaighstir Teàrlach Caldair*, first published in Inverness in 1821. Charles Calder (1748-1812) was his predecessor as minister of Ferintosh. Donald Beaton describes

this as “a beautiful Gaelic elegy”.¹⁴ An English prose translation of about a fifth of the poem is given in *The Apostle of the North*, pp. 39-46.

(2) “Short Account of Dr Stewart”, *Iomradh aithghearr air Dr Stiubhard*. Dr Alexander Stewart (1764-1821) was successively minister of Moulin, Dingwall, and the Canongate, Edinburgh. Dr Macdonald composed two pieces on Dr Stewart. The first, “Dr Stewart on his Way to Leith”, *Dr Stiubhard a’ dol do Leid*, was written in 1819 when Dr Stewart’s health failed and he travelled to Edinburgh for medical advice. A full English prose translation is given in *The Apostle of the North*, pp. 227-8. The second, “Elegy on Dr Alexander Stewart”, *Marbhrann air Doctoir Alastair Stiubhard*, was presumably written and circulated, or published, soon after Dr Stewart’s death in 1821.

(3) “Verses Composed by the Author on a Voyage to St Kilda”, *Rainn a rinneadh leis an ughdair air a thurus do Eilean h-iorta*. This was written during the visit of 1822. An English prose translation of a small part of the poem is given in *The Apostle of the North*, p. 86.

(4) “Elegy on John Robertson”, *Marbh-rann air Maighstir Eoin Robeson*, first published in Inverness in 1829. An extract was given in “The Gaelic Messenger”, *An Teachdaire Gaelach*, for November 1829. Two further editions followed in 1839. John Robertson (1758-1825) was missionary in Achreny, near Dr Macdonald’s birthplace, in the 1790s, and was instrumental in his conversion. “The clear and unctuous preaching of Mr Robertson, then missionary at Achreny, afterwards of Rothesay and Kingussie,” was one of “the means employed and blessed by the Lord in guiding him into the truth as it is in Jesus.”¹⁵ This is often considered the best of Dr Macdonald’s poems. An English prose translation of 56 of the 136 stanzas is given in *The Apostle of the North*, pp. 23-6, and a metrical translation by Principal John Macleod on pp. 297-312.

(5) “Waters of Jordan”, *Uisgeachan Iordain*. This consists of three parts, based on the life of his father James Macdonald (c. 1735-1830): “The Christian on his way to Jordan”, *An Criosduidh air a thurus gu Iordan*; “The Christian on the Bank of Jordan”, *An Criosduidh aig bruaich Iordain*; and “The Christian over Jordan”, *An Criosduidh thall air Iordan*. The first section to be written, in 1829, shortly before his father’s death was what

¹⁴ Donald Beaton, *Some Noted Ministers of the Northern Highlands* (Inverness, 1929), p. 116.

¹⁵ *Apostle of the North*, p. 23.

ultimately became the second part: "The Christian on the Bank of Jordan". Fifteen stanzas of this were published in "The Gaelic Messenger", *An Teachdaire Gaelach*, for September 1829, and the full thirty stanzas (though in a slightly different order from that finally adopted) were included in an edition of Duncan Lothian's *Deasbairreachd eadar am Papa agus an t-Athleasacha*, published in 1834.

The first nearly complete version of the whole poem seems to have been the Edinburgh edition of 1838. This has the three parts in a different order: "The Christian on the Bank of Jordan", *An Criosduidh aig bruaich Iordain*; "The Christian over Jordan", *An Criosduidh thall air Iordan*; and then "That Christian's Life on Earth", *Beath a Chriosdaidh ud air thalamh*. In later editions the third section was slightly changed and was re-located to become the first section.

A number of English translations have been made. A prose summary of first part is in *Apostle of the North*, pp. 7-10. A metrical translation of the entire poem by Principal John Macleod first appeared in *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 10 (1905-6), pp. 153-7, 198-200, and subsequently in *The Christian: an Elegy in Three Parts* (Glasgow, 1906), reprinted by the Knox Press (Edinburgh, 1976). It was also included in the 1932 edition of the *Apostle of the North*, pp. 313-30. A different metrical translation of the first part, by John W. Macleod, Glasgow (1875-1919), was published in D. Mackay, *Memories of Our Parish* (Dingwall, 1925), pp. 176-182.¹⁶ A translation of the third part was included in Hugh MacColl, *Immanuel* (Strathroy, Ontario, 1902).

(6) "Elegy on John Kennedy", *Marbhrann air Maighstir Iain Ceanadaidh*. John Kennedy, Redcastle (1772-1841), was the father of Dr John Kennedy, Dingwall. He was inducted to Killearnan a few months before Dr Macdonald was inducted to the neighbouring parish of Ferintosh. Of this poem Dr Macdonald said to Dr Kennedy, "If I have not succeeded in my description of your father, I myself have profited by the attempt; for this I can say, that each stanza which I wrote sent me at least once to my knees".¹⁷ We do not know when it was first published. It is included in his collected poems, mentioned below.

¹⁶ This translation appeared earlier in John W. Macleod, *Nor'land Songs and Poems* (Paisley, [1921]).

¹⁷ *Apostle of the North*, p. 228.

(7) “Account of the Work of the Spirit in the People of God”, *Iomradh air obair an Spioraid ann an sluagh Dhe*. This was first published in Dingwall in 1845.

Dr Macdonald’s poems were collected in “Elegies Composed upon Worthy, Deceased Ministers”, *Marbhrainn a Rinneadh Air Diadhairibh Urramach nach Maireann*, published in Edinburgh in 1848. Dr Macdonald was assisted in the work of publication by Mackintosh Mackay who supplied biographical prefaces to some of the poems.¹⁸ A second edition was issued the same year, with a fourth edition in 1858, and further editions in 1868, 1885, 1890, 1897, and 1912. Each edition consisted of a thousand copies. It is clear from these numerous editions that there was a popular demand for Dr Macdonald’s poetry.¹⁹

Opinions vary, however, about Dr Macdonald’s merits as a poet. Dr Kennedy was dismissive: “He had as much fondness for poetry as moved him to write it: but though he had poetic taste, he lacked poetic skill. Though he could admire genuine poetry he could not produce it.”²⁰ Donald Beaton’s comment on this criticism is, “We will not take upon ourselves to set aside the verdict of a master in Israel and a first-class judge of literary form, but one thing must be admitted, that Dr Macdonald has a very high place among the religious bards of the Highlands, and it may be owing to Dr Kennedy’s own high standard of what constitutes genuine poetry that he pronounced the above verdict”.²¹

Professor Donald MacLean of the Free Church was more positive: “Meditative, hortative, and didactic, his poetry moves on with an easy expression and pleasing melody. Evangelical teachings, of which he was a master, are translated to the people in phrases which have become popular. Perhaps the best known of all his poems is the ‘Christian’, whose fine consolatory notes have been often the means of conveying much comfort to Zion’s pilgrims.”²² In a similar vein, John MacInnes of

¹⁸ Mackintosh Mackay (1793-1873) was minister successively of Laggan, Dunoon, Free Church congregations in Melbourne and Sydney in Australia, and lastly Tarbert, Harris. He was an eminent Gaelic scholar.

¹⁹ In March 1850, for instance, John Farquharson, a joiner in what is now Ontario wrote to his brother Thomas in Perthshire requesting that he would send out a copy of Dr Macdonald’s poems with someone who was emigrating, see Margaret A. Mackay, “Brothers in Mission: Alexander Farquharson of Cape Breton and Archibald Farquharson of Tiree”, *Records of Scottish Church History Society* 37 (2007), p. 152.

²⁰ *Apostle of the North*, p. 270.

²¹ *Some Noted Ministers*, p. 170.

²² Donald Maclean, *The Literature of the Scottish Gael* (Edinburgh, 1912), p. 70.

Halkirk says: “Macdonald is always forceful, often eloquent, and has occasional flashes of poetic felicity, but, except in the elegy on his father and certain verses in his other pieces, he creates the impression of a powerful preacher who thinks it his duty to write in verse. His elegies contain much edifying evangelical doctrine, and, on the whole, may be regarded as metrical sermons.”²³

III. Translations into Gaelic

1. The first translation work that we know of in which Dr Macdonald was engaged was in connection with Thomas Boston’s *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*. Dr Love refers to a proposal to translate this in a letter of July 1806: “I heartily approve the design of publishing the *Fourfold State* in Gaelic. It is a book well fitted to shine in those dark places of the earth, and to bear witness against the tremendous horror of darkness and iniquity, wherein the people are willingly, for the most part, wrapt up.”²⁴

The original Gaelic translation was made by Gilbert Macdonald, a schoolmaster in Edinburgh, and was published in Edinburgh in 1811. Gilbert Macdonald is presumably to be identified with the “Mr Macdonald, Teacher, Edinburgh”, who worked for the SSPCK, first in Campeltown 1788-90 and then in Edinburgh 1792-1822, and who translated John Brown of Haddington’s *Catechisms into Gaelic* in 1799 and 1802.²⁵ In 1816 he issued a Gaelic edition of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* with modernized spelling, and this was re-issued with a new title-page in 1821.

Dr Macdonald’s interest in Gaelic translations was spurred on, if not awakened, by his experiences in St Kilda. The Edinburgh Society for the Support of Gaelic Schools (ESSGS) had been formed in 1810 by Christopher Anderson, Thomas M’Crie and others, and the Gaelic school in St Kilda was established in November 1821. Dr Macdonald met the teacher, Alexander Mackenzie, during his 1822 trip, and in 1824 he conducted a reading exam in the school and distributed some Gaelic catechisms and tracts.²⁶ The following year he published a revision of

²³ John MacInnes, “Gaelic Religious Poetry 1650-1850”, *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 10 (1948), p. 52; also *The Evangelical Movement in the Highlands of Scotland, 1688-1800* (Aberdeen, 1951), pp. 292-3.

²⁴ *Letters of John Love* (Glasgow, 1838), p. 321.

²⁵ A. S. Cowper, *SSPCK Schoolmasters, 1709-1822* (Scottish Record Society, Edinburgh, 1997), p. 50.

²⁶ *Apostle of the North*, pp. 120-1. See Appendix below.

Gilbert Macdonald's translation of the *Fourfold State* (Edinburgh, 1825), 522pp. According to the preface of the 1858 edition, he "kindly undertook to revise the whole of the translation – to restore the true meaning of those passages which had been imperfectly understood, or ambiguously expressed – to purify the style from provincial expressions and grammatical inaccuracies – and to make the orthography accord with that of the improved version of the Gaelic Scriptures published by the SSPCK".²⁷ This "improved version of the Gaelic Scriptures" was the General Assembly version which was not published until the following year, 1826, but Dr Macdonald would presumably have known the orthography being employed.

When in 1827 Dr Macdonald examined the St Kilda Gaelic school again, he recorded, "I wish some kind friend or friends would think of sending them some copies of Gaelic books, such as Boston's *Fourfold State*, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Doddridge's *Rise and Progress*, and a work not less valuable in itself, nor less valuable to them, Dyer's *Christ's Famous Titles*, etc."²⁸ His revised translation of the *Fourfold State* was reprinted in 1837, 1858, 1868, and 1894.

2. The next Gaelic translation with which Dr Macdonald was connected was the 1826 Gaelic Bible. This was a revision of the 1807 edition, and was produced at the instance of the General Assembly. Dr Macdonald was not appointed to the Revision Committee until 1825 so it is doubtful that he had much of a share in the work.²⁹ The main revision was done by his namesake John Macdonald (1794-1875), who had been licensed in 1822 and who in 1830 became minister of Kinloch Rannoch. He remained in the Established Church at the Disruption when he became minister of Comrie. In 1822 he had published a revised Gaelic translation of Alleine's *Alarm*.³⁰

Some of the serious defects of this 1826 Gaelic Bible were detailed by Dr Archibald Clerk in two scathing articles in the *Celtic Magazine* in 1879, amongst which he mentions the following: "The 1826 edition of the Bible deals very loosely with the 'Received Text' of which the

²⁷ Michael Robson makes the statement that Dr Macdonald "expressed neither interest in nor admiration for the ancient and rich language [Gaelic] used by him in his lectures and sermons", *St Kilda*, p. 297. The words just quoted, and the Gaelic publications mentioned in this paper, suggest the opposite conclusion.

²⁸ *Apostle of the North*, p. 284.

²⁹ *The Principal Acts of the General Assembly, 1825* (Edinburgh, 1825), p. 41.

³⁰ John Reid, *Bibliotheca Scoto-Celtica* (Glasgow, 1832), p. 169.

English Authorized Bible is a translation – sometimes transferring passages from one book to another, sometimes adding passages the source of which is not declared, and sometimes omitting passages without any assigned reasons.”³¹

3. A third Gaelic translation, sometimes attributed to Dr Macdonald, is *Cleachdan luchd-comanachaidh: ann an da earrainn*, a translation of *Sacramental Exercises* by Jabez Earle.³² The translation was published in Edinburgh in 1827. Earle (c. 1676-1768) was an English Presbyterian who for a while was pastor of a congregation in Drury Lane, Westminster, but who moved his congregation to Hanover Street, Long Acre, about 1708. In his *History and Antiquities of the Dissenting Churches*, Walter Wilson makes a very brief reference to Earle’s life, and then directs the reader to the Hanover Street entry, “for a more particular account of this extraordinary man”.³³ Sad to relate, however, this “more particular account” was never forthcoming. In 1741, Earle was a correspondent member in London of the SSPCK, so he evidently had an interest in the work of the gospel in Scotland.³⁴ He was the author of a number of works and his *Sacramental Exercises* was first published in 1708 and was highly popular, going through numerous editions in England, Scotland, and America during the eighteenth century.

The Gaelic translation of *Sacramental Exercises* was executed by “I. MacDhonuill”, but whether this was Dr Macdonald or John Macdonald of Comrie, above, is uncertain.³⁵ On the whole we think that this was not Dr Macdonald. If it was, then this was the only original Gaelic translation that he did, and one would have expected some reference to it in *The Apostle of the North*. The book, though small, is 158 pages long and must have involved considerable labour. The usual Gaelic spelling of Dr Macdonald’s name was “Domhnullach” and we have only once seen it

³¹ Donald Mackinnon, *The Gaelic Bible and Psalter* (Dingwall, 1930), pp. 93-5.

³² The translation is attributed to Dr Macdonald in the *Scottish Gaelic Union Catalogue* (Edinburgh, 1984), p. 103.

³³ Walter Wilson, *History and Antiquities of the Dissenting Churches* (4 vols, London, 1808-14), Vol. 1, p. 169.

³⁴ *State of the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge* (Edinburgh, 1741), p. 48 (mis-numbered 56).

³⁵ Both editions of the *Fasti* attribute the translation to John Macdonald of Comrie, Hew Scot, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticanæ* (3 vols., Edinburgh, 1866-71), Vol. 2, part 2, p. 821; (2nd edn., 7 vols, Edinburgh, 1915-1928), Vol. 4, p. 264. They also, however, erroneously attribute the 1829 Gaelic edition of the *Shorter Catechism* to him instead of to Dr Macdonald.

spelt “Macdhonuill”.³⁶ Furthermore, the translation does not seem to have been especially popular – there was no second edition, and copies of the original edition appear in a publishers’ advertisement as late as 1880 – whereas Dr Macdonald’s popularity would presumably have ensured a wide circulation.

4. The final publication of Dr Macdonald’s to be mentioned is his revised edition of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. The original Gaelic edition was published in 1653, but no copy is known to survive. The second edition was issued in 1659,³⁷ with a multitude of editions following in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Dr Thomas Ross of Lochbroom published a version in 1820 which went through numerous editions and continued in print at least until 1924. Dr Macdonald’s first edition of the *Shorter Catechism* was issued in 1829 and reprinted the same year. It differed quite considerably from Dr Ross’s, and was distinguished by footnotes giving variant translations. Further editions of his version followed in 1833 and 1867 and it remains in print to this day.

IV. Conclusion

In summary, we see that Dr Macdonald’s main period of literary activity was 1812-1830. During the last twenty years of his life, he published little other than his Gaelic poems. He was happy to write reports, and to revise and publish other people’s work, but his own work was published only under duress. The exception was his Gaelic poetry, but even then the collected edition of 1848 required the assistance, if not the insistence, of Mackintosh Mackay.

After his death, Dr Macdonald was himself the subject of two Gaelic elegies. The first, by William Findlater, was included in his *Gaelic Elegies* (Edinburgh, 1850). The second, by Duncan Macinnes, was originally published in the *Ecclesiastical and Missionary Record of the Free Church, Nova Scotia*, for March 1857, and was reprinted in *Marbh-rann do’n Ollamh Urramach Eòin Domhnallach, a bha’na mhinistear an t-Soisgeil ann an sgìreachd na Tòisidheachd* (Glasgow, 1862).

³⁶ *Scottish Gaelic Union Catalogue*, entry 1358: Duncan Lothian, *Deasbairreachd eadar am Papa agus an t-Athleasacha le Donnacha Loudinn maille ri Laoidh mholaidh do Chruith-fhear ’n t-shaoghail, le Daibhidh Macaileir agus Laoidh, le Iain Macdhonuill* (Edinburgh, 1834).

³⁷ It was reprinted as an appendix in R. L. Thomson (ed), *Adtimchiol an Chreidimh, The Gaelic Version of John Calvin’s Catechismus* (Edinburgh, 1962), pp. 231-250.

APPENDIX

In this Appendix, we give an extract from the letter sent by Dr Macdonald to the ESSGS on 18th January 1827, and then discuss some recent unfavourable comments on it. The letter describes Dr Macdonald's catechising of the St Kilda schoolchildren. A comparison with his SSPCK reports shows that the date of the event was Saturday 28th May 1824.³⁸

After having examined the more advanced classes among them on the principles of Christianity, and particularly the leading doctrines of the gospel, in all of which they gave me much satisfaction, I confined my examinations to the chapter which they had just read, and which happened to be the 7th of Luke.³⁹ And I must say, that I was astonished to find how smartly and correctly the greater part of them answered the questions put to them, having had no previous notice of my intentions as to this sort of cross-examination, and, therefore, no opportunity afforded them of preparing themselves. My notes on this subject run thus:

“On what message did John the Baptist send his disciples to Christ?” A boy of about 14 replies, “To inquire if he was the person who was to come”. “What do you mean by the person who was to come?” “The promised Saviour,” says he. “And what reply did Christ give them?” “He was working miracles at the time, and he bade them go and tell John the things that they had seen.” “How did the miracles which he wrought prove that this was he who was to come?” “Because,” replies another boy, “none but God could do these things, and none except God was with him.” “But did not others work miracles as well as Christ?” “Yes,” replied the first boy, but not in their own strength; Christ wrought them by his own power.” “Who is Christ?” “The Son of God,” replies a third boy. “For what purpose did he come into the world?” “To save sinners,” says he. “What does he save sinners from?” “He saves

³⁸ *Apostle of the North*, pp. 120-1.

³⁹ In his shorter 1824 account for the SSPCK, he says: “I examined the children, particularly such as could read, on some parts of the chapter which they had just read (Luke vii.), and the answers they gave the several questions which were put were most satisfying, such indeed as indicated great attention to what they had read and heard, and as might have put to the blush many who enjoy greater advantages,” *Apostle of the North*, p. 121.

them from sin and wrath,” says a fourth. “How has he brought about salvation for them?” “By his death,” replies he. “How many natures has Christ?” “Two,” answered a fifth boy, “the nature of God, and the nature of man.” “In which of these natures did he die?” “In the nature of man,” says he; “God could not die.” “Of what use, then, was the divine nature in him?” After some pause, for the question seemed to stagger them, one of the girls replied, “He would not be able to save us, unless he were God.” Another girl adds, “And besides, it supported his human nature under suffering.” “O yes,” says a boy of about 13, “and gave value to these sufferings,” – literally, as expressed by him in his own language, “put merit into these sufferings.”⁴⁰ “Whether did the Pharisee or the woman of whom we read in this chapter love the Redeemer most?” “The woman,” replied a boy. “How so, seeing the Pharisee made a feast for him?” “He did so,” replies one of the senior girls, “to be seen of men, and that the Redeemer might have good opinion of him, but not from love; but the woman wept, and washed his feet with her tears, and wiped them with her hair.” “Was not this love? What made her weep?” “Her sins,” replied a little girl, I suppose about 10. “How do you prove that her sins, sitting as she was at her Saviour’s feet, were the cause of her weeping?” “Yes,” replies the first boy; “you told us yourself lately, when preaching from Zech. xii 10, that a sight of Christ, whom we have pierced, would make us weep.”⁴¹ This boy had scarcely done, when another, a little older than he, added, “The love of Christ, too, made her weep”. “Ah, yes!” says an aged man, one of the parents, “the love of Christ! that, indeed, melts the heart.”⁴² Thus ended the exercise. And after delivering a short address to children and parents, I concluded the whole with prayer.⁴³

⁴⁰ Rev. John MacLeod, London, suggests “chuir e airidheachd na fhulangasan”.

⁴¹ This sermon was preached on Tuesday 17th May. Dr Macdonald records, “Preached in the evening from Zech. xii 10 on the promise of the outpouring of the Spirit and the effects that should follow. I felt much impressed myself, and so did my hearers seem to do too”, *Apostle of the North*, p. 110.

⁴² The “aged man” was probably blind Finlay Macdonald who was sixty-three, see *Apostle of the North*, pp. 94, 112, 143, 281, 285-6, 288, 294.

⁴³ John Mackay, *Memoir of John Macdonald, Helmsdale*, pp. 41-3. The full extract in the Appendix to the ESSGS 1827 Annual Account, pp. 30-31, contains a couple of extra sentences at the end.

Next we quote the unfavourable comments on this letter, italicising the parts that call for a response.

In spite of [Dr Macdonald's] inability to reach St Kilda in 1826 the ESSGS received a letter from MacDonalld dated 18 January 1827 containing an account of the examination of the St Kilda school *as if he had been there himself*. It opened with statements *that did not sound as if they related to that particular island*: "After having examined the more advanced classes among them on the general principles of christianity, and particularly the leading doctrines of the gospel, on all of which they gave me much satisfaction, I confined my examinations to the chapter which they had just read." The rest of the description consisted almost entirely of questions put to the children and their replies, all of which conveyed little *apart from illustrating the conventional method used to persuade an easily-led group into accepting and giving required responses*. . . . The account of the school examination in MacDonalld's letter to the ESSGS was *uncharacteristic of the writer* and seemed more like a quotation from some other examiner, such as the tacksman or possibly even the teacher.⁴⁴

Evidently, the writer of these comments has fallen into a serious error. The date of the letter is indeed puzzling at first, but had Dr Macdonalld been given credit for basic honesty, it would soon have been realised that he was describing his 1824 visit, rather than fabricating an account of a non-existent 1826 visit.⁴⁵ The change of style is simply because Dr Macdonalld is quoting from his notes, as he says.

Anyone with experience of questioning children, and even adults, on Christian doctrine will be impressed, we think, both with the questions and with the answers in the catechising.⁴⁶ The writer of the comments suggests the tacksman, Murdo Maclellan, as the possible examiner, and Maclellan was indeed a religious man, but it is not every

⁴⁴ Robson, *St Kilda*, p. 300.

⁴⁵ Robson himself summarizes the events of 28th May 1824 on p. 293.

⁴⁶ Richard Baxter's experience in Kidderminster in the 1650s was very different. Though in his preaching, he says, "I study to speak as plainly and movingly as I can", yet in his catechizing, "I frequently meet with those that have been my hearers eight or ten years, who know not whether Christ be God or man, and wonder when I tell them the history of his birth and life and death, as if they had never heard it before", *The Reformed Pastor* (Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1989), pp. 196, 242.

Dr. Macdonald (from a calotype by D. O. Hill and R. Adamson, 1843).

religious man who could have asked these questions.⁴⁷ The answers are even more remarkable, which presumably is why Dr Macdonald took such full notes afterwards. Some of the answers could have been given by well-drilled children but several go beyond that and show an intelligence and spiritual understanding which, as Dr Macdonald says, would put many “to the blush”.



Michael Robson’s book is the most detailed that has been written on St Kilda but, like several other books on St Kilda, it is marred by an unconcealed distaste for evangelicalism, and for Dr Macdonald in particular.⁴⁸ The mistake to which we have adverted shows that such an anti-evangelical bias can be the cause of factual error. A mistake of this sort calls into question other assertions of a religious nature made in the book.

⁴⁷ Maclellan fully supported Dr Macdonald’s visits to St Kilda, and having joined the Free Church at the Disruption, he made another trip to the island with Roderick Macleod, Snizort, in 1846, Robson, *St Kilda*, p. 388.

⁴⁸ See pp. 274-6 for an extended tirade against Dr Macdonald, against his biographer Dr Kennedy, and against eighteenth and nineteenth century Highland religion generally. The preface describes the book as “dispassionate”, p. 3, suggesting that the author and the prefacer move in circles cloistered from evangelical influence.

