

Friendship, Faith and the Bard MacLean

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ABSTRACT

Among Canada's pioneer poets John MacLean is uniquely *Am Bàrd MacGilleathan*. His 'The Gloomy Forest' gave an eloquent account of tree-felling challenges facing Highland settlers. MacLean's background in fertile Tiree, where his bardic skills developed, was very different. This paper focuses on a friendship between the bard and a priest, Colin Grant, who shared his knowledge of clan-based society. The friendship flourished in an area of Nova Scotia where faith communities met. Protestants from the northern Highlands put down roots in Pictou while Catholics from further west settled in Antigonish and Cape Breton. The personal friendship reflected a period of shared Gaelic culture when clergy were in short supply. Scripture in Gaelic helped to establish Calvinist values, while Catholic belief and practice continued to draw on an imaginative folk-culture. The bard's praise-poetry for the priest followed him to death, but MacLean turned to spiritual verse as faith communities drew apart.

Renowned in Canada as *Am Bàrd MacGilleathan*, John MacLean was the leading Gaelic poet of immigration from the Scottish Highlands. Despite this, little progress was made towards a biography following his grandson the Rev. Alexander Maclean Sinclair's brief 'memoir'.¹ Professor Robert Dunbar of Edinburgh University is in process of filling that gap on the basis of his doctoral thesis.² Here the focus is on an unlikely friendship between the Protestant bard and a priest from Scotland, Colin Grant. *Maighstir Cailean Grannd* was given charge of Nova Scotia's first Catholic mission at Arisaig in Antigonish county. Grant is little known beyond the song-poems which MacLean composed for him.

That segment of biography is played out against the wider background of relationships between contrasting approaches to religious faith. Catholics came to Nova Scotia from the Western Isles and the *Garbh Chrìochan* ('Rough Bounds') between Morar and Moidart.³ Protestant immigrants could be seen as heirs to northern Highland revivalism, notably at annual communion gatherings when ministers were supported by the 'Men'.⁴ MacLean and Grant met at the boundary between Antigonish and Pictou, where the bard was helped by the priest. This was at a time when faith communities were in process of being created.

¹ Maclean Sinclair 1881: xiii-xxvi.

² Dunbar 2007.

³ Roberts 2015. Knoydart emigrants settled in Glengarry County, Ontario.

⁴ Macinnes 1951: 211-20.

FRIENDSHIP, FAITH AND THE BARD MACLEAN

Here we are concerned with those who settled in Nova Scotia and the island of Cape Breton. Inured to subsistence farming in Scotland, these Gaels of two faiths faced the same challenge. Clearing forest land and making homes out of logs called for hard work and new skills. MacLean's *Òran do dh' Ameireaga* was so well known that it became known by the end of its first line, *Gu bheil mi am ònrachd sa coille ghruamaich*, 'I am so lonely in this gloomy forest.'⁵ It has been rated 'undoubtedly the greatest of all emigrant songs.'⁶ Sent back to Scotland by the bard, *A' Choille Ghruamach* had the effect of stemming emigration. A wedding at Tobermory is said to have been reduced to tears by it.⁷

Colonisation of Nova Scotia's mainland by Highlanders began in 1767 when forty settlers were landed by the Philadelphia Company at what became Pictou Harbour. One of them, James McCabe, serves to introduce the theme of religious faith: McCabe was a Catholic in a place which the Company stipulated was for Protestants, so the holding had to be registered in his wife's name. McCabe's tree-felling was unusual: 'He had brought with him what they call a mattock, a heavy instrument, on one side an axe and on the other a grubbing hoe. Instead of chopping down the tree, his practice was to take away the earth from the main roots and cut off all the smaller ones, and then leave it to fall by the wind or drag it down and out of root.'⁸

Highland settlers followed.⁹ There was friction when immigrants from Loch Broom in Wester Ross refused the offer of holdings up to three miles inland, breaking into stores when denied provisions. The trees upriver were very large, and 'to men unaccustomed to clearing the wood in America, and unskilled in the use of the axe, the work seemed hopeless.'¹⁰ They prayed for deliverance, and after eleven years without a pastor Pictou's settlers appealed to Scotland for a Gaelic-speaking minister. The man sent out by the Secession Church in 1786 was James MacGregor. An Anti-Burgher strict Calvinist, MacGregor was licensed as a probationer and taught in Highland schools until ordained for Pictou. Friendship touched on faith quite widely when he encouraged his people to provide shelter for the many Catholic migrants who came among them:

'As they were all newly beginning in the woods, a gift which he gave to numbers of them was an axe and a hoe.'¹¹ Long after this MacGregor visited some of his former hearers at River Inhabitants and West Bay in Cape Breton. Preaching

⁵ Sinclair 1881: 98.

⁶ MacDonell 1982: 17.

⁷ Newton 2014: 21.

⁸ Patterson 1872: 60.

⁹ See Donald MacKay, *Scotland Farewell: The People of the Hector* (Toronto, 1980).

¹⁰ Patterson 1872: 84.

¹¹ Patterson 1859: 258.

in barns, he urged them ‘to continue steadfast in their Protestant profession, as he knew they were surrounded by Papists on all hands.’ On his way back to the Canso crossing MacGregor met Catholics he had helped on their arrival in the New World. One of them guided him through the forest: ‘The Doctor offered to pay him for his kindness but he refused, and asked him if he did not remember giving such a poor man an axe and a hoe.’¹²

Tiree and Coll

John MacLean grew up at Caolas in Tiree, looking over a narrow strait to Coll. It is hard to imagine a greater contrast between the America of MacLean’s lament and the island of Tiree. One description of it is *Tir an Eòrna*, the land of barley. Low-lying, sunny and above all treeless, it was a heavily cultivated place: ‘The harvest generally begins about the middle of August. . . Barley is the prevailing crop, which gets two and sometimes three ploughings and so consumes much time.’¹³ Tiree’s barley fueled a West Highland whisky boom, and a ceilidh culture of music and story flourished. The parish minister Archibald MacColl saw no problem in ‘Fingalian and other tales repeated by the inhabitants, mentioning engagements and the names of chieftains. At this day they point out their burying-places, whence the ground derives its name.’ He was a moderate clergyman of his time, with no call to condemn papists among his people:

They still retain some Roman Catholic sayings, prayers and oaths, as expletives; such as “*Dias Muire leat*”, i.e. God and Mary be with you, “*Air Muire*”, swearing by Mary, &c. They are free of superstition, and make a considerable progress in knowledge. There is no schism from the established church; and none of any other persuasion, except now and then a few Roman Catholic servants from Barra.

The parish school was poor in quality, and another was opened by the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge. However ‘These two schools generally had not ten scholars each. The people had not taste for education. . .’¹⁴ As for being ‘free of superstition’, it was a *Tirisdeach* who told a later minister about an encounter between *Fionn mac Cumhaill* and the headless *Colann gun Cheann*.¹⁵ According to local belief, a man at Ruaig killed eighty hens with one glance of his evil eye and went on to wreck a big ship of five cross trees.¹⁶ It was generally Highland Catholics - not least in Nova Scotia - who were accused of being credulous.

¹² *op. cit.*: 445-6. Guidance on felling trees was later published. Robert MacDougall 1841 re-presented by his descendant Elizabeth Thompson (Toronto, 1998).

¹³ Sinclair 1791-99: xxix. Parish of Tiry (1794), 397.

¹⁴ *op. cit.*: 401, 413, 415.

¹⁵ Black 2008: 277.

¹⁶ *op. cit.*: 203.

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Apprenticeship to a Tiree cobbler failed to make a craftsman of John MacLean, whose background was comfortable. From an early age he enjoyed listening to elderly song-makers and story-tellers:

He could learn very easily; he read all the books that came his way; and he remembered whatever he heard or read. He delighted especially in history and poetry. He went several years to school, learning to read and spell both English and Gaelic, to cipher, and to write. He was an excellent reader and a good pen-man.¹⁷

At a time and place where there was little regard for formal education, John MacLean stood out from township poets like his brother *Dòmhnall Cùbair*.¹⁸

John MacLean was known in Scotland as *Bàrd Thighearna Cholla*. How did the Tiree man become bard to the laird of Coll on the other island? There was a precedent: another bard in the family. In 1754 his maternal great-grandfather Neil Lamont, living at Balevullin, composed a panegyric for Hector MacLean of Coll. His patronage was appreciated: 'After I returned from visiting you to my delight I even had a full powdered wig.'¹⁹ Alexander MacLean followed his brother as a benevolent landlord. There were no evictions, and he maintained a home in Coll while supporting Gaelic traditions. In 1815 the laird and his bard fell out when the Society of True Highlanders was being launched by Walter Scott's figurehead Glengarry. As the gentlemen sat down to dine Coll's bard was left outside, only to be brought in by Alasdair Ranaldson Macdonell.²⁰ After draining the chief's dram he declaimed a toast to the effect that 'Glengarry and not Coll was the King of the Gael.'²¹ This threatened 'one of the last patron-poet relationships in the Gàidhealtachd'.²² Harmony was restored, and three years later the bard dedicated a collection of songs to his patron.²³ MacLean of Coll was from home when his bard left for the New World. Colonel Simon Fraser, a Mull tacksman, owned the ship

¹⁷ Maclean Sinclair 1881: xiv. Tiree's SPCK school was following a new national policy of promoting English literacy through Gaelic.

¹⁸ Dunbar 2014:200. John MacLean's brother, a cooper by trade, was born about 1785. Five short poems by him have survived.

¹⁹ Cregeen and Mackenzie 1978: 6. See also Cameron 1932.

²⁰ See Osborne 2001.

²¹ Maclean Sinclair 1881: 89. The 1926 edition with the quarrel between Coll and his bard added was revised by Hector MacDougall.

²² Nicholas MacLean-Bristol 2007: 359.

²³ The collection was published in 1819 as *Òrain Nuadh Ghaedhlach* by Robert Menzies in Edinburgh, with financial help from the laird of Coll. When MacLean left for America he owed £33 6s, with 380 Gaelic song books unsold. Maclean Sinclair 1881: xv, xvi.

Economy on which both men crossed the Atlantic. Fraser had property at Pictou.²⁴ As a collector of Gaelic books he was willing to cover the printer's bill in Edinburgh, and this enabled John MacLean to sail with his wife and three children in August 1819.

Creating Faith Communities

The first Highland emigration to what became Canada was a very Catholic affair. John MacDonald of Glenaladale's 1772 expedition mainly benefited his own Moidart people, but there were others. A campaign extended as far as London against Colin MacDonald of Boisdale's attempt to force his South Uist tenants into kirk attendance. Catholic money enabled some of them to cross with Glenaladale, and persecution ceased.²⁵ *Isle Saint-Jean* (later Prince Edward Island, Gaelic *Eilean Eòin*) became a haven for Catholics, and the future bishop Angus Bernard MacEachern took on a leadership role. He criticised James MacGregor's provision of tools as proselytism among Catholic immigrants (there were conversions) and helped to create settlements for them. Over time Glenaladale's paternalism was rejected by tenants attracted to Nova Scotia by the government's offer of freehold property. He condemned them as 'Yankified Highlanders'.²⁶ Although bishops of Quebec included Scots immigrants in visitations of the Maritimes, French-speaking priests could do little for the Gaels. Acadians were their primary care. The same applied to Irish clergy ministering to immigrants in English, while the Mi'kmac natives presented another linguistic challenge.

Protestant Gaels came mainly from the northern counties of Ross and Sutherland, where evangelical 'awakening' had taken place in the previous century. Charles Dunn judged that Protestant and Catholic Churches in Scotland were both slow to support the emigration of Gaelic-speaking families. Clergy 'did not follow their flocks until some years had passed.' Catholic missionaries (as in Scotland) were more mobile: 'When they could reach no minister, Presbyterians had their children baptized by itinerant Catholic priests. And even in the later part of the century many communities were supplied only irregularly. In the large Presbyterian community around Whycocomagh in Cape Breton, from the first arrival of a minister in 1837 until the end of the century . . . there were twenty-four years in which the pulpit was vacant.'²⁷ When the future bishop William Fraser reached Antigonish town in 1822, Highland Protestants listened 'as attentively as our people, and declared that they would contribute to our Church, and would become

²⁴ MacLean-Bristol 2007: 398.

²⁵ Gordon 1874: 78-82. Scotland's Bishop George Hay was friendly with Bishop Richard Challoner who caused collections for South Uist to be taken at embassy chapels in London.

²⁶ Clan Donald Centre Collection, MS.1.1. John MacDonald, London, to John MacDonald, Borrodale, 30 January 1806.

²⁷ Dunn 1953, 1991): 92-3.

Catholics if Mr Fraser would stay among them.’²⁸ He went to rural settlements: ‘We have conversions not a few; during one year’s residence in Bras d’ore I had no less than 25 converts.’²⁹

Scripture lies at the heart of Protestant belief and practice, so the New Testament translation into Gaelic which became available in the latter part of the eighteenth century was timely for settlers who rarely heard clergy preaching. Sponsored by the SPCK, it was the joint work of the Rev. James Stewart of Killin and the poet-catechist Dugald Buchanan.³⁰ The Old Testament was added in 1807 before a corrected Gaelic Bible was issued by the Kirk’s General Assembly in 1826. Scripture readings at home depended on someone literate in the language, but there developed ‘the custom of committing the Shorter Catechism to memory on the Sabbath evening. . .’ There were also times when a senior member of the family ‘would recite “notes” from the lips of the ministers or catechists that they heard on certain occasions in the old land.’³¹

At this time catechists led Cape Breton worship, but regular Presbyterian forms were in place at Pictou. Metrical psalms led by a precentor aided congregational singing, but there were no hymns. Gaelic ones by the Baptist minister Peter Grant of Speyside inspired devotion on both sides of the Atlantic. Set to tunes well known in the Highlands, his *Dain Spioradail* went into a fourth edition at Montreal in 1836. By no means all who sang were Baptists: ‘In brief it may be said that, though Presbyterian custom precluded the use of the “dain spioradail” in public worship . . . they became, and continued almost up to our own time, to be the Gaelic-speaking Highlander’s chief devotional commentary on the Gospel.’³²

The Rev. James MacGregor, who had learned his Gaelic in Scotland, led the way in moving from bardic lore to religious verse. Such was the hostility in Pictou to his enjoyment of Alasdair Mhaighstir Alasdair and Duncan Ban Macintyre that he lost worshippers. MacGregor presented ‘a new and aggressive Evangelicalism’ for missionary effort overseas: ‘All things were possible; with the key of knowledge in his hand the Gael would open a door which led straight to an ampler life.’³³ MacGregor has recently been celebrated, with fresh recognition, as the man who brought to Nova Scotia a more than religious enlightenment.³⁴ Pictou became noted for graduates who professed science and agriculture as well as the liberal arts.

²⁸ Johnston 1960: 433.

²⁹ *op. cit.*: 436.

³⁰ MacLean 1913.

³¹ Murray 1921: 264-5.

³² Macinnes 1951: 265.

³³ *op. cit.*: 289-90.

³⁴ Wilson 2015.

A narrower view focused on ministers: ‘In less than a hundred years she [Pictou] has given to the church nearly three hundred clergymen.’³⁵ More than a preacher to Gaels, MacGregor was committed to the Scottish Enlightenment which he had espoused at Glasgow University. Book-learning was the way ahead. Despite his concern to preserve the Gaelic language, it was English schools which provided the means.

As a minister he made arduous journeys over a large area essentially Protestant but far from united in religious belief. Anglicans reflected the views of the Halifax government.³⁶ Loyalists who came north after the American colonists rejected British rule, brought their Puritan heritage, and MacGregor particularly approved of Ulster Scots for their ‘steady Presbyterianism’.³⁷ It took him years to accept that Scotland’s close theological disputes hardly mattered in a pioneer setting, and he came to see value in the earlier preaching of Henry Alline ‘the Apostle of Nova Scotia’.³⁸ Among his hearers were former soldiers: ‘They had received a large grant of land, still called the 82nd Grant extending east to Merigomish.’³⁹ The military connection explains why Col. Simon Fraser, whose father had served as an officer of the 82nd, arranged land at Barney’s River for John MacLean.

Agreeing on at least one thing with Angus MacEachern, MacGregor sought to move Highland Catholics on from Pictou. The newcomers were regarded as a bad influence: ‘Most of their time was spent in naughty diversions, jestings which are not convenient or decent, in telling extravagant stories of miracles done by priests. . .’⁴⁰ MacGregor had no time for these clergymen: ‘What miserable teachers are the priests, who prohibit the use of the Scriptures and teach pure fables?’ Considered to be a ‘good man’, however, the minister was expected to find animals lost by Catholics and cure their ailments, as with one woman’s cow:

As she would take no denial he at length went, and laying a rod which he had in his hand upon her back he said, ‘If you live you live, if you die you die.’ The cow recovered. Some time after the Doctor himself had a sore throat, and this old woman came to see him. As soon as she entered the room she said, ‘Ah, if you live you live, if you die you die.’ He immediately recollected the

³⁵ MacPhie 1914: iv.

³⁶ Gardina Pestana 2009.

³⁷ Patterson 1872: 68.

³⁸ Stewart 1982. Alline was an evangelical whose influence was mainly on Canada’s Baptist Church. He composed 487 hymns before dying at the age of thirty-five.

³⁹ Patterson 1872: 80. The 82nd Foot or Prince of Wales’s Volunteers served in Haiti before the Nova Scotia land grant was made.

⁴⁰ *op. cit.*: 257. See also Roberts 2006.

circumstances and burst out laughing, which broke the abcess that had been forming, which discharged and he soon got better.⁴¹

MacGregor had a sense of humour. The same was true of the Rev. Thomas McCulloch who followed him as Presbyterian leader. From the Covenanting corner of south-west Scotland, he shared MacGregor's Secessionist viewpoint which led to Disruption and the Free Church. Also a graduate of Glasgow University, McCulloch's earliest publications were on 'Popery condemned'.⁴² His Stepsure Letters in the *Acadian Recorder* provoked laughter 'until the rafters o' the house fairly shook. . .' In more serious vein, his *Colonial Musings* of 1826 introduced James MacGregor, which 'helped to consolidate the increasingly religious tone of McCulloch's fiction, for in [Macgregor's] lengthy sermon there was an elaboration of the Calvinist vision which formed the moral underpinning of . . . Mephibosheth Stepsure.'⁴³

Faith and Folk-Culture

Dr MacGregor was not the only one who looked down on priests from Scotland. Bishop Joseph-Octave Plessis of Quebec found Highland clergy improperly dressed for worship: 'A Scottish priest, wearing lay attire, places around his neck a stole. . . With this he preaches, hears confessions, and administers all the sacraments.'⁴⁴ Better clerical attire was acquired in time. Writing in 1812 Plessis also criticised Highlanders for talking in church and bringing in dogs, but he was astonished at their devotion:

During Mass you hear them sighing, and at the Elevation they burst forth into sobs. Many of them keep joining and separating their hands while they pray, and their arms are in continual motion during the Holy Sacrifice. . . When they come to Communion, both men and women drag themselves forward on their knees.⁴⁵

In the year of James II and VII's accession, an Irish Vincentian wrote about Highlanders who 'never speak to a priest but after reseving his benediction kneeling before him.'⁴⁶ Even when the region produced its own priests, their numbers were few and their people scattered, so that clergy contact was a source of great joy. Meanwhile the Sulpician-trained clergymen of New France had a high sense of

⁴¹ Patterson 1872: 258-9.

⁴² McCulloch 1808; 1810 in response to Nova Scotia's Bishop Edmund Burke.

⁴³ Buggiey and Davies 1988.

⁴⁴ Johnston 1960 i: 230.

⁴⁵ *op. cit.*: 232.

⁴⁶ John Cahassy, Paris, to Cardinal Norfolk, Rome, December 1685. SCA/ BL 1/90/2 (1). See also MacDonald, 2006.

vocation and vestments to go with it. No wonder the congregation was emotionally engaged when a richly attired bishop, with acolytes, consecrated the host they rarely saw elevated.

Church services are almost a minor part of the story, however, as shown by the Gaelic scholar John MacInnes while introducing an accessible version of Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica* out of its six volumes:

These religious texts with their strange blend of pagan and Christian imagery, witnesses to the spirituality of a vanished age, their complement of mysterious words and phrases . . . and their dignified, almost liturgical style, fascinate the reading public, English and Gaelic alike. Here it would seem was a lost lexicon of piety which almost miraculously had survived into modern times.⁴⁷

MacInnes went on to discuss the doubts raised by Carmichael's 'tidying up' (or editing) of what he heard before reaching a balanced conclusion: 'In spite of many unanswered questions, it is now clear that *Carmina Gadelica* is not a monumental exercise in literary fabrication nor, on the other hand, is it a transcript of ancient poems and spells reproduced exactly in the form in which they survived in oral tradition.'⁴⁸ Questions were discussed through Edinburgh University's Carmichael Watson Project, and answers have appeared in print.⁴⁹

'Spells' provide a way into the Gael's religious sensibility which touched every aspect of natural life. There were charms against sickness in humans and animals. As Dunn the folklorist noted, sties in the eye could be removed by *Eolas an Déididh* and 'in most cases there were complicated stipulations to be observed. The Charm for the Eyes had to be recited by three people of the same first name – by three Maries, or three Duncans, for instance.'⁵⁰ The waulking of wool by women thumping and tugging became the milling frolic – marked as ever by musical refrain. Catholics had a formal way of ending it, with three sunwise (*deiseil*) turnings of the cloth dedicated to the Trinity.

Singing had been condemned by ministers in Scotland along with the playing of bagpipe and fiddle. Across the Atlantic traditional *piobaireachd* failed to 'take' in the absence of chiefs to sponsor players. However Cape Breton became known for loose-fingered pipers playing quick tempo strathspeys and quicker reels.⁵¹ A percussive 'close to the floor' style was replaced by genteel country dancing in Scotland. It is now being reintroduced, with fiddle music, from across

⁴⁷ MacInnes 2006: 477.

⁴⁸ *op. cit.*: 17.

⁴⁹ See Stiùbhart (ed.) 2008.

⁵⁰ Dunn1953: 43.

⁵¹ See Gibson 2002.

the Atlantic.⁵² Step-dancing had to be learned. Alexander Gillis was a dance-master based at South West Margaree who left Ardnamurach, Morar, in 1826.⁵³

Associated with the bardic verse at which John MacLean excelled was story-telling. Some of it was ancient, and long sessions of well-remembered lore could become ‘tales until dawn’.⁵⁴ It was not only Catholics who enjoyed the tradition-bearer’s art. Cape Breton’s Presbyterian chronicler recalled ‘a time when telling stories of fairies and witches was a common practice round the big hardwood fire.’⁵⁵ Representing the oral tradition of song and story is the late Lauchie MacLellan of Dunvegan in Inverness County. John Shaw, an American who crossed to the School of Scottish Studies, recorded Lauchie over a period of years, and his shared conclusions with this latter-day tradition-bearer found their way into print.⁵⁶ Lauchie MacLellan’s district in Cape Breton was largely settled by families from Morar, so it is pleasing to find he knew of a great-great-grandfather who enjoyed some status in Scotland. *Fearchar an Òir* (Farquhar of the Gold) collected rents for the landlord.⁵⁷

Loneliness

John MacLean’s land was at Middle Barney’s River, named after Barnabas McGee who had been the first settler in Merigomish.⁵⁸ MacLean moved into an empty house overlooking the stretch of woodland he had acquired. His nearest neighbour was two miles away. In the following year he began to fell trees and planted potatoes.⁵⁹ He named the farm *Baile-Chnoic* (Township of the Hill) but spent that winter down river for the sake of his children’s schooling. MacLean’s ordeal may be said to have begun in the winter of 1821.⁶⁰ He complained that ‘every former talent in my head has gone’. This is ironic in light of the poem’s high reputation and ‘a massive text of 144 long lines.’⁶¹

Nutrition was meagre, and we are left to imagine how Isabella fed six children. Motherhood restricted her outdoor work in the *Baile-Chnoic* years which

⁵² Melin 2006:, 219.

⁵³ MacDougall 1922: 401.

⁵⁴ MacNeil 1987.

⁵⁵ Murray 1921: 265.

⁵⁶ MacLellan 2000.

⁵⁷ Roberts 2017, 51.

⁵⁸ Patterson 1872: 66.

⁵⁹ Patterson 1859: 130.

⁶⁰ Michael Newton (2014: 8) suggests before 1820.

⁶¹ *op. cit.*: 65, 21.

extended to 1831, although ‘she could handle the hoe, the sickle and the rake.’⁶² Cold was expected, but summer heat brought on a ‘taloned insect’ in the form, surely, of the Canadian black fly making ‘eyes swell through its potent poison.’⁶³ The poem returns to the theme of loneliness, in contrast to ‘when I was youthful – at every table I loved to chat, in jovial company, in hearty spirits, in carefree style as our time ran fast.’⁶⁴

Robert Dunbar has drawn attention to emigrant poets sharing ‘a distinct rhetoric or code of dispraise’.⁶⁵ The earlier they came, the worse the conditions. Furthermore the first generation of versifiers belonged to groups which had faced the least hardship in Scotland.⁶⁶ Another ‘Song of America’ was composed by John ‘the Hunter’ MacDonald. He had been a forester and brought his gun, which featured in nostalgic verse about ‘roaming the dells on the wild moors, stalking the young deer.’⁶⁷ This provoked a cousin, Allan ‘the Ridge’ MacDonald. His *Moladh Albainn Nuaidh* praises Nova Scotia but more of it is about old Scotland where ‘the gentry got it for themselves’. As for hunting, ‘Though you brag greatly about the stag, should you kill it for your use . . . you will be prosecuted’.⁶⁸

Allan the Ridge was closely enough related to Keppoch chiefs in Lochaber to be ranked as gentry. John Gibson has placed some emphasis on the cultural importance of the Gaelic middle class, Protestant and Catholic, in Nova Scotia.⁶⁹ By contrast John Shaw reckons its rural society, thanks to the 200-acre land grants, was ‘markedly less hierarchical’.⁷⁰ Mabou was Gaelic in culture, its Catholic loyalty encouraged by Alexander MacDonald as resident priest.⁷¹ *Alasdair Mòr* was described by Effie Rankin as ‘a veritable chieftain and patron of poets’. She felt that Allan the Ridge was ‘insulated to a great extent from the outside English world’, so that he flourished in a ‘cheerful bardic community’.⁷²

⁶² *op. cit.*: xxi.

⁶³ Meek 2003: 69. The translator suggests mosquito for *a’ chuileag ineach* (405).

⁶⁴ *op. cit.*: 71.

⁶⁵ Dunbar 2004-2006: 22-125 at 43.

⁶⁶ See MacLellan, Vincent 1891.

⁶⁷ MacDonell 1982: 85.

⁶⁸ Rankin 2004: 77-81.

⁶⁹ Gibson 1998: 187-200.

⁷⁰ MacLellan, Lauchie 2000: 5.

⁷¹ Johnston 1960 ii: 125, 247. Alexander MacDonald went on to become the first vicar general or deputy to Bishop Colin MacKinnon. *op. cit.*: 275-6.

⁷² Rankin 2004: 28.

MacLean's situation was very different, but his sociable nature found an outlet in due course as celebrated in *Òran Bhàil Ghàidhealaich*. This 1826 gathering which took place at Merigomish has been described as 'an act of ethnic solidarity'.⁷³ Religious differences set aside, Gaelic-speakers from Pictou and Antigonish met to celebrate their common culture. MacLean sang his own verses about preserving it. Michael Newton put the matter formally: 'Like other minority cultures whose existence is threatened by hegemonic forces, Gaels have often perceived tradition as an internal cultural resource for the renewal and reassertion of the culture itself.'⁷⁴ John MacInnes has suggested that the annual communions of Revivalism in northern Scotland resembled 'tribal gatherings in sacred places to renew the spiritual vigour and fertility of the community.'⁷⁵ Calvinism played no part in John MacLean's friendship with the priest Colin Grant.

Priest in Scotland and Nova Scotia

The Rev. Colin Grant was born in Glenmoriston about 1784 as the son of Duncan Grant, Presbyterian, and Helena Chisholm, Catholic. He was two years a priest in Strathglass after ordination at the Highland District seminary on the island of Lismore. Bishop John Chisholm who performed the ceremony was a cousin. He and his brother Aeneas were long remembered in Scotland and Canada as *na h-Easbuigean Bàna* 'the fair-haired bishops'.⁷⁶ Grant's next posting was to Braemar. This district south of Glenlivet was awash with home-distilled whisky, and smuggling followed a change in the law.⁷⁷ Fellow clergy agreed that Grant's predecessor William McLeod had not been up to the challenge of 'a particularly turbulent period'.⁷⁸

Mgr. Alexander MacWilliam researched and admired two Highland Jesuit missions.⁷⁹ Regarding the last Jesuit in the Braes of Mar, 'It could be wished that the secular clergy who took his place kept up the same standard. Unfortunately some of them gave too much evidence of the weaknesses of human nature.'⁸⁰ Colin Grant's memorial stone in Nova Scotia recalled him as 'a man of splendid

⁷³ Dunbar 2014: 221.

⁷⁴ Newton 2009: 120.

⁷⁵ John MacInnes 2006: 441.

⁷⁶ A pectoral cross produced at Antigonish by an old lady was believed to have been worn by the two bishops (Blundell 1909: 210).

⁷⁷ An Act of Parliament made a capacity of forty gallons the minimum legal size of still in 1823 (Daiches 1969: 53).

⁷⁸ MacHardy 2009: 41-68 at 43.

⁷⁹ MacWilliam 1972: 22-39; 1973: 75-102.

⁸⁰ 'The Braemar Mission' typescript is in that part of the Scottish Catholic Archives still in Edinburgh after the removal of most pre-1878 material to Aberdeen University.

physique'.⁸¹ Despite this, the priest was badly bruised after being provoked into a trial of strength at a market. The Rev. Charles Gordon in Aberdeen reported to the Lowland District's Bishop Alexander Cameron: 'You probably have heard that our Braemar friend, Mr C. Grant, has been and still is in another scrape. . . Some of his Great Great friends taking the thing into consideration advised him and prevailed upon him to commence an action before the Commissary Court here.'⁸² The affair did not go to court, thanks to the influence of 'Priest Gordon'.⁸³ He ended: 'But should not Bishop Chisholm be informed of this? What would you say if any of us were going on thus?'⁸⁴ Further light was shed by Henry Innes, priest at Ballogie on Deeside:

Mr Grant of Braemar, who some time ago rendered himself conspicuous by being inveigled into a quarrel and a scuffle in a public house (though I do believe it was less owing to his own imprudence than to the malice of some people who bore him ill-will) has now again exposed himself and his character to the public notice in a most unbecoming and odious light. A young girl, the daughter of a Mrs Cumming who keeps a publick house in Castletown of Braemar, has it seems taken such a fancy to Mr Grant that in defiance of her mother and other friends she insisted on her being in his house as his housekeeper and he is weak enough to harbour her as such to the great scandal, as it is reported, of both Protestants and Catholics, and utter ruin of the girl's character and certainly not much less of the priest's.⁸⁵

Bishop Chisholm acted quickly, and within three weeks Bishop Cameron learned that Colin Grant was leaving for America. There was an element of scandal, but Grant may have asked for a transfer as other Highland priests had been doing. A key example, Alexander MacDonell, came from Grant's corner of Scotland.⁸⁶ Grant was not dismissed for drinking like later Highland priests.⁸⁷ On the positive side, he

⁸¹ Johnston 1994: 45.

⁸² Commissary courts dealt with small debts and had disciplinary powers over defamation.

⁸³ See Stark, 1909.

⁸⁴ SCA/BL 4/409/4, Gordon to Cameron, 18 Feb 1813. The priest's comment on Grant's 'Great Great friends' may be contrasted with his own humble origins. Constance Davidson, *Priest Gordon* (London, 1929), 14.

⁸⁵ SCA/BL 5/46/2. Henry Innes, Ballogie, to Bishop Cameron, Edinburgh, 23 Jan 1818.

⁸⁶ See Toomey 1985. MacDonell was vicar general to Bishop Plessis of Quebec until the Kingston bishopric was created in 1826.

⁸⁷ See Roberts 2004: 17-44. Two of the three who took up a new life in Nova Scotia did very well.

was responsible for the erection of a clergy-house at Braemar and a school for seventy pupils.⁸⁸

After crossing the Atlantic in 1818 *Maighstir Cailean* was asked to serve as pastor of Arisaig.⁸⁹ Nova Scotia's first Catholic mission had been given this name by its priest James MacDonald, whose boyhood home in Arisaig became a seminary for the Highland District.⁹⁰ Grant found a log chapel beside the landing-place, built in a single day.⁹¹ His predecessor Alexander MacDonald from Clanaig in Lochaber had come out in 1802. Still incomplete was 'an immense wharf (the work of Father MacDonald, paid for by the government).'⁹²

The church which MacDonald began was 40 feet long and 26 wide. A larger one had been built on the other side of the Strait at MacEachern's Savage Harbour - 'a frame Church on the premises 60 feet by 36 and 18 feet at the post, with a choir over the door and Galleries on both sides up to the Sanctuary.'⁹³ Colin Grant fell heir to MacDonald's 'spacious Glebe House'.⁹⁴ In 1820 Bishop Edmund Burke came there from Halifax to discuss opening a seminary at Arisaig. Grant might have been in charge (teachers of Latin and Greek were to be supplied) but the bishop's death halted progress.⁹⁵ In 1821 Grant had the Arisaig church enlarged, making it slightly longer than that of the man who became bishop of Charlottetown.⁹⁶ Catholic churches in Nova Scotia tended to be 'narrow and high while the Presbyterian ones were frequently wide and low.'⁹⁷

Having demonstrated a concern for education in Scotland, Grant set about providing schools for the children of immigrants. Soon there were four in his parish, no doubt teaching largely through the medium of Gaelic. Alexander MacGillivray who taught the Arisaig school had a father, John the Piper, who

⁸⁸ Christine Johnson, *Developments in the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland, 1789-1829* (Edinburgh, 1983), 224.

⁸⁹ Johnston 1960 i: 380.

⁹⁰ Watts 2002: 93.

⁹¹ Johnston 1994: 61.

⁹² Johnston 1960 i: 254.

⁹³ SCA/BL 4/272/15. MacEachern to Cameron, 29 Nov 1806.

⁹⁴ Johnston 1960 i: 474. MacDonald's chapel and house had been built in 1808. The 'magnificent living room and two bedrooms of the glebe house' were admired by Bishop Plessis. *Ibid.*, 252.

⁹⁵ *op. cit.*: 416.

⁹⁶ MacEachern became vicar general with responsibility for most of the Maritimes in 1819 and bishop ten years later.

⁹⁷ Campbell and MacLean 1974: 214.

composed ‘The Song of the Gaels’.⁹⁸ Then during a six-month period in Pictou County there were opened along the Gulf Shore ‘six or seven flourishing English schools’.⁹⁹

Grant was present in 1827 with upwards of two thousand people when his cousin William Fraser was consecrated at Antigonish as Nova Scotia’s first Catholic bishop.¹⁰⁰ School children were one thing, old people another: ‘So long as the care for the sick or dying is one of the indispensable functions of the ministry, so long shall the name of Father Grant remain associated with all that is self-sacrificing in the life of a devoted priest.’¹⁰¹ Despite criticism by fellow clergy in Scotland, in short, Grant made an immediate impact in Nova Scotia. In the words of John MacLean’s grandson, ‘The Rev. Mr Grant was a man of many excellent qualities. The poet was deeply attached to him.’¹⁰²

Friendship and Poetry

Perhaps Arisaig’s priest assisted the MacLean move to a less isolated site, if only to the extent of advice. MacLean took his family six miles east to James River near Addington Forks, which was to become known as Glenbard. Despite its being on the Antigonish side of the county line, the cemetery was associated with Pictou.¹⁰³ Children of the family attended school two miles away at Beaver Meadow, as did several future priests of the diocese.¹⁰⁴ This was a faith frontier, but a friendly one when the MacLeans moved in. At a later time of tighter boundaries, the coffin of a Catholic woman was re-buried at Arisaig after being dug up at Glenbard, ‘a Protestant cemetery’.¹⁰⁵

The first of the bard’s three songs to the priest starts with MacLean being astounded at what he had learned from being ‘in the company of a nobleman’ the

⁹⁸ *Mac-Talla* (Jonathan G. MacKinnon [ed.]) 1903, vol. xi, no. 25: 199. John MacGillivray had been Glenaladale’s piper in Scotland. ‘His house took fire a few years before his death and his manuscripts perished.’ Maclean Sinclair 1881: 316.

⁹⁹ Johnston 1960 ii: 70.

¹⁰⁰ *op. cit.* i: 518. Fraser, who had taught Colin Grant at Lismore, was a second cousin through his mother. Johnston 1994: 27.

¹⁰¹ MacDonald, Ronald 1878: 10. MacDonald became Bishop of Harbour Grace, Newfoundland.

¹⁰² Maclean Sinclair 1881: 172.

¹⁰³ Ritchie 1956 xi: 2.

¹⁰⁴ Beaver Meadow pupils included future priests James Fraser b. 1842, Alexander MacGillivray b. 1847 and Ronald MacGillivray b. 1885. Johnston 1994: 40, 71, 73.

¹⁰⁵ Johnston 1960 ii: 281.

previous Tuesday.¹⁰⁶ Clearly this was a first meeting, some time before 1825. Later, during MacLean's 'greatest hardships', Grant gave him 'a present of a snuff-box, which contained together with the snuff five pounds in gold.'¹⁰⁷ As the friendship developed MacLean gave Grant a drinking-horn, as described in the dialogue poem *An Adharc*. Drinking was important in Gaelic culture, and MacLean celebrated convivial Antigonish sessions in *Diteadh Mhic-an-Toisich*.¹⁰⁸ Later Bishop Colin MacKinnon led a teetotal campaign which forbade clergy participation: 'An *ipso facto* suspension will be incurred by any pastor who dares to drink intoxicating liquor in a tavern. . .' Grant's hospitality at the Arisaig glebe house was celebrated: 'At the time of sitting down about your table famous were your habits with the guests.'¹⁰⁹

The same mood is struck, somewhat incongruously, in the final lament: 'Stoups filled with hard liquor, when they were emptied more would be found.'¹¹⁰ With a shift towards clericalism, the bishop's ban also forbade drinking 'with lay people anywhere.'¹¹¹

In the third verse MacLean goes into the panegyric mode which had once been reserved for clan chiefs and leaders like the laird of Coll. John MacInnes has made the subject his own, showing how the traditional warrior theme became concerned with the protection of a threatened society:

Gaelic panegyric is not merely the direct celebration of great men in life and death. . . The utterance is controlled by social norms, and deviations are more likely to be regarded as such than to be valued as an original point of view. But far from weakening poetic expression this confers strength, clarity and classical normality on it. It often concentrates the art so that the mundane takes on an archetypal intensity.¹¹²

MacLean makes reference to Grant's handsome appearance and virtuous character before coming to his true introduction: 'I received proven testimony from others that you were expert in every manly exploit. Why should I not report some of them?'

More than a third of the poem (verses 10-17) is concerned with what the Aberdeen priest Charles Gordon called Colin Grant's 'Great Great friends'. The

¹⁰⁶ MacLean, *Òran do Mhaighstir Cailean Grannta, Sagairt Arisaig*, l. 5. MacLean Sinclair 1881: 167

¹⁰⁷ *op. cit.*: xvii.

¹⁰⁸ *op. cit.*: 149-55.

¹⁰⁹ MacLean, *Sagairt Arisaig*, ll. 152-3. *op. cit.*: 172.

¹¹⁰ MacLean, *Marbhrann do Maighstir Cailean Grannda, Sagairt Arisaig*, ll. 91-2 *op. cit.*: 176.

¹¹¹ Johnston 1960 ii: 275.

¹¹² MacInnes 2006: 317-8.

bard chose to describe them as ‘many a strong soldier who was closely related to you in the high country of the mountains.’¹¹³ In his examination of these verses Dunbar has identified kin connections which are better left for their repetition in MacLean’s final elegy.¹¹⁴ Two verses here celebrate Grant’s skill as a seaman and call up the idea of him setting out from the Arisaig wharf on pastoral duty. He also made journeys on land:

You were a lively horseman
On the pacey, well-shod horse of the proud head,
Girdled, saddled and harnessed
I’m sure it had never beheld any better;
It trots straight, without straying,
With a simple touch of your heel to its side,
Nimble, spirited and wild,
Snorting, noisy, eager on the ground.¹¹⁵

Allan the Ridge MacDonald made his prime example of better life in Nova Scotia travel on a ‘saddled horse’.¹¹⁶ That pleasure was unknown to pioneers at the time of this poem, but forest trails were being beaten into tracks and horses were particularly associated with priests on peripatetic mission. Winter prevented that for Alexander MacDonald Clianaig: ‘He is too heavy for snow shoes and no horse can carry him through deep snow.’¹¹⁷ Tracks were wide enough for two riders by the time a second Alexander MacDonald reached Cape Breton. This appears in an exchange of verse when Angus Beaton got a small horse which some thought could challenge that of the Mabou priest *Alasdair Mòr*. Also a poet when required, MacDonald rejected the possibility of his horse being outrun: ‘A word would suffice to get him to gallop, and Angus Beaton would lose, though he’d die in the attempt.’¹¹⁸

Grant’s Fall

Colin Grant was a fine horseman who had considered taking up an army career like his brother. However the priest had a serious accident when tracks were still challenging, as appears in the poem of 1825. The third verse describes the priest’s fall:

You were a most excellent horseman

¹¹³ MacLean, *Sagairt Arasaig*, ll. 138-40. MacLean Sinclair 1881: 172.

¹¹⁴ Dunbar 2007: 252-3.

¹¹⁵ MacLean, *Sagairt Arasaig*, ll. 65-72. MacLean Sinclair 1881: 169. Transl. Dunbar 2007.

¹¹⁶ Rankin 2004: 81.

¹¹⁷ SCA/BL 4/272/15, MacEachern to Cameron, 29 Nov 1806.

¹¹⁸ Rankin 2004: 89. This cheerful flyting over the priest’s horse appears as *Each an t-Sagairt*.

On a strong-willed wild horse,
 I didn't see you denied
 In the place where you had tested him;
 Though it has just now happened to you
 Falling to the ground from your saddle,
 When he jumped so skittishly,
 Whatever fright caused him fear.¹¹⁹

It appears from the poet's farewell lament for the priest that Grant regularly spurred his horse 'hurriedly in motion' as 'an object of mirth'.¹²⁰ The animal left his rider with broken bones, and according to a note in the poet's hand the priest 'looked to be dying.'¹²¹ MacLean was distressed to learn that Grant 'was in his bed of illness and pain.' He wished he had the medical skill to 'leave you healed, without affliction and without a fever.'¹²²

These injuries had long-term effects. Bishop Fraser found Grant's constitution was shattered in October 1828, as he informed the rector of the Scots College, Rome.¹²³ Four months later Grant resigned, still in his forties, after agreeing to make sick calls until a successor could be found. William Bernard Macleod took over. Grant bought a farm at Malignant Cove, seven miles south-west of the new Morar chapel, the erection of which was his last public achievement. For Grant there was an old log chapel at Malignant Cove built by army veterans.¹²⁴ Alexander MacGillivray the Arisaig school teacher no doubt lived with his father at Malignant Brook.¹²⁵ After health problems ended his hopes of becoming a priest, MacGillivray put together a collection of moral and spiritual advice as *Companach no Oganach* or 'The Youth's Companion'. Charles Dunn gave full approval: 'It apparently found its way into even the humblest settler's cabin and appealed to the Highlanders, especially those of the Catholic faith for whom it was particularly intended.'¹²⁶ Colin Grant would have been cheered in difficult times: 'His

¹¹⁹ MacLean, *Òran do Mhaighstir Cailean Grannta*, ll. 17-24. Transl. Dunbar 2007.

¹²⁰ MacLean, *Marbhrann*, ll. 87-8. = MacLean Sinclair 1881: 175. Transl. Dunbar 2007.

¹²¹ Dunbar 2007: 256.

¹²² MacGilleain 1819, *Òran do Mhaighstir Cailean*, ll. 15-6. Transl. Dunbar 2007.

¹²³ William Fraser to Angus MacDonald, 8 October 1828. Archives of the Scots College, Rome. Johnston 1960 ii: 70

¹²⁴ *op. cit.* ii: 144.

¹²⁵ Maclean Sinclair 1881: 316.

¹²⁶ Dunn 1953: 75-7 at 76. *Companach no Oganach, no An Comhairliche Taitneach* was published at Pictou in 1836.

constitution shattered, he was in straitened circumstances in his last years.’¹²⁷ The community’s historian was moved to sympathy:

Enforced retirement often adds to existing physical ailments a burden of mental suffering which can seem too bitter to bear; and this fact may suggest the reason why the hospitality and practical charity of the Highlanders were sometimes impeded by a sensitive refusal of their needy neighbours to accept proffered aid. The pioneer years, too, were far antecedent to our modern age of the welfare state, which seeks to provide professional attention to those of its citizens who are physically or psychologically unable to take care of themselves; and one is saddened to learn that the ailing priest was imprisoned for debt in 1838 and that he died intestate and without means.¹²⁸

Four years earlier Grant’s priest-nephew John Chisholm had also died intestate. Born in Strathglass, he grew up at Antigonish Harbour and assisted Bishop Fraser after his ordination. After taking charge of a new academy at Arichat he drowned on a crossing to Newfoundland.¹²⁹ His older brother Alexander was appointed Crown Land Surveyor and became a mathematician of some distinction.¹³⁰ The parents of Alexander (Sandy *Mòr*) and John were Donald *Mòr* Chisholm and Catherine Grant, a sister of *Mhaighstir Cailean*.¹³¹ There was another sister Margaret, married to Alexander Chisholm, whose son Duncan Chisholm was a merchant in Antigonish.¹³²

The Rev. Colin Grant died at Antigonish on 31 March 1839. John MacLean’s elegy, or *marbhrann*, described an unnamed sister as ‘most sorrowful and often the tears run down her cheek.’ Grant died on Easter Sunday, yet it was two days before she saw him ‘in white clothing, unconscious and cold’ (l. 204). It is natural to wonder why neither of his surviving nephews, one of them a merchant, was able to save the Rev. Colin Grant from debtor’s prison. Clergy buried him in Antigonish’s old cemetery at Lower South River. A memorial raised by public subscription after half a century could only be found, in more recent times, ‘with great difficulty’.¹³³

Last Words

¹²⁷ Johnston 1994: 45.

¹²⁸ Johnston 1960 ii: 70-71. The evidence for debtor’s prison comes from a letter by Bishop Fraser’s vicar general Jean-Baptiste Maranda dated 2 May 1838.

¹²⁹ Johnston 1994: 27.

¹³⁰ See Chisholm 1861.

¹³¹ Johnston 1994: 27.

¹³² The kinship of Margaret’s husband to the Chief of Clan Chisholm has been questioned. Dunbar 2007: 251.

¹³³ Johnston 1960 ii: 71.

Considerably longer than *A' Choille Ghruamach*, MacLean's *marbhrann* has twenty-seven verses.¹³⁴ It was sung to the air *Mile marbhphaisg ort a shaoghail* - 'A thousand shrouds upon you O world'. A distinction has been drawn between the bardic *marbhrann* and the spiritual elegies of Highland revivalism. These latter moved swiftly on from the deceased to religious homilies, although their 'exaggerated panegyric is reminiscent of the old clan bards. . .'¹³⁵ MacLean's is not spiritual. After opening verses on the qualities of the departed, his main emphasis is on Grant's link with Highland clans and warriors of a former age. Dunbar comments on the significance of 'Creagellachie' (pipe tune and war cry) to the Grants in Strathspey but finds no connection through the *MhicPhàdraig* Patersons of Glenmoriston. He cites MacLean Sinclair on Grant of Glenmoriston's descent from the MacLeans of Ardgour, Campbells of Barcaldine and Camerons of Lochiel. Bard MacLean relished this detail but gave priority to Chisholms as 'the kindred of your mother' (l. 115). The *marbhrann* praises MacKenzie from Brahan (l. 123). 'Colin Òg Chisholm married in 1749 Margaret, daughter of Alexander MacKenzie, third of Ballone, by whom he had Helen, mother of Colin.'¹³⁶

Another name in the elegy is of less obvious relevance, but the Frasers of Lovat from Dounie Castle (l. 129) could hardly be ignored in a parade of significant clans. On the other hand MacLean had started a verse of his earlier praise-poem with 'Glengarry is loyal to you'.¹³⁷ The chief Grant toasted at Coll's expense must surely appear, but this unrelated branch of Clan Donald receives only passing mention at the last. As for *Mac-na-Ceàrda Morair Ghallaibh*, otherwise the Sinclair lord of Caithness (l. 157), MacLean's daughter Christy was ending her marriage to John Sinclair of Strathalladale when the bard mourned Colin Grant. Alexander MacLean Sinclair lost a father by this, and it may be that 'the poet was trying to convince his daughter to stay with Sinclair.'¹³⁸ MacLean was mainly looking to the past, however, treasuring what he had learned from Grant: 'He was a seannachie as well as a poet, and possessed vast stores of information respecting the history, poetry, genealogy and tales of the Highland clans'.¹³⁹ Maclean Sinclair's view of his grandfather has been confirmed in our times: 'In short, it is clear that John MacLean's work as a collector, custodian and publisher of poetry, much of

¹³⁴ Working from a manuscript version by the bard's son Charles MacLean, Dunbar found sixteen more lines than appear in MacLean Sinclair, *Clàrsach na Coille*.

¹³⁵ Macinnes 1951: 275.

¹³⁶ Maclean Sinclair 1901: 194.

¹³⁷ Mac Gilleain 1819 *Òran do Maighstir Cailean Grannta.*, l. 121 = MacLean Sinclair 1881: 171.

¹³⁸ Dunbar 2007: 263.

¹³⁹ Maclean Sinclair 1901: 15.

which would otherwise have been lost, has made a very significant contribution to the preservation of important aspects of our Gaelic heritage.¹⁴⁰

In light of this, the bard's emphasis on Grant's connections in Scotland goes far beyond a snobbish preoccupation with 'Great Great friends'. The priest shared his knowledge with the bard in a mutual imaginative spirit. The first line of MacLean's three celebrations of the priest is *Gu bheil m' inntinn air dùsgadh*, translated as 'My imagination has been awakened'. Then MacLean makes use of the priest's forename for the sake of a pun:

*'S mo dhùrachadh do Chailean,
A dh'ùraich dhomh 'n càilean an dràst' . . .*

'And my greetings to Colin, who has refreshed my mental faculties just now. . .'¹⁴¹ A mourning comment at the last regrets the bard's lack of kinship but may also touch on contact coming to an end: 'Though I was not closely related to you great is the loss to me that is your death.' MacLean regrets his part in this: 'You were loyal in support of me to stand by me when I was in need.'¹⁴²

Moving on to faith, John MacLean's friendship with Grant clearly lapsed at a time when his reformed religious convictions were strengthening. Having grown up in Tìree where 'vital godliness was at a very low ebb,' MacLean married the daughter of a Lismore elder. His grandson testifies that in Nova Scotia he 'had always observed the worship of God regularly in his family.' The same source notes MacLean's devotion to Puritan writings; 'Boston's Fourfold State was a work in which he especially delighted. He read it very frequently.'¹⁴³ Some of this influence from John Bunyan to Philip Doddridge may have come later, but it was at Barney's River that he 'turned his attention to this species of composition.'¹⁴⁴

Canada's national biography states that although MacLean was a good friend of the priest, he was 'a fervent admirer of the Reverend James Drummond MacGregor of Pictou.'¹⁴⁵ MacGregor was MacLean's example in moving from secular poetry to hymns. The first edition of MacGregor's *Dàin a' Chòmhnadh Crabhaidh* published at Glasgow in 1819 had twenty-five long composition aimed

¹⁴⁰ Dunbar 2014: 224.

¹⁴¹ MacLean, *Sagairt Arisaig*, ll. 1, 145-6.

¹⁴² MacLean, *Marbhrann*, ll. 21-4

¹⁴³ Maclean Sinclair 1881: xiv, viii, vix. See Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State* (Edinburgh, 1753). Boston was minister at Ettrick.

¹⁴⁴ Maclean Sinclair 1881: xviii.

¹⁴⁵ Maureen Lonergan Williams, 'MacGhilleathain, Iain', *DCB* vol. 7. Williams taught at the Jesuit School of Theology in Toronto. Her 1977 Glasgow University MA thesis was on 'The Canadian songs of John MacLean'.

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at instruction.¹⁴⁶ Eleven years before this he had obtained Gaelic bibles from the British and Foreign Bible Society ‘for sale or free distribution’.¹⁴⁷ Hence MacLean’s ‘The Propagation of the Gospel in this Country’ rejoiced that ‘in our hands we have the Bible in a language that we know’, thanks to ‘Master James’.¹⁴⁸ The bard’s own hymns far outnumbered his other compositions in America. Coming from an oral tradition, he ‘never called a pen to his aid.’ Latterly, however, he became conscious of the need to preserve what might be lost. A small edition of his hymns was ‘very inaccurately printed.’¹⁴⁹

Master James MacGregor may have discouraged MacLean’s friendship with Grant, if only by example. After the first threat of Catholic Highlanders corrupting the Pictou flock was overcome by a spreading apart of settlements, there was a brief period of mutual toleration. Time and place were right for inter-faith friendship. Before the horse-riding accident the bard was a witness to the priest’s eloquence:

What has increased your countrymen’s sorrow
Is to be missing you on Sundays,
At the time they gather together
To listen to your homily;
When you would put on your vestments
To go to read the scripture
And you would explain it to them
To bring knowledge to the ignorant.¹⁵⁰

Gaelic preaching was separate from the Latin mass, which a conscientious Presbyterian might have chosen to avoid. Long after attending the church at Arisaig, MacLean made his address as if to a minister rather than a priest: ‘Often you read from the Bible, from your mouth it sounded so sweet.’¹⁵¹ During the following decades Presbyterianism became firmly established in Pictou, and there were resident priests in all Catholic settlements to the east. Eighteen Chisholms served the Antigonish diocese in its first century and a half. Many more with

¹⁴⁶ At the end of MacLean Sinclair’s *Clàrsach na Coille* of 1881 notice was given of his newly published *Dain Spioradail* which included forty-six of MacLean’s hymns, mostly unknown, and six by MacGregor: ‘Dr M’Gregor’s hymns occupy forty-five pages. They are the last hymns he composed.’

¹⁴⁷ Susan Bugey, ‘MacGregor, James Drummond’ *DCB* vol. 6 1988.

¹⁴⁸ Meek 2003: 75. The bard drew attention to Pictou Academy and the first three Gaelic-speaking ministers who graduated there in 1825. *op. cit.*: 77, 407.

¹⁴⁹ Maclean Sinclair 1881: xviii, xix. The contemplated ‘second and larger edition of his hymns’ had to wait for inclusion in the 1881 volume.

¹⁵⁰ MacLean 1819, *Òran do Maighstir Cailean Grannta*, ll. 33-40. Transl. Dunbar 2007.

¹⁵¹ *op. cit. Marbhrann*, ll. 207-8. = MacLean Sinclair 1881: 179

Highland Scots names are on record, and a later *Sagairt Arisaig* wrote about them.¹⁵² The bard's last words were 'You have left a gap in the clergy...'¹⁵³

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