

Notes for researchers

Donald McLean's childhood

1779 to 1792

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www.christinaanddonaldmclean.com

This is one of a series of 38 articles which should to be read in conjunction with each other. Look at [‘Setting the Scene’](#), in Small Print on the left of the homepage, for a list of all these articles and explanations of some concepts being used.

The following notes provide a context for understanding these notes on Donald's childhood:-

- [‘Overview of Donald's life’](#): This has summaries of each of the notes.
- [‘Donald's initial working life’](#):
- [‘Donald's continuing work and growing family’](#):
- [‘Places: Blaich & Duiskey’](#):
- [‘Donald's parents & grandparents – our strategies’](#):
- [‘Donald's parents & grandparents – searching original records’](#):

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Summary – purpose and highlights

- Donald Mclean was born on 26th Sept 1779 in Blaich in the Western Highlands. His parents were Allan McLean & Rachel Ranken. Allan was also born in Blaich, in 1746, and Rachel was born in Campsie (Stirling) in 1744. The reasons for reaching these conclusions are detailed in our notes on searching original records.
- Presumably Donald spent all his childhood and at least some of his young adult life in his parent's household. He probably spent his earliest years around Blaich which is on the shores of Loch Eil in and as a young man he would have been around Duiskey which is nearby.
- Much of his time was focused on the loch – fishing and ‘messaging around with boats’. When he was 12 years old, he was probably amongst his cousins and friends who rushed to the lochside to marvel at a giant whale. And on another day, they saw a dog-fish shark washed ashore.
- These notes attempt to describe what it might have been like for Donald as a child.

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Birth

Donald would have been born in the family cottage, with Rachel assisted by someone from a neighbouring cottage – and perhaps by her own mother and aunties. Soon after his birth, the family would have gone to the other side of the loch where a simple baptismal ceremony took place, perhaps on the site of the Corpach church which was built just four years later (Fraser p125). His birth was recorded in the Kilmallie parish register.

Siblings

We have not found any record of Allan and/or Rachel having any other children:-

- It was unusual for there to be just one child. Fraser stated that, in Kilmallie, *“women, in general, are very prolific, frequently bringing forth twins; and, in September 1792, two women were delivered of 3 children each at birth. Every marriage commonly produces from 5 to 7 children”* (Fraser p428).
- The births of Donald’s siblings might not have been recorded, or records might have been lost. Fraser stated that, in Kilmallie, *“For several reasons, it is almost impossible to keep exact and complete register of baptisms and marriages, in so extensive a parish as this. Unless the clergyman, at the time of celebrating these ordinances, write down, in a memorandum book, the names of the parties, and transmit them afterwards to the session clerk, they will never be registered; for the parties themselves either neglect, or disregard to do it. Besides, it is believed that the Papists and Episcopalians keep a separate register of their own births and marriages. And of deaths, no register has ever yet been attempted to be kept in the parish”* (Fraser p428).
- *“The parish register commences in 1772, but has been very irregularly kept, partly owing to the scattered state of the parish, and partly owing to the number of Episcopalians and Roman Catholics in the parish, who do not record the names of their children in the parish register”* (McGillivray p122).

Blaich

What was life like around Blaich when Donald was a child? There is a general description of Blaich in our other research notes, [‘Places: Blaich & Duisky’](#). To this, we can add the following details which are specific to Donald’s childhood.

- There were clusters of a few cottages strung along the road - either fronting the road or no more than 100 metres from it. The cottages were mostly on the southern side of the road, the hill side, because it ran so close to the loch.
- The cottages were small, with earth floors xxxxxx
- Peat was used to heat the houses for warmth and cooking. *“The parish, in general, is well provided with excellent peats, which is the chief fuel that is used”* (Fraser p440).
- These might have been the hay days for this area.

Who was living at Blaich and Duisky? – numbers (population)

Trends across the whole of the parish of Kilmallie.: In the 37 years between Webster’s calculations in 1755 and Fraser’s account in 1792:-

- Overall, the population of the whole parish increased from 3091 to 4031 (Fraser p428) – ie 30%
- Kilmallie is the largest area of the 40 parishes in Scotland but is just 5% of the total population of Scotland of 87,000. However, it is the fourth most populous (behind only Dundee, Stirling and Allos) and, at 30%, was one of the fastest growing compared to an average of 19% for all of Scotland over those 37 years.
- Populations on sheep farms decreased by two thirds
- Populations on black cattle farms (about a quarter of the area) were maintained.
- There was a considerable increase in Fort William.
- *“The introduction of sheep, it is obvious, has a tendency to diminish the number of inhabitants in particular districts. In this parish, however, from the operation of particular circumstances, the population has increased considerably, and is still on the increase. It is not easy, now to determine the exact proportion of people that remain, compared with those who have been obliged to remove. From a medium statement of several farms, in different situations, they appear to have been nearly three times as populous, as they are at present. But one fourth of the parish is still under black cattle, and contains as great a number of people as ever.”* (Fraser p427)

For the following reasons, we estimate that there were about 300 people living around Blaich and Duisky when Donald was a child:-

- The census of 1841 (note this is 62 years after Donald was born, and 4 years after the family left the area) has 286 people in 47 cottages in Blaich, and 62 people in 12 cottages in Duisky) – a total of 348 in 59 cottages.
- Old maps show xxxxx buildings in Blaich and Duisky and xxx in Garvan xxx – but we do not know how many were barns rather than cottages - and how many were occupied when Donald was there.

- In 1845, there were 1100 people who were 'supplied' by the minister for the two churches on each side of Loch Linnhe near Corran Ferry (McGillvray p125). This would have included those on the east side of Loch Linnhe as well as around on the west side (notably Clovullin) and the south side of Loch Eil (notably Blaich). Blaich would have been a small portion of the 1100.
- There were 4225 in the whole of the parish of Kilmallie in 1792. Of these, 1200 were living around Fort William (Fraser p428) and there were 500 to 600 people living within three miles of the Corpach kirk in 1835 (McGillvray p125). Thus about 2500 (60%) were scattered in the hamlets and isolated farms in other parts of this parish which was the largest in Scotland.
 - Donald would have seen people move away from some areas as sheep took over. And he might have noticed the growth of Fort William as a population centre.
- We are in the process of gathering the names of the people who were living around Blaich. These are being placed on the secondary family tree 'Lairds, tacks and residents of Ardgour, Blaich & Duiskey' within our website www.christinaanddonaldmclean.com.

Who was living at Blaich and Duiskey? – names

- The Maclean name was not the most common. There were many with the surname of Boyd, McMillan, Livingston and xxxxx.
- Although we know very little about Donald's family specifically, we have some details about a couple of other families living there in Blaich. Donald would have been in daily contact with them - they might have been his cousins.
- The details of one of the families, Lachlan MacLean and Mary McColl, was provided by Allan 'Willowburn' McLean and Edwin MacLean. Mary was born about 1752 in Achaphubuil and she died in 1847. Lachlan was born in Mull c1751. His father, Allan, fought in Culloden and survived. Lachlan was buried in Cille Mhaodain, the burial ground of the Ardgour Macleans. The children of Lachlan and Mary were:-
 - Allan: Born 1773 – he had a croft in Blaich – he married Catherine McPherson – he died in 1832 and was buried in Cille Mhaodain, next to his father's grave.
 - Katherine: Born in 1774 in Garvan or Kinlocheil - she married a Lachlan McLean - they lived at Duiskey and Garvan where she died in 1868.
 - Ann: Born 1778 – she married Allan Maclean and lived at Garvan
 - Jean: Born 1780
 - Hugh: Born in 1782? in Garvan but subsequently might have been a baker in Glasgow - married Ann McLachlan and they lived at Duiskey [research: Was this a second Hugh in this family? Or is this the same person who was a baker in Glasgow?]
 - Lachlan: Born 1782? – He might have been a sibling - he might have lived in Glasgow
 - John: Born on 9th May 1784 at Garvan
 - Alexander: Born in 1797 in Gerradh – married Christian MacMillan. He died in 1862 in Blaich. Alexander and Christian were the 2 X grandparents of Willowburn.
 - Archibald: Buried in Cille Mhaodain, on the other side of his father.
 - Mary (Jean): Born 1803 - she married John McNiven and they lived at Bottle, Liverpool – she died in 1886.
 - Blaich, Duiskey and Garvan are right next to each other and, as they were so close and there was so few people living there, it is probable that Donald grew up with the youngest of these children – perhaps they were cousins. Lachlan's and Mary's family were living in that vicinity for all of Mary's childbearing years from 1773 to 1803 – and some of the children remained there in their adult lives.
- Another family was that of Ewen McLean and Ann Livingston. The details of this family are from Ian Miller, 29 Nov 1998, message board, ancestry.com. Ewen was born c1758, probably in Blaich. Anne was born c1762, also probably from Blaich. Their children were born at Blaich, Duiskey, Garvan and Drimfern are a string of localities, each about a kilometre from the next (Drumfern is at the end of Loch Eil - a farm owned or leased originally by Cameron of Druimnasallie). The children were:-
 - John: born 8th Feb 1784 in Blaich

- Sarah: born 2nd Apr 1786 in Drumfern
- Annie: 19th Aug 1786 Drumfern
- These were a few years younger than our Donald.

Schooling

- There was very little formal schooling in the area when Donald was a child.
- Rev Fraser reported that in the years prior to 1792 (when Donald was primary school age), there was a parish school in Fort William with 150 students, and there were five other schools throughout the Kilmallie parish. There are no indications that any of those five schools was accessible to Donald.
- None-the-less, it appears that somehow Donald became literate. Maybe, along with a few other children, he had a private tutor, or maybe he taught himself after some initial instructions from his father or an uncle. His ability is indicated by letters he wrote (or maybe written for him?) about land when he was in his late 60s (ref: BRB p14). Also he had a Gaelic bible – but this does not prove that he could read Gaelic, let alone that he was perhaps literate in two languages?

Loch Eil

The loch was a big part of everyone's life:

- There was always something happening on the loch.
- The cottages were right next to the loch
- Kelp
- Boats: In the whole parish of Kilmallie, there were very few land conveyances, but many boats (Fraser p446):-
 - Land: Two four-wheeled chaifes (a type of horse and cart??), three two-wheel machines (another type of horse and cart??), two dozen carts, and many sledges for hay and corn. There were also creels on horseback for peat (a wicker basket).
 - Water: Between 80 and 100 boats (60 in Maryburgh), four sloops from 20 to 40 tons (single mast), one brig of 200 tons (two masts), and eight ferries (5 are on the salt water).
- Swimming and wading
- Tidal flows – check
- Iced over – check
- They could see across to the other side – about 300?? metres across at Duiskey point
- Storms: Fraser p411 *“The lands, on both sides of Locheile, being so high, occasion frequent sudden squalls, which have sometimes proved dangerous. Several have been drowned, of late years [around 1791], in the parish [of Kilmallie].”*
- Fresh water fish: Salmon, sinnacks, char, grilse, trout (white, black and yellow). (Fraser p410) [research: Loch Eil was salt water, but was there any fresh water fish around Blaich and Duiskey? – perhaps in the An Dubh Uisge River?]
- Sea fish: *Herrings are the fish that abound most, and that are of the greatest benefit. There are red cod, lythe, seath, skate, flounders, mackarels, whittings and a few haddocks. If the weather be moderate, lythes and seaths may be fished every day of the year. They are killed with small rods, and a hook, having a feather, resembling one of the herring fry. Cod, skate, and flounder are caught with long lines with bates of herring or muscles. There are great many eels and sturgeons* (Fraser pp412&413).
- Commercial fishing – and fishing rights: See our notes on Donald's initial working years.
- Recreational fishing: Donald and his cousins/friends would have been fishing in the loch and also perhaps the An Dubh Uisge River. We could imagine them threading a feather onto the hook and casting their rods to try their skills
- Large sea creatures occasionally found their way into the loch. *“Seals and porpoises and other sea animals are frequently seen to chase the salmon; and whales, the herrings.”* In 1792, it was reported at the time, *“Last season [1791], three whales appeared in Locheile, of a great size: one of them seemed to measure about 600 feet. The same season, a shark, 3 years old, came ashore. That species of shark, called the dog-fish, is very numerous.”*

(Fraser, p 413). Recently, in 2008 and 2009, northern bottlenose whales were seen in Loch Eil so we are not surprised that whales were seen in Donald's time – but we doubt that the whales were 600 feet. In fact, they would have been a fraction of this size. Even if they were not as huge as reported, none-the-less these events must have prompted great excitement as people rushed to the shore. We can imagine 12 year old Donald running to have a look, with much shouting and pointing, with his friends/cousins – the children of Lachlan and Mary: Allan (18ys), Kate (17yrs), Ann (13yrs), Jean (11yrs), Hugh (9yrs), Lachlan (9yrs) and John (7yrs). And the children of Ewen & Ann: John (7yrs), Sarah (5yrs) and Annie (5yrs).



Dog-fish shark – up to 4 ft (1.2m)



Northern bottlenose whales – up to 32 ft (8m)

The road

- The road would have been rutted and boggy in parts. It would have been quite busy – mainly walkers and occasionally a horse - but probably no horse-and-cart.

Birds

- Fraser p413: *“The sea fowls are gulls, herons, cormorants, curlews, ducks, teals, pies, marrots, folon geese, eagles, and many others. Of the migratory kind, are the pictarnies and wigeons.”*

Laird

- The line of lairds of Blaich had ceased before Donald was born. Alexander MacLean, the 13th Laird of Ardgour, was the proprietor of Blaich and Duiskey and surrounding properties. Alexander was 15 years older than Donald. He had become laird as a four-year-old and he began a military career soon after Donald was born. Although he was technically Donald's landlord, initially Alexander was not personally involved in the affairs of the properties because he was so young and absent on military service. Alexander took a more personal interest much later, when he had reduced his military duties. Maybe Donald never actually met Alexander – certainly not in the Donald's childhood years which are the focus of these notes.

Churches

- The parish church at Corpach was built in 1783. It could accommodate about 900 or 1000 sitters (McGillivray p 125)

Nearby – neighbourhood

- What involvement did Donald have with the neighbouring communities along the southern side of Loch Eil - Garvan, Archuilbul?
- What involvement with Ardgour house, Corran Ferry, Clovullin and Sallachan?

- What about crossing the loch to Maryburgh (Fort William), Corpach and Fessburn? To get to the population centres across the loch many would have walked about 5 kilometres to the Narrows (which was only about 200?? metres wide at low tide) and then took their own small boat or caught the ferry across (or the kids might have swum but the tidal flow is rapid and it would have been cold – was probably never frozen over). The return journey could be undertaken within a day. For some, the journey might have required an over-night stay so it would not have been undertaken without a little planning. The possession of a small rowing boat would have been very useful for fishing and getting to Maryburgh. [Research : How valid is this whole description for this time and location?]
- Alexander MacLean used to boat over each day for his tailoring work in Maryburgh (ref: Allan MacLean of Willowburn).

Health

Rev Fraser describes the health of the people in Kilmalie up to 1792 when Donald was in early teens so this gives an insight into the conditions around him while he was growing up.

- *“Rheumatism is attributed to the dampness of the air and people ceasing to wear flannel shirts”* (p 409).
- *“Smallpox was almost under control with a program of inoculations even though some were resisting it. In one season 460 were inoculated and three died – attributed to a ‘bad habit of body’ rather than ineffectiveness of the inoculation”* (ref p409). Maybe the McLeans were inoculated – or maybe they were among the anti-vaxxers.
- *“Fever of the epidemical kind were very frequent”* (p409).
- Dropsy was common – *“This is ascribed to their feeding so much upon potatoes, which is now become a substitute for meal”* (p 409).
- *“The jaundice and the stone are almost unknown here”* (p 409).
- *“The itch [presumably STD], which has been imputed as a disgrace to this quarter of the island, is but rarely seen now, even among the lowest classes of the people. This, doubtless, is owing to their living in a more cleanly manner than their forefathers.”* Rev Frazer quoted one instance (ref p409&410).
- Some lived to a very old age – 13 people were over 84 years old (in a population of 4225) – (p428&429)
- The tallest person was 6ft 7.5 inches. The general height is 5 foot, 7.5 inches. (p446)
- There were two instances of suicide (p447)

Topics around the kitchen table

The following provides an insight into the kinds of discussions which Donald might have been involved in during his childhood. What was his reaction to what he saw going on around him?

- Government duty on coal and salt make these items much more expensive than that would otherwise be. (p440)
- Inflation : Common food items increased by 2 or 3 times in the 20 years from 1771 to 1791 (ref p436)
- The need for a quay at Fort William (p441) This was eventually built in xxxxx
- Weekly market for meat (p441)
- Piping water to Fort William (p441)
- Tannery (p441)
- Sawmill (p442)
- Wool mill (p442)
- Fort William fairs in June and November.
- Culloden – the effects would still be felt. The children of Lochlan and Mary might have talked about their grandfather’s experience of the uprising – why he went, the battle, his escape, and the long term repercussions.
- Sheep – see below.

Sheep taking over

Sheep were introduced on a large scale to Kilmalie starting from 1764 – fifteen years before Donald was born, so, in his childhood, he would have seen the continuation of this rapid transformation.

- *“Sheep require a smaller number of hands to tend them, than black cattle; can graze in places where these would not venture, and yield a greater produce. This, it will be acknowledged, is a strong temptation to proprietors, who value money more than men, to encourage sheep farming”* (Fraser p433).
- *“There is an absolute necessity of preserving the grass, during summer and harvest [autumn], upon the low grounds, for the use of the sheep in winter and spring - for otherwise they run a risk of perishing. This could not be done, were the same number of people, as formerly, to live there, and to cultivate lands for their own subsistence. Besides, the number of cows and horses, they would require, would entirely consume the grass”* (p427).
- For some, the change was dramatic. The highland enclosures meant that lairds were abruptly evicting crofters so that sheep could be kept by fewer workers, in larger areas – and produce greater profits for the operators. Clearances resulted in whole communities being dispossessed by landlords. This was certainly occurring in some areas of the Highlands and there was a substantial move towards sheep in Kilmallie, however this was not as traumatic as in other parts of the Highlands. None-the-less, Donald would have been aware of these changes occurring around him as he was growing up.

Manner of living of prior to the year 1764

In 1792, Fraser, painted an idyllic picture of life around in Kilmallie before sheep were introduced.

“All the arable ground was carefully cultivated, and sowed, mostly with oats. If the returns were few, the rents were low. Farms were divided into small proportions among the occupants; yet their cattle were grazed in common, every tenant having cattle in proportion to the share of rent which he paid. The cattle were never the less appropriated, and each had his own, and their fruits. Besides black cattle, they had a few sheep and goats; out of which, they could, at any time, afford to take part for the use of their families. And, as they had plenty of milk, butter and cheese, and a good deal of oats, they lived very comfortably. In return, they were always ready to perform for their landlords every kind of service. This was rarely an involuntary service. For, when they had the felicity to have a good master, their attachment to him was strong and ardent. Instances of such are fresh in the memory of many living: and there have been proprietors, who never removed a tenant; and tenants, who never fought a discharge for their rents. Landlords, when indulgent, actually possessed, all the authority and love of a magistrate, of a protector and a father. In those days, however, the tenants were ill lodged, and as ill clothed” (Fraser p443).

Manner of living upon sheep farms in 1791 (per Fraser in 1792, p444):-

Fraser (p444) then paints a different picture almost three decades after sheep were introduced. Living became better for those on the sheep farms – but only for the fewer who managed to stay.

“The people subsist, as may naturally be expected, in a great measure, upon the offals of the flock. If they live apart, as herds, they have each a stone of oat-meal per week, from the possessor, together with grass for 2 cows and 70 sheep; and they may plant as much potatoes, for their own use as they can cultivate. They live very comfortably, and generally have some money. They are well accommodated in clothes and bedding; which is a consequence of their more extensive commerce with the world, and of the abundance of wool. Travelling the hills, to look after the sheep, is their usual employment; excepting at the smearing and shearing seasons, when they gather them all down to the low grounds, and take them by parcels for these purposes. Shepherds, who live in their masters’ houses have their maintenance, and grass for 70 sheep, or so. Their allowance and profits are far superior to those of domestic work servants. Their sheep are marked for themselves, and the produce sold commonly with the master’s and at the same price. ... Servants are kept, either for tending and managing sheep, or for black cattle. The former are few in proportion: two shepherds are sufficient for any ordinary farm, capable of grazing 1,460 sheep. If they live in their master’s house, they have, besides their maintenance, grass for 70 sheep. If the shepherd be married, and keep a family of his own, he has grass for a cow and 40 sheep or thereabout, and a stone of meal per week, all of which are equal to about £20. If a servant be employed for the purpose of

husbandry, and lives himself, with a family, but ready to answer when called on, to assist in the work of the farm, he is paid as follows:-

- | | |
|---|----------------------------|
| • Grass for 2 cows valued at | £2, 10shillings |
| • Ditto for 20 sheep, valued at | £2 |
| • Lands for potatoes etc, valued at | £1 |
| • Maintenance, when working for his master, valued at | £3, 10 shillings |
| • Oat-meal, 3 half bolls, valued at | £2, 18 shillings, 4 pence |
| • Cash | <u>£5</u> |
| • Total | £16, 18 shillings, 4 pence |
- He has also the use of his master's horses.

Upon black cattle farms, the wages are something different. Domestic servant men have from £5 pounds to £6 and women up to £3 pounds. In harvest, or in time of cutting peats, the men have 1 shilling per day, and the women from 6 pence to 8 pence, with their dinner. Statute labour is 6 pence per day" (Fraser pp444-446)

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References

- See 'Library' for all the sources used in this series of notes.
- See 'Setting the Scene' for comments about how sources have been used.
- Of particular relevance to the present notes, see Rev Alexander Fraser's chapter on Kilmalie in the first Statistical Account of Scotland in 1792

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