

# Donald McLean's initial working life as a teenager and young adult

– from 13 years old to 30 years old – from 1792 to 1810

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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 are pertinent to this phase of Donald's life:-

- '[Overview of Donald's life](#)': This includes summaries of each of the other notes
- '[Donald's childhood](#)'
- '[Donald's continuing work and growing family](#)'
- '[Places: Blaich & Duiskey](#)'

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## Summary – purpose and highlights

- Donald's childhood was in Blaich in the Western Highlands and probably started his working life as a teenager on the Duiskey Estate which is next to Blaich on the shores of Loch Eil.
- These notes attempt to describe what it might have been like for Donald at this time.
- He was beginning his work at Duiskey Estate at a time when sheep were taking over and Alexander, the 13<sup>th</sup> Laird of Ardgour, was reforming the local crofting system.

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## Christina's childhood

Christina McPhee was born 8 years after Donald, in 1787 – near the beginning of the years covered by these present notes. We think that she was born in Crieff which is about 90 miles from Blaich. We do not know how or where she met Donald, nor when she first came to live in the area. All we know is that their first child was born in Blaich in 1811 when she was 24 years old and Donald was 32 years. This was the end the period at present under consideration.

Maybe she lived around Crieff in her childhood or maybe her parents moved to nearer to Blaich at some stage. We would have some idea about this if we knew when and where her siblings were born, but unfortunately, we have no information about whether or not she had any brothers or sisters.

We know nothing about Christina's early years, but it is likely that she did not have any schooling as she was illiterate. We know this because her will stated that it was "*read over and explained to her*" and she did not sign it. (BRB p20)

## Donald and Duisky

The BRB stated that “*Donald grew up to lease the Duisky Estate*” (p4). We know that he was leasing the farm prior to migrating in 1837 when he was 58 years old, and we assume that he was on the farm for a long time before that. But we do not know when he was first at Duisky. There are various possibilities:-

- His father (and even his grandfather) might have had close connections with Duisky for a very long time. The family might have been living there for several generations – ie Donald might have lived there as a child. We are only speculating here.
- The form of words “*grew up to lease Duisky*” indicates that, as a child, it was anticipated that he would eventually be the tacksman and this came about as a matter of course.
- He might not have lived on the property – maybe living nearby at Blaich and going to work on the farm each day. There are examples of others (who???) leasing Duisky but who were living elsewhere.
- He might have begun his connections with Duisky much later – say, in the 1820s. This is less likely, but if this was the case, initially he might have been undertaking some kind of work on a nearby farm.
- We don’t know how old Donald might have been when he started doing ‘men’s’ work – maybe in his early teens which mark the beginning of the present period under consideration in these notes.

There is more detail about Donald’s leasing of Duisky in our next set of notes – ‘[Donald’s continuing work and growing family](#)’.

## Farming

- Farms
  - In 1792, the average size of farms was 6.25 square miles or 4000 acres (1620 hectares) (Fraser p433).
- Crofts
  - There were xxx crofts in Blaich and xx crofts in Duisky.
  - The crofts were about xxx acres or so, fenced with rocks?? and hedges??, on which people would tend a few sheep, goats or black cattle, and grow oats and vegetable crops such as potatoes.
- Rents: The average annual rent was 50 pounds (p433)
- Commons: There is no common in the parish (ref p424)
- Livestock: In 1792, Fraser reported that there were 60,000 sheep, 6,000 black cattle, 1000 goats and 500 horses.
- Sheep: “*The sheep were first introduced into the parish in the year 1764. They have since increased so much that about three quarters of the country are occupied by them*” (Fraser pxx).
- Crops: Fraser gathered information about sheep farms in Kilmallie in 1792 and found that they averaged 13 acres under 12 bolls (2.4kl) of oats, 4 acres under 3 bolls (0.6kl) of barley and 10 acres of potatoes – with about 35,000 acres of sheep pasture (p425). For black cattle, there are nearly four times these tilled acreages (p425).
- Yields: “*The pasture grounds, including sheallings, do not rent above 4 pence per acre annually. The returns, upon an average, are, of oats, 3 from 1, of barley, 5, and of potatoes, 10. There is no hemp, and very little flax feed, sown in the parish. The valleys and meadows yielding spontaneously plenty of excellent grass; there is but little clover, or rye grass sown. The gardens yield the ordinary vegetables*” (Fraser p425)
- Timber: Fraser p423 “*On the property of Capt McLean of Ardogur, there are about 1000 acres of firs, oak, and other species of trees. These woods, in many places, would be very valuable. Here, however, they are not, being far from the shore, and the roads to them extremely bad. .... The trees that grow naturally are oak, fir, birch, ash, mountain-ash, holly, elm, wild geen, hazle and the Scotch poplar. Those planted are larix, spruce, silver fir, beech, plane and fruit trees.*”
- Ploughing: There were about 500 horses in the parish. “*They were used for ploughing, harrowing and leading home peats and carrying manure to the fields. Four of them are yoked abreast in plough; and a man leads them, stands immediately before them, and walks backward, facing the ploughman. This surely, is very awkward! The gentleman in the parish, however, yoke but two horses in the plough; and one who holds it, manages also the reins. Three different kinds of ploughs are used.*” (Fraser p424)

## Changes in the organization of farms

Donald leased Duisky at a time when the crofting system was being re-shaped. By 1800, Alexander, the 13<sup>th</sup> Laird, had reduced military involvement and become more personally involved in the management of his estates even though he might still have been absent – perhaps living in Edinburgh. He began to transform the farming system along the southern shores of Loch Eil. As tacksman, Donald would have been at the centre of these changes, and would have been affected directly – either as a crofter himself, or as a tacksman who had some part in helping the laird to implement the new scheme. The reforms which the 13<sup>th</sup> Laird instigated are described in his letter to his crofters in 1850 when he reflected back over the previous half century. This letter, in the Ardgour papers, p33 & 34, is in appendix A, and is analyzed as follows :-

- Previously: In the 1780's, *"before crofting was known"* the people were *"located in the glens and on different farms upon the estate, some holding a fourth, some an eighth, and many as low as a sixteenth share of the farm - the arable land divided into as many parts, and lots drawn for it every season, so that no man should sow the same land two years following"*.
- Farms: Around 1800, Alexander began *"dividing the farms along the shores into separate holdings"*.
- Process: *"At that time the crofting system was hardly known and the farmers could not at once see all the advantages of the plan"*. Alexander did not press them. He gave them time to consider, and a year or two elapsed before a large majority agreed to make a trial
- Surveying: In 1801 the allotments were surveyed, marked out, and to be taken possession of at Whitsunday 1802. *"I had four farms upon the shores of Locheil surveyed and sub-divided into allotments, each consisting of some arable, or land easily improved into arable - with each allotment the pasture of four cows, their followers, and a certain number of sheep."* Undoubtedly, Duisky was one of these four farms.
- Fertilizers: *"The value of kelp at that period was about its height; but, as encouragement to improve the soil, I gave it up to the occupiers."*
- Sheep: A few years later the arrangements with the sheep were changed. Under the old system, *"every man having his sheep on his own mark and his own management, fraught with almost daily disturbance to the flock"*. Under the new system, *"the whole sheep of the farm were then put together under one mark and one shepherd, under the control of three men chosen by the crofters"*. Although the 13<sup>th</sup> implied that this local democratic method worked well in the early 1800s, a decade before, Fraser expressed doubt that such cooperation was possible: *"Proprietors, it is said, have made repeated trials of letting their lands, among the former tenants, jointly, provided they would stock them with sheep, and agree among themselves, with regard to their respective shares. But every instance of this kind, has proved unsuccessful in the end. And, indeed, it is almost impossible, that a multitude of people can agree in managing a joint flock of sheep, and bringing the produce to market. Schemes of this kind, consequently, how plausible soever they may seem in theory, will ever fail of success in practice; and experience has demonstrated the absurdity of such an attempt. The fact is, that sheep farms cannot be let with prudence, or advantage, to a number of tenants; and the introduction of sheep must, of course, diminish the number of tenants in particular districts"* (ref p427).
- Conditions: *"Restrictions were few, intended for mutual advantage, but were strictly to be complied with":*
  - Rent: *"The rent of the farms was fixed according to the rents of the day, and three of the crofters selected by themselves accompanied by the surveyor and the factor, apportioned the amount upon each croft separately. The numbers were then put into a bonnet and drawn out by one of the crofters."*
  - Hills: The Hill Rent was given gratis for three years
  - Construction: Stone houses, head and side dykes were to be finished within three years.
  - Obligation: Tenure was based on good conduct, industrial and frugal habits, quiet neighbours, obedient to the laws of our country.
  - Continuity: *"Assurance was given that no alterations should be made (to the crofting arrangements) for nine years, and at the end of that period your own industrial conduct, with one exception, rendered any change uncalled for."*
  - No formal leases: *"Some time ago I offered you leases: your reply was, "What was to be the use of them? Had any man been removed unless for bad conduct, or had any man's rent been raised for forty-eight years? What good then would a lease be to us?" I agree that, when mutual confidence exists, you are better without a lease. I know the absence of it has saved many of you from bad and indolent habits, and that my watchfulness preserved many of you from mischief"* (p34).
  - Termination: *"When a man leaves his croft, from whatever cause, he receives two-thirds of the value of the house and offices, valued by the verdict of three sworn burleymen."*

- Results: See the next set of researchers' notes – on Donald's continuing working life.

## Minerals

- 'There is a rock, of an excellent redish granite, in the farm of Sallanchan, belonging to Captain McLean of Ardgour' – good quality (Fraser p 420).

## Economic activity

Fraser reported the following in 1792, and similar conditions might have applied in the present period being considered (1793 to 1810)

- Imports: Meal, flour, oats, butter, cheese, whisky, foreign spirits, salt, timber, tar and all kinds of ordinary mercantile goods (Fraser p 425)
- Exports : Fish (herring), wool , sheep, horses and black cattle
- Rent: Valued rent of the parish = 434 pounds, Real gross rent = 5200 pounds, The lands rent = 4734 pounds, Salmon fishing on the Lochy = 230 pounds, Still water fishing = 27 pounds, Houses = 200 pounds (approx) (p 433)
- Land values: The value of land now used for sheep is three times what it was when sheep were introduced about 3 decades previously (p 432)

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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 Fraser's chapter on Kilmallie in the first Statistical Account of Scotland in 1792.

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## APPENDIX A

### Address by Colonel Alexander MacLean, 13<sup>th</sup> Laird of Ardour, to his crofters on the Ardgour properties Ardgour papers, bundle 12, 31st August 1850, pp33& 34

In 1850, Alexander reflected back over his time as laird for the previous 50 years.

*"My Friends, Our connection existed before crofting was known. Near seventy years ago I found you and your forefathers located in the glens and on different farms upon the estate, some holding a fourth, some an eighth, and many as low as a sixteenth share of the farm- the arable land divided into as many parts, and lots drawn for it every season, so that no man should sow the same land two years following. This pernicious system was more injurious to the tenant than to the landlord, but greatly so to both; ten years afterwards I found you all in the same predicament. I was then a Captain of Dragoons, and allowed my military service to prevail over duties both more important both to you and to myself, and things remained as they were. At the conclusion of the first French war, when I came more among you, I perceived it was incumbent upon me to rescue you and myself from so pernicious a system, and dividing the farms along the shores into separate holdings appeared to be the most attainable and most conducive to the interest of both parties. At that period large emigration to America was going on from the neighbouring countries, and many of you said, if you were removed from your holdings, you would emigrate also. I had an aversion to any of you leaving your native country, and endeavoured to show you the benefits of what I conceived to be a better system, advantageous to both you and me. With this impression, I had four farms upon the shores of Locheil surveyed and sub-divided into allotments, each consisting of some arable, or land easily improved into arable- with each allotment the pasture of four cows, their followers, and a certain number of sheep. The value of kelp at that period was about its height; but, as encouragement to improve the soil, I gave it up to the occupiers, and to this day yourselves are the best judges of its value. You could not at once see all the advantages of the plan. The crofting system was then hardly known: I did not press you, and gave you time to consider. A year or two elapsed before a large majority agreed to make a trial. At length, in 1801, the allotments were surveyed, marked out, and to be taken possession of at Whitsunday 1802. The rent of the farms was fixed according to the rents of the day, and three of your number, selected by yourselves, accompanied by the surveyor and the factor, apportioned the amount upon each croft separately. The numbers were then put into a bonnet and drawn out by one of yourselves- the Hill Rent was given gratis for three years, when stone houses, head and side dykes were to be finished- restrictions were few, intended for mutual advantage, but were strictly to be complied with- tenure, based on good conduct, industrial and frugal habits, quiet neighbours, obedient to the laws of our country. Assurance was given that no alterations should be made for nine years, and at the end of that period your own industrial conduct, with one exception, rendered any change uncalled for. Years rolled on before we discovered an error in our practice, but which was easily remedied and acquiesced in by all: I allude to every man having his sheep on his own mark and his own management, fraught with almost daily disturbance to the flock. The whole sheep of the farm were then put together under one mark and one shepherd, under the control of three chosen men of your number. The change has worked well, and all, I believe, are satisfied. Sometime ago I offered you leases: your reply was, What was to be the use of them? "Had any man been removed unless for bad conduct, or had any man's rent been raised for forty-eight years? What good then would a lease be to us?" I agree that, when mutual confidence exists, you are better without a lease. I know the absence of it has saved many of you from bad and indolent habits, and that my watchfulness preserved many of you from mischief. I shall now close this Address, by thanking you most fervently for your general good conduct and persevering industry, the beneficial results of which are now apparent in your present condition- your crofts improved, your rents paid. At this date, the whole arrears are under eight per cent- one-half of which is due by five individuals. All I have to add it, persevere in your present course;- while I live, mine to you shall not be changed, and before I go hence my endeavour shall be to insure to you support in your present possessions. On one point only have you disappointed me- the improvement and cleanliness of your dwelling-houses. For this you have facilities which few crofters in the West Highlands possess. You get small timber for houses and offices gratis, almost for the asking; and when a man leaves his croft, from whatever cause, he receives two-thirds of the value of the house and offices, valued by the verdict of three sworn burlymen."*

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