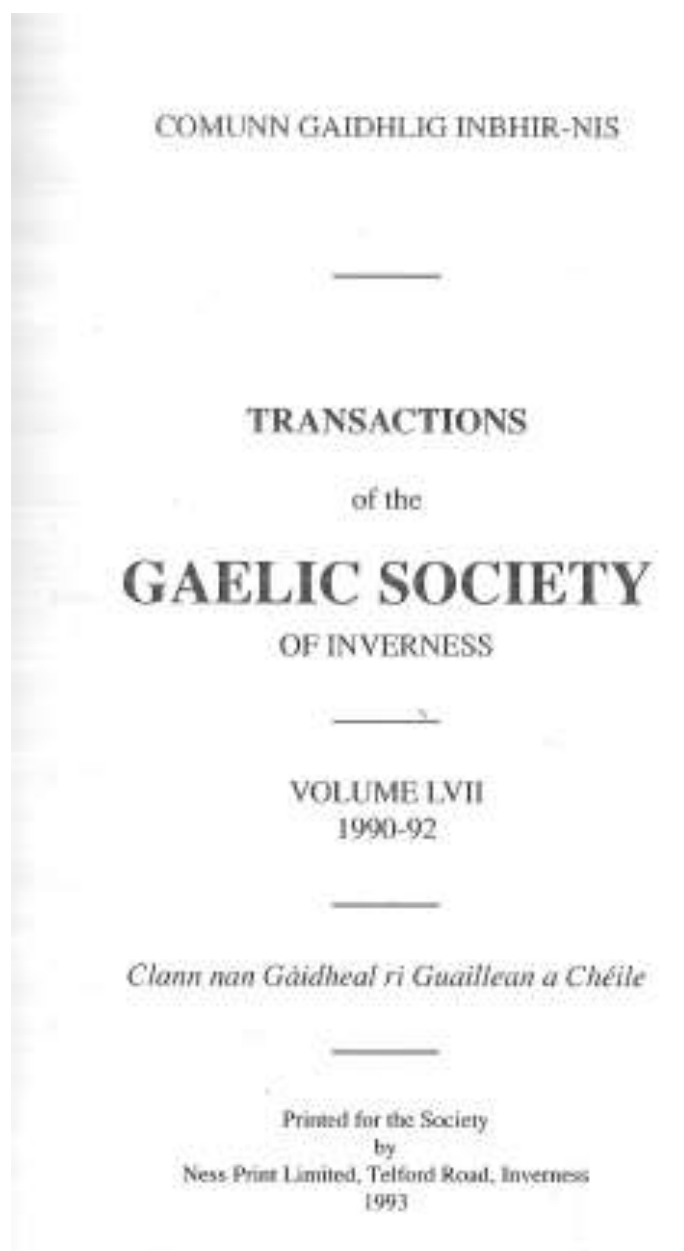


# Memoirs of John Macleod (including mentions of Jane Robertson and Donald Cameron)

*A boyhood in An Gearasdan [Fort William]: Notes by the Late Principal John MacLeod*

By JFM 'Jeff' Macleod in *Transactions of Gaelic Society of Inverness*, vol 57, pub 1993



Notes by Don Gordon, February 2022.

- This is an extract – a selection of pages relevant to a family tree on page 2 of our D56. Pages 238 to 256 have not been included because they do not have details relevant to the family tree.
- JFM 'Jeff' Macleod introduced these memoirs. Jeff is the grandson of John Macleod.
- On [www.christinaanddonaldmclean.com](http://www.christinaanddonaldmclean.com) Jeff's ID is 9091 and John's ID is 9086.

Credibility

- John Macleod's memoir is an important source for our D57 because it links Donald Cameron, the sawmiller at Achnacarry, with Jane Robertson from Aberdeenshire in the 1770s.
- See the first page of D56 for comments about the reliability of these memoirs.

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## A BOYHOOD IN AN GEARASDAN: NOTES BY THE LATE PRINCIPAL JOHN MACLEOD

J. F. M. MACLEOD, M.A., LL.B.

6th March, 1992

I have been asked to introduce this evening's paper which I must, at the outset, stress is not my work but rather that which remains of a writing in the hand of my late grandfather. It is right to give some preliminary inkling as to both the man and this particular writing.

My grandfather was born in Fort William in 1872 and spent his entire boyhood there before proceeding for his secondary education to Aberdeen Grammar School. His mother, although born in Stornoway, belonged to the old Lochaber family of the Macmasters, Corriebeg. His father who had come to Fort William as a Preventive Officer in the Customs & Excise had his family roots in Kirkhill and Urray. Both parents could speak Gaelic but, as will become apparent, Gaelic was not the language of the home.

My grandfather, a one time member of the Gaelic Society of Inverness, played a prominent role in the religious and educational affairs of his day. He was, as a student, involved in the founding of the Free Presbyterian Church, but later on transferred his allegiance to the Free Church of Scotland. During the course of his ministry in the Free North Church in Inverness, he also became chairman of the Inverness-shire Education Authority. In 1930 he moved to Edinburgh as Principal of the Free Church College and in 1932 he was, at the age of 60, widowed. Some four years later he settled down to write a brief account of his early life. This extended to 14 pages of close-written material which form this paper. These are very characteristic of the man as I remember him, much interested in education whilst at the same time forceful in his evangelical persuasion. The views expressed are, as will therefore be understood, those of grandfather in his day and generation.

I also indicated that I would touch on the provenance of the

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paper. At the time of grandfather's death in 1948, his personal papers were passed to the Reverend Mr G. N. M. Collins, Minister of St Columba's Free Church in Edinburgh who availed himself of them when writing a biography. Some two years ago Mr Collins, latterly Professor Collins, died and his desk in turn required careful tidying out. This task was undertaken by Miss Irene Stewart a member of his former congregation and, at the same time, a daughter of my grandfather's first cousin, Mrs Jeanie Macmaster or Stewart. Rene readily recognised the source and the significance of the papers and forwarded them to me. I in turn discussed them with Mr Hugh Barron who set himself the work of deciphering grandfather's handwriting and producing a fair copy. This in turn has been much worked over by both my cousin Mr Alan Macleod and myself. The result is the following insight into nineteenth century Fort William which we all three of us present for your attention this evening.

April 8th 1936

My memory goes back to early days in Fort William where I was born on the 25th day of March, 1872. The house where my parents then lived was known as Lundavra House. It was the old town house of the Lundavra family who were cadets of the Lochiel family. The house became a ruin a few years ago and was pulled down. It stood on the south side of the High Street almost opposite what was then and may be still known as the Ben-Nevis Hotel, the lessee of which in my boyhood was Alexander Boyd. The house of my birth was first to the west of the present Post Office and at its west side a lane led up to a court behind which two families of Macphees lived. One of them represented the decayed fortunes of what used to be the chief family of the Macphees of Glendessary. In that glen which has only a family or two now there used to be twenty three families of Macphees. The son of this family was at school with me - Duncan was his name. He is dead a number of years ago. His trade was that of a tailor. As I left Fort William when we were but boys I have kept no trace of his family if he had one. Like almost all boys in Lochaber in those days he was better known by his

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mine to a part extent that I failed to learn from him. Just about as soon as I was transferred to a really good teacher I knew the difference and responded to the stimulus. In my boyhood there, there were still traditions current about Ewen MacLachlan and his learning. He died just about fifty years before I was born. Yet eighty years after his death one might hear of how he got his father who was a poor weaver to keep him at school. The father wanted that he should begin work. The son wanted to have the chance of becoming a scholar. The father agreed to gratify him if he would tell him in Latin how he took his breakfast. The answer was prompt - "cum porrigibus cum lactibus cum ramshorni spoonibus". He was allowed to stay on at school. Ewen was my grandfather's senior contemporary and no doubt they knew each other well. There were more schools in Lochaber in those days than the Fort William one. But the early education of the better to do families was very simple. I have had in my hand the well-thumbed copy of the English Bible that Miss Jenny Cameron had as her schoolbook as she went from house to house among the tacksmen to teach their young folk. It is possible that this volume is in the hands of Mrs Eadie of Manchester whose mother showed it to me. On my grandmother's side there is a tradition of English home education for the greater part of two centuries. It was shortly after the middle of the 18th century that Donald Cameron the Miller at Achnacarry under the Commissioners of the Forfeited Estates brought to Lochaber his young wife Jane Robertson. She belonged to an upper class family in Aberdeenshire. When she was sent to Aberdeen to finish her education, she came to know her future husband who was then in that city learning the trade of a millwright. The young folk took to one another and they made a runaway match. She came to Lochaber with no Gaelic but learned the language yet so as to speak it always as an acquired one. Disowned, she went in Lochaber by the name of A' Bhean Ghallda or the Lowland wife. She saw to it that her children got from herself a course of English and practical education. Likely she had a course in Aberdeen of what used to be called "The White Seam". She taught my great grandmother to spin and weave linen and my sister still has a

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table-cloth which this daughter made. She grew the flax, scutched it, spun it, and then wove it. Home Industries counted for something in those days. It was something more than fancy work. People depended on their own initiative and enterprise. In those days this was an uncommon thing that a whole family boys and girls should get an English education in the fastnesses of wild Lochaber. There were in the extensive parishes of Kilmallie and Kilmonivaig a few S.P.C.K. schools where the education was being given in English only. These however met the needs of anyone who was within reach of them. One should not forget the extent of these contiguous parishes, the two largest in Scotland. Their area is as extensive as that of almost half a dozen of the smallest Scottish counties put together. Fort William used to be a garrison town before my time but the memory of its garrison days was still quite fresh in my boyhood. I heard about the good name of the 93rd Highlanders who were on duty there for some time. When the garrison was withdrawn, the walls and houses of the old fort remained, and, when I was about five or six years old, we went to live in one of the houses. It was next door to what had been the governor's house. There tradition still told of how the governor and his lady kept state over a century ago. When he was a junior officer, he eloped with the daughter of the Marquis of Tweeddale, Lady Alice. The governor was, I think, a brother of the famous Earl of Dundonald. He used to be spoken of as Captain Cochrane. What used to be the glacis of the Fort was called the Glassie. It was parcelled out in gardens. The wall along the River Nevis was about two feet wide and was coped with best freestone. How often have I run from end to end of it without a tremor. On one occasion I remember the tides getting into the Fort. It was the night of November 23rd 1882. There was the greatest gale that I have ever known and as it swept up from the south west it heaped the waters of Loch Linnhe upwards. The water was about a foot deep on our ground floor and I remember how my father carried us on his back upstairs. We had a kind neighbour who had left the governor's house some time before. I happened to say when calling on her a little after the storm that it was one I should

a donkey – are you for sale?” This type of back chat was popular. Our connection with Glasgow and its imps kept us abreast with the newest slang of Clydebank. If we went to the Nevis to bathe, the favourite places were The Craigs with its deep pool – the new Steps – for more daring swimmers, the Ram’s Pool and, when we had time to go there, to the pool above Nevis Bridge which was called after Colin MacInnes below whose croft it was sited, Linne Chailein. As boys we used at the proper season to visit the hazel wood at the entrance to Glennevis and sometimes a shinty match or a football one might take us to the level fields of Glennevis Farm – once or twice I was in these early days in the graveyard above that field – Tom eas an t-slinnein. In this burial ground I came to know that my mother’s great grandparents are buried – Ewen (Hugh) MacMillan and his wife Christina Cameron. He was 101 when he died. His wife whom my mother might remember died in 1842 at the age of 96. She may have been even older – for my great grandfather, her son Donald who died in 1845 was over 80 at his death. He is buried in Kilmallie and beside him my parents are laid. In Tom eas an t-slinnein there was a heavy iron kind of coffin which was in use over a hundred years ago when the scare over the misdeeds of Burke and Hare filled the country with fear of the bodysnatchers. Even an out of the way corner like quiet Glennevis stood in the fear that the freshly buried bodies might be dug up to provide material for the dissecting board. This iron frame which could be laid upon a grave had neither top nor bottom. But presumably the grave on which it was laid was watched for several days and nights. If any attempt were made to tamper with it, the noise would warn the watchers by night that mischief was on foot. In Glennevis there is another old burial ground called Achnancon. This I have never gone to see. But not far from the farm house further up than Tom eas an t-slinnein at the foot of the hill is what we were wont to call The Rocking Stone, Clach nan turraman. High up above it on the hillside is an old vitrified fort. This is near the gap by which men used to get to Blar a’chaorainn on the road to Lundavra. It was only once that I took this highway and I took it from the Blar a’Chaorainn

the old days of home simples some of which may be still in use and is the plant which is used in cases of erysipelas. It is spoken of in Gaelic as *Lus an ròs*. When it is boiled the fluid may be applied either externally or internally. I heard of a case in which it was a success in both ways. It was first used externally. The swelling subsided but came back in three weeks time as foretold by the prescriber. Then the patient drank the decoction. The inflammation went away and never came back. My informant in this matter was the late Mr Neil Cameron who was himself the patient and who, when the plant was sent him, was suffering from severe erysipelas yet was so far sceptical as to the remedy that he tried the outward application first. Among the old Cameron families in Glennevis were the forebears of the late Dr. Allan Cameron of the East Church, Inverness who was a distant cousin of mine on my mother’s side. I have the impression that his parents were of the old Episcopalians of Lochaber. Their congregation was the first one in Fort William. It may have been founded by Allan Cameron of Lundavra who was one of Bishop Forbes’ right hand men. It had a Mr Alexander MacLennan as its minister about a century or more ago. He was a little man and, as he wore the surplice he got the nickname by which he was better known than by his own name, Iain Beag a’ chòtan bhàn. Like the clergy of his body he was always ready to baptise, and fugitives from strict disciplines made their way to him. There was one such parent who applied to him for baptism and in speaking to the cleric called him, much to his disgust, Maighstir Iain. The testy answer was “Chan e Iain a th’ orm, chan eil ann an sin ach frith ainm a thug blagairdean a’ Ghearasdan orm” (John is not my name, that is only a nickname that the blackguards of the Garrison have given me). I have heard that at one time the chapel had an evangelical man as its incumbent, a rare thing in the Scottish Episcopal Church. He was a Mr Simpson and I am told that my grandmother went sometimes to hear him of an evening. This freedom from the tether of church exclusiveness was quite in keeping with her independence and her family history. Her mother had been the hostess of the Haldane preachers and of Finlay Munro. Her husband,

end. The sides of Glennevis seem to me to have as rich a coating of grass as any place that I have ever seen. The old Camerons of this Glen were Clann or Sìochd Shomhairle. They have been said to have been not Camerons but MacDonalds. I never, however, came across any of them that looked on themselves as anything else but Camerons. It was of these Camerons that the many of that name who are found in Upper Strathspey are. They are the children of the Mùgaich as they were nicknamed by their new neighbours when they went to Rothiemurchus about three hundred years ago as the tail or bodyguard of a daughter of Glennevis who married Grant of Rothiemurchus. My grandmother’s grandfather, Donald Cameron, the miller at Achnacarry was of these Strathspey Camerons, his father being the miller at Aviemore. In Lochaber this sept of the Camerons were often spoken of as Na Tomaidh from the fact that they buried in Tom eas an t-slinnein. So those who buried at Gairloch were the Camerons of Dochanassie. They were spoken of as Na Dochaidh. I think that my grandfather’s mother was of the Dochaidh so that we have connection with Kilmallie, Gairloch and Glennevis. If I had early enough taken an interest in these things, I could have learned much about these from my mother but she was gone before I thought of the connection in which we were with the various families of Lochaber who were our remote cousins. As I have been speaking of Glennevis, I may mention that as a boy I once went there to gather bog myrtle, the which I took home for boiling. The decoction which we called bog myrtle then was used as a cure for worms in children. It was, I think, astringent and brown and though not pleasant was not very unpleasant. As to home medicines I remember the use of hartshorn for rubbing and the rhubarb pills which my mother used to compound in the old mortar that we still have. This was given to my grandfather about 1818 in the high part of Banffshire where he was teaching. There he used his medical knowledge as he did in the various places in which he taught. He must have come back to Lochaber about 1818 as it was about that year that he got married. The bog myrtle is called roid in Gaelic. The use of it as a medicine may date back to

whose convert she was, was through his father in the faith in the John Newton tradition. She was an out and out Free Church woman. Yet she was critical of much in her church and instead of making an idol of it she once, during the Union movement of 1863-73, said that she wondered that the U.P.s would unite with such a body as the Free Church. With all this however she was one of the truest of Free Church women. But churchianity was not put in the place of Christianity and, though there were lively Christians about her, there was a very mixed multitude also that had no greater ground of confidence than that they belonged to such and such a church. With this pious tradition it was little wonder that such Evangelicals as Ryle and Spurgeon should be household names with us. I was the last of the grandchildren that my grandmother lived to see. I was a child of about eight months old when she died. At such an age as I then was I could scarcely be thought likely to have any memory of her. She outlived her husband almost thirty six years. My mother was her youngest daughter and the second youngest of her children. The youngest John who was only a few weeks old when his father died went to Australia. His folk had no word from him since the year after his mother’s death when he went to Queensland. So long as she lived, her house was an open house of call for her Christian friends who were travelling from the north to Glasgow. Until the opening of the Highland Railway the canal route was much more important than it came to be afterwards. Her son Donald who was minister of Back in Lewis somehow thought that, owing to her attachment to her son in law Donald Cattanach, she had a leaning to separatism. All that he could legitimately infer from the facts was that she was very independent and that Donald Cattanach, who was not a separatist, was one of the noted laymen of the Free Church that were held in high esteem by the remnant of the Separatists about Inverness, and in particular by the set of Mr Archibald Cook’s admirers who were spoken of as Cookites. He might almost as well have said that his father in law, Big John Macrae had a leaning to Separatism because of the esteem in which he held the leaders of the Separatist movement whom he knew about Inverness.

It was in a letter to Mr Cameron of Back that Donald spoke of these leanings. Donald had a very marked strain of the touchy in his make up. Donald Cattanach was married to my aunt Catherine who was my mother's oldest sister. There was a number of years between them in age, the one being born in 1821 and [he] the other in 1813. Catherine married in 1841. She was of a very patient and sweet disposition. She died in 1863 which was the year of my mother's marriage. Her daughter Mary who married the schoolmaster in Newtonmore was for almost seven years brought up by my mother and as one of them. She was with them until she was eighteen years old. When my mother was still a girl, she walked with her mother all the way to Newtonmore to attend the communion services in Kingussie. All this way they walked and I think stayed with the Rosses of Gaskbeg. Mrs Ross who died in Aberdeen was of the set with whom my grandmother was intimate. She was of the old type of Evangelical Christians that were in Badenoch from the time of Mr Robertson's ministry in Kingussie. She met with adversity. This took her to Aberdeen where she kept boarders. When I went there in 1885, my mother wanted me to call on her. It is one of my regrets that I did not do so. As a boy I had a good deal of shyness. This helps so far to account for my failure to go to see this good woman. Her grandson Donald MacMillan, the son of an architect, who was married to her daughter was some years in advance of me as a student. I did not like him as he was a bit of what looked like a conceited wasp. This may have also helped to keep me from calling as the old lady stayed in their home. When in 1871 George Macleod of Lochbroom's death was mentioned in the papers, a man to whom she was much attached, one of her boarders, said, "Mrs Ross, the devil is dead". "Not", said she, "as long as you live". Donald MacMillan had no sympathy with his grandmother's line of things. No more in those days had I, though even then those who followed that line were those for whom in my heart I had most respect. Donald became a parish minister in Prestonfield in Edinburgh. In his student days he was a strong Tory which I was not. I came from the Highlands where the heather was on fire with the Land

Question and I had no liking for the party that stood for the oppression which had been inflicted upon the tenants of the Highlands and Islands. When I was a boy of thirteen, I first went away from home and spent a holiday with my cousin Ewen Cattanach who was my aunt's youngest son. I came thus to know the Cattanach connection. I often saw my uncle Donald Cattanach but the shyness of which I have spoken kept me from speaking to him. Two years before this he had a stroke and was as ready to shun a stranger as I was shy to approach him. I remember meeting Donald MacDougall from Grantown who came to see the old man. The MacDougalls were of the Established Church. They represented the old tradition of Inverness-shire Separatism. I met also Alexander whom I found very kind. He was the banker in Kingussie. Mrs Kinnaird my cousin was the oldest of the Cattanachs. She used to get the "Perthshire Courier" which was the weekly paper that found favour with the old school Free Church folk. Mrs Kinnaird was a good woman who had met with much sorrow. She had lost her husband and her children. She herself did not live to see sixty. I think she was only fifty two when she died. In her young married life her home was in Edinburgh. Her husband and she were connected with Dr. Begg's congregation. I think he was a deacon in it. It was on my first visit to Newtonmore that I first saw a railway train. In those days the village was a very plain one. Its day of development had not come. My mother always used to call it Newton moor and this was no doubt the right form of the name as in Gaelic it is An Sliabh without the "more". It was the new town on the moor. The moor itself was called the Moor of Strone. Strone is the name of the land holdings under the hillside above the village.

#### FOOTNOTE

In course of our preparation of this paper for publication, I had occasion to visit Old Kilmallie burial ground. A leaning stone bears this legend:- "In Memory of Isabella, wife of Alexander Macleod Fort William, born Stornoway June 26th 1834, Died Fort William April 3rd 1889. She rests beside her mother Mary daughter of Donald MacMillan, Corriebeg and

wife of John MacMaster SPCK Teacher Stornoway. Also the above Alexander Macleod died at Edinburgh June 3rd 1910". It was within the short compass between grandfather's birth in 1872 and his mother's death in 1889 that his boyhood which we have been considering extended.

Readers may also wish to know what befell grandfather in the period following upon his writing this evening's paper. There remained to him five years of active service to the Free Church College and increasingly infrequent visits North. He fell a victim to a progressive disease which weakened his physical strength. His last foray to his beloved Highlands was in the Summer of 1941 when he had to submit to the indignity of passing through a military control at Beauly before delivering his final full Message to a congregation in the hall of Helmsdale Free Church. On this occasion his voice tailed somewhat away, and he realised that his years of activity were at an end.

Your secretary has asked me whether I can shed any light on grandfather's attitude to Gaelic. He has particularly drawn my attention to a passage at Page 115 in Professor Collins' biography where Mr Murdo Morrison, Director of Education in Inverness-shire when grandfather was chairing the Education Authority, is quoted as writing:- "He sponsored an experimental scheme whereby, in selected schools, the children of Gaelic-speaking parents, at their first admission, should be taught actively in their mother tongue for the first year". Unfortunately I know nothing of this experimental scheme, of its practitioners or of its ultimate success or failure. I can only report that my grandparents, who were both bilingual, did not teach Gaelic to their five children. Rather it was used as a medium whereby manse secrets could be imparted beyond the reach of little ears. In his own exculpation grandfather used to observe that, as he had mastered the language after his own boyhood himself, so similarly could his offspring. As four of the children pursued their scientific bent and became doctors, their educational development inevitably carried them furth of, and not as in grandfather's case home to, the Gaelic language.