

Centenary of the Free Church of Coll

by Betty MacDougall

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When the Great Disruption of 1843 took place in the Church of Scotland, Coll and Tiree were a joint parish. The chief minister of the parish was the Rev. Neil MacLean, a connection of the Crosbull family. He lived in Tiree and the assistant minister, the Rev. Archibald Nicol who served the Coll church lived in the manse at Clabach. Mr MacLean remained in the Established Church but Mr Nicol and his parishioners "came out".

Hugh MacLean the laird of Coll was rarely resident in the island. However he had taken exception to statements made by some firebrands in the Free Church and refused the Coll people a site for a church of their own. In fact he attempted to imitate the measures taken by his ancestor, the wielder of the Yellow Stick. He sent word to the Coll people that on a certain Sabbath he would present them with a minister in whom he had confidence. On the appointed day he stationed himself and his chosen man beside the Established Church and spoke to the people as they approached, remonstrating and reasoning with them.

Respectfully but firmly they refused to comply with his wishes, declaring that their consciences were their own and that they could not surrender their convictions. They streamed past him to join Mr Nicol in an open air service since the church was denied to them. MacLean remained obdurate about providing a site but thereafter he did allow the people the use of the Parish Church except when it was otherwise required which was rarely. A varying account is that all shelter was denied them by the estate factor, Captain Donald Campbell. Certainly Mr Nicol had to leave the manse at Clabach and was housed in a little bothan at Baile Hogh on the way down to the shore. The Deacons' Court Minutes of the Free Church show that they had the use of Clabach Church from 1855 to 1857.

The enthusiasm of the Disruption led to a great revival in lay preaching of an evangelical fervour. A certain William MacKay appeared in Coll and it was said by some of the old people who had heard tales of the "great awakening" that his harsh Calvinistic stance caused Mr Nicol to leave the island in 1852. MacKay was joined in his preaching by a son of Coll, a Neil MacLean who was a schoolmaster in Islay.

The Coll Estate changed ownership in 1856 but it was not till 1861 that a site was granted through the intervention of Mr Edward Bouverie M.P. for Kilmarnock. A Free Church and manse were completed by 1863 at Griseabull. The present house was the manse and the barn was the church. Going by the Deacons' Court records, there was a gallery in the church.

When Mr Nicol left in 1852 there was no replacement till 1855 when the Rev. Alexander Fraser was appointed, He also was of the rigidly Calvinistic school that believed all secular pleasures were essentially sinful. Many tales were told of his baleful influence. One old worthy was driven to bury his bagpipes in the peat bog; young people who saw him approaching in their path took to the hills rather than suffer his exhortations. If any report came to his ears of singing or story telling in a home, he would refuse baptism of the children till the parents had adequately expressed their remorse.

Fraser was succeeded by the Rev. Roderick Ross from Ardersier in 1882. He married a local girl, Julia, daughter of Roderick MacKinnon shoemaker at Broadhill in the west end. He seems to have started off on good terms with Colonel Stewart the owner of the Coll estate, for the Colonel suggested that a site be chosen in Arinagour for a new Church with a commodious manse. With a regular steamship and postal service, Arinagour had developed considerably and the bulk of the population now lay towards that part of the island. This was agreed to and the new Free Church was opened in 1884.

However in the course of time, Ross became involved in island politics. At the request of his congregation he opposed the laird and factor at the local council elections. In revenge, Darroch, the factor, set about harassing the minister and his family. A dispute was fabricated about the approaches to the manse and Darroch went the length of ordering the estate workers to barricade the house entrance. He even had a cartload of rubbish tipped into the manse well. The outcome was a lawsuit by John Lorne Stewart v. Roderick Ross in the Sheriff Court at Oban in 1894. The dispute was settled in favour of the minister and all obstructive acts were forbidden.

The Campbell family, lairds of the east end and Caolas supported the Free Church. The coloured glass windows in Arinagour church are a memorial to Flora Campbell, eldest daughter of Murdoch Campbell of Caolas. She married the Rev. Francis MacBean who became minister of Fort Augustus Free Church. Hence the initials at the base of the windows, FCMB - Flora Campbell MacBean.

Ross was an advocate of the union of the free churches which took place in 1900. There followed four years of bitter dispute in Scotland over the ownership of the free church buildings. Finally the stalwarts who had held out for their Free Church were forced to go to law. After protracted litigation the case was decided in the House of Lords in favour of the "Wee Frees" as rightful owners of the properties as existed before the union of 1900. So the free church congregation in Coll had their building restored to them and the United Free Church congregation had to seek accommodation elsewhere in the houses currently known as 'Windswept' and 'Burnside'.

Meetings were held for worship at other places as well as the church, for instance in the carpenter's house at Uig and the house at Struthan which was also the east end school until 1892 when the Board School was erected at Bousd. Another great revival hit the island in the 1880's and the Mission House at Struthan would be packed to the doors with an attentive overflow outside. There were further revivals in the 20th century but a fast-dwindling population was reflected in a diminishing congregation. The Free Church had conducted all its services in Gaelic which helped greatly to keep the language alive but even that custom fell into disuse with the advent into the church of non-Gaelic speakers.

Subsequent ministers after Roderick Ross were the Rev. Peter M. Chisholm from 1921-25, Rev. Jonathan Campbell from 1926-31 and the Rev. J. A. Newall from 1934-39 when he left at the outbreak of the Hitler war to serve as a padre in the forces. The current holder of the charge is the Rev. Huite Sliep.

Since it was in 1884 that the Free Church opened in Arinagour, 1984 is their centenary celebration year.