

Scalan News

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Mgr. Sandy MacWilliam



Mgr. Alexander MacWilliam was born in Buckie on the 28th May 1902. He went to school there until 1918 when he entered Blairs Junior Seminary. His younger brother J. Lewis, born in 1904, had preceded him there in 1917. As was customary when two members of the same family wished to train as priests, they were sent to different seminaries. Alexander to the Scots College, Rome from 1919 to 1926 and Lewis to Valladolid, Spain from 1922 to 1929. Alexander was ordained in Rome in 1926 and returned, as was customary, to join the Cathedral staff in Aberdeen for two years. His first parish was Kirkwall in the Orkney Islands from 1928 to 1932 followed by twelve years as parish priest at Aboyne. During this time his brother Lewis, ordained in 1929 in Valladolid, returned to join the cathedral staff, moved to Stonehaven in 1930 and from there was transferred to Forres spending a period of twenty years there, from 1932 to 1952. While in Forres he met Peter Anson, who was his guest at the presbytery in 1934 during Peter's caravan tour around interesting Catholic places in both Scotland and England. His record of the tour was published in 1938 as 'The Caravan Pilgrim'.

Father Alexander MacWilliam was transferred to Chapelton in 1945. While he was there between 1945 and 1947 his interests in the history of Scotland's seminaries was awakened; the close proximity of Scalan must have encouraged this interest. Peter Anson came from Macduff in 1946 to do a survey and accurate drawings and measurements of Scalan. In the same year and in 1947, there appeared three articles by Glenlivetensis (Rev. Alexander MacWilliam) in 'Claves Regni', St. Peter's College Cardross, on the history of Scalan. In 1946, together with Peter Bonneyman and David McRoberts, he founded the Scalan Association aiming to 'restore and maintain Scalan as a place of pilgrimage and a national monument for the Catholics of Scotland'. They bought Scalan for £50.

In 1947 Father Alexander MacWilliam moved to St. Peter's Aberdeen and was parish priest there until he retired in 1977. During those years in Aberdeen he travelled frequently by bus to Blairs College where the Scottish Catholic archives were then kept. He never learned to drive. He researched deeply into all aspects of the North East's Catholic heritage and was a highly respected scholar. The historian Leslie Macfarlane wrote of him in the 'Innes Review': 'A most unassuming man of great gifts, much learning and considerable charm, Canon Sandy, as he was affectionately known to all, inspired a whole generation of scholars.' He had neither radio nor television, books being his great interest and he was surrounded by them.

Part of Canon Sandy's retirement was spent back in Aboyne but latterly in Aberdeen at Nazareth House where he died on the 20th March 1988 in his 62nd year of his priesthood. His burial was at St. Ninian's in the Enzie.

Ann Dean

The Highland Seminaries

Before 1731 the Highland and Lowland Seminaries were under the same administration but Bishop Gordon, like Bishop Nicholson before him, advocated splitting the two vicariates. The Highlanders were an alien race according to the Lowlanders. The former were mainly Gaelic speaking with rough manners and strange dress i.e. kilts, quick to pick a fight and lived in a clan system, McDonalds, Camerons, Stuarts, Grants to name a few. Many lived in damp, dark, smoky hovels with earth floors and turf roofs with only a hole to let the smoke escape. Malnutrition and disease were common owing to poverty and poor living conditions. Life expectancy was short. The Lowlanders considered themselves far more civilised although there were equally bad living conditions in the towns, namely the slum districts. It should be noted not all Highlanders were Catholic; a belief that arose because of Bonnie Prince Charlie and the 45. The Catholics tended to live in Knoydart, north and south Morar and Arisaig. Moidart had some and small groups could be found throughout the Highlands.

In 1726 Bishop Gordon won the approval of the Vatican to appoint a separate Bishop for the Highlands; his first choice was the Scalan Master John Grant but he disappeared in Rome before his consecration. It wasn't until 1731 that Hugh Macdonald, born in 1699 in Morar, transferred from Eilean Bán in 1716 to Scalan to study and was consecrated in 1731. The first Bishop appointed was a true highlander.

The splitting of the two vicariates was based on language not terrain. Scalan is situated in upland terrain in a predominantly Catholic area but the people were not all Gaelic speakers therefore the Seminary was placed in the Lowland district under the administration of Bishop Gordon.

To return to the Highland Seminaries: The first was established at Eilean Bán in Loch Morar. Father James Cassey had lived there until his death in 1704. Both Bishops Nicholson and Gordon had stayed there when travelling in the west. In 1714 Bishop Gordon opened the Seminary at Eilean Bán, he stayed for three months enrolling seven students, one being Hugh Macdonald whose father owned the island. The Bishop's nephew George Innes was appointed Master. The Seminary closed in 1716 owing to Hanovarian troop movements and the students were transferred to Scalan. In 1732 Bishop Hugh Macdonald returned to the island and built anew, possibly on the old site. Today the island is heavily wooded and all that remains are a course or two of stones. The Seminary was abandoned in 1738 and moved to Ghaoideil (Guidale) on the Rhu peninsular near Arisaig on land belonging to his younger brother John. With larger premises and more money coming in there were eight students studying for the priesthood.





Possible remains at Guidale

Eight years later 1746 saw the closure of Guidale owing to lack of funds for reasons unknown.





Bourblach ruins

There was reputed to be no seminary in the west until 1768 but people 'native' to the area tend to dispute this. On the closing of Guidale premises were rented at Bourblach situated near Morar. These were vacated in the early 1760's when the factor needed them for other purposes. 'Glenaladale' Macdonald who owned the land on the west side of Loch Shiel offered the Bishop accommodation in what is now the Glenfinnan Hotel. It was probably one or two rooms in the original building built as an inn in 1754. The inn was linked with the original church built by the same family on their land. The Rector, John Macdonald, visited the premises and subsequently wrote stating that he did not consider the accommodation suitable owing to the party atmosphere and the coming and going of the inn. A mention is made of a fine library at Glenfinnan; is this where it was? Two year later the Bourblach premises again became available and in 1770 the Seminary returned.







Another location for the Glenfinnan Seminary could have been the Green Isle (St. Finnian's Isle) in Loch Shiel. The remains of the Catholic Chapel are still visible—low stone wall and an altar stone. Ancient grave stones mark the burial sites of Irish settlers. A Celtic cross dominates the site marking the burial place of a 19th century priest and author Charles Macdonald. A seminary or a school for Catholic boys who knows? Certainly not the people I spoke to. I was told about the redcoat soldier who stole the chapel bell which did not stop ringing until he returned it to its rightful place.

To return to Bourblach. Bishop Hugh Macdonald was in failing health when he agreed that Bishop John Macdonald return to Bourblach which was now vacant. The building needed repairing and the farm stocked but with good management and money from Bishop Hugh this could be the 'Scalan' of the west. With the five Macdonald students, Bishop John as spiritual leader, financial adviser and disciplinarian, the move was made in 1770. In 1772 Aenaes McGillis, a newly ordained priest was appointed master and priest for North Morar. Unfortunately nothing went to plan and when Bishop Hugh died in 1773 it was still not a viable seminary. It is said he died of worry and over work. This Highland seminary struggled on until 1783 when Bishop Alexander Macdonald of Bornish had it closed and transferred to his house at Samalaman which was extended to accommodate the students. It was an unpretentious place situated in the rough bounds of Moidart, cramped and uncomfortable with a leaking roof and unstable walls; not an ideal place to educate students.



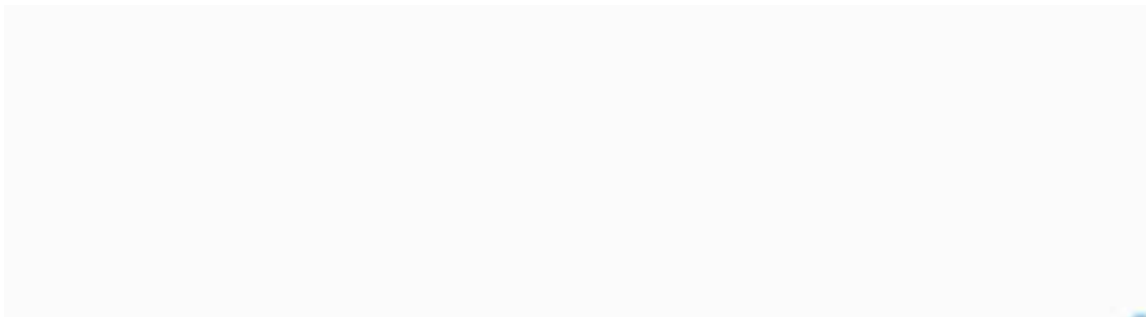




Samalaman today

The Vicar Apostolic, Bishop John Chisholm, one of the Strathglass Chisholms, had been looking for a new site for five years and finally one came on the market on the Island of Lismore; a good solid house with large cultivatable grounds. The purchase price was £5000; far more than the poverty stricken Vicariate could afford. The property was bought possibly with family money, who knows? The purchase of the property did not meet with the unanimous approval of the Highland clergy because of its inaccessibility on the island. By 1803 the seminary was established at Kilcheran where it remained for twenty six years.

Bishop John Chisholm is credited with founding the lime burning industry on Lismore. He was hoping the profits from Kilcheran quarry would help maintain the seminary. The business lasted for about ten years but doesn't appear to have been very profitable. Bishop's John brother Aeneas was saddled with supervising the lime kiln. In 1805 he was consecrated at Lismore; he was coadjutor to his brother. Two mitres in one family did not go down well with the Highlanders. In its twenty six years Lismore Seminary educated eighteen students; two thirds of them lived out their lives as hard working missionaries.







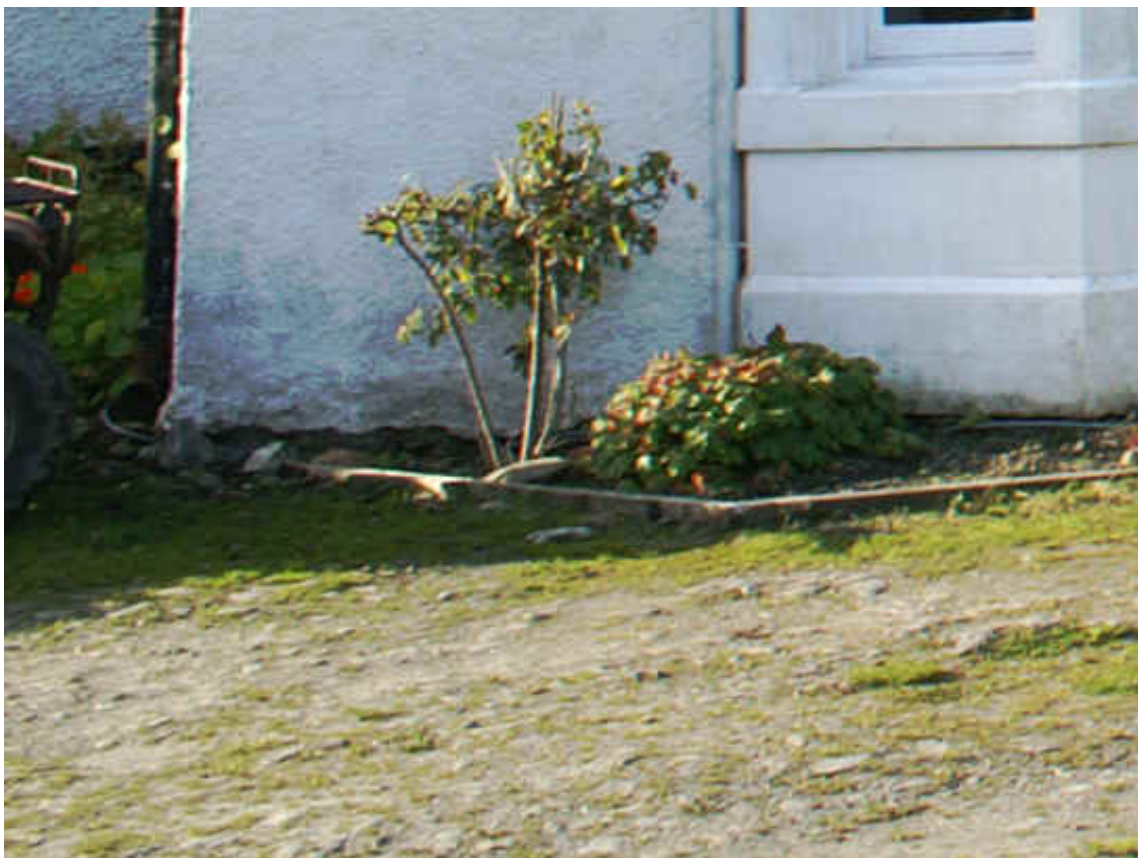


Remains of the lime kiln

The last student was Coll Macoll, a Lismore name; he was educated at Lismore and ordained by Bishop Ranald Macdonald in March 1831 after the Seminary closed in 1829. He stayed on to help the ailing Bishop who died in 1832. Father Macoll left for the Arisaig station but left under a cloud and travelled to Australia. Bishop John Chisholm died 8/7/1814, Bishop Aeneas Chisholm Died 31/7/1818. Both buried at Kilcheran.







The old part of Kilcheran House

One can only admire the Bishops of the Highlands who doggedly carried on against all the odds to train students for the priesthood. It wasn't in vain; the supply of priests to the west was sustained.

I hope this account illustrates the close ties the Highland District had with Scalan. Bishop Hugh Macdonald never forgot his student days at Scalan and tried to create a 'Scalan' in the Highlands but never succeeded. Some Highland students passed through Scalan, studied and left for Scots Colleges abroad. Many never integrated with the Lowland pupils which illustrates the difference that used to exist between the two Vicariates. The Highland seminaries never had the financial resources and it was decided in 1829 to amalgamate the two Vicariates to form the National seminary at Blairs near Aberdeen. By this time Scalan was closed moving to Aquhorties in 1799. At least two Highland students from Lismore entered Aquhorties prior to the opening of Blairs to students in 1830.

Blairs is no longer a viable teaching college and like so many Scots Colleges at home and abroad has closed its doors to students.

So few men and boys wish to train for the priesthood; once it was considered an honour to have a priest in the family. Religion plays no part in so many families, no part in day to day living. We are certainly the poorer for it. What is the answer?

I wish to acknowledge the late Sandy MacWilliam and John Watts who have unknowingly given me the inspiration to delve into books and papers.

I wish to thank the people of Glenfinnan who readily answered questions and pointed out where the remains of the cells (seminaries) could be found.







John and Aeneas Chisholm,s graves at Kilcheran

Sylvia Toovey

Points of interest

A Tribute

The Scalan Association lost one of its greatest supports when Jane McEwan died after a brief illness on January 7th 2010 aged 82 years. She died at the Fleming Cottage Hospital in Aberlour fortified by the rites of the Holy Church. Jane was laid to rest in the burial ground of the Church of the Incarnation, Tombae, Glenlivet. The requiem Mass was held on Monday 18th January 2010 organised by Canon Andrew Mann from Banchory. Canon Brian Halloran gave the address. Among the other priests were Father Michael Briody from Moodiesburn and Father Jim Thomson from Steppes. Jane had many friends among the clergy, a number were present to pay their last respects. Despite the bitterly cold snowy weather people travelled miles to say goodbye.

Jane and her husband Bill lived in a typical old Scots cottage on a hill with marvellous views over hilly farmland. Both liked gardening, not only was the garden large but it had flowers beds, mature trees and a pond. Vegetables were home grown and regularly used to make delicious soups. A cup of tea and home made cakes were always on offer when I dropped in for a word of advice about the news letter. I took the editorship after Alasdair Roberts retired. Jane was always there to encourage but never interfered. A lady with a gentle smile and a helping hand, a true friend to all.

The rowan trees at Scalan were loaded with berries in 2009 which, according to folklore, is a sign of a hard winter. By December 18th those who farmed the land at Scalan had moved their cows and sheep nearer home for shelter. The snow came with plummeting temperatures, a pattern that was repeated until March 2010. The seminary and the track from Eskemullach car park was impassable even for tractors. A handful of skiers were the only ones to pass Scalan which was wrapped in a blanket of beautiful white snow and completely cut off. At least the skiers could pass over the fences, no need to open gates. The wild life couldn't find food and it has been estimated that at least 33% of the deer perished. The white and brown hares were also hard hit and according to one keeper the grouse fared no better.

In the 17th century Scalan was shieling ground only used in the summer months. 2009 saw the farmers reverting to using Scalan as shieling ground. By March 15th Scalan was slowly emerging from its winter seclusion. The snow was retreating and the Crombie was in full flood. The Slochd behind Scalan was still white but odd patches of heather and rock could be seen. A landrover could make it but it wouldn't be an easy ride. How did those residents at Scalan in the 18th century survive with no running water and no steady source of heat for warming the houses. In this modern age we expect so much more than getting water from the burn, digging peats for fuel and living on a diet of oatmeal with the occasional hare or rabbit thrown in. The one thing that would be a bonus was that communities like Scalan Town helped one another at all times. All would rejoice and join together as spring arrived. A steady stream of people would make their way to Easter Mass with the birds singing above and the promise of summer ahead.

According to the frogs in Eskemullach mill pond spring is here, once again there are hundreds of frogs 'going a courting'. Mind it's a short dalliance, a maximum of three days.

Alexander Farquharson

Student 1771-1775 Master 1784-1787.

Alexander Farquharson was born in 1758 at Minmore Glenlivet, a second cousin to John Farquharson, Alexander was one of only a few who spoke fluent Gallic. He was a student at the college for four years entering the Scots College Rome in 1775. After his ordination in 1784 he returned to Scalan as master, his first post in the mission.

He received his training for the priesthood under John Patterson, an excellent master and a good role model. Unfortunately he did not have the ability of John Patterson.

On taking up the post he immediately had trouble with the Scalán farm tenants who wanted a larger share of the seminary's rental (they wanted to pay less rent). He refused to meet their demands; the tenants petitioned the Duke who reprimanded them. He went one step further; any more trouble and the factor would remove them from the land.

The Duke was sympathetic to the master and offered to instruct the tenants to carry the slates to re-roof the buildings; the Duke wanted them improved. The master had ambitious plans for the seminary but owing to a spark igniting the thatch (it was quickly put out) Bishop Hay made the decision to start slating immediately, also authorising interior improvements as well. Work started after Whitsunday 1786, but there wasn't sufficient money to cover the costs. The master wrote bills of promise to local tradesmen and by December he had overspent by £31. The harvest that year was very bad which greatly increased the price of meal and fodder. Bishop Hay considered him a bad manager and on visiting Scalán was appalled at the waste of money and the misappropriation of funds. The master left for Rome in 1794 to avoid conviction which could have resulted in the death penalty; a black day for Scalán.

Alexander Farquharson wandered round Europe and South America for a number of years unable to return to his Glenlivet home. He died in London in poverty age fifty three years.

John Gordon

Student 1771-1774

John was born in 1760 at Landends in the Enzie. He was a nephew of John Geddes (later Bishop) and a cousin of John Gordon who was appointed Vice-rector in 1776 and Rector of the Scots College Valladolid in 1798.

John Gordon (Landends) entered Scalán in 1771 where he spent three years studying under John Patterson before travelling to the Valladolid College. He completed the course but returned to Edinburgh in 1784 for his ordination by Bishop John Geddes. He served the Mission in Aberdeen from 1785 to 1797. In 1799 Scalán Seminary was moved to Aquhorties (by Inverurie). A new Scalán was emerging, one more able to cope with the needs of the growing, changing Church. John Gordon was appointed the first Procurator, a post he held until 1807. He moved to Eastlands and became Factor at Blairs in 1808, a post he held until his death in 1823.

John Anderson

Student 1771-1772 Assistant Master July–August 1793

John Anderson was born at Glenbuchet in 1758. He spent a year as a student (1771-1772) when he travelled to Ratisbon (Regensburg, Germany) leaving in 1781. Bishop Hay appointed him Assistant Master at Scalán in charge

of the boys and their studies. He was an unordained priest and after a month left for Würzburg where he was ordained as a Benedictine priest in 1792. He remained there until his death in 1828.

John Anderson never served on the Mission but briefly helped with the boys.

Donald Stuart

Student 1771-1772

Donald Stuart was born in 1756 at Strathavon. He entered Scaln in 1771 when consecutive bad winters and summers meant poverty was not far away for hundreds of farming folk. Master Patterson was willing to take in students but found many could not afford to pay for their keep. Donald Stuart's family were in this category. In 1772 he entered The Scots College Rome where he studied and was ordained in 1781. He returned to Scotland and took up a post in Tomintoul in 1783. By 1788 he had built a chapel just off the main street. St Michael's was built in 1836 near to the site of the old one.

1804 saw him moved to a new Mission in Dundee. Many were leaving the rural areas for the more lucrative industrial regions springing up in the Lowlands. New churches were being built, these required priests otherwise the Faith would be lost. Priests like Donald Stuart were being sent from their safe rural parishes to take up the challenge. How did he cope? Fourteen years is a long time so one can assume he enjoyed the work and the change. In 1818 he returned to Elgin dying there in 1820.

Andrew Deason or Dawson

Student 1772-1777 Master August 1787-June 1788

Andrew was born in 1762 or 64 at Haddoch in the Cabrach and was enrolled at Scaln in 1772 where he spent five years before leaving for the Scots College Valladolid where he studied and was ordained in 1785. He returned to Scotland the same year and took up a post in the Shenval for two years, before being appointed master at Scaln in August 1787.

Bishop Hay chose him to succeed Alexander Farquharson, who had proved not to be a good master. He had run up large debts with the local traders and, on inspection, the accounts did not tally. The Bishop sent him to replace Dawson at the Shenval. He paid off all known debts, re-engaged the wrights and heatherers to complete work on the chapel. The new master was given a set of rules for the running of the Seminary and a sum of money for everyday costs. The Bishop departed knowing he had left a good honest man in charge. Bishop Geddes was asked to help Andrew if he requested it.

Things didn't go well for the new master. The men working on the chapel demanded more money, he refused

them so they downed tools. Janet Roe the housekeeper for the last seventeen years, had a row with Magi, the under servant. Janet left to take up a job with Alexander Farquharson at the Cabrach. The Master wasn't sorry to see her go and Magi promptly cleaned the house thoroughly, then set about de-lousing the boys. The petty thieving stopped and conditions at Scalan greatly improved. Martinmas was the time of payments and Master Dawson wrote to Bishop Geddes detailing what money he would require and why. He requested £84 sterling but was only sent £40 and told to use credit to spread the outlay into spring. He did not expect this and wrote again in the New Year pointing out he had restored order and discipline.

He felt neglected, alone with the boys and the servants in an alien place. He was a sick man and Bishop Hay suspected he might have consumption and sent him to Huntly for two weeks in January. On his return he was in better spirits and determined to carry on. By Easter 1778 the consumption had taken hold and he was advised by the doctor to leave Scalan but with no immediate replacement he hung on until June 1788. When Bishop Hay visited Scalan he sent the Master to stay near his family at the Cabrach where he died in September of that year at the age of 24 years. Bishop Hay stayed in very close contact with Scalan for the next five years; in fact he stayed there as Master until 1793 when James Sharp was appointed as master

The A. G. M. is on the 1st June The Mass is at 12 noon, lunch at Chapeltown Hall afterwards followed by the A.G.M. at 2.15. The lunch will cost £6.00. If you are attending the A.G.M. and require lunch please reply by 28th May to

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Saint Finnian's Isle Loch Shiel