



Old Seminary at Scalan about 1793.
Attributed to J. Keenan 1844-1932

[Bishop John Geddes](#)

[1735-1799](#)

John Geddes was born in 1735 in the Enzie, the son of John Geddes and Marjory Burgess, his father a tenant farmer on the estate of Letterfourie.

He was sent first to the parish school in 1742 and later to various private schools. Over the winter of 1748/49 he and five other boys were taught and directed by the priest Alexander Godsmann at Preshome.

John wished to go to Scalan to start his training for the priesthood, but was instead sent to the Scots College, Rome in 1750 along with William Guthrie, an Aberdeenshire convert. A year later they were joined by the Edinburgh convert George Hay and in the years spent at the Scots College they became close friends.

All were ordained in 1759 and travelled back through France, then at war with Britain, and finally reached Leith via Rotterdam. John Geddes and William Guthrie walked from Leith to Aberdeen and on to Preshome where they met Bishop Alexander Smith, usually in Edinburgh, but then visiting the northern parts of his district.

The Cabrach was to be John Geddes' first mission station. Nicknamed 'Siberia' by many priests, it was a tough assignment: George Hay was assigned Preshome.

At this time, Scalán was experiencing possibly the harshest and most dangerous conditions since its beginning in 1716. Partially destroyed and made uninhabitable by Hanoverian soldiers in 1746, it took several years for the master, William Duthie to restore even a small part of the college buildings. A few students returned, mainly local boys who could live at home, but life was dangerous with a detachment of soldiers in the Braes billeted in the farms near Scalán.

In 1758 William Duthie was sent as Prefect of Studies to the Scots College, Paris, with George Duncan, a former student at Scalán, an experienced priest and a good master replacing him, but because of the critical shortage of priests at the time, he could remain for only six months. During the next three years when William Gray was in charge, the condition and management of Scalán and the morale of its three students sank to a deplorable state and Bishops Grant and Smith realised that something had to be done immediately to save the seminary. A replacement was found for John Geddes at the Cabrach and in 1762, aged twenty six with only three years experience as a priest he set out from Shenval to Scalán, to rescue it from what appeared to be its death throes.

Despite the seminary's inadequate and dilapidated buildings, he succeeded in restoring discipline and the morale of the students, their numbers growing from three in 1762 to ten in 1767. Nothing could be done about the condition of the building until new leases of the land at Scalán had been negotiated and the seminary's lease made secure until 1784. Once this was achieved, John Geddes set in motion his and the bishops' plan for a new, larger building on the east side of the Crombie burn, 'our' Scalán.

On the completion of the new building, John Geddes was moved first to Preshome and then to Spain to save what he could of the Madrid College (moving it to Valladolid). He returned to Scotland in 1780 as Bishop Hay's co-adjutor bishop and his visits to Scalán were probably confined to the annual meetings of the bishops and the senior clergy each summer. John Geddes made his final visit to Scalán in 1793. Suffering from severe rheumatic pains, it was hoped that the rest would help him, but this he could not do and his condition worsened. Unwilling to become a burden to the master and boys, he was moved to Aberdeen, where he died in 1799.

In Scalán: *The Forbidden College, 1716-1799* Dr John Watts' description of John Geddes cannot be bettered: 'In his five years as master [at Scalán] he had brought to the task energy and determination, idealism, wise judgement, charity, courtesy and grace — those same qualities that would distinguish his work as a bishop in later years, and for which he would always be remembered.'

Ann Dean

Francis Macdonell (Macdonald)

Student 1727-1736 Assistant Master 1736-1737

Francis Macdonell (Macdonald) was born around 1716 at Kiltry, Glengarry. He entered Scalán in 1727 as a pupil and was ordained by Bishop Gordon at Scalán in October 1736. He was one of three to receive their full education at Scalán, the other two being George J Gordon and John Gordon (Glenlivet); the latter only remained at Scalán because he couldn't get to Paris due to the 1745 uprising.

F Macdonell was appointed Assistant Master at Scalán (Master being John J. Gordon) for about a year when he was sent back to the Highland District in 1737 where he could put his fluent Gaelic to good use, staying in Moidart until 1740. His sister Catherine moved in to keep house in 1738 and soon after rumours began to circulate about an incestuous relationship. She gave birth to a still born baby in February 1739 under suspicious

circumstances. It was not uncommon for women in the 18th century to use herbs as abortifacients, often prescribed by "henwives"; a woman specialising in midwifery, charms and incantations believed to dispel every kind of sickness. She was sometimes labelled a witch. Catherine probably used the herb known as "Fairy Flax" or "Purging Flax" – *Linum catharticum* Found on heaths, rocks and dunes. Her brother was said to have been seen collecting this insignificant plant.



The plant would have been dried and made into an infusion. At one time purging was a recognised treatment for cleansing the body systems. The herb was favoured for gynaecological problems. Only a foolish or desperate woman would resort to this method. Catherine was a Catholic and would have known she was going against the teaching of the Church. An incestuous relationship is against the law of the Church and the country; it was in the 18th century and it is today.

News of the alleged incestuous relationship reached the ears of Bishop Hugh Macdonald who ordered Francis to leave his sister's company. They ignored the order, staying together and moving from place to place claiming the charges against them to be untrue. In 1741 she gave birth to a baby boy at Barrisdale.

Again strange circumstances attended the delivery. When the placenta failed to come away Francis brought her a silver tass (cup) filled to the brim with his own urine to drink. Those present took this as an admission of his guilt as drinking the father's urine was a known remedy in such a case. The child only lived a few days but had shown no sign of sickness. Francis arranged for her to marry Ranald Macdonald, a widower in Ardnamurchan, who knew nothing of past events. Francis still visited Catherine and after a few months she left her husband setting up home with him on the isle of Eigg.

Bishop Macdonald held a meeting in February 1742 and Francis once again denied he was the father; he was suspended from his duties as a priest and in early August the suspension was made permanent. The Bishop gave him money and suggested he went abroad to start a new life. He accepted the money but remained in Scotland, renouncing his Catholic faith in 1743. 1744 saw him accepted into the Ministry of the Church of Scotland (they were unaware of his past). He had a post in Strontian and other Ministries in the Highlands. He died in 1784. I can find no further records of his sister Catherine.

Today D.N.A. would have proved if Francis was the father or if it was malicious rumours. The only two people who knew the truth were Francis and Catherine.

George J. Gordon

Student 1716-1725 Master 1727-1738

George J. Gordon was born at Focabers in 1699 and entered Scalán with Hugh Macdonald in 1716. He studied for nine years and was ordained with him by Bishop Gordon on Ember Sunday 1725 at Scalán. At his request he was given a post in the Highlands being sent to assist William Shand, the priest for Strathavon. He took over the Glenlivet section and this was the first time this region had been considered a separate station.

In June 1727 he returned to Scalán as Master, an appointment it was hoped would bring stability. Masters had been coming and going for about eleven years.

On June 6th 1733 Bishop J. Gordon chaired a meeting at Scalán; those attending were Bishop Hugh Macdonald, three highland and four lowland priests, including John Tyrie, Colin Campbell, George Gordon (Scalán master) and George Duncan (assistant Scalán master). At the meeting three letters were penned to Rome, the first two from the Bishops to the Pope and the Cardinal Protector respectively; the third from the seven priests claiming to be written on behalf of "the whole clergy" of the Mission. The contents of the letters stated that Jansenist heresy was being taught at the Scots College, Paris and that reform was urgently required and certain staff dismissed. Those present at the meeting subscribed in writing to the Constitution Unigenitus and a decision was taken that every priest in Scotland should do the same. John Watt page 73

The only reason George J. Gordon and George Duncan were at the meeting was because they resided at Scalán. Two days later a meeting was held at Clashnoir, neither master being present. George Gordon was accused of heresy in his absence. He strongly denied the charge but was not fully believed by Rome or Scotland. He never condemned Jansenism in his teaching but never promoted it, believing it better to leave the boys in ignorance of the scandal.

By 1736 George Gordon's health was beginning to fail due to the strain he was under but he wasn't replaced until 1738 when he was sent as a missionary to Aberdeen, one wonders if he got the peace he craved.

Although he brought continuity to Scalán for eleven years he did not bring stability. The disputes, accusations and infighting certainly did more harm than good to the Scalán name.

George Gordon spent twenty seven years in Aberdeen dying there in 1766. Whilst George Gordon was superior he gave several boys, sons of gentlemen, not destined for the priesthood, a general education and religious instruction. Boys recorded as having spent time at Scalán for education are (1) A young boy — Gordon of Glastirium which is between Focabers and Buckie; (2) Mr. Gordon of Aberlour (meal merchant) who supplied Scalán; (3) The sons of Letterfourie between Focabers and Buckie; (4) The sons of Birkenbush either beside Aberlour or possibly Aboyne.

John Godsmán

Student summer 1720

He was born in 1699 at Dallachy near Spey Bay and was admitted to Scalán in the summer of 1720 where he stayed for about three months before travelling to The Scots College Rome. He was ordained in Rome in 1729 returning to take up a post in Auchinhalrig near Focabers Morayshire. In 1734 he was made responsible for the

scattered Catholics in the Enzie. After the battle of Culloden he was hunted by the Hanoverian troops, captured and imprisoned. On his release he disguised himself as a farmer travelling from one safe house to another which enabled him to say Mass in houses, barns and hideouts.

In 1755 Father Godsmann wrote to the Vicar Apostolic asking if he remembered being shown a small house between Auchenthalrig and Tulloch where a poor woman had lived for some time. He goes on to say that Tynet was proposing to build a sheep cote adjacent to the house. This has now been done and the sheep are now using it for shelter. After a suitable period of time we will be using the cote for celebrating Mass; a permanent centre for people to gather and worship. There will be no outward signs of a chapel; nothing to indicate that it is anything more than a sheep cote. The 'Little House' and the adjoining sheep cote became the nucleus of the present Church of St. Ninians Tynet. Today 2007 it still resembles an agricultural building but the bleating of the sheep has been replaced by the tinkle of the Sanctus bell. Saint Ninian is the oldest post Reformation Catholic Church in Scotland in unbroken use.







Father Godsmen died in April 1769. His friend Bishop Geddes assisted at his bedside and later wrote 'that everyone regarded this missionary priest as a saint' He endured so much to keep the Catholic faith alive in the mid 18th century.

John Alexander Grant

Master June 1722 - September 1724 December 1726

John A. Grant was the elder brother of James Grant who became a Bishop. After his ordination John Grant spent three years in Paris before taking up the post of master at Scalán. He was a nervous person with a scrupulous temperament and felt quite unfit to take up the post. He did have a fair knowledge of Erse. His new post included acting as priest to the local community and he felt far to inexperienced to carry out this duty. To add to his worries he found the Braes a bleak and desolate place. In September 1724 he was called to Aberdeen for about six months which gave him a break, John Tyrie taking over until his return in 1725.

He prepared his brother James and Peter Grant for their transfer to Rome in September 1725.

In December 1726 he left Scalán and travelled to Rome to be consecrated Bishop. He had no wish to become one but yielded to Bishop Gordon's wishes. He travelled to Rome and it is thought that he then went to Montepulciano in "retreat" waiting for the Papal Bull to be made ready. He never returned to Rome; extensive enquiries were carried out but to no avail. Fifteen months later he contacted William Stuart the Scots Agent in Rome and asked for a little money to be sent to him in Genoa. This was done, the one and only communication. Various theories were put forward, drowned, had an accident or possibly joined a religious order. He may have returned to teaching, a job he grew to enjoy while at Scalán. Teaching and spreading the word of God could have been his only wish. He was described as a man of great virtue and piety.

William Reid

Student 1728-1733

He was born in 1713 at Wester Boggs Enzie. He entered Scalán in 1728 where he studied until 1733 entering the Scots College Rome that year and was ordained in 1739. On returning to Scotland he took up a post at Mortlach. In 1740 he wrote anti-Jansenist letters to Rome causing them to carry out yet another special investigation into Scottish affairs. The outcome of this investigation was to order students bound for the Scots college Rome not to stop off at the Paris College in case they were accused of Jansenism. Jansenism was like a web spreading far and wide, trapping the innocent with the guilty.

William Reid was renowned as an eminent scholar and much respected in academic circles. He spent thirty years at Mortlach and when his health started to fail retired to Aberdeen where he lived a further twelve years until his death in 1785.

George Duncan

Student 1726-1732 Assistant Master 1733-1734

Master Oct.1758-1759

George Duncan, date of birth unknown, came from Edinburgh. His parents sent him to the Scots College Paris to study for the priesthood, his teacher being George Innes (Prefect of Studies). Not a brilliant pupil but a good steady plodder; his health started to fail in September 1726. He left the College and returned to Scotland continuing his studies under a priest of the Mission. He made good progress and was enrolled in Scalán between 1727-1730. March 1732 saw him ordained by Bishop Gordon, he was sent to teach in the Highlands returning to Scalán in 1733 as assistant master. He was unwittingly involved in the Jansenist controversy, wrong place wrong time. He was asked to attend the meeting chaired by Bishop Macdonald on June 16th 1733. He signed the Constitution Unigenitus as requested but this did not stop him being branded a Jansenist by some because he had attended Scalán, studied under George Innes and was assistant master to George J. Gordon. He vacated Scalán in 1734 taking up a mission in rural Angus. He was in the borders during the 1745 rebellion and was imprisoned in 1746. After his release he successfully smuggled the Blessed Sacrament into Carlisle Castle to prisoners awaiting execution. He fled to Scotland and took up a post at Traquair serving both the house and the local community. From here he went to Edinburgh where he stayed until 1758

In October 1758 he returned to Scalán as master. The pupils had been without supervision for three weeks and his first task was to restore order and sort out funds. Spring 1759 saw the Seminary restored to order. George Duncan left and went to assist Mr. Guthrie at the Glenlivet station. He lived at Tomnalienan in a turf house on the gable end of the main building; this being erected in a day with the help of the Scalán boys who stamped down the earth floor. The summer sheilings were built on the same lines; foundation to ridgepole in a day. He didn't spend long in his new home as he died in 1761.

Alexander Gordon

Student 1735-1737

Alexander Gordon was born in 1710 at Coffurich. He was known as 'Coff' Gordon to distinguish him from the numerous other Gordons with the same name. In 1724 he enrolled as a student in The Scots College Paris returning to Scotland in 1729 for a brief spell when he entered Scalán. He was considerably older than the other boys and was more like an assistant master. In the autumn of 1729 Bishop Gordon decided he must return to Paris to continue his studies. He received the subdiaconate then returned to Scalán to complete his studies; he was ordained by Bishop Gordon on 21st September 1734.

He was sent back to Paris in 1735 and appointed Prefect of Studies; a post he held for a short time. The Clashmore letters written to The Protector for Scotland in June 1733 demanded the removal of the Superiors from the Scots College Paris and specified the Prefect of Studies who at that time was George Innes. By the time the Cardinals in Rome had read the letter it was 1736 and the Prefect of studies was Alexander Gordon. The College carried out an investigation which did not clear Alexander Gordon of Jansenism in December 1737. He was dismissed from the College finally leaving in June 1738.

Once again Jansenism had reared its ugly head; Alexander Gordon was accused on circumstantial evidence and possibly mistaken identity. A. Gordon was not an uncommon name. Certainly the Scottish Bishops did not believe the charges against him. He was appointed Rector of Scalán in August 1738.

He returned to Scalán in times of change in the neighbourhood. The tenant farmers were improving barren land

and making it fit for cultivation. The vegetation was burnt off and the top soil was removed, the subsoil was mixed with ash and dung to enrich it and make it fit to grow corn.

He spent three years at Scalan and witnessed one of the worst winters in living memory, 1739-1740. The rivers froze and remained so for six weeks. Ploughing and sowing couldn't begin until late May and there was very little sun that year. The corn was poor or non-existent which meant there was very little seed to sow in the spring 1741 and the area was in the grip of famine. He stayed at Scalan until the autumn of 1741 helping where he could, then left for Edinburgh where he spent twenty-two years. He moved to Stobhall for thirteen years returning to Edinburgh in 1788; in the December he was made Vicar General, a post he held until his death in 1793.

Scalan to the rise of the Slochd burn

This walk is best carried out in dry conditions and with stout footwear. Time approx. 1½ hours

Leave Scalan at the gate and turn left passing the gable end of Sandy's cottage. Note the ivy growing up the gable end and edging its way along the roof and gutters. Was it planted when the cottage was built on the foundations of the college kitchens? Bear slightly right and pass through the dilapidated fence. At the burn side of the old building is the metal of an old waterwheel which used to work the old threshing mill inside.

The track can be rough and muddy especially where it passes through the old stone wall that marks the old Scalan boundary. This land is grazed by sheep and cattle belonging to the tenant farmer. In summer this rough pasture is where you can spot curlew, oystercatchers, lapwings and skylarks. You will see a ruined croft on your right and it is here that a family of stoats have set up home among the stones. These vicious little creatures are a rich brown with a black tip to the tail in summer but in winter they turn white retaining the black tip; stoats in ermine. Heartsease grows in the rough grass beside the croft as do stinging nettles, take care! Gorse bushes can be seen flowering at any time of year and their brilliant yellow flowers cheer up a dull day.



The Black Burn crosses the track just past the ruin; it flows down towards the water wheel where it joins the Crombie. Negotiate the burn and look to your left where the burn splits from the Slochd Burn. You will see a white marker post and a tree trunk spanning the water; this is where the keepers used to trap mink. In the spring and summer strongly smelling mint grows between the water and the track. You may see dippers flying from stone to stone above the burn. Brown hare and roe deer also inhabit this area. Keep going to the east end of the wood and pass through the gate to upland moor, home to the red grouse.









The conifer wood is about 40 years old and was planted in and around the mill dam which used to serve Scalan, there is no sign of it today. The back of the wood is a morass full of springs indicating there would have been sufficient water for a good sized dam. Hearsay has it Sandy Mathieson built a boat to enable the local children to enjoy playing on and in the water.

From the gate walk steadily upwards and you will see the deer fence enclosing the water supply for the Speyside Glenlivet bottling plant. Keep the fence on your left and continue upwards until you reach the Slochd Burn entering the enclosure. Walk up the side of the burn until you reach the peat hags and the source of the burn just below the saddle between Carnmhor and Carn Liath. With out a map you would be advised to retrace your steps to Scalan.

With a map you can onto the saddle and either (1) turn left and follow the ridge to the trig point on Carnmhor, 804metres, (a Corbett, a hill over 2500 ft) and make your way back to the Eskemullach car park or (2) turn right and follow the ridge to the right onto Carn Dulack and from there descend by the grouse butts and the gate in the hill fence to the Clash of Scalan and then to Scalan.

Whichever way you go you may be lucky to see golden eagles flying high above.

[Points of Interest](#)

Tartan.

The 2007 Scalan books and leaflets have a tartan band of black, blue and blue lavender. I sent a leaflet to James D. Scarlett to enquire about the name and origin of the pattern. He is a well known authority on the subject. To quote "your tartan is Priest, a fancy pattern put out by Wilson's the Bannockburn Weavers in the late 1820s. James Logan put a somewhat garbled pattern table in the 'Scottish Gael' in 1831 and the imperfections of early colour printing turned into what is now sold as Clergy."

Mr Scarlett does not think Priest is available off the shelf but it could still be woven, at a price, for a special order as there is a record of thread counts. Wilson's colours for Priest were black, lavender and light blue. Logan's colours for Clergy were black, white and grey.

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The ban on the wearing of tartan came into force on the 1st April 1747 but fell into disuse fairly soon after. It is generally acknowledged that it had little effect.

The students at Scalan if they wished, and were allowed to, would have worn tartan 'but it could not have been Priest, or I am sure, any uniform pattern.' There could have been a weaver in the vicinity of Scalan. In 1761 there was a small croft beside the Scalan — Eskemullach "weaver's croft"

2. Ann Dean has written 'St Margaret's' Huntly; the story of a parish'. It traces the history of the Catholic Church in Huntly, Strathbogie and beyond, from pre-Reformation times up to the year 2,000. Strathbogie had many links with Scalan in the 1700s.

A5 booklet, 64 pp, 10 b&w illustrations; price £6.00. Copies are available from

Ann Dean

West Lediken,

Insch,

AB52 6LL

Please add £1.00 to cover inland p&p; Europe add £1.50 p&p; elsewhere add £2.00 p&p.

3. March 6th saw the first lapwings dip and dive over the Scalan fields. Two days later two were seen performing and calling to announce the arrival of spring. The 6th was a clear cool sunny day and heralded the mass movement of frogs to the Eskemullach mill dam beside the track to Scalan. The croaking was easily heard as they jumped and leapt in the clear water; their dark bodies glistening in the sun. On the 8th a flock of Oyster catchers flew over and a lone curlew was spotted standing on the old Scalan boundary wall.

It was certainly a false spring. By the 21st snow was falling over Scalan and the trees were creaking in the bitter arctic wind. The birds deserted the fields, the frogs were nowhere to be seen and the frog spawn drifted on the water. Once again we humans will wait to see the true spring; the birds will stay to nest, the fields green up and the sun will rise high in the sky.

Scalan is a place of peace, an ideal place to visit and reflect on the past.

An annual Mass is held outside (weather permitting) on the first Sunday of July at 4 o'clock and all are welcome

Negotiations with Smiths Gore for the purchase of Sandy Matheson's cottage built on the foundations of the old Scalan kitchens are still ongoing. The end is nearer than the beginning!

Association President:

Very Rev. Canon Brian Halloran

St James, 17, The Scores, St. Andrews, KY16 9AR

Tel. 01334 472856

Treasurer and Membership Secretary:

Mrs Jane McEwan

Ogilvie Cottage, Gallowhill, Glenlivet AB37 9DL

Tel 01807 590340

All correspondence regarding the Association should be directed to Mrs Jane McEwan

AGM Secretary:

Rev. Michael Briody,

St. Michael's, 133 Glenmore Avenue, Moodiesburn, G69 0DL

Tel. 01236 872537

Editorial Team:

Mrs Sylvia Toovey, Miss Ann Dean, Mrs Elizabeth Beaton.

This is your newsletter and the committee would welcome your ideas, views and news. Correspondence can be sent to Sylvia Toovey, Chapel House, Chapeltown of Glenlivet, Ballindalloch. AB37 9JS. Tel. 01807 590295. Emails. johnsylvia-braes@hotmail.co.uk

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O Lord you have been our refuge

From one generation to the next.

Before the mountains were born

Or the earth or the world brought forth,

You are God, without beginning and end.

Psalm 89 verses 1 & 2

Copies of photos used may be obtained from the editor with a donation to The Scalan Association. Please state size (up to A4)