

The Gaels of Greenock

Frances M Dunlop

In the peaceful kirkyard of Glendaruel there is a small tombstone with a poignant inscription:|

Here lyes interred
the remains of Daniel Black
Cooper in Greenock son to
John Black boatman their (sic)
who departed this life the
10 of June 1778 aged 28 years
to whose memory this
stone is erected



What a sad story lies behind these few short lines! We can imagine John Black moving to Greenock with his family, as so many Highlanders were doing, looking for work, and a better life.

The Clyde was busy not only with large sailing ships, but with fishing vessels and small boats of all kinds, ferrying goods and people. Most boatmen on the river were Gaels. And one of them was John Black.

How proud he must have been when his son completed his apprenticeship as a cooper. A tradesman's wages must have made a difference to the family finances. And then, after a few short years Daniel died at a tragically young age. Was it an accident? Or did he succumb to one of the nasty diseases which lurked in the crowded, foetid closes of the town? (Like Burns's Highland Mary, who died of typhus in Charles St in 1786.)

We can imagine the anguish that was felt as the young man's coffin was carried down the Firth, very likely in his father's boat, up the Kyles of Bute and Loch Riddon, to be borne back to the Glen for burial.

The lines on his tombstone encapsulate a typical story of hope and heartbreak.

Increasingly throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, Highlanders poured into Greenock, leaving behind the harsh conditions at home. When Daniel Black was born in 1750, it was only four short years since the Battle of Culloden, which brought such devastating consequences to the Highlands. "Rebels" were hunted down; homes were burned; Highland dress was outlawed: the erosion of Gaelic culture and identity had begun.

In subsequent years a succession of bad harvests led to not infrequent famine. Landlords were ruthlessly clearing the people from their overcrowded estates to make way for sheep, which would bring in more profit. The depopulation of the Highlands was well under way. Many emigrated to the Americas or Australia. Others flooded into the cities of the Lowlands.

By the time the Rev. Mr Archibald Reid was writing his report in 1792 for the *Statistical Account of Scotland*, there were 3387 families in Greenock, of which he reckons 1825 were Highland. Mostly they came from nearby Argyll: the most common surname in the town was Campbell. “Most of the labourers, boatmen, sailors &c. in Greenock, are from the Highlands, and they often settle here with large families to support which requires their utmost industry and application.” Many, in fact, found work in the developing shipbuilding industry. Many girls and women were employed in domestic service.



Blind Highland street musician in Greenock (Courtesy of Greenock Burns Club.)

They came to an alien land, where their language was not understood; where they were mocked as “teuchters”. Their names were anglicised. Where everyone had the same clan name, then as now nicknames were widely used. So John Black may have been named for his own hair colour and dark complexion, or have inherited the nickname from an ancestor. In his native Glendaruel he would be known as “Iain Dubh” or “Iain Mac ‘ille dhuibh”. His son would perhaps be known as “Dòmhnall Iain Dhuibh”. Dòmhnall sounded a bit like Dan’l, so Daniel Black he became in “civilised”, English-speaking society.

A song of homesickness from the mid-nineteenth century mentions the attitude the Gaels often encountered in their new home:

“Nuair theid mi Là na Sàbaid dhan eaglais airson sàmhchar
Cha tuig mi srann dhan cànan: ‘s e ‘Ghàidhlig a bha bhuamsa.

Ach tha na Goill ag radha nach d’ fhiach a’ chainnt a’ Ghàidhlig
‘S an Tì a rinn gach cànan, cha d’ dh’fhàg e ‘Ghàidhlig suarach...”

*On the Sabbath Day when I go to church for some peace,
I don’t understand the drone of the talk: there is no Gaelic.*

*The Lowlanders say that Gaelic is a useless language;
but the Lord who made all tongues didn’t make Gaelic any less worthy.*

The Greenock Gaels had plenty of company among their own people. Rev. Reid reported in 1792 that “one may at times walk from one end of the town to the other ... without hearing a word of any language but Gaelic.” He also notes: “Of this, their native tongue, which is said to be copious and expressive, the Highlanders are amazingly fond.”

So it was not surprising that the Presbyterian majority among them soon wanted a place of worship where they could hear preaching in their own language, and to that end those who could afford it started raising funds in 1782.

In the meantime Mr Blair, assistant at the Mid Kirk, preached in Gaelic in the Star Hall in Broad Close. Later, the minister of the Kirk, Rev. John Adam, allowed the Highland congregation to use his church on Sunday evenings. However, there were complaints from his regular members that the pews were left in an untidy condition, and that the seats and books had grease dripped over them from the candles which were required on the dark winter nights. The complainers even took the matter to the Town Council when Mr Adam took no action! The Council took no action either!

The Gaelic Chapel, later to become the Gaelic Parish Church, was opened in 1792, beside the West Burn.

At the Disruption of 1843 the minister, Rev. Angus McBean, seceded along with most of his congregation. For a time he held services in a tent in the Inverkip Street cemetery. Funds were quickly raised, and the new Free Gaelic Church was opened in Jamaica St in 1844.

By the early years of the twentieth century there was another split, and the members of the congregation who joined the newly formed United Free Church found a new home in the former St Thomas's in Grey Place. This became St Columba's Gaelic Church.

In 1966 the West Kirk in Nelson St united with the Gaelic Parish Church in Westburn St to form the Old Kirk (now Westburn).

In 1979 the North Kirk on the Esplanade united with St Columba's Gaelic to form the Old West.



Communion table from the Gaelic Parish Church, now in Westburn Church, Nelson St.



Former St Columba's Gaelic Church, Grey Place

In 1835 Highlanders' Academy was opened after fundraising by the Highlanders' Church and School Association. The first building was in Roxburgh St, later moving to Mount Pleasant St to make way for the new railway. The intention was to provide children with "a sound English and commercial education".

This was the era when children were discouraged from speaking Gaelic, or even punished in school for doing so, as it was thought that the language would hold them back. Now that we understand better the benefits of bilingualism it is perhaps poetic justice that the special unit for educating children through the medium of Gaelic was placed in Highlanders'. It is now incorporated in Whinhill Primary School.

Commemorative plaques from Highlanders' Academy, founded to "promote the intellectual, moral and religious improvement of the children of Highlanders & of other classes in the community of Greenock, by affording good and cheap education to the poor."

TO PROMOTE THE INTELLECTUAL, MORAL AND RELIGIOUS IMPROVEMENT OF THE CHILDREN OF HIGHLANDERS & OF OTHER CLASSES IN THE COMMUNITY OF GREENOCK, BY AFFORDING GOOD AND CHEAP EDUCATION TO THE POOR:
BY THE FAVOUR OF ALMIGHTY GOD
 WILLIAM MACFIE, ESQ. OF LANGHOUSE, THE PROVOST OF GREENOCK
Assisted by
 JAMES STEWART, ESQ. OF CLYDE BANK, JAMES STUART, ESQ. OF BELL TREES, JOHN KER, ESQ. AND ADAM FAIRRIE, ESQ. THE FOUR MAGISTRATES OF GREENOCK & PATRICK M^r FARLAN, D.D. MINISTER OF THE OLD OR WEST PARISH OF GREENOCK.
LAI D THE FOUNDATION STONE OF THIS BUILDING
 To be erected by Private Subscriptions & Parliamentary aid as a token of regard for the best interests of the Young & Rising Generation in the Town of GREENOCK
In presence of a number of the Inhabitants of the Town & Neighbourhood,
ON WEDNESDAY THE THIRTY FIRST DAY OF AUGUST,
M D C C C X X X V I,
AND IN THE SEVENTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF HIS MAJESTY WILLIAM THE FOURTH.
 DIRECTORS OF THE GREENOCK HIGHLANDERS CHURCH & SCHOOL ACCOMMODATION SOCIETY
Instituted 22^d December 1834.

President
 Alexander Dunlop Esq. Advocate, Edinburgh.
1834 Presidents
 William Johnston Esq. of Willow Park.
 James Watt Esq. of Heathfield.
 James Stewart Esq. of Clyde Bank.
 Patrick Cameron Esq.
 Alexander Ross Esq.
 Charles Murray Esq.
 Neil Campbell Esq.
Treasurer
 Alexander Thomson Esq. of Cadder Hill.
Assistant Treasurer
 Daniel M^r Arthur Esq.
Secretary
 Messrs John Ferguson.
 John Park.
 Donald Thomson.
Committee
 Messrs John M^r Kechnie
 Hugh Smith
 John M^r Pierson
 Kenneth M^r Cashell
 Neil M^r Kay
 Alexander Weir
 Andrew M^r Farlan
 Peter M^r Craig
 John Weir
 Arch^d M^r Kinlay
 Donald Sinclair
 John M^r Leod
 Duncan Fletcher
 Messrs Arch^d M^r Bellar
 Daniel M^r Farlan
 Malcolm Kerr
 Norman M^r Donald
 George Cameron
 Andrew Smith
 Dugald M^r Callum
 John Douglas
 Dougal M^r Farlan
 John Livingston
 Arch^d M^r Kay & Brown
 Malcolm Fullerton
 Alexander Cameron

Building Committee
 Messrs James Stewart
 W^m Johnston
 Alex Ross Chairman
 Charles Murray
 Daniel M^r Arthur Convener
 John Park
 John M^r Kechnie
 William Walker
 Donald M^r Farlan
Trustees
 James Watt Esq. of Heathfield
 W^m Johnston Esq. of Willow Park
 James Stewart Esq. of Clyde Bank
 Alex Thomson Esq. of Cadder Hill
 Alex Ross Esq.
 Charles Murray Esq.
 Daniel M^r Arthur Esq.
Architect & Inspector
 M^r Daniel M^r Farlan

Messrs	Trades	Amount of
Thompson & Mitchell	Joiners	£ 579 0 0
Erskine Orr	Mason	157 0 0
M ^r Cunn & Russell	Plumbers	155 0 0
John Paul	Plasterer	36 0 0
Thomas Anderson	Sister	40 0 0
		Total Amount 1477 0 0

WHICH UNDERTAKING MAY THE SUPREME ARCHITECT OF THE UNIVERSE BLESS & PROSPER
*The Lions young may hungry be,
 And their meat seek they food,
 But these that will seek the Lord
 Shall not be hungry again.*
*O Children, hither do ye come,
 And unto me give ear,
 I shall you teach to understand,
 How ye the Lords should fear.*

THIS PUBLIC SCHOOL,
 WHICH PROVIDES ACCOMMODATION FOR 1015 SCHOLARS,
 WAS, IN ANNO DOMINI MDCCCLXXXVII.,
 THE JUBILEE YEAR OF THE REIGN OF HER MOST GRACIOUS MAJESTY QUEEN VICTORIA,
 ERECTED BY THE SCHOOL BOARD OF THE BURGH OF GREENOCK,
 To reinstate the original HIGHLANDERS' ACADEMY situated in Roxburgh Street, which had been founded by the
 HIGHLANDERS' CHURCH and SCHOOL ACCOMMODATION SOCIETY.
 The Site and Buildings of the Academy having been transferred by the Directors of the Society to the School Board in accordance with the Education (Scotland) Act, 1872,
 they were Sold by the latter body to the Caledonian Railway Company, and the Price was applied by the Board to Build and Furnish the New Academy,
 THE FOUNDATION STONE OF WHICH WAS LAID BY
ALEXANDER SCOTT MORIES, Esq., Chairman of the Board,
 ON XVII. SEPTEMBER, MDCCCLXXXVI,
 BEING THE JUBILEE YEAR OF THE ORIGINAL ACADEMY,
 it having been resolved to retain the name, and thus transmit to coming generations the record of the Rise of
THE HIGHLANDERS' ACADEMY.

Prominent among the Founders of the Society was
Mr DANIEL MACARTHUR, Merchant,
 who was for upwards of 17 years its energetic Acting Treasurer.
 In commemoration of his long connexion with the Society, Mr. MacArthur's Family have, with the sanction of the School Board, founded a Prize to be styled
THE MACARTHUR MEMORIAL PRIZE,
 to be Awarded Annually, after Competition, to the best scholar in the Academy.

The adjoining Memorial Plate inserted in the Foundation Stone of the Original Academy,
 Was recovered upon the Demolition of that Building by the Railway Company,
 As were also Two Glass Vases containing Newspapers of the day, Documents connected with the Society, current Coins of the Realm, &c.
 NEAR THIS SPOT THE VASES HAVE AGAIN BEEN DEPOSITED.

By the late nineteenth century there were several flourishing societies where Gaels could socialise. Comunn Gàidhealach Ghrianaig (Greenock Highlanders' Society) was founded in 1872 "for the following objects:- viz:- 1st For the purpose of preserving the language, literature, music, poetry, antiquities and athletic games of the Highlanders, and for encouraging the more general use of the national dress;

2nd For founding one or more bursaries or to make annual or other grants of money in aid of diligent or distinguished students, being natives, or sons of natives of the Highlands of Scotland; and 3rd For establishing a fund for affording temporal relief to deserving and destitute Highlanders, and assisting worthy persons coming from the Highlands in quest of employment." (P.O. Directory 1877 – 78)

The society's premises at 41 Nicholson St was "open every evening".

There were also the Ossianic Club and the United Highlanders' Society.

A famous frequenter of their gatherings was the renowned, and well-loved poetess, Mary MacPherson, always known in Gaelic as Màiri Mhór nan Oran (Big Mary of the Songs). And she was big! Seventeen stone, with a personality to match! It was said that she could "warm up a ceilidh like ten quarts of whisky". From 1876 to 1883 she worked in Greenock as a district nurse.

At that period the Highland land question was the burning issue of the day, and Màiri composed songs, which are still popular, in support of crofters' rights.

She seems to have enjoyed her time in Greenock. One of her songs, *Deoch Slàinte Gàidheil Ghrianaig* is dedicated to her friends in the Ossianic Club:

"Ach nuair a ruigeas mi baile Ghrianaig,
Far 'm bi na siantan dian a' dòrtadh,
Bidh còmhlan rianail de Ghàidheil fhiachail
Ag innse sgeula dhomh 'n Comunn Oisein."

But when I reach the town of Greenock
Where the stormy cloudbursts pour down
There will be a fine company of worthy Gaels,
Telling me a tale at the Ossian Club.

(It might seem a bit cheeky for a native of Skye to be making remarks about Greenock weather – but maybe it reminded her of home!)

Màiri was involved in a notable event, the New Year shinty match of 1877, honouring a long-standing tradition in the Highlands and Islands. It was held in celebration of the Old New Year (12 January.)

The match was advertised in the *Greenock Telegraph*, Fri 12 Jan 1877:

"The match will take place in a field near the Craigs. The Greenock Men will meet their Glasgow Co-Champions at the Caledonian Railway Station at 2.30 pm and then march to the field by Finnart, headed by Pipers.
Glasgow Chieftain – A M'Queen
Greenock Chief – Donald MacRaid.
Admission to ground 6d."

The Craigs, Newark Street, was a mansion belonging to Robert Cuthbertson, shipowner.

Dr Donald MacRaild, a Skyeman, was an office-bearer of the Greenock Highlanders' Society.

The previous year Màiri had done the catering for the match in Glasgow, with “ a creelful of bannocks, a cheese as big as the moon, and a wee drop of Ferintosh to put life in the lads.”

In her song *The Greenock Shinty Match*, she says: “Last year we baked them good substantial bannocks, but this year they were more than an inch thick!”

The Royal National Mod, which takes place every October, has become a huge event, second only to the Edinburgh Festival. The first Mod, held in Oban in 1892, was a one-day affair, with competitions in solo and choral singing, somewhat on the model of the Welsh Eisteddfod. Màiri Mhór took part, but didn't win any prizes.

Many Greenock-based Gaels distinguished themselves over the years, with Gold medal winners including Tom Lawrie, Allan MacLean, Duncan C MacLellan, Ina MacDiarmid, Margaret C Mitchell.



Nearly fifty years after winning the Gold Medal, Allan MacLean was still enjoying the Mod with Inverclyde Gaelic Choir.

Choral singing had never been a tradition in Gaeldom as it had been in Wales. But now Gaelic choirs began to spring up, including Greenock Gaelic Choir. The choir of St Columba Gaelic Church in Glasgow led the way. In 1900 the choir published *A' Chòisir Chiùil*, with four-part arrangements of Gaelic songs. This became the springboard for a whole new tradition in Gaelic singing, more in line with mainstream European music.

Greenock Gaelic Choir split in two, with the offshoot being known as Greenock Gaelic Choral Society (later Inverclyde Gaelic Choir). Both choirs had success at the National Mod. Greenock Gaelic Choir carried off the coveted Lovat and Tullibardine trophy no fewer than ten times in the course of its history.



Inverclyde Gaelic Choir at Golspie Mod, 1977



Greenock Gaelic Choir, Fort William, 1981

Both choirs have now ceased to exist, but Gaelic songs are still sung locally by Sgioba Luaidh Inbhirchluaidh, founded within Greenock Gaelic Choir in 2000. This group chooses to return to the

traditional roots of Gaelic song, and presents a variety of worksong programmes, trying to recreate the context in which the songs would originally have been sung.

Sgioba Luaidh have travelled throughout Scotland and further afield, singing their songs and demonstrating how the tweed was waulked. They have performed in the oldest house in Greenock, the Back House in William Street, where it is easy to visualise a family like the Blacks of Glendaruel and their friends gathering in the tenements of Greenock to sing the songs of their native glen.

You can find more information about Sgioba Luaidh Inbhurchluaidh on their website: www.waulk.org



The Back House, William St



Glendaruel



Sgioba Luaidh Inbhurchluaidh performing in the Back House



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