
The MacBeath brothers of Castletown, Caithness, 1843-1879

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The Church of Christ in nineteenth-century Caithness was adorned by the witness of numerous godly and able ministers including Walter Ross Taylor, John Munro, Finlay Cook, and Alexander Auld. In those days, throughout the North, the Free Church was very much stronger than the Established Church, though in Caithness the pattern of denominational allegiance was rather more varied than in most of the rural Highlands. The county was noted as a stronghold of separatism, particularly the parish of Latheron. Furthermore, in addition to the Established Church and the Free Church, there were Reformed Presbyterians at Thurso and Wick, United Original Seceders at Thurso and Castletown, and Baptists at Freswick, Scarfskerry, Stroma, Thurso (for a time), and Wick. Considerable numbers of people had not only severed their links with the Church of Scotland but had joined other denominations, although not to the same extent as in neighbouring Orkney.¹

In the parish of Thurso, a congregation of the Secession Church had been formed in 1766 after a group left the Parish Church because ‘two ministers in succession were understood to have preached Arminian doctrine’.² The Reformed Presbyterians had their origins in Caithness

1. Orkney was the only county in Scotland in which the United Presbyterian Church was stronger than both the Free and Established Churches at the time of the Church census in 1851; see N.M. de S. Cameron (ed.), *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Edinburgh, 1993), p. 157. This was to a large extent due to the remarkable Rev. Robert Paterson of Kirkwall.

2. R. Small, *History of the Congregations of the United Presbyterian Church* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1904), Vol. 2, pp. 480-1.

in the 1830s when both congregations were constituted. Their followers were deeply committed, one visiting minister commenting, ‘nowhere are more intelligent Covenanters than in Caithness’.³ The existence of the Baptists in Caithness was the result of the enthusiasm of ‘the preaching knight’, the eccentric Sir William Sinclair of Dunbeath who began taking services on his own account at Keiss in 1750.⁴ Secession churches also existed in Easter Ross, at Nigg and Evanton, but such separate congregations were very much the exception rather than the norm in the Northern Counties.

This article seeks to examine the origins of the Original Secession congregation of Olig and the considerable influence of the brothers John and James MacBeath upon the local community.

1. Background

Any visitor to Caithness is immediately struck by an open, flat and largely treeless landscape, with extensive tracts of arable land, big skies, and the peaks of Morven, the Scarabens, and Ben Loyal on the far horizon. With the desolate and boggy Flow Country stretching to the west, and approached from the south by the steep road over the towering Ord, Caithness has a very different ‘feel’ to the rest of the Northern counties, and is often referred to as ‘the lowlands beyond the Highlands’. Most of the county, with its strong Norse identity, has no recent tradition of spoken Gaelic, which by the 1800s was limited to the parishes of Latheron, Reay, and Halkirk. Instead, the people have their own distinctive and expressive dialect of English.

A prosperous agricultural sector, especially following the ‘improvements’, meant that grain could be exported on a large scale, as is evident from the many ruinous mills which can still be seen. Caithness was thus almost unaffected by the periodic food shortages which plagued much of the Highlands. By the 1840s, flagstone quarrying was also an important source of employment, particularly in the parishes of Olig and Thurso, while Wick and Lybster were among the busiest herring ports in Scotland, hosting an annual influx of west-coast fishermen and girls who gutted and

3. J. A. Dickson, *Ministers and Congregations of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, 1688-2016* (Edinburgh, 2016), pp. 68-9, 71.

4. See D. Beaton, *Ecclesiastical History of Caithness* (Wick, 1909), pp. 219-24; C. Lumsden, *A Rich Inheritance: Sir William Sinclair and Keiss Baptist Church* (Baptist Historical Society, 2013).

packed the fish for export. Mid nineteenth-century photographs show the whole of Wick harbour and riverside jammed with boats, and dozens more lying offshore waiting for berths to become free.⁵

The principal landowners in the parish of Olig were the Traills of Castlehill, who were descended from Rev. George Traill of Hobbister, D.D. (1723-85),⁶ minister of Dunnet and the son of an Orcadian landowner. Rev. George purchased the lands of Garth and Stangergill from his brother in law, David Murray of Clairden. In 1825, the minister's son, James Traill (1758-1843), a lawyer who had become Sheriff Depute of Caithness in 1788, inherited this estate. Known locally as 'e good shirra' Traill', he married Lady Janet Sinclair, daughter of the Earl of Caithness and thereafter further expanded his estate by purchasing the lands of Rattar from her family.⁷ An enterprising man, Traill followed the ideas of the famous 'Agricultural' Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster. Introducing five-course crop rotation, he also drained the Loch of Durran and used the marl to improve the soil. Small farms in the Murkle area were combined into larger ones of over 150 acres. In the new planned village of Castletown, the Sheriff provided allotments and cottages for numerous families evicted from Strathnaver.⁸ He was a kindly landlord, often accepting promissory notes, or 'lineys' from the Highlanders when money was tight for them.⁹ Traill's motives were not completely altruistic however: he had noted the great potential of the flagstone industry and he saw the people as a potential workforce. As early as the 1790s, small quantities of flagstones had been exported from Castlehill to Aberdeen, but the Sheriff opened up quarries on an industrial scale. Corn and flax mills and a small rope-works were also established.¹⁰ The imposing Georgian mansion house of Castlehill, surrounded by

5. See Iain Sutherland, *Wick Harbour and the Herring Fishing* (Wick, c.1983), and also the Johnston collection of photographs, online (Wick Heritage Museum website).

6. See Beaton, *Ecclesiastical History of Caithness*, p. 303.

7. See James T. Calder, *Civil and Traditional History of Caithness* (Wick, 1863), pp. 250-2.

8. Traill was following the example of Sir John Sinclair who founded Scotland's first planned village, Halkirk, in 1803; see Joyce Brown (ed.), *Flagstone Village: Castletown, Caithness* (Wick, 2002), pp. 21-3, 75-6. Some of the original single-storey cottages survive on the long main street, and there is an interesting exhibition about the history of Castletown, especially the flagstone industry, at the Castlehill Heritage Centre.

9. David Stephen, *Gleanings in the North* (Haddington, 1891), pp. 126-7.

10. The rope-walk, where the ropes were tensioned, still exists as a footpath from the village towards the shore.

wooded policies and massive walls to provide shelter, was testimony to the prosperity of the family. Sadly, it was burned down in 1970.

Beginning as a small-scale operation which employed thirty men working with hand tools and using lighters to float the flagstones out to ships anchored in Dunnet Bay, Traill's enterprise continuously expanded until the quarries and their associated spoil heaps virtually surrounded the village. Initially windmills and later steam-powered pumps were used to drain standing water from the quarries. Traill also employed the renowned wreck-raiser and engineer, James Bremner from Keiss, to build a substantial harbour where ships could be loaded with flags.¹¹ Stone-cutting and polishing sheds were erected near the harbour, the machinery being powered by an overshot waterwheel. Eventually a narrow-gauge railway driven by a stationary engine brought the flags from the quarries for dressing.¹² By the 1860s, almost 500 men were working at Castlehill during the peak summer season. Other Caithness landowners also opened quarries, but Traill's operation was always by far the largest. Owing to their reputation as the hardest wearing flooring, Castlehill flags were used within the new Houses of Parliament at Westminster and were highly commended by the architect, Sir Charles Barry. Eventually, the streets of major cities including London, Liverpool, Melbourne, Valparaiso, St Petersburg, and Dunedin were paved with Caithness flagstone.¹³ By the 1870s annual shipments from Castlehill amounted to over 9,000 tons.¹⁴

For over forty years, a local man, James MacBeath, who had risen from being a labourer in the quarries, acted as manager of the whole enterprise, latterly under the sheriff's son, George Traill (1787-1871), who was elected Member of Parliament for Caithness six times, serving from 1841-69.¹⁵

2. Church matters in Olig

The parish minister of Olig, Rev. William Mackenzie (1795-1857) was an evangelical, and much respected for his 'gentleness, meekness and amiability'. Of somewhat patrician background – 'by various ties he

11. The design included a wide quay to allow for large flags to be stored and handled. See Elizabeth Beaton, *Caithness: an illustrated architectural guide* (Edinburgh, 1996), p. 73.

12. *Scotsman*, 14th December 1868.

13. *John O' Groat Journal*, 27th September 1860 (hereafter *JOGJ*, with date).

14. See article on the flagstone industry in *JOGJ*, 24th October 1878. Also Donald Omand, *The Caithness Book* (Golspie, 1972), pp. 202-4.

15. See Mr Traill's obituary, *JOGJ*, 5th October 1871.

was connected to several of the leading families of Caithness' – he 'used the great influence which he thereby possessed in doing good as he had opportunity, especially to those of the household of faith'. Though 'a man of peace who lamented divisions', he was unyielding on the issues of patronage and the Headship of Christ.¹⁶ Despite all of this, some of his parishioners were attracted to the powerful preaching of the Rev. Alexander Gunn (senior) of Watten. Mr Mackenzie began his career at Monkwearmouth in Northumberland before succeeding his father in Olig in 1825. In 1843, he adhered to the Free Church. His people 'cleaved to him almost to a man'. Mr MacKenzie left behind him a large and elegant church with a battlemented tower which was less than two years old.¹⁷ When the Rev. William Phin, appointed in his place, opened up the parish church and held a service in November, the attendance was only 56, which included 'a gathering from Dunnet' but only two or three families from the parish itself.¹⁸ The Traills of Castlehill, who in spite of their evangelical leanings did not 'come out',¹⁹ granted sites for a new Free Church and associated school.²⁰

16. Obituary of Rev. William Mackenzie, *JOGJ*, 24th July 1857.

17. *JOGJ*, 22nd October 1841. This new church had replaced the medieval church of St Trothan which was inconveniently sited for the village. It was seated for 700 and Miss Traill presented a clock for the tower. It was itself abandoned as a place of worship after the union of the Established and United Free Churches in 1929 and now lies derelict. The present parish church on the main street is the former United Free Church, one of several constructed in the county to a similar design, after the original buildings were given to the 'legal' Free Church following the 1904 House of Lords decision.

18. *JOGJ*, 24th November 1843.

19. The Traills usually attended Dunnet Parish Church. The minister there until his death in 1845 was Rev. Thomas Jolly, who had been Sheriff Traill's tutor before being presented to the parish by Sir John Sinclair, on the death of Traill's father. A diligent pastor, and author of *An Essay on Justification*, at the age of 90 Jolly wrote a much publicised letter to Thomas Chalmers earnestly asking him not to break up the Church of Scotland. See Calder, *History of Caithness*, pp. 229-30. Significantly, both Mr Phin and Mr Jolly gave some of their children the middle name Traill. Thomas was succeeded by his son Peter and then, in 1876, by his nephew, Archibald, a Free Church minister who felt it his duty to return to the Established Church after the Abolition of Patronage Act in 1874. The three Jollys were ministers of Dunnet for a period of 105 years.

20. The church, of the standard Caithness double-gabled design, was seated for 850 people. It still stands today at the west end of the village, though now used as a store for a local joinery firm. See Ordnance Survey Name Books, online at Scotlandsplaces.gov.uk, under Caithness OS Name Books, 1871-1873, Vol. 7, p. 36.

Mr MacKenzie however was in failing health, and he had several pastoral assistants before Rev. Alexander Auld was ordained as his colleague and successor in 1855.²¹ Alexander Auld was called to Olig as a result of his being in the congregation at one of John MacBeath's pre-communion services at Bower. When a visiting minister failed to turn up, the young probationer was asked to take the service. He was reluctant, as he was not wearing his clerical frock coat, but David Steven appeared with Matthew Dunnet's teacher's gown and draped it over his shoulders. Several visitors from Castletown were so impressed that he was invited to preach there. Alexander Auld's godly mother, Janet, was the sister of Rev. Alexander Gunn, sen. and this may also have commended him to many. The parish of Olig was always noted for its conservatism in Church practice.



*Rev. Alexander Auld,
Free Church minister of
Olig from 1855 to 1904.*

In 1898, a report in the *John O' Groat Journal* noted this, highlighting the fact that Olig was the last place in Caithness where the reading of the line was maintained rigidly in singing the psalms in every service of worship, including even children's Bible classes.²² Mr Auld ended up as the only minister in the county to adhere to the Free Church in 1900, and his people overwhelmingly followed him. After the split, Olig was described as 'the largest English congregation in the church.'²³

In the neighbouring parish of Bower, the minister was the elderly Rev. William Smith (1767-1846). Donald Sage records that when he was a student assistant there, he found Mr Smith 'capricious and eccentric, "unstable as water" also, in all his plans, conferences and habits. His meals were most extraordinary. To breakfast we had porridge and milk, and mustard seed mixed up with them.'²⁴ He also delighted in travelling at night in the worst possible weather. Smith was an Evangelical, albeit of a milder breed than Mr Gunn, and was in his younger days one of the most

21. See Auld's obituary in *Northern Ensign*, November 4th 1904.

22. *JOGJ*, 1st July 1898. In Canisbay and Dunnet, the psalms had for a long time been sung straight through except at the Lord's Table. In Bower church the line was discontinued completely at an early date, because of the 'superior musical taste' of Rev. William Smith. See Stephen, *Gleanings in the North*, p. 20.

23. *Free Church Monthly Record*, October 1903, p. 168.

24. Donald Sage, *Memorabilia Domestica* (Wick, 1887), p. 215.



The old Free Church at Olig, where Rev. Alexander Auld was minister.

popular ministers in the county with his homely style of preaching.²⁵ He remained in the Established Church although he said that if he had been younger he would have sided with the Seceders, and he took an interest in the building of the Free Church, often speaking with the builders.²⁶ However, a large number of his people joined the Free Church. The noted elder David Steven arranged services in his stackyard at Halcro, assisted by the schoolmaster, Matthew Dunnet. Subsequently, they organised the construction of a basic church with low stone walls and a tarred roof. Many tradesmen gave their labour free of charge.²⁷ The first minister of Bower Free Church was Rev. John MacBeath, the younger brother of the Castlehill quarry manager.

3. The MacBeath family

The MacBeath family have been resident in Caithness since at least the seventeenth century, and the first Presbyterian minister of Olig

25. See Calder, *History of Caithness*. Mr Smith was on the committee of the Northern Missionary Society; see J.R. MacKay, 'The Northern Missionary Society', *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 19 (December 1914), p. 298.

26. See James McCosh, *The Wheat and the Chaff Gathered into Bundles* (Perth, 1843), p. 99; Stephen, *Gleanings in the North*, pp. 37-8.

27. The church building was later improved and the walls heightened. It still stands but is much altered and now used as a farm steading.

after the Glorious Revolution was Rev. William Mackbeath. James and John MacBeath's father was the noted Christian, William MacBeath. In his poem *The Fathers of Caithness*, William Crowe, Wick, wrote of William, 'On the surf beaten shore, at the end of the sand, plaintive William Macbeath was the salt of the land. Eyes glistening with tears and a persuasive tongue, beseeching the aged and warning the young.'²⁸ Rev. Alexander Auld included an account of his life in his book *Ministers and Men in the Far North*.²⁹ William married Charlotte Groat (a descendent of the famous Dutchman Jan de Groot, who held land at modern-day John O' Groats and is buried at Canisbay). William MacBeath was born in the parish of Dunnet and began work as a mason, residing at Castlehill. In later life he was a farm manager at Garth (Millhill) just outside Castletown, where Charlotte continued to stay after his death.³⁰ He attended the preaching of Rev. Alexander Gunn, sen. at Watten.

It would seem that William was a deeply spiritual though somewhat intense man. 'Vivid was his realisation of things unseen and eternal; small his estimate of things seen and temporal; deep his sense of the value of immortal souls; earnest his desire that Christ would widely reign and that Satan ... might lose no less than all his subjects.'³¹ Mr Auld tells that when he was praying outside such was his fervour that he could be heard for over a mile around and relates how when William would visit Wick and walk down the High Street, the sight of crowds of people would cause him to 'pray loudly in passing through them and personally expostulate with them about their souls.'³² Though an old man by 1843, he was instrumental in organising Free Church congregations in Bower, Canisbay, and Keiss. The Church Extension Committee, chaired by Dr Thomas Chalmers, was so well aware of William's important contribution that they resolved to give expression to their debt in a tangible form. 'When the question was put, "What are we to give?", Dr Chalmers is reported to have replied, "There is just one gift you can give to him, and

28. [W. Crowe], *The Fathers of Caithness and Other Poems* (4th edn., Glasgow, 1896).

29. See A. Auld, *Ministers and Men in the Far North* (2nd edn., Inverness, 1891), pp. 146-9.

30. There was also a daughter, Mary, who was three years younger than John. The 1851 census records Charlotte employing two servants at Millhill.

31. Auld, *Ministers and Men in the Far North*, p. 147.

32. Auld, *Ministers and Men in the Far North*, p. 149.

that is a Bible.” A handsome Bible, inscribed in Chalmers’ own hand, was duly presented to him.³³ William died on 8th May 1848.³⁴

4. Rev. John MacBeath (1812-78)

While he spoke little of his conversion to Christ, as a youngster John frequently retired in the evenings to the dunes behind the Dunnet Sands (near the site of the old St Coomb’s kirk) where he could find peace and solitude to meditate, pray, and search the Scriptures. John obviously had more academic tendencies than his older brother and proceeded from the Parish School of Olig to the High School, Edinburgh. During his time there, he maintained the first place in the Rector’s Greek class before proceeding to Edinburgh University. After a time as schoolmaster of Tannadice, Angus, John returned home to take over the school in his native parish, residing with his parents. But then, ‘acting on impulses which were, I may venture to say, hereditary to him, he forsook that profession for another, the exalted aims and responsibilities of which must have been weighed by him with solemn care.’³⁵ He proceeded back to Edinburgh where he studied Divinity, and he was licensed by the newly formed Free Church of Scotland on 29th November 1843.

The congregation of Bruan, whose minister Rev. John Sinclair³⁶ had died on 22nd August 1843, only weeks after the Disruption, sent a call to MacBeath. This speaks volumes for his abilities, as Sinclair was highly regarded by the people of God, ‘a burning and a shining light’ as his gravestone states. In June 1844 the Directors of the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge (which funded the Bruan mission) had agreed to appoint MacBeath on a temporary basis even though he was not a member of the Church of Scotland. At a further meeting it was decided, albeit with some dissensions, ‘not to recall the appointment of Rev. Mr MacBeth [sic],’

33. ‘Memoir of the Rev. John M’Beath, Olig’, *Original Secession Magazine (OSM)*, new series, Vol. 13 (September 1878), pp. 731-744 (p. 734).

34. An acrostic on William MacBeath, written by ‘J.S., Thurso’, was printed in *JOGJ* (2nd June 1848): ‘With holy fear he humbly trod, In wisdom’s ways before his God, Longing from sin to be set free, Life to enjoy eternally, In heaven above where joy doth reign, And where no sorrow is or pain, Most cordially and with delight, Mortals to Christ he did invite, And sin and Satan’s wiles to shun, Crowns to receive by Jesus won, Bounteous and free redeeming love, Em’nating from the throne above, Aloud he in his Master’s name, To chief of sinners did proclaim, His great and constant darling theme.’

35. John MacBeath’s obituary in *JOGJ*, 28th March 1878.

36. See sketch of John Sinclair’s life in Auld, *Ministers and Men in the Far North*, pp. 83-87.

and in December it was resolved that the Society could employ as teachers and missionaries, 'members of any of the Reformed Presbyterian Churches in Scotland'. But the Established Church authorities strongly objected to this policy and began legal action which resulted in an interim interdict preventing the SPCK from appointing MacBeath or any other member of the Free Church.³⁷

MacBeath instead accepted a call to the Free Church of Bower where he was ordained and inducted on 9th May 1844. 'The time of his settlement was to himself, as well as to his father and friends, a time of much prayer – a time at which he dedicated himself anew to God's service.'³⁸ But after a few years, MacBeath found that his conscience was troubled by the policies of some of the leading figures in the Free Church. In particular, he was disappointed that the Free Church, instead of relying on the Lord's provision, accepted grants from the Privy Council for the support of her schools, on the same terms as those given to the Church of Rome. He was troubled by the apparent inconsistency of the Church's speaking out against the endowment of colleges to train popish priests while going along with the endowment of Romanism as propagated by Roman Catholic teachers under the control of the same priests.

A further issue of concern was the Free Church's relationship to the Covenants. In 1843, the Original Secession Synod sent a deputation to the first Free Church Assembly and Dr White of Haddington gave a striking speech. In response, Dr Thomas Guthrie, perhaps one of the most popular preachers in the Disruption Church, 'hinted that when the banner of the Free Church was fully unfurled it would have emblazoned upon it both the Covenant and the Crown'. It seemed likely that union would soon be achieved.

But issues arose regarding the continuing obligation of the Covenants, and many Original Seceders complained that 'the Free Church was content to start from the low level of the Revolution Settlement instead of going back to the Reformation Settlement'. Many in the Free Church agreed, including Drs Robert Candlish and William Cunningham who

37. Beaton, *Ecclesiastical History of Caithness*, p. 236. See also *JOGJ*, 22nd November 1844. In the event, no new minister was appointed as the entire congregation in this crofting area had joined the Free Church. The size of the congregation is obvious on seeing the large and gaunt church, now roofless, beside the A99 at Clyth. Owing to the foresight of Sir George Sinclair, who made out the feu of the building in the name of 'the people of Bruan', the church was the only one in Caithness retained by the Free Church after the Disruption. *JOGJ*, 15th October 1868.

38. *OSM*, new series, Vol. 13 (1878), p. 735.

strongly supported an overture at the 1847 General Assembly to adopt the principles of the Covenanted Reformation. Others however were uneasy at what they saw as forcing a 200-year-old 'man-made' covenant on the consciences of Free Church members. Prominent in this group, rather surprisingly, was Dr Alexander Keith of St. Cyrus, the Hebrew scholar who had travelled with Robert Murray M'Cheyne and Andrew Bonar to the Holy Land. Keith fiercely insisted that 'the Scottish nation had no right to enter into a Covenant with God – that the only Covenant which had Divine sanction was that made with Abraham – and that in the Solemn League there were things which – if they were approved of by the Free Church – would compel him to leave it'.³⁹ On Dr Keith's motion, the overture was rejected, a decision which deeply disappointed MacBeath.

For the meantime negotiations were suspended, although many Original Seceders continued to look towards the Free Church; for instance, giving regular donations to her foreign mission funds. Eventually the union movement was relaunched and at the 1851 Assembly, an Act and Declaration was agreed which asserted that the Disruption Church held the same principles as the Church of Scotland during the Reformation period. Many within the Original Secession Church considered this to be a sufficient acknowledgment of their own distinctive principles. After a lengthy debate, the Original Secession Synod agreed to union by a majority of only 32 to 31.⁴⁰

Many Free Church people refused to accept what they perceived as an abandonment of Second Reformation principles. About the end of 1855, two ministers, Revs. Alexander Hislop and Robert McCorkle, founded the 'Association for Promoting the Principles of the Covenanted Reformation'. It failed to attract significant support but produced several interesting publications, including one on *Tombstones of the Scottish Martyrs*.⁴¹ Alexander Hislop was a noted scholar of the Chaldean pagan origins of Romanism,

39. This section is based on Norman L. Walker, *Chapters from the History of the Free Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1895), pp. 228-32; see also R. McCorkle, *The Decline of the Free Church and the Need of a Reformed Free Church in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1868), pp. 16-17, 45-48. On p. 48, McCorkle mentions that he had raised the matter of the abiding obligation of the Covenants at the 1845 Assembly.

40. The figures in the Church as a whole were 22 to 13 ministers, and a large majority of communicants, in favour of union.

41. R. McCorkle, *Tombstones of the Scottish Martyrs* (Glasgow, 1858). For more on Hislop and McCorkle, see 'Rev. Alexander Hislop and *The Two Babylons*', *The Bulwark*, October-December 2014, pp. 18-21.

well known even today as author of the magisterial work *The Two Babylons*. Interestingly, Hislop was well known in Caithness, having begun his career as parish schoolmaster of Wick. Following his death in 1865, the editorial in the *John O' Groat Journal* commented: 'Mr Hislop always retained affectionate memories of Caithness and the years spent in Wick where he made many fast friends. Some years ago he revisited the Far North on a summer tour and spent a portion of his visit as the guest of Sir George Sinclair at Thurso Castle.'⁴² Typical of his thinking is this overture which he composed, sent from the Free Presbytery of Arbroath to the 1854 Free Church Assembly.

Whereas God has visibly a controversy with this nation, and whereas there is reason to believe that in addition to the many heinous sins that have provoked His displeasure, one grand reason ... is the flagrant breach and long continued neglect of Covenants solemnly entered into both by Church and Nation and still binding upon posterity, [the Presbytery] asks for steps to be taken for bringing all ranks and classes back to their allegiance to the Most High, that God, being nationally honoured and acknowledged may be pleased to return to us as in days of old, and that glory may again dwell in our land.⁴³

5. MacBeath's resignation from his charge at Bower

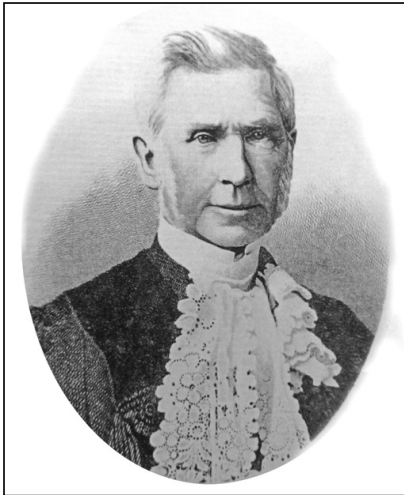
There is no indication that MacBeath joined with these efforts of Hislop and McCorkle. One reason for this was probably that MacBeath was unwell in the years around 1850, suffering from deep spiritual darkness and despair. 'He could not believe that the evidences of Divine life, that were so satisfactory to others, had any existence in his own soul.' Furthermore, he was questioning his own connection with the Free Church, feeling that the adoption of Dr Keith's view was 'a step backwards, a step of declension,

42. Sir George Sinclair (1790-1868) was a most benevolent gentleman who 'gained the love and esteem of all who regard the Christian graces as the best ornaments to life'. He was also a strong Protestant. See his obituary in *JOGJ*, 15th October 1868. He joined the Free Church several years after the Disruption and the following rather touching story is told. On entering the Thurso Free Church for the first time, Sir George made his way down the passage to the elders' seat. When another elder, Mr MacKidd made way for him, Sir George said, 'I am afraid, sir, I am depriving you of your seat'. MacKidd replied, 'Not at all, I've been keeping it for you all these years'; Archibald Auld, *Memorials of Caithness Ministers* (Edinburgh, 1911), p. 42. A monument inscribed with a lengthy tribute to Sir George stands in Sir John's Square in Thurso. His half-sister was the godly Lady Colquhoun whose *Life* was written by Rev. James Hamilton (1850).

43. *Elgin Courant*, 3rd February 1854.

that, if not averted, would lead the Free Church away from the grand principles for which she contended and appeared at the Disruption’.

On 22nd March 1848, MacBeath resigned his charge ‘and retired to Millhill, where he had resided with his father during the greater part of his ministry at Bower’. William MacBeath was at this time a great support to his son. ‘Experimentally acquainted with the working of the heart



*Rev. Walter Ross Taylor.
Minister of Thurso, in the
Established Church and Free
Church, from 1831 to 1896.*

and the temptations of Satan, the old man knew how to deal with his case and what to say in trying circumstances.⁴⁴ MacBeath subsequently withdrew his resignation but he resigned by letter three further times before the Presbytery finally acceded to his wish on 25th April 1850.

The congregation then voted to call Rev. John Durran, who was another native of Olrig, his family having been farmers at the Ha’ of Durran for several generations. He was a scholarly man who had worked as a teacher in two English public schools before studying for the ministry. Though Liberal in politics he was thoroughly conservative in his preaching and practice. Bower was to be his only charge, and he remained there until his death in January 1891.⁴⁵

The Presbytery was duly asked to moderate in a call to Mr Durran, to which it agreed, but on 30th July 1851, a proposal was made that the Presbytery should revisit the matter of the call to Mr Durran. This the Presbytery refused to do. In September of that year, the Synod of Caithness and Sutherland heard a complaint from Rev. W. R. Taylor, Thurso against this decision of the Presbytery. A very prolonged discussion ensued. Mr Taylor insisted that judgment of the Presbytery had been based on inaccurate data regarding the proportion of the membership who had signed the call, meaning that the level of support could not be accurately judged. He maintained that there were many members who had not signed the call and many communicants whose names were not on the roll. Mr Mackenzie (Tongue) suggested that the irregularities in the roll could be explained by

44. OSM, new series, Vol. 13 (1878), pp. 735-6.

45. See Durran’s obituary by Rev. J. C. Connell, Thurso in *Free Church Monthly Record*, November 1891, p. 340.

MacBeath's ill health. The Presbytery Clerk, Rev. Alex Gunn, jun. (Watten)⁴⁶ and Rev. Charles Thomson (Wick) appeared for the Presbytery. Mr Gunn insisted that even if there were there were mistakes there was still 'a very large majority' to proceed.⁴⁷ Mr Taylor wanted a new communion roll to be drawn up and asked for the Synod to consider a petition from 173 people asking for a delay of twelve months and for Mr MacBeath to be offered the charge again after this before anyone else was considered. It was said by his obituarist, that Mr Taylor was very strong willed and that once he had made up his mind no human being could persuade him to change it. It seems that his insistence on this matter reflects this characteristic.⁴⁸

Mr Gunn said that this was 'absurd' as MacBeath had already appealed to be released from his charge on no fewer than five separate occasions 'and in such earnest pleading too that they could no longer deny his request without being guilty of very great injustice and cruelty towards him'. While the congregation's attachment to their minister was 'very natural', Mr Gunn believed that they would willingly accept Mr Durran. The petition, he said, was not an authenticated document and it included seven names written in the same hand 'without having so much as the mark of the parties'. Moreover, at the congregational meeting a proposal to ask MacBeath to continue failed to find a seconder while the motion of David Steven to call Mr Durran was carried unanimously. Rev. Charles Thomson (Wick) quite justifiably said that the record showed that 'the Presbytery had shown great patience which probably has few parallels in the history of the Church'. The number of resignations and interviews with MacBeath all went to show

46. Rev. Alexander Gunn, jun. (1809-92) succeeded his father and seems to have inherited his forceful personality. As a churchman, he was described as 'liberal and catholic in his views, whilst at the same time he showed no sympathy with what is now known as the higher criticism'. His obituary notes that 'his aesthetic powers were varied. Let him but sound the flute or sing and there was music. Let him touch the canvas with brush or pencil and there was art.' In spite of his broadmindedness in some matters, he was 'mighty in the Scriptures and well-read in the old Scots Divines' and seems to have retained the loyalty of his father's congregation. See his obituary by Rev. J.C. Connell, Thurso in *Free Church Monthly Record*, March 1893, pp. 368.

47. Mr Durran had received the votes of 57 out of 65 members (including 6 out of 7 elders) and 431 adherents. The usual attendance was about 500.

48. Rev. W. R. Taylor was 'a man greatly beloved' in Caithness. Though a native of Tain, he lived and ministered in Thurso for over 65 years, preaching for the first two years in the medieval St. Peter's Church. A kindly man, small in stature, his 'placid and retiring disposition disguised from strangers his intellectual and moral strength'. He was appointed Moderator of the Free Church in 1884. See his obituary by A. Taylor Innes, Advocate (his cousin) in *Free Church Monthly Record*, October 1896.

that this was the case.⁴⁹ Rev. Donald Beaton wrote in summary: ‘though the Presbytery did all in their power to show sympathy with him, yet they saw at last that it was their duty to accept his resignation.’⁵⁰

Nevertheless, the Synod voted to overturn the Presbytery’s decision (7 to 6 with 13 abstentions), instructing the Presbytery to make up a new roll before the signing of the call on 17th September. As a number of MacBeath’s regular hearers were drawn from other parishes this would account for the perceived irregularities in the roll.

After his recovery, MacBeath at first intended to go abroad and preach to the heathen. His supporters, however, persuaded him to preach occasionally to them at Millhill on his own account as a minister without charge. He retained the support of many of his hearers, ‘not a few’ of whom resided at places ‘many miles distant’.⁵¹ He remained in this anomalous state, in the Free Church but occasionally taking separate services, until he finally severed his connection with the denomination in 1855 (see Section 7 below).

6. Association with Jonathan Ranken Anderson

The controversial Rev. Jonathan Ranken Anderson, a Glasgow Free Church minister, was suspended *sine die* from the ministry by the 1852 Assembly after refusing to retract public criticisms of his brethren. In point of fact he resigned his connection with the Church before the sentence was pronounced. He had been friendly with Revs. F. and A. Cook although he formed a strong and somewhat inexplicable dislike for the young John Kennedy, Dingwall. Anderson reputedly once said to Rev. Finlay that there were only two faithful ministers in Scotland, implying that they were the two of them. He received the unexpected reply, ‘That will be myself and my brother Archie!’. In the light of later events, it is noteworthy that the day following the Presbytery meeting which referred his case to the Assembly, Mr Anderson was visited by Rev. James M. Smith, Original Secession minister of Pollokshaws, who asked him to consider transferring his allegiance to them. In characteristic style Anderson commented: ‘while I approve of their theory [on the binding obligation of the Covenants], I hardly think they would tolerate a testimony against their formality and deadness.’⁵²

49. *JOGJ*, 5th September 1851.

50. Beaton, *Ecclesiastical History of Caithness*, p. 188.

51. *OSM*, new series, Vol. 13 (1878), p. 737; Vol. 3 (1856-8), p. 432.

52. *Diary of the Late Reverend Jonathan Ranken Anderson, Minister of the Gospel in Glasgow*

After his suspension, Mr Anderson had considerable, though sometimes guarded, sympathy from some on the conservative wing of the Free Church. He established his own congregations in Glasgow and Aberdeen. Caithness seems to have appealed to him as a potential source of support. In the autumn of 1852, Anderson wrote, 'I had accounts of the state of things in Caithness and was astonished at the interest which appears to have been felt in our case by all the godly people there and the disapprobation shown to good ministers for remaining silent'. He later commented, 'I learned from a Caithness man that my friends in the county are the very pick of the people.'⁵³ Anderson was in correspondence with several sympathisers in Caithness, one of whom was Rev. John MacBeath. He was urged by these friends to visit the county to preach. Such a visit could only serve to spread the nascent discontent over the direction in which the Free Church as a whole was heading.

Anderson's first visit to Caithness was in July 1854. In those days, the fastest route north was by steamer from Aberdeen. Having conducted services at Wick and Thurso, Anderson drove to Castletown on 19th July, where he found the parish school 'crowded to excess and nearly as many outside' so that he decided to hold the service in the open air. 'The people came about me in groups', he wrote in his diary, 'and a strong desire was expressed that I should come back and preach'. He returned on 21st July, and on that occasion 'a tent had been erected and from twelve to fourteen hundred people assembled'.⁵⁴ Press reports were hostile, stating that in Thurso his sermon was poorly attended and 'ill received', although admitting that 'numbers proceeded out of town' to hear him at Castletown.⁵⁵ When preaching in the Temperance Hall in Wick, Anderson is said to have declared that 'there were not three or four Christian men' in the town.⁵⁶

A person signing himself, 'VOX POPULI, THURSO', wrote to the *John O' Groat Journal* on 9th August 1854 to defend Anderson against the 'churlish' press, insisting that he preached 'excellent, simple and solid

(cited as *Anderson's Diary*), Vol. 2, 1852, p. 149, quoted in R. Middleton, 'Jonathan Ranken Anderson and the Free Church of Scotland, Part I', *Scottish Reformation Society Historical Journal (SRSHJ)*, Vol. 4 (2014), pp. 135-274 (pp. 232-3). For an account of *Anderson's Diary*, see *ibid.*, p. 136, n. 3.

53. R. Middleton, 'Jonathan Ranken Anderson and the Free Church of Scotland, Part II', *SRSHJ*, Vol. 5 (2015), pp. 211-318 (p. 300).

54. *Anderson's Diary*, Vol. 4, 19th and 21st July 1854.

55. *Northern Ensign*, 27th July 1854.

56. *Inverness Courier*, 28th June 1854.

truths', with 'a style and a manner highly original and peculiarly his own', and suggested that his ministry was, like Wesley and Whitfield, to 'arouse the careless and carnal'. His addresses were characterised by 'neatness, brevity and close application – the pure, simple gospel, capable of reaching the lowest understanding'. 'As to the audience', the letter continued, 'I believe that were the largest church in the county thrown open and previous notice given, it would not contain the hearers.' Although some churches had been granted to 'strolling lecturers', none were offered to Mr Anderson who 'preached only the Gospel without money and without price ... I trust it was not because "he followeth not us".' The letter insisted that the preacher 'did not, in my hearing, attack any man or body of men'. At Castletown, 'the congregations were almost all carrying Bibles, frequently turning them up "to see if these things were so". I never witnessed greater decorum and attention in hearers and I could see no sleepers there.'⁵⁷

At the August meeting of the Free Church Presbytery of Caithness, it was asserted that those who had gone to hear Mr Anderson had 'in so doing trampled on the spiritual authority of the Church of Christ, of which he has said, "He that despiseth you despiseth me."' A motion was moved to the effect that 'the Presbytery, understanding that a large number of members of the Free Church had been induced to go and hear and support Mr Anderson under the impression that he was a minister in communion with the Free Church, deemed it right to make their people aware that he had been deposed by the highest court of the Church; and that they were therefore warned against supporting him in his crusade against the Church.' After a vote, it was decided to send a minute to be read from every Free Church pulpit in Caithness. Three ministers, Finlay Cook (Reay), Walter Ross Taylor (Thurso), and David Campbell (Dunnet)⁵⁸ voted against this measure.⁵⁹

57. *JOGJ*, 15th August 1854.

58. David Campbell, a native of Halkirk, was as a young man, a teacher at Achow in the parish of Latheron, where 'he formed friendships with not a few of the excellent of the earth; and this, while developing his personal piety, gave him much of the tone of thought and idiosyncrasy of "the Men".' See his obituary by Rev. Alexander Auld in *Free Church Monthly Record*, February 1877, p. 43. An outspoken opponent of Union with the United Presbyterians, Mr Campbell 'though not of the most robust health, was a Boanerges in the pulpit, unsparing in his denunciations of what was wrong and as vigorous in upholding the truth'. He was a strict keeper of the Sabbath and refused Church privileges to anyone who broke it. Archibald Auld, *Memorials of Caithness Ministers*, pp. 282-4. Such tendencies perhaps explain why his ministry attracted many who were unhappy with the modernising tendencies in the Free Church.

59. *JOGJ*, 15th August 1854.

When the Presbytery's minute was read out in the Castletown church, it was claimed by one correspondent, signing himself, 'Free Churchman', that a 'large number' of people stood up and walked out.⁶⁰ Both the *Northern Ensign* and the *John O' Groat Journal* insisted that the number was small; the latter claiming that 'we are informed that only some 12 or 15 left the church and of these a large number, it is said, consisted of persons in the habit (a habit by no means laudable but which prevails throughout the County) of rising and leaving the church before the benediction is pronounced.'⁶¹ The following week, 'Free Churchman' wrote that 'the testimony of several persons who were present has satisfied me that [the newspapers] have understated almost as widely as I have overstated' the number of those who walked out.⁶²

'Free Churchman' (stated by the editor to be 'a respectable and intelligent adherent of the Free Church'), claimed that 'several congregations of the Free Church have lately been astounded by an intimation that anyone who went to listen to Anderson would be liable to suspension from Church privileges', and likened this to denunciations from the altar in Papist Ireland, stating it was 'surprising that in the Free Protestant Church of Scotland there should be found a Presbytery, though there were creditable exceptions, capable of fulminating the ban of excommunication against the general body of their own adherents, and that for no other reason than their having listened to a sermon in the open air on a weekday evening'. The correspondent regarded this action as 'ludicrous', 'painful' and 'inconsistent with Christian charity'. He suggested that there were many actions far more worthy of Church discipline than listening to 'a preacher of talent and eloquence and against whom nothing has been brought involving error of doctrine, or of life or conversation'. Anderson's audiences, he wrote, were 'only attracted by what seems good in the man'.⁶³ The editorial in the same issue of the *John O' Groat Journal* insisted that the intimation 'contained no threat of nor allusion to Church censure' on those who went to hear Anderson's preaching, and continued:

We believe that had Mr Anderson been allowed to pass unheeded by the press, his followers would be comparatively few. Anything savouring of a bull or prohibition is sure to gather adherents and as Mr A. deals largely

60. *JOGJ*, 8th September 1854.

61. *JOGJ*, 15th September 1854.

62. *JOGJ*, 15th September 1854.

63. *JOGJ*, 8th September 1854.

in ‘brimstone terrors’, which he applies equally to clergy and laity – a style of preaching, we regret to say, still admired to a lamentable degree in the Northern Counties, he will, if he perseveres, draw large audiences.⁶⁴

Some of the opprobrium from this controversy must have landed on MacBeath, who had been identified as a follower of Anderson’s. The following April, the press reported that

since his [MacBeath’s] withdrawal from the Free Church he has been preaching on his own account and last Sabbath addressed a number of people in a barn at Castletown. It is reported in that district that a party among the parishioners intend to erect a chapel for the rev. gentleman who, it is alleged, has imbibed and intends to follow up the principles of Rev. Jonathan Anderson.⁶⁵

It is obvious that Anderson was greatly encouraged by the response he received in Caithness, so much so that he returned only a few weeks later. This time, he was staying at Castletown with Rev. John MacBeath. ‘The worship in the family was simple and accompanied by a little savour’, he commented. It seems that the two men sat up late discussing spiritual matters,⁶⁶ and Anderson on leaving noted that he had ‘experienced much kindness from Mr McB and family, where I spent so many happy moments with the portion of the soul.’⁶⁷ However Anderson was obviously taking soundings about his host, recording that, ‘The people in Thurso say he is certainly a King’s son, but he has stolen the hearts of the people.’⁶⁸ Again, Anderson preached at several locations across the county. It is notable that the people he refers to visiting in his diary were predominantly Seceders and Reformed Presbyterians.

Through James MacBeath, the visiting preacher had access to the quarry workers. On 7th September, a service was held in the quarry ‘where we had a congregation of at least twelve hundred people – most of them men’. On the 10th, ‘the tent was erected in a hollow near the sea [at the west end of the Dunnet sands near the Castlehill Mill] and persons from almost every parish in Caithness were at the sermon ... and four individuals even from Reay. We had about two thousand present’. Anderson travelled

64. *JOGJ*, 8th September 1854.

65. *Inverness Courier*, 26th April 1855.

66. *Anderson’s Diary*, Vol. 4, 11th September 1854.

67. *ibid.*, 26th September 1854.

68. *ibid.*, 25th September 1854.

to Scarmclate in the parish of Bower when over three hundred gathered and on the following day preached at Newlands of Tain near Dunnet when over 600 were present.⁶⁹ The parish minister Mr Phin rather mischievously offered him the use of the parish church but his offer was declined as the weather continued fair.⁷⁰

Anderson's last visit to the county was in June 1855. MacBeath had finally resigned from the Free Church in March of that year. Having landed at Wick, Anderson recorded, 'DD called and seemed to have some bad news about Castletown, which he said he would tell me on Monday, that my mind might not be harassed on Sabbath. I was led to think that the trial of Caithness is coming to a close and perhaps the door opened may now be shut'.⁷¹ Having preached in the Temperance Hall to 'noble congregations', on the Monday, Anderson received a letter from John MacBeath in which 'he [MacBeath] speaks of being in perplexity about my intended visit and it seems to me I should not proceed further but return to Aberdeen'. Anderson's reply stated that the responsibility for his premature departure was not his own. Although a supporter from Castletown arrived in Wick in a gig to collect him, the disenchanted Anderson decided to cut short his visit and boarded the steamer.⁷² It is clear that by this time MacBeath's mind was moving towards the Original Secession Church.

The following week, at home in Glasgow, Anderson received a letter from

Mr McA who is still in Caithness and had ample confirmation of the step I had taken in returning from it. The people that cleave to Mr J. McB threaten to give trouble by their divided allegiance between him and the Free Church. I am glad I am out of the way, so that if any division takes place, it cannot be said that I am the cause of it.⁷³

7. Separation from the Free Church

As mentioned above, on 26th March 1855, Macbeath wrote to the Caithness Presbytery to resign his connection with the Free Church. This was accepted. His letter to the Presbytery Clerk stated: 'it is long since I felt inclined to

69. *ibid.*, 13th September 1854.

70. *ibid.*, 23rd September 1854.

71. *Anderson's Diary*, Vol. 5, 16th June 1855.

72. *ibid.*, 18th June 1855.

73. *ibid.*, 27th June 1855.

take such a step, from a continual and careful observation of the course of procedure, followed by the Free Church generally, and in particular



Rev. Alexander Gunn, jun. Minister of Watten, in the Established Church and the Free Church, from 1837 to 1892.

PIC. COURTESY OF MRS ANNE ALEXANDER,
WATTEN CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

instances.⁷⁴ The Presbytery minute recorded that his resignation was made 'without assigning any special reason'.⁷⁵ The *Original Secession Magazine's* account of MacBeath's life highlights this statement, and a further one a fortnight later when, at a meeting of Presbytery held at Olig, 'when one would have supposed the case was finally settled, Rev. Alexander Gunn [jun.] was put up to declare again in public that "he [MacBeath] had not stated any reasons and the Presbytery is not aware of any reasons to justify his step".' The *Original Secession* writer goes on: 'the northern leaders [of the Free Church] were alarmed when a minister of MacBeath's high moral standing left the Church', and

he claims that 'the design of this meeting was obvious but the effect was [that] it led the more serious of the people to think of his position and listen to his arguments'.⁷⁶ In fact, 'the design of the meeting' was basically that of signing a call to Alexander Auld as colleague and successor to Mr MacKenzie, and Alexander Gunn's statement was incidental to the main business.⁷⁷

The *Original Secession Magazine* undoubtedly overstates MacBeath's influence. He was neither a prominent minister nor a noted preacher, and the protracted affair of his resignation from Bower can hardly have enhanced his reputation. Yet J. R. Anderson's ability to attract large congregations, in defiance of the Church courts, clearly showed that there was a measure of discontent among the more conservative Free Church people in Caithness. This was later evident in the controversy in Thurso over discontinuing reading of the line in public worship, when

74. *OSM*, new series, Vol. 13 (1878), p. 737.

75. *JOGJ*, 6th April 1855.

76. *OSM*, new series, Vol. 13 (1878), p. 738.

77. See report of the Presbytery meeting in *JOGJ*, 27th April 1855.

several elders and members resigned, some of them joining the smaller Presbyterian Churches in the town.⁷⁸

In 1857, John MacBeath published a pamphlet entitled *Statement of Separation from the Free Church*, a work which, according to his obituarist, was ‘worthy alike of his heart and his head’.⁷⁹ He attempted to justify his taking up a separate position, seeking to show:

1st that his case from the beginning was one of principle and not feelings; 2nd That the leaders of the Church, during the non-intrusion controversy, had maintained the two principles of Anti-Patronage and Spiritual Independence, and excited within many of their adherents the hope that they would take up Reformation ground; 3rd That by its worldly policy the Free Church has not only failed to revive the testimony of the Church of Scotland, she has practically departed from the maintenance of her own. She has practically departed from the maintenance of the two great principles which she contended to secure for the Established Church in the previous struggle, and for the maintenance of which the Disruption was effected...; and 4th he gives an exposition of the principles that those adhering to him were understood to maintain and defend.⁸⁰

These principles were, in the opinion of his obituarist, almost identical to the principles of the Original Secession Church.

John MacBeath was a quiet and diffident man, a very different character from Jonathan Ranken Anderson. His criticisms were not personalised. The protracted affair of his leaving the Free Church must have taken a fearful toll on him. Furthermore, this new divisiveness was particularly sad because in the 1850s, the Free Church in Caithness was characterised by strict orthodoxy and deep spirituality. In 1869 the prominent Argyll elder, Archibald Crawford, was sent by Dr James Begg on a tour of the Northern Counties, to ascertain the views of the people in case there should a second Disruption over the Union controversy.

78. See Norman Campbell, *Reading the Line* (Stornoway, 2005), pp. 15-16; William Mill, *The Despised Fathers of Caithness* (Inverness, 1884), pp. 27, 34, 39-40. Another who left was the Free Church missionary William Campbell, who separated about 1871, remaining separate until he joined the Free Presbyterian Church in 1893; see his obituary in *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 4 (January, 1904), pp. 355-360; N. Campbell and R. Dickie (eds.), *Witnesses in the Far North* (Reformation Press, 2017), pp. 126-137.

79. The present writer has been unable to locate a copy of this pamphlet, although its contents are summarised in MacBeath’s OSM obituary. It is listed in J. Mowat, *A Bibliography of Caithness* (Wick, 1940), pp. 56, 163.

80. OSM, new series, Vol. 13 (1878), pp. 738-9.

His considered opinion was that ‘in Ross-shire he felt that the people were living on the religion of their grandfathers; in Sutherland they were living on the godliness of their fathers; while in Caithness he fell in with a people who had some godliness of their own!’.⁸¹

On 30th April 1857, in Edinburgh, John MacBeath married Jane Sutherland, a native of Reay, who was the daughter of John Sutherland, grocer and Margaret MacLeod. Jane was a cousin of his brother’s wife, Marion MacLeod. She was an ideal minister’s lady, and was obviously a great support to him in his depression: ‘prudent in speech and conduct, kind and conciliatory in manner, understanding and entering sympathisingly into her husband’s feelings and desires, and able to relieve him from all anxiety in regard to his temporal affairs, Mrs MacBeath proved herself to be an invaluable help and comforter to him in the great work to which he had consecrated his life, and to which it was constantly his delight to be engaged.’⁸² Jane’s brothers were Rev. Robert Sutherland, a Free Church minister,⁸³ and Dr David MacGregor Sutherland, who was the highly respected doctor in Castletown for many years. David ‘resided with his relative, Mrs James MacBeath during the greater part of his youth’ and later stayed at Garth until his death in 1886.⁸⁴

MacBeath’s *Statement* provoked a strong reaction from Rev. Alexander Gunn, who wrote him an angry letter which he copied to the *John O’ Groat Journal* stating, ‘your references to me are pretty frequent and not over friendly’. He pointed out, ‘you do not appear to have taken the

81. John MacLeod, ‘An Argyllshire Worthy’, in G.N.M. Collins, *John MacLeod, D.D.* (Edinburgh 1951), p. 264.

82. OSM, new series, Vol. 13 (1878), p. 740.

83. In 1843 Robert Sutherland, as a probationer, signed the Deed of Demission and Act of Separation. At that time, he was resident at Dunbeath, where he was a teacher. He subsequently went to Australia where he had several different charges. He was the author of *The History of Presbyterian Church of Victoria* (London, 1877). By 1880, Mr Sutherland was suffering from ill-health and had returned home to Reay. He tragically died of heart-failure after swimming at Fresgo on Sandside Bay, Reay. See *JOGJ*, 9th September 1880. He was buried with his parents in the old churchyard at Reay.

84. Dr David Sutherland was a prominent member of the local community and served on the School Board for many years. His obituary records: ‘he had considerable aptitude in diagnosis and was far from rash in his use of medicines; and when he had to deal with a case of unusual gravity, few were aware how much – under his cool demeanour and reticent manner – it weighed on his mind and occupied his thoughts’; see *JOGJ*, 12th May 1886. The Garth farmhouse still stands, an impressive double-gabled house.



The Original Secession church at Millhill, built for Rev. John MacBeath about 1857.

course or acted in the spirit of Hosea when the church was in such a corrupt state as you represent the Free Church to be. He was commanded to “plead with his mother” for her reformation’. But MacBeath had ‘first turned his back on her’ and was now ‘stoning her’ even though for twelve years, since he was licensed to preach the Gospel, as a minister and then as a preacher within the bounds of the Presbytery of Caithness, so far as Gunn knew, MacBeath had ‘found no blemish in the principles or the practice of the Free Church’.⁸⁵

Once MacBeath had left the Free Church, his followers prevailed on him to start regular services, and a simple but substantial little stone church, seating 300 people, was built across the road from his house at Millhill.⁸⁶ His congregation, which included ‘a good many families’ from Bower,⁸⁷ was ‘not large, [but] certainly it included not a few intelligent members’.⁸⁸

MacBeath’s preaching was appreciated by his people. His sermons were carefully prepared, and

85. *JOGJ*, 17th July 1857.

86. Ordnance Survey Name Books, online at Scotlandsplaces.gov.uk, under Caithness OS Name Books, 1871-1873, Vol. 7, p. 55.

87. Obituary of John Calder, farmer, Brabsterdorrin in *JOGJ*, 10th August 1894.

88. *JOGJ*, 28th March 1878.

doctrinal in a degree and simple in style as a Puritan divine. Oftentimes they were delivered with an amount of warmth which became very impressive and showed the deep-seated earnestness of the speaker.⁸⁹

John MacBeath was a gentle and compassionate man. When a member of his congregation died, his words were ‘touchingly well chosen and clearly reflected that kindness of heart which made private intercourse with him so very enjoyable’. In no way seeking prominence, MacBeath avoided involvement in public affairs although he would strongly express disapproval of ‘advanced’ theological views.

8. Joining the Original Secession Church

On 20th August 1857 the Original Secession Synod ‘took up a petition from the congregation of Millhill, parish of Olig, Caithness, under the inspection of Rev. James [sic] MacBeath applying for union with this Synod. The Rev. Mr MacBeath was heard in support of the petition. The members of court having delivered their minds at length, and expressed their gratification’, it was unanimously agreed that the application be acceded to; and the Presbytery of Perth and Aberdeen were asked to arrange for their admission into the denomination.⁹⁰

The Original Secession Church comprised a minority of the former Old Light Anti-Burgher Synod. Following the Disruption of 1843, the Original Secession Synod came to the majority conclusion that there was no continued justification for its separate existence from the Free Church. After all, the other conservative section of the Secession (the Old Light Burghers) had joined the Established Church in 1839 when the Evangelicals were in control. Support for the Covenants in the Free Church was limited, however, (as detailed in Section 4 above), and the union between the Original Secession Church and the Free Church in 1852 led to the formation of an ongoing Original Secession Church which retained a formal commitment to the Covenants. It was this body that MacBeath had now joined.

The Original Secession was a small Church. With fewer than thirty congregations, it was overwhelmingly a lowland denomination.⁹¹ Though there was a congregation in Thurso and another across the Pentland Firth

89. *Northern Ensign*, 17th April 1879.

90. OSM, new series, Vol. 3 (1856-8), p. 333.

91. This figure included five congregations in Ulster.

at Birsay in Orkney, the closest one in the other direction was over 200 miles away, in Aberdeen. The Thurso congregation had recently split following the union with the Free Church. The minister, Rev. David Burn, had joined the Free Church, and so had his congregation, by a majority of one. They then became a Free Church congregation (Thurso West). The minority launched a much publicised property-case which caused a lot of ill-feeling towards them in the county but ultimately went their way, the Lords of Session finding that even if one member remained in the original denomination, the property should be assigned to him.⁹²

As a former Free Church minister, MacBeath's decision to join the Original Seceders at this juncture must have further eroded his reputation among the wider public. In commending Robert McCorkle's *Tombstones of the Scottish Martyrs*, a reviewer in the *Original Secession Magazine* commented:

we are not infrequently represented as though we were hostile to the Free Church. This has arisen because we were constrained to speak out freely of what we deemed her defects in this very matter [the Covenants] when forced into controversial conflict with our late brethren who have entered her communion. This feeling has been aggravated by the local efforts of congregations, or parts of congregations, to preserve their property, in connection with the Original Secession Church.⁹³

The reviewer took the opportunity to praise Hislop and McCorkle's 'Association for Promoting the Principles of the Covenanted Reformation' for the breadth and thoroughness of the Reformation which it had as its object, which was identical to the principles of the Original Seceders themselves.

92. See *JOGJ*, 1st December 1859. The Lords of Session in their judgment found that there were three differences between the Free and Original Secession Churches, which meant that those uniting with the Free Church had changed their principles and forfeited their rights to the property, namely: the Original Secession Church recognised the descending and perpetual obligation of the Covenants while the Free Church did not; the Original Secession Church believed Presbyterian Church government to be the only form bearing the Divine sanction while the Free Church merely believed that it was in accordance with the Bible; and the Original Secession Church condemned the Revolution Settlement and Treaty of Union while the Free Church made them the basis 'of their Claim and Protest'. This finding would have been in line with MacBeath's thinking, although the judges' grasp of the theology, e.g. the difference between Biblical authority and the Divine sanction, was quite legitimately questioned by the Free Church, for instance in *The Witness* newspaper.

93. See *OSM*, new series, Vol. 3 (1856-8), pp. 522-8.

A week before he became an Original Secession minister, MacBeath was passing through Aberdeen and called at Mrs Parker's home in Skene Terrace in the hope of seeing Jonathan Anderson, who was staying there while supplying his congregation of supporters in the city. As was his frequent practice when staying in Aberdeen, and even though it was the end of November, Mr Anderson was at the Bay of Nigg bathing in the North Sea. He later commented in his diary: 'on our return we learned that Mr J. McB of Castletown had called for me. I was rather pleased that I escaped the visit and the discussion which in all probability would have ensued.'⁹⁴

On 27th November, the Perth and Aberdeen Presbytery met at Millhill. Rev. Dr Manson, the Perth minister, acting as Moderator *pro tem*, was present along with Rev. Ebenezer Ritchie, Thurso and his elder, John Coupar. It was to be followed by a communion season. Dr Manson, though almost a generation older than MacBeath – he was born in 1794 – was also a native of Orlig, born at Gothigill, on the hill behind Castletown, where his father, William Manson, was a farmer.⁹⁵ Even at a time when there were very many eminent Christians in Caithness, it was said that 'everyone knew godly-living William Manson'. Though it involved a five-mile walk each way, he was a member of the Original Secession Church in Thurso. Like the MacBeaths, young Thomas was brought up in 'an atmosphere of vital godliness'. It is recorded that 'it was customary at that time for men of God to spend some part of Sabbath morning in prayer in the caves or geos of the rocky Caithness coast'. One morning after he had come to the shore as usual, he found every such place was already occupied and rather than return home, Thomas knelt down on the beach and poured out his heart. 'He could not but rejoice that so many had come out on such an errand.'⁹⁶ As a young man he was apprenticed to the worthy David Sinclair, Thurso and later married one of his daughters, Janet.

An independently minded boy, he was an able scholar who wrote works defending the universality of Noah's flood and the literal days of Creation. He was awarded a Doctorate of Divinity by the University of Glasgow. For some years, he edited the *Original Secession Magazine*. He was also remembered as an extremely diligent pastor.⁹⁷ Though he spent

94. *Anderson's Diary*, Vol. 7, 20th November 1857.

95. See *JOGJ*, 17th March 1837.

96. See Manson's obituary in *OSM*, new series, Vol. 12 (1875-6), pp. 725-40.

97. See D. Scott, *Annals and Statistics of the Original Secession Church* (Edinburgh,

most of his life in the south, Manson retained a great love and respect for the worthies he knew in the days of his youth, once writing to his father-in-law: 'Though I have been for nearly twenty years employed in public, I am looking for the return of something like my first days with interest, and am more in love with the kind of Christianity that I saw with the old people about Thurso; yet I would not judge harshly those who, with a different education, have a different form to this.'⁹⁸ It would seem very likely that Manson's influence was an important factor in encouraging his younger friend to join the Original Secession cause.

After MacBeath answered the questions of the Formula, he 'declared his readiness to enter into the bond for renewing the Covenants at the first opportunity'. The questions were then put to Donald Miller and James MacBeath, elders and to Alexander Leitch, deacon.⁹⁹ The *Magazine* commented that before the Disruption, MacBeath and his supporters 'expected that those who had made such warm appeals to the Covenants and the contests and sufferings of the Covenanters, while the struggle with the state and the Court of Session was proceeding, would, when at length they came out, have taken up their position on the hallowed platform of the Covenanted Reformation in all its breadth. But they were disappointed in this, which was by no means an unreasonable expectation ... and being disappointed, they were led, step by step, to see it to be their duty as witnesses, to ascend to the identical position on which the First Seceders took their stand, and which Original Seceders continue to occupy'. They had not joined the denomination as a matter of expediency, but out of real conviction. Later, in 1866, when the Synod resolved to

1886), pp. 557-9. Scott describes Dr Manson as 'the worthy son of pious parents', and writes: 'in prayer he delighted, and as he was familiar with the names and circumstances of all of his flock he used to pray for them in rotation. In gravity of demeanour and Christian consistency he was a model pastor.' He quotes a close friend who said, 'He was truly a delightful person, a Nathaniel in simplicity and without guile'. Manson died on 31st March 1876. His cousin was Rev. David Waters, Burghead, a prominent constitutionalist Free Church minister. Mr Waters was born in 1793 and at the time of his death in 1887 was the oldest minister in the Free Church. At one time he wanted to be a minister in the Original Secession Church but was dissuaded by Dr Colquhoun of Leith and entered the Establishment instead. His obituary records, 'Mr Waters was a man of marked individuality, brimful of humour and with a singularly rich store of quaint reminiscences, which he could tell in quite an inimitable way,' obituary by Rev. John MacPherson, Findhorn, *Free Church Monthly Record*, December 1887, p. 369.

98. OSM, new series, Vol. 12 (1875-6), p. 728.

99. OSM, new series, Vol. 3 (1856-8), pp. 430-2.

renew the Covenants MacBeath made the effort to be personally present in Glasgow, where he ‘took the liveliest interest in the proceedings, gave himself solemnly to the Lord and found it to be a time at which his soul was refreshed and his zeal for the maintenance of our public profession increased.’¹⁰⁰

Interestingly, in light of Jonathan Anderson’s comment on the Original Secession’s ‘formality and deadness’ (Section 6 above), the article went on to commend ‘the warmth of religious affection and a manifestation of practical godliness, which ought to excite others to emulation’, and expressed a desire that such a spirit would spread around the denomination, ‘a spirit by which the Church was characterised – as our fathers have told us – in the days of her youth’.

Over the days of the communion, attendances were very encouraging, and on Sabbath a number had to leave owing to lack of space in the church. Two hours after the public worship ended, a prayer meeting was held which did not finish until after one in the morning.

9. Ministry at Millhill

John MacBeath resided in a manse at Burnside, at the east end of Castletown,¹⁰¹ only a couple of minutes’ walk from the church at Garth. There, he indulged his favourite pastime of cultivating his flower-garden. The minister took a great interest in the natural world, always showing visitors around the Castlehill policies, Dunnet Sands, and the moors on Dunnet Head, where he was so well acquainted with the flowers, mosses, and birds of the rocky coastline. His knowledge was not imparted to impress his companions, but rather given in answer to enquiries and in such a way, his obituarist noted, that led one to think of the Creator ‘that you would love Him more, adore Him more, and serve Him better than hitherto you had done’.¹⁰² MacBeath had a conservatory built where he could bring on his bedding plants. Indeed the attractive sloping grounds of the manse, which occupy a prominent location at the entrance to Castletown, were a noted feature of the village for many years.¹⁰³ He felt much more settled now that

100. *OSM*, new series, Vol. 13 (1878), p. 742.

101. It is still standing, at the junction of the Wick and John O’ Groats roads, and is now called Woodside House. The stable now forms part of the adjacent garden-centre.

102. *OSM*, new series, Vol. 13 (1878), pp. 742-3.

103. *JOGJ*, 6th July 1865. His son, Rev. William MacBeath, later stayed there after he succeeded his father as Original Secession minister of Olrig.

he was out of the Free Church and he proved to be a dedicated pastor who did not spare himself in the service of his Heavenly Master. John MacBeath

devoted himself with renewed vigour, wisdom and zeal to his great work, and manifested that through his trials he had only been more fully qualified for its efficient performance. Instant in season and out of season ... he had assigned to every day of the week its special work in the master's service; and no worldly matters, however important, were allowed for an instant to interfere with what had the first place, nay all place, in his heart and in his arrangements. Rising regularly at five o' clock and on Sabbath mornings an hour earlier, he continued in the service till eight or nine at night, his only complaint being that his body would not allow him to continue in it longer. Convinced that as an ambassador of Christ he ought to wait regularly on the Lord for instructions, and be able always to say to the people, My speech and preaching were not with enticing words of man's wisdom, he was in the habit of spending every Wednesday in the church, in private meditation and prayer.¹⁰⁴

He frequently got his text and lines of thought during these times of prayer, and after meditating further 'he came forth on Sabbaths as from the presence of the Master, not only as a scribe fully instructed in the things of God but with an unction and an eloquence which made the people hang on his lips.' Towards the end of his life he 'seemed to be in haste to prepare for the public services of the sanctuary; and he seemed to be in haste to retire from these to his study, where he spent hours alone with God.'¹⁰⁵

As well as Dr Manson, Perth, MacBeath was friendly with Rev. John Robertson, Ayr, and one of them was normally invited to assist at the Orlrig communions. Mr Robertson was highly respected for his compassion and sympathy for the ill and the dying. 'Probably no-one in Ayr was more widely known and more highly esteemed for Christian labour'. In later life he became the senior minister of the Original Secession Church.¹⁰⁶ In

104. OSM, new series, Vol. 13 (1878), pp. 740-1.

105. Ibid., p. 742.

106. See Robertson's obituary in OSM, 3rd series, Vol. 1 (1893-4), pp. 725-33, 789-803; Scott, *Annals and Statistics of the Original Secession Church*, p. 580. 'His brotherly love and Christian character have been such that there has been a danger of all men speaking well of him'. On his ministerial jubilee, the local newspaper commented: 'With a singleness of purpose he has given himself to the work of bringing the aids and consolations of the Gospel to all classes of the people. At no hour of the day or night did he ever refuse a call to the bedside of the sick or dying, and his sympathy for those in trouble or sorrow has always been ready and heartfelt', *Ayr Advertiser*, 2nd July 1891.

1866, on the Monday evening of an Orlig communion, it is recorded that Dr Manson 'gave a very beautiful address in the Secession Church which was quite filled with an audience composed of people belonging to all the denominations in the place.'¹⁰⁷

The following year, Dr Manson was invited, but the weather was so severe that his steamer could not sail from Aberdeen. Mr Robertson was so determined to 'keep the feast' that he proceeded by train. One of his companions was a lady, 'to whom he showed that courteous kindness which was habitual with him'. This deeply impressed an officer of the Royal Engineers who, when the railway could take the passengers no further, promised to accompany Mr Robertson on his onward journey. They continued by coach but upon reaching Helmsdale, were warned that two mail coaches were already stuck in the snow drifts on the Ord of Caithness and they should not think of carrying on. The minister, however was determined to proceed and when the landlord in the Bridge Hotel refused to give him a horse from the stables, Mr Robertson said. 'In that case I will walk'. The officer vowed, 'In that case, I will go with you', and the driver of the stagecoach, not to be outdone, harnessed one of his horses, strapped the travellers' bags on its back and so they ventured out into the blizzard. Upon reaching one of the stranded coaches, they yoked the one horse to it and 'sometimes walking, sometimes pushing their vehicle', they managed to cross the Ord. When Mr Robertson parted from his companions, they shook hands and said goodbye. The soldier said to him, 'I saw your kindness to that woman and was determined to see you through'. He eventually reached Castletown, where many prayers had been said and one worthy man had prophesied he would surely come to the communion.¹⁰⁸

In April 1859, his elders presented MacBeath with an eight-day clock and an easy-chair as a token of their regard,¹⁰⁹ and three years later he was given a carriage, a horse, and a complete set of harnesses by his congregation.¹¹⁰

In 1860 he published a pamphlet entitled *The Privy Council and Popish School Books*¹¹¹ which was prompted by complaints that the bad state of the Castletown Free Church School was the result of the decision of the

107. *JOGJ*, 20th December 1866.

108. *OSM*, 3rd series, Vol. 1 (1893-4), pp. 796-7.

109. *JOGJ*, 21st April 1859.

110. *JOGJ*, 17th July 1862.

111. Mowat, *A Bibliography of Caithness*, p. 163. There is no copy in the Wick Library.

Free Church school-governors to refuse Privy Council education grants. These grants had originally been intended for destitute areas of the country. As the Free Church had been unable to fund schools across the whole of Scotland, she had sought a share, though this move had been opposed by some in the 1847 Assembly because large parts of this grant had been used to pay for Roman Catholic schools and textbooks promoting Romanism. A letter in the *John O' Groat Journal*, which though signed 'Observer, Castletown' was undoubtedly by John MacBeath, addressed the issue of the grants, noting that it had been objected by some that the local parents had been 'duped by an individual (himself?) who by Jesuitical means had misrepresented the state of the case'. In fact, he wrote regarding these grants that, since their introduction, 'instead of the good expected from them, a positive curse has been inflicted on the country', and the Roman Catholics 'have ever since got an increasing share' which has been used

to inundate the country with Popish error. The Free Church sins against Protestantism and the glorious traditions of the Church of Scotland which she professes to represent. It must be a cause of deep regret to every right hearted Scotchman that by the voluntary act of the Free Church a greater stimulus has been given to Popery than at any time since the Reformation, and this by the Church professing to represent the Church built up by Knox, Melville and Henderson.¹¹²

He rather overstates the case in saying that there was 'almost a Disruption' over this issue at the 1847 Assembly. The motion of Mr Duncan of St Boswells, which suggested that accepting these grants would involve 'bartering for pecuniary advantage the crown rights of the Redeemer', later characterised by Noman Walker as 'extreme', attracted only five votes. Nevertheless, in the succeeding years ministers including James Begg and Alexander Moody Stuart continued to express concerns over this issue.¹¹³

As far as the present writer can discover, none of MacBeath's sermons survive, but the following passage – a reference to the death of one of his congregation, Sinclair Waters, Gothigill (Dr Manson's uncle) – taken down by a hearer, gives a flavour.

Mr MacBeath preaching on Psalm 103:10 said, 'I cannot refrain from referring to one whose removal from our midst we have just been called

112. *JOGJ*, 19th April 1860.

113. Walker, *Chapters in the History of the Free Church of Scotland*, pp. 118-9.

upon to witness, and you know it was the case that the words of our text were often – very often – used by him in public, and surely my friends if he delighted in them so much while on earth, he will do so still more in the place to which he is now gone; indeed we feel sure he will be saying in glory, ‘With us he dealt not as we sinned, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities’. He was a man of Christian worth – of unspeakable Christian worth and influence such as we seldom see. He was a man of prayer and his whole life was imbued with that spirit of humility by which the redeemed of the earth are ever known, so that he thus sets before us an example which we should all strive to follow, seeking aid from Him who is willing to deal with us in love and mercy, not according to our deservings.¹¹⁴

In May the same year it was reported that a special fast day was observed in the Millhill church, ‘in consideration of the portentous aspect of continental affairs’.¹¹⁵ It was a congregational, not a synodical fast. The *John O’ Groat Journal* commented, ‘Most of those engaged in the stone-trade carried on by Mr [James] MacBeath being adherents of this congregation, all work at Castlehill was at a standstill’.¹¹⁶ James clearly encouraged his workers, most of whom must have been connected with the Free Church, to attend his brother’s preaching instead of the regular Free Church at the other end of the village. This cannot have gone down well with the Rev. Alexander Auld, who was known to have had a rather quick temper.¹¹⁷ This was the beginning of a period of ill-feeling over Church matters in Castletown, as we will see in Section 10.

Mr Auld’s biography, written by his son Archibald,¹¹⁸ makes absolutely no mention of MacBeath and his supporters, but the divisiveness in the parish must have caused Mr Auld much distress, particularly in view of his devotion to ‘the old paths’ and his obvious respect for MacBeath’s father. Together with his ‘saintly’¹¹⁹ wife Christina, who was the daughter of Dr W. R. Taylor, Thurso, Auld welcomed many noted Christians to his

114. *JOGJ*, 13th June 1867.

115. At that time, war had recently broken out between Austria and the combined forces of France and Sardinia. The following year, Austria was defeated and was forced to surrender her territories of Lombardy and Venetia. The various Italian states were then united under the Sardinian King, Victor Emmanuel I.

116. *JOGJ*, 19th May 1859.

117. According to Auld’s descendent, Mrs Muriel Murray, Castletown.

118. See Archibald Auld, *Memorials of Caithness Ministers*, pp. 229-77.

119. Mrs Auld is so described on their tombstone in the old Olrig Burying-Ground.

communions. William Crowe wrote of them, 'A prince and a princess in wedlock combined, on a slope of a hill in Olig you'll find. Kind to the tender, while watching the sheep, recording the valour of those now asleep'. To the present writer, MacBeath's organising a breakaway congregation in Olig in 1857 would seem quite unnecessary. Indeed, Alexander Auld's style of preaching, being straightforward and homely, would have been easy for the quarry workers to follow. Rev. Professor J. D. MacCulloch, formerly minister of Latheron, said at the Commission of Assembly after his death: 'Few excelled Mr Auld in what might be termed natural fitness for the ministry, in the ability to say what he had to say so that men clearly understood him'. He also noted 'his singular mastery of illustration, analogy and allegory in his setting forth of truth, the result being that probably a greater number recalled his sermons than recalled the sermons of any other minister in Caithness.'¹²⁰

Many of the quarry workers were Gaelic speakers but neither Alexander Auld nor John MacBeath could speak the language. Perhaps with the aim of winning over some of them, Mr Auld successfully proposed to the Free Presbytery of Caithness that the Gaelic-speaking residents of Castletown should occasionally have the services of the Free Church ministers officiating in that language to the west-coast herring fishermen and girls at Wick.¹²¹ Auld pointed out that no fewer than 112 Gaels were resident in the village and 30 more in the rural parts of Olig Parish; 'likewise the great number of labourers who yearly resort to the Castlehill flagworks, the Quarrieside quarries, etc. ... averaging 70 to 100 men during the five months of the season.'¹²² The first meeting in July, held in the Free Church school, 'was not so well attended as it might have been.'¹²³ Perhaps this was because there were 'not so many Highlanders at the flagworks these many years back'.¹²⁴ Almost invariably Dr Kennedy was present at the August communion and on the Friday evening he preached a Gaelic sermon.¹²⁵

120. *Free Church Monthly Record*, December 1904.

121. For many years the noted layman Alexander Gair conducted these services. As recorded on his gravestone in Latheron churchyard, it was 'the largest Gaelic-speaking congregation in the world'.

122. *JOGJ*, 20th June 1867.

123. *JOGJ*, 11th July 1867.

124. *JOGJ*, 26th September 1867.

125. Archibald Auld, *Memorials of Caithness Ministers*, p. 256.

John MacBeath ‘laboured on and on, often, no doubt in physical weakness, but yet with an untiring zeal, chastened only by a rarely sensitive and reverential spirit – till the Unseen messenger came and the silver cord was loosened.’¹²⁶ In the closing months of 1877, he was badly affected by a cold and cough which he never managed to shake off. John MacBeath’s appetite decreased and he became weaker until on Sabbath 3rd March 1878 he was unable to preach, and over the following days medicines began to lose their effectiveness. He eventually died on 15th March, leaving an only son, William, who was at that time a student at Aberdeen University, to mourn him. Along with other members of his family, he was buried in Dunnet Churchyard beside the Traills, an indication of the respect in which they were held by that influential local dynasty.

MacBeath never regretted the step he had taken; indeed, the better he became acquainted with the Secession Testimony, the more clearly he came to see the importance of maintaining a witness for these principles in Scotland. Near the end of his last illness, he told a friend, ‘Since I have lain on my bed here, how vividly have the events of my past life arisen before me, and how thankful I am that my brother, a few friends, and myself, were able to make a stand for the Truth in the face of such powerful opposition’. As his obituarist commented, ‘How cheering when minister or member can say at the end of the journey, “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith; henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord the righteous judge shall give me at that day, and not to me only, but to all them also that love his appearing.”’¹²⁷

His son William MacBeath studied for the Secession ministry and was called to his father’s congregation where he was ordained and inducted on 15th August 1883. He remained there for four years or so when he chose to join the Established Church and was inducted to Halkirk Parish Church in 1888. There he ministered to a rather small congregation.¹²⁸ William MacBeath was a prominent member of the local school board and was an activist for land-reform to provide smallholdings by breaking up farms. In speeches he referred to the good practice of the Traills in this matter. It would seem that he enjoyed a pleasant lifestyle at Halkirk. A surviving photograph shows a group including William dressed for a day’s salmon-

126. *JOGJ*, 28th March 1878.

127. *OSM*, new series, Vol. 13 (1878), p. 739.

128. Beaton, *Ecclesiastical History of Caithness*, pp. 212, 247.

fishing on the Thurso river which flows in front of the manse.¹²⁹ The house at Burnside, Castletown which had been his previous manse was obviously the personal property of the MacBeath family and was described as his 'private residence' when he took a group of Sabbath School pupils and members of the choir from Halkirk on a tour of Castletown and Dunnet. An ornate cottage-style extension with crow-stepped gables was added by him in 1893.¹³⁰ The Orlig Original Secession congregation struggled on, gradually declining in numbers, until it closed about 1920.

10. James MacBeath

As the Superintendent of Works on the Castlehill estate, James MacBeath not only managed the quarries but was also in charge of the Traills' various other enterprises, including the mills and harbour as well maintaining roads, rent collection, and building-works in the village. A land steward oversaw the farms. James was an extremely shrewd man whose capacity for work was immense,

becoming for him quite a passion, by which he was governed to the last. Almost everything was sacrificed by him for the advancement of his employers' interests. By day and night, in foul weather and fair, totally regardless, I may say, of his personal comfort, he was always 'at his post'. Whatever could be done by himself, or under his own immediate direction, he never left to a substitute.¹³¹

In addition, he was always willing to use to give advice to others. With 'his long association with business, his grasp of all the details of a subject and his lucid judgment', he became indispensable to the Traills, 'with whom he was a great favourite'. Miss Margaret referred to him 'our dear friend Mr Macbeath, who has been such a faithful servant and whose advice we have all learned to value so much'.¹³² He was also willing to advise others – 'frequently the means of preventing some men from entering in on speculation by which they would be ruined and advising others to enter on paths which led to prosperity and success'.¹³³ Together with Captain John Dunnet, James invested in an 88-ton two-masted schooner, the *Castlehill*,

129. In the Castletown Heritage Centre.

130. *JOGJ*, 21st September 1894. Date-stone on the gable.

131. Obituary of James MacBeath in *JOGJ*, 10th April 1879.

132. Ibid.

133. Obituary of James MacBeath in *Northern Ensign*, 17th April 1879.

built at Perth in 1867, to carry flagstones to the south.¹³⁴ On 28th December 1879 – the night of the Tay Bridge disaster¹³⁵ – the *Castlehill* sank in a gale off the Angus coast with the loss of all five of her crew. She was heading back to Caithness with 130 tons of Wallsend coal from South Shields.¹³⁶ By this time James had died and the ship was owned by his widow.

George Traill and his sister Margaret were resident in London while Parliament was sitting, so James had effective charge over hundreds of people. He thus occupied a highly responsible and influential position and was more than capable of the duties this entailed, owing to ‘the rare spirit of unflinching determination which he possessed’.¹³⁷ When the Traills arrived home each summer for a three-month stay, landing from the steamer at Wick and proceeding by carriage to Castlehill, James invariably arranged an elaborate welcome ceremony, allowing the men off work early so that they could clean and dress for the occasion. Porter and bread were distributed and the Traills would appear on the terrace at the rear of Castlehill House to acknowledge the cheers of the people. The Castletown correspondent of the *John O’ Groat Journal* wrote on one such occasion that ‘the workers expressed ... a strong wish to make a demonstration on that day, so as to mark in some measure their sense of gratitude and the very high esteem they held for Mr Traill as a landowner and employer and Miss Traill for her unceasing acts of kindness to the villagers.’¹³⁸

Similar celebrations were held on important public events. On the occasion of Queen Victoria’s marriage to Prince Albert in 1840, James made ‘a very eloquent speech’ in which ‘he fervently hoped for many years of domestic happiness for the couple and most earnestly prayed that an alliance, on whom the blessing of thousands had been invoked, would be marked in an especial way by the sanction and countenance of the Most High without which riches and power and rank were indeed vain and futile.’¹³⁹ James acted as master of ceremonies at Castlehill. In 1863, there were rejoicings for the marriage of Edward, Prince of Wales and Princess

134. *JOGJ*, 19th Sept 1867.

135. The then new railway bridge collapsed when a passenger train was crossing on Sabbath 28th December 1879 resulting in the tragic death of some 59 people. See John Prebble, *The High Girders* (London, 1979).

136. *JOGJ*, 22nd January 1880.

137. *JOGJ*, 10th April 1879.

138. See *JOGJ*, 2nd August 1860.

139. *JOGJ*, 21st September 1840.

Alexandra of Denmark. It was reported that James made ‘a very eloquent speech’ in which he reminded the men

of the respect Mr Traill bore to his workmen, and how he at all times laboured for the interests of the county which he had so long and ably represented in Parliament. Cheers both long and loud and oft-repeated showed how cordially they shared the sentiment of respect for Mr Traill and how deeply they desired his prosperity and happiness.¹⁴⁰

James was a tough but fair boss who made it his business to know absolutely everything that was going on. Some workers reportedly said, ‘Many think [he] is a hard master but he is very just and always willing to look after our wants.’¹⁴¹ As a result, Castletown impressed many visitors because of its ‘order and cleanliness’.¹⁴² Many of the original quarriers were Gaelic-speakers who had been evicted from Kildonan and Strathnaver Clearances in Sutherland. Later, in the 1870s, many came from the overpopulated townships in Lewis. The Traills broke up some of the large farms to provide them with crofts on condition that they worked at the Castlehill quarries.¹⁴³ For these men, quarrying was regarded as the next best option to the east-coast herring-fishing.¹⁴⁴ James was much criticised in some quarters for the unusual system of paying the workmen. Payment was made only once a quarter. Large quantities of meal and coal were bought by the Traills, shipped direct to Castlehill harbour by vessels returning from delivering flags, and sold at cost price. Oatmeal was available at 18/-6d. a boll while it cost 20 to 22/- at Wick. Coal was sold at 14/-6d. a ton, as opposed to 16/- at Wick. Some asserted that MacBeath was using the infamous ‘Truck system’ which was so much criticised by social reformers.

A local merchant, James Reid, for several years organised his own cargo of coal on behalf of a local syndicate of six tradesmen. Each summer the *Marjory* landed a special cargo of coal for them. In 1860 however the vessel’s arrival coincided with a severe gale and low tides and she was refused entry to the harbour at Castlehill three times on the orders of MacBeath, an act which was described by Reid as ‘unkind, unchristian and autocratic’, if not outright ‘illegal’. The *John O’ Groat Journal* reported that

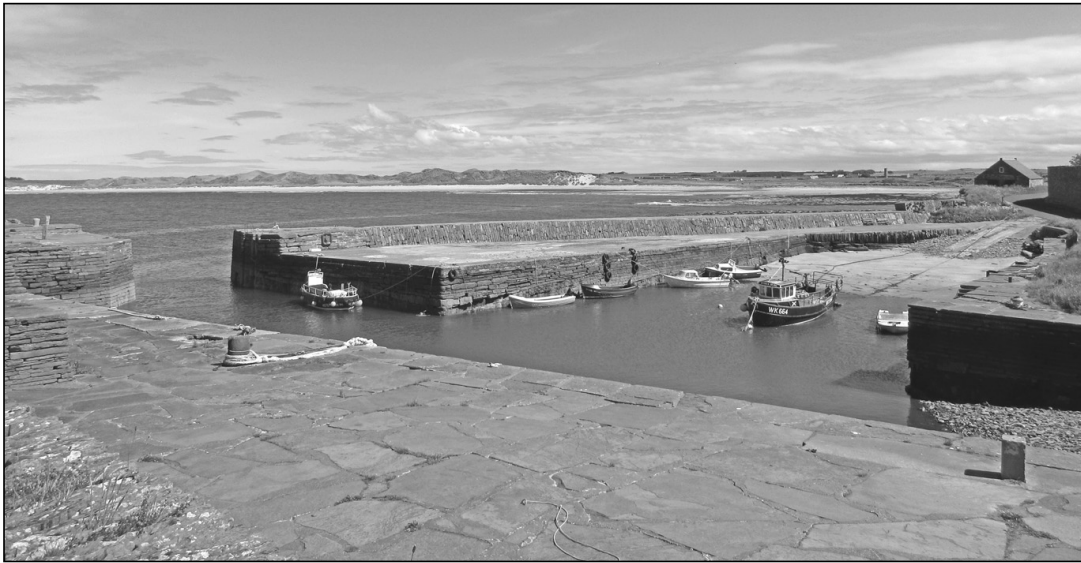
140. *JOGJ*, 19th March 1863.

141. *JOGJ*, 10th April 1879.

142. *Scotsman*, 14th December 1868.

143. *JOGJ*, 5th June 1884.

144. *JOGJ*, 24th October 1878.



Castlehill harbour, designed by James Bremner and built about 1825.

there were rumours that the ship was carrying over 100 tons and was thus too deeply laden for the port.¹⁴⁵

James MacBeath responded to this controversy by pointing out that Reid's coal delivery always coincided with the busiest season for shipments of flagstones and 'we were more than once obstructed in our operations'. Moreover, sometimes Reid had purloined some of the most skilled tradesmen at the works to help him unload. On the most recent occasion there were several vessels in the harbour and the master of the *Marjory* was advised to proceed to Scrabster as the tide was too low and MacBeath obviously did not want the entrance to Castlehill blocked. By the time the storm subsided, there were five more vessels waiting in Scrabster Roads to pick up flagstones and MacBeath was unwilling to obstruct Mr Traill's business: 'my master's interests must be of paramount consideration'; and, besides, he was in danger of losing good customers if deliveries were late.¹⁴⁶

In 1863, a series of letters appeared in the *John O' Groat Journal* entitled 'Castletown: what I found there and what I did not'. The author was one A.M. (Aberdeen),¹⁴⁷ a teetotaler with a facility for quoting scripture, who had visited Caithness on business to do with the flag-trade and had

145. *JOGJ*, 19th July 1860.

146. *JOGJ*, 23rd August 1860.

147. 'A.M.' may possibly have been Alexander MacDonald, a stonecutter and builder who made a substantial fortune and eventually lived at Kepplestone House on Queens Road, Aberdeen. He was a member of the Free Church, and after his death in 1880 he left a valuable collection of paintings to the Aberdeen Art Gallery.

been resident in the village for some four months. It would seem likely that he got on the wrong side of the quarry manager. 'A.M.' wrote that the workers 'were ground into the very dust by poverty and oppression', and because they had no ready money they were forced to go to the 'Tommy Shop'.¹⁴⁸ 'A.M.' said that he

often felt miserably sad when I saw a fine-looking man, on a cold winter evening trudging home from the truck store with a bag of oatmeal on his shoulders but not one farthing in his pocket. Although there should be two or three months' wages due to him yet all the other wants of his family must be supplied on credit. Just go up and speak to him. You will easily perceive that his natural gaiety is gone. He appears crushed and humiliated.

He then quotes the text, 'Thou shalt not oppress a hired servant that is poor and needy ... at his day thou shalt give him his hire neither shall the sun go down upon it, lest he cry against thee unto the lord, and it be sin unto thee' (Deut. 24:14-15).¹⁴⁹

Another matter which shocked 'A.M.' was the divisiveness in the local churches. 'I found sectarianism shedding its baneful influence. I never knew a place where its pernicious workings were more visible or more mischievous.' In a probable reference to James, he says, 'a circumstance took place a few years ago which tended greatly to engender this unhallowed spirit. A certain man, once famed as a Free Church leader and at the same time noted for his pugnacious, domineering self-will – this man, being thwarted in getting certain plans carried out in which he was very much interested, took offence and seceded. He unfortunately possessed some influence and did not fail to use it in mustering a party of followers. I cannot describe the thing in better language than that of the sacred historian when speaking of David in the cave of Adullam – 1 Samuel 22: 2. Now one can easily perceive that a band of grumbling recusants like this would of necessity be a disturbing influence in any community. But let it not be supposed that my remarks refer to any of the ministers in the village and its vicinity. I would be sorry to say anything which would wound their feelings for as far as I know they all labour faithfully and diligently in their respective portions of the vineyard'.¹⁵⁰

148. *JOGJ*, 29th January 1863.

149. *JOGJ*, 19th February 1863.

150. *JOGJ*, 29th January 1863.

This accusation seems to have struck a chord with one local who wrote to the *John O' Groat Journal* that

this letter did my heart good. Could I extend my hand to the writer I would shake his heartily and honestly. The blessing of the poor church-ridden inhabitants of Castletown rests on his head ... he has struck a responsive chord in the heart of many. I hesitate not to say that 'the half has not been told' of the traffic carried on in the matters of conscience and religion and in the oppression and destitution of poor workmen.¹⁵¹

But the following week, the Castletown correspondent, obviously concerned to redress the balance, wrote: 'It is a great cause of gratitude that we live under such a family as that of Castlehill; their kindness and charity flow continually', noting that over the previous week some 20 to 30 tons of coal was distributed amongst 'the most needful families' by MacBeath, on Miss Traill's orders.¹⁵²

In 1859, an anonymous letter to the *Scotsman* newspaper, signed 'An enemy to slavery', claimed that, before he baptised their infants, Rev. Alexander Auld made parents promise that they would be sent to the Free Church school.¹⁵³ However, the Castletown correspondent in the *John O' Groat Journal* stated that 'we can find none who heard these vows put to any parent'.¹⁵⁴ The *Scotsman* letter also suggested that the lending library which had been operating for some time was denounced by Mr Auld from the pulpit 'for no other reason, we opine, other than that it was kept in the parochial schoolhouse'. 'A.M.' commented on the same issue, and he is probably referring to James MacBeath when he states that the proprietor had planned to provide a reading-room but it had been delayed 'because a certain capricious obstructive cannot get it carried out in accordance with his more peculiar views. Is it not astonishing that a man would be permitted to set factors at defiance, gentlemen who are not easily turned aside – and not only that but thwart the benevolent purposes of the proprietor himself.'¹⁵⁵

The Traills were indeed paternalistic employers who sought to educate their workforce and encourage good conduct. Of George Traill, it was

151. *JOGJ*, 5th February 1863.

152. *JOGJ* 11th February 1863.

153. *Scotsman*, 12th May 1859.

154. *JOGJ*, 26th May 1859.

155. *JOGJ*, 29th January 1863.

written: 'His servants revered and loved him as he was ever open-handed and ready to reward their faithfulness ... his presence commanded respect wherever he went. Where shall we find one in his sphere who has done so much for the improvement of the young and secretly been so beneficent to the poor.'¹⁵⁶ His sister Margaret was of like mind, often sending wine and soup down from the 'big house' and distributing two flannel-shirts each winter to those workmen who were troubled by rheumatism. Her obituary speaks of 'the anxiety with which Miss Traill enquired regarding the comfort [of the workmen], especially of those who had spent the best of their days there. [She] knew all the older employees and took an especial pride in visiting their families.'¹⁵⁷

The Traills funded both female and infant schools in the village and in 1863, a proper reading-room was eventually set up, based in the parish school. A committee was established, chaired by Rev. William Phin, the parish minister, and including James MacBeath as well as various shopkeepers and tradesmen in the village, but not Mr Auld. It was hoped that the facility would benefit the locals, especially the young men during their hours of leisure and when inclement weather prevented work in the quarries. Miss Margaret Traill agreed to pay for a subscription to the *Times* and the other metropolitan papers while James MacBeath, rather surprisingly, supplied the *Free Church Witness*.¹⁵⁸ Subsequently, Miss Traill funded the purpose-built Traill Institute, with a library, reading-room and public hall at the east end of the village, which was opened in 1867.¹⁵⁹ In 1872, when Drs James Begg and Hugh Martin were travelling all over Scotland to speak on the Education question, a meeting was held at Castletown and a committee to organise a petition subsequently formed, consisting of the three ministers and Mr James MacBeath.¹⁶⁰

Though an effective businessman, James was, like his employers, sincerely benevolent. It was said that

the distressed poor always came to him for help. One man lost a cow, another a horse and they came to him for assistance. He gave them

156. *JOGJ*, 12th October 1871.

157. *JOGJ*, 6th June 1878.

158. *JOGJ*, 12th November 1863.

159. *JOGJ*, 10th January 1867. The building has been unused for decades but in recent years a community group has been raising funds to restore it as a community-centre.

160. *JOGJ*, 15th September 1872.

money to meet their loss and in consequence of their poverty he was never repaid.¹⁶¹

He annually selected 15-20 boys from the Sabbath School and trained them in various skills, acting 'like a father' to them. As an elder in the Secession Church, he was a tower of strength to his much less confident brother. Though usually working a 16 to 18-hour day, he was never absent from the prayer meeting. James often officiated when the minister was absent or ill. 'His readings were with a clearness and unction which rivetted the attention of his hearers', and which gave to the printed sermons 'the attractions of the most impressive eloquence'.¹⁶² James MacBeath, as a strong advocate of total abstinence, encouraged his workmen to follow his example and established a Temperance Society in the village.

James married Marion MacLeod, the daughter of a merchant from Tongue. In 1861, a deputation of quarry workers waited on Mr and Mrs MacBeath and presented them with a large silver snuff-box and an Etruscan silver teapot respectively.¹⁶³ James and Marion latterly lived at Quarryside on the hill overlooking Castletown. From his front door, he could keep an eye on goings-on in the main quarries and the village.

Though evidently a man who divided public opinion, James was of a kind and especially hospitable disposition and in discussing general subjects he showed very extensive information and much force of intellect – his conversation being rendered agreeable by a subdued but strong vein of humour. His shrewd knowledge of men and manners was specially noticeable and he had a rich store of telling anecdotes, illustrative of the same – particularly in regard to times of public excitement in the North.

After his death in 1879 it was reported that James MacBeath had

left a large sum of money. His investments however were largely in bank-shares, principally commercial, which of late have fallen much. He carried on a shipping and large trading business on his own account.¹⁶⁴

11. Conclusion

The dedicated and devout ministry of John MacBeath saw much of the fervour and the wonderful love among the people of God which was

161. *Northern Ensign*, 17th April 1879.

162. *Ibid*.

163. *JOGJ*, 11th April 1861.

164. *JOGJ*, 10th April 1879.

characteristic of Caithness Christians in those days. But such spiritual treasure, as ever, was held in earthen vessels. Sadly, discord is always present to some degree in the Church of Christ. Naturally any outward denominational rivalry tends to aggravate this. Moreover, the domineering personality and robust business practices of the elder brother James MacBeath meant that James's efforts to advance the Original Secession Church cause in Castletown, though well intentioned, caused considerable ill-feeling. One feels rather sorry for John who in some respects would have perhaps been better off without James's help. That said, James seems to have sincerely sought the best for his employees and there is no doubt that he was highly effective in establishing a successful enterprise which gave longstanding employment to many.

Rev. John MacBeath, like his one-time friend Jonathan Ranken Anderson, was a discerning man and he could see how the Free Church was failing to live up to her early promise to follow in the steps of the Covenanters and to maintain a strong emphasis on the sovereignty of God in preaching. While there were undoubtedly grounds for concern over the Free Church, noticed by some of her most eminent ministers, in reality no one at that stage was actively denying the teachings of the Scriptures or the Confession of Faith. Both Anderson and Macbeath were rather intense in nature and seemingly subject to some degree of mental disturbance. Macbeath's response to trends within the wider Free Church was, in the present writer's view, ill-advised and, at that point in time, probably schismatic. Like Anderson, he was over-hasty in taking up a separate position and he would have done better to have lent his support to men like Alexander Auld, W. R. Taylor, and John Kennedy, with whom he had a such close spiritual affinity.