
Short Note: The Glasgow and West Coast Mission, 1855-1950

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For many years an organisation, now lost in almost complete obscurity, brought gospel services and nursing provision to the most far-flung corners of the western Highlands.¹ At one time the Glasgow and West Coast Mission (GWCM) had a string of mission stations stretching from Jura to Lewis.²

The Mission appears largely to have been a co-operative effort between the Church of Scotland and the Free Church.³ Only a few references to its work appear in recent publications. These are mainly Frank D. Bardgett's wider study of Church of Scotland home mission work, *Devoted Service Rendered: The lay missionaries of the Church of Scotland*⁴ and Angus Duncan's *Hebridean Island: Memories of Scarp*. This short note attempts to reconstruct a little more of the Mission's history using newspaper and magazine references.⁵

1. Constitution of the Mission in 1855

The Glasgow and West Coast Mission was constituted in 1855. Its aims were described as:

to maintain Missionaries in remote districts of the Hebrides, beyond the direct influence of the Church, and to maintain Nurses where doctors cannot be

¹ In the late 1920s, the Glasgow and West Coast Mission was regarded locally as bearing most of the costs of nursing services in the North Tolsta area of Lewis. *Stornoway Gazette*, 20th January 1928, North Tolsta column. Accessed on North Tolsta Historical Society web-site.

² Angus Duncan, *Hebridean Island: Memories of Scarp* (East Lothian, 1995), p. 105.

³ *Stornoway Gazette*, 4th April 1950, p. 2.

⁴ F. D. Bardgett, *Devoted Service Rendered: The lay missionaries of the Church of Scotland* (Saint Andrew's Press, 2002).

⁵ This and all further references to newspapers in this article are courtesy of the British Newspaper Archive (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk) and copyright the British Library Board. Neither the Mitchell Library in Glasgow, nor the National Records Office, nor New College (Edinburgh) hold papers for the GWCM in their Church or wider holdings. There is no reference to the GWCM in the Acts of Assembly for the Free Church or the Church of Scotland in the late 1940s or 1950 when the organisation was being wound up. The Church of Scotland Law Department gave Mr Bardgett access to some papers gifted to them by the late Dr Thomas Murchison (1907-1984) but the main Minute Books had not been 'available for transmission'. Bardgett, *Devoted Service Rendered*, p. 310.

obtained without much expense and delay. The Mission is unsectarian, and has the sympathy and support of friends of all denominations.⁶

The leader of the group of men and ministers who formed the Mission on 17th December 1855 was an Orcadian, Thomas Rosie. He lived in Edinburgh and had done missionary work in the east-coast ports of Scotland but was turning his attention to the west. Initially the Mission focussed on ports from Port Glasgow to Stranraer. The first agent, William Sheriff, began work in Girvan on 15th June 1856. The town with its 1235 families was divided into 63 districts which 'lady visitors and tract distributors' visited every fortnight.⁷ After an 1856 survey of the west coast, the Mission began from 1860 to appoint missionaries further west, with men appointed in Tighnabruaich, North Uist, Rona (off Raasay), Barra, Glendale, and other locations.⁸

A personal experience of the Truth was expected of the missionaries. They were expected to apply a scriptural yard-stick in assessing people with whom they came into contact. An undated set of 'Instructions to Agents of the West Coast Mission' set the standard:

Inculcate upon all the duty of reading the Scriptures daily, as a revelation of the mind and will of God, and the standard by which they will be judged at the last day. Impress upon them the duty of personal and family prayer; also of the necessity of special and contrite confession of sin...State also, when asked to visit anyone on a deathbed, what conversation you had, what hopes the dying had for Eternity, and if these were founded upon the finished work and righteousness of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God Whose Blood cleanseth from all sin (1 John 1.7).⁹

A further entry in the Instructions provided a checklist of questions which applicants for work as agents of the Mission were required to answer in writing. This included:

Have you seriously considered the difficulties which an Agent of this Society must encounter, and prayerfully sought Divine guidance?...NB: – Spiritual-mindedness, and a readiness to refer to texts, in proof of the doctrines and duties which God requires mankind to believe and practise, are essential requisites for Missionaries of this Society.¹⁰

Amongst the 'instructions and counsels' given in a draft Letter of Appointment to new missionaries were: that they would devote their 'whole time to the work of the Mission'; that they hold two meetings and a Sabbath School on the Lord's Day; and that on weekdays they

devote five hours daily to visiting the people in their homes, giving special attention to the sick and infirm, and, above all, to those in spiritual anxiety... Our Mission is strictly unsectarian. Its object is the leading of souls to Jesus Christ...The need of the Spirit's presence is the deepest requirement for this work, and the prayer of faith will always bring Him to our aid.¹¹

⁶ *Glasgow Directory for 1934-1935* (Glasgow, 1934), p. 199.

⁷ Bardgett, *Devoted Service Rendered*, pp. 63-64.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 311, 320.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 315-316.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 316-317.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 317-319.

The duties of GWCM Missionaries appear to have shifted to this full time service, from the initial normal expectation of ten to fifteen hours every week, during the 1860s.¹²

Those present at the 23rd Annual General Meeting in 1879 heard that ‘continued progress had been made in the operations of the Society’ in the previous twelve months. Despite poor economic conditions, ‘there had been a considerable increase in the funds.’¹³

2. Church tensions

The separation of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland in May 1893 from the Free Church led to tensions within the Mission. A writer for the *Northern Chronicle* reported in the following month: ‘It appears that Mr Maclennan, missionary at Rona, and Mr Mackenzie, missionary at Gairloch, have both received notice from the West Coast Mission that their services are to be dispensed with.’ This had caused surprise as the GWCM professed to be neutral but the suspicion in the communities was that they were being ‘persecuted’ for leaving the Free Church. Mr Maclennan had been blamed for causing a division in Rona, wrote one correspondent to a newspaper, but only one person on the island had remained in the Free Church and he was not a native of the island.¹⁴

The ongoing tensions following the Free Presbyterian separation continued to affect the Mission in southern Skye. In late 1893, a Mr Mackenzie appears to have set up as missionary on the island of Scalpay, Harris, but had gone round collecting for the purpose in south Skye. A number of people appear to have subscribed their support to him, some under the impression that he was working for the GWCM. Rumours seem to have then circulated that he was either a ‘Secessionist’ (Free Presbyterian) or a Free Church man setting up in opposition to the GWCM. The Rev. Alexander Grant of Broadford wrote in December 1893 that he knew from Scalpay sources that Mr Mackenzie had no sanction to collect money in order to set up a Free Presbyterian cause on that island.¹⁵

Further correspondence to the *Inverness Courier* then appeared to imply that Mr Mackenzie was neither a Free Presbyterian nor a rival to the GWCM. A letter on 16th January 1894 stated that Mr Mackenzie had seceded from the Free Church before the passing of the Declaratory Act; the reasons for this were ‘numerous’. Although not a Secessionist (Free Presbyterian), he was ‘in favour’ of the movement ‘through good principle’. The writer claimed that Mr Mackenzie and his congregation had in effect set up an independent church.¹⁶ After assuring the Free Church minister, Mr Grant, that he was not a Free Presbyterian, he was granted the use of the church in Strath for a service but failed to turn up when the service was expected to begin.¹⁷

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹³ ‘Glasgow – the West Coast Mission Society’, *Scotsman*, 14th February 1879, p. 4.

¹⁴ *Northern Chronicle*, 13th June 1894, p. 7. Mr Maclennan appears to have continued to use the mission house on the island and to have then been paid by the Free Presbyterian Church. The context is analysed in Alexander Maclennan, *He Led Me*, ed. N. Campbell and R. Dickie (Reformation Press, 2018).

¹⁵ Letter: ‘Subscriptions in Skye’, *Inverness Courier*, 26th Dec. 1893, p. 5.

¹⁶ Letter: ‘Subscriptions in Skye’, *Inverness Courier*, 16th Jan. 1894, p. 6.

¹⁷ Letter: ‘Subscriptions in Skye’, *Inverness Courier*, 26th Jan. 1894, p. 6.

By the time of the Mission's 1894 Annual General Meeting a month later, things had settled down, and it was recorded that 'encouraging reports as to the evangelising works in the Highlands and Islands were given'.¹⁸

3. Poverty in the Islands

In summer 1917 the Mission opened a hostel in Glasgow. This was 'for the sons of Highland war widows'. Board and lodging were to be provided 'for apprentices in needy circumstances to suit their earnings', reported one newspaper.¹⁹ This was known as the City Hostel and situated off Edwin Street in Ibrox.²⁰ It was to shut by 1937.²¹

By 1919, Lord Leverhulme's plans to remodel the economy of the Isle of Lewis were in full swing. His determination to develop the island was hailed by the Mission leadership 'with joy and expectation'. The labours of their own missionaries and nursing staff in the islands had 'met with encouraging success' in the past year. The government had provided a small grant for their nursing work and a grant for the boys' hostel.²²

The Mission even found itself the subject of an appeal for food from a storm-bound island in the winter of 1921/22. The appeal had come from 'one of the Monach islands' off North Uist during a 'protracted storm', the Mission's Annual General Meeting heard. The main inhabited island in the group was Heisgeir. Normal communication with the island had been interrupted. A resident had put a letter into a tin box 'with a note instructing the finder to post the letter'. It was addressed to the Mission headquarters in Glasgow. This letter was actually found and posted; thankfully, contact between the island and North Uist had been restored in the meantime.²³ The contact with the Mission seems to have borne fruit, however: from 1938 until 1944, the Mission appears to have had a presence on Heisgeir. Fishermen visited the island frequently. The last permanently-resident family left in 1942 but an unsuccessful resettlement attempt was made between 1945 and 1949.²⁴

The Island poverty of the 1920s was addressed by the Mission. In 1925, for example, the Mission sent fifty bales of clothing to the islands. The lack of ministers in the area was an ongoing cause for concern. The Rev. J.M. Munro²⁵ told the 1926 Annual General Meeting that the Highlands and Islands Committee of the Church of Scotland had met shortly before, to discuss 'the lamentable lack of men' to fill ministerial vacancies. Even were all charges filled, there would still be a need for the work of the Mission. He said that they were living in a time 'when perhaps the need of the mission was never greater'.²⁶

¹⁸ *Greenock Telegraph*, Tuesday 27th February 1894.

¹⁹ *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, 15th September 1917, p. 2.

²⁰ *Glasgow Directory for 1934-1935*, p. 199.

²¹ Bardgett, *Devoted Service Rendered*, p. 319.

²² *Scotsman*, Wednesday 5th February 1919, p. 6.

²³ 'By Sea "Post"', *Evening Telegraph*, 9th February 1922, p. 2.

²⁴ The Trust for Heisgeir, *Heisgeir: the fair island* (n.p., 2007), pp. 8-10.

²⁵ John Malcolm Munro (1867-1942) had been transferred from West St Giles, Edinburgh to St Columba's, Glasgow in 1925. He was inducted in 1928 to Kilmartin in Argyll-shire. Hew Scott (ed.), *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae* (Edinburgh, 1950), Vol. 8, p. 300. Munro died in Kilmartin in 1942. *Scotsman*, Wednesday 17th June 1942, p. 3.

²⁶ *Scotsman*, 4th February 1924, p. 11.

The 'acute business and industrial depression' hit the Mission hard. A decline in contributions of £555 took place in 1930. The 1931 Annual General Meeting heard, however, that there had been an increase in grants and legacies in the year of £521.²⁷

A new mission hall, paid for by the Mission, was opened in Lemreway, South Lochs, Lewis in 1931. It was dedicated to the memory of John Duff, Falkirk, who had been secretary to the Mission for many years. In a speech after the Gaelic opening service, it was explained that Mr Duff had dedicated himself with 'whole-hearted and single-minded devotion' to the work of the Mission.²⁸

By the mid-1930s the depopulation in the Highlands and Islands associated with the economic depression was seen as a further reason to continue the work of the Mission. 'The people who were left were mostly of the older generation', the Lord Provost of Glasgow was reported as telling the Annual General Meeting that year. They needed 'more help, assistance and sympathy than ever before'. He went on to state that the Mission's work was 'the connecting link between Glasgow and the Outer Isles'.²⁹

4. The island of Scarp

This 'help, assistance and sympathy', however, could not be further extended to the people of Scarp, a small island off north Harris, in 1935. The case of a woman 'who gave birth to twins in unusual circumstances'³⁰ had led to the directors' investigating whether to base a full-time nurse on Scarp. The incident involved a young mother giving birth to a girl on Scarp, but then being evacuated immediately by boat and car to Stornoway Hospital, where she gave birth to the twin sister. As well as the twins being born in different counties, the case highlighted the extreme fragility of the Scarp community.³¹ A 'full investigation' by the Mission had concluded that a full-time resident nurse was not needed. The reason given was that 'the medical services' (two doctors and a nurse) on mainland Harris were 'adequate for the needs of the island, which had a population of 100'. The 1935 Annual General Meeting was addressed by the Free Church moderator, Rev. Duncan MacDonald,³² as well as Rev. Duncan Blair and Rev. J. G. Drummond.³³

The information available about the Scarp mission gives a good insight into the work of the body. The Mission first appointed a missionary in Scarp in

²⁷ *Scotsman*, 12th February 1931, p. 7.

²⁸ *Scotsman*, Thursday 1st October 1931, p. 5. Mr Duff was born in Bainsfoot and died in his mid-50s. He had been involved in the Falkirk Free Church and the Drummond Tract Depot of Stirling. He made annual tours of the stations run by the Mission. *Falkirk Herald*, 1st December 1928, p. 9.

²⁹ 'Glasgow and West: West Coast Mission', *Scotsman*, 14th February 1935, p. 7.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Duncan, *Hebridean Island*, p. 157.

³² Mr MacDonald was minister of Milton Free Church. A native of Glenurquhart, he died at the age of 56. He had been ordained and inducted to Duthil in 1910, and been inducted to Milton in 1917 while an army chaplain; the induction took place during a weekend leave from the trenches of France. 'Death of the Rev. Duncan MacDonald', *Scotsman*, Wed. 19th February 1941, p. 6. There is an extended account of Mr MacDonald in Ian M. Allan, *West the Glen: A History of the Free Church just west of the Great Glen* (n.p., 1997), pp. 174-178.

³³ 'Glasgow and West: West Coast Mission', *Scotsman*, 14th February 1935, p. 7.

1878. A mission hall (with a dwelling attached) was built in 1891.³⁴ The missionary conducted two services every Sabbath, as well as the Sabbath School, holding a week-night service on Thursday and a Psalmody class.³⁵ Prior to the West Coast Mission's work in Scarp, the islanders had often gone to Tarbert on the Sabbath. Adhering to the Free Church (as they had done prior to 1900), they had been under the ministry of Dr Mackintosh MacKay.³⁶ The people joined the ecclesiastical unions of 1900 and 1929. When the Church of Scotland missionary died in September 1966, he was not replaced. The School closed the following summer and the last of the indigenous people moved off Scarp in December 1971.³⁷

The growth of aviation had its own impact on health services and affected the organisation. In 1934 it was agreed that part of the Mission's special nursing fund was to be used for paying the costs of flying patients from Hebridean islands to the nearest mainland hospital 'in cases of emergency'. The organisation stipulated that 'such assistance would only be available in cases where patients themselves could not pay the cost of transport'.³⁸

5. 'The gloom of Highland religion'

One wonders if some of the directors of the Mission always brought tact and diplomacy to their task, or even a basic spiritual understanding of the piety of the area covered. The President of the Mission, in his report to the 1936 Annual General Meeting, was quoted as saying:

I do think that there is a great field all over the Hebrides, not excepting our own missionary districts, whereby the gospel of cheerfulness and laughter may be told to the people more often than it is now. My impression was that with our good friends up there, religion is a terribly gloomy thing. You dare not smile. There is something wrong when you find that two sets of men, who work together in the fields and in the fishing boats during the week, will not look at each other on a 'Sunday', because one is a Free Presbyterian and the other is a 'Wee Free'.³⁹

The editor of the *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Rev. Donald Beaton,⁴⁰ commented:

³⁴ Duncan, *Hebridean Island*, p. 105.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 106.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 107. Mackintosh Mackay (1793-1873) was Church of Scotland minister in Laggan from 1825 to 1832, and then in Dunoon. He took his congregation into the Free Church in 1843. During the 1846-1847 famine in the Highlands he helped organise relief collections amounting to £15,000. A Gaelic scholar and published author, he was a tower of strength to the Church in the Highlands, supplying many places on the schooner *Breadalbane* and editing a Gaelic edition of *The Witness* periodical. Between 1853 and 1862 he preached to Highlanders in Australia, and from 1854 was based in Sydney. In 1862 he came to Harris, retiring in 1868. 'Dr Mackintosh Mackay, Harris', *The Free Church of Scotland Monthly Record*, 1st September 1873, p. 191.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 158. Various individuals unconnected with the pre-evacuation community have unsuccessfully attempted permanent residence since then. Those leaving in 1971, and their descendants, retain(ed)crofting rights in the entire island.

³⁸ 'To Hospital By Air', *Edinburgh Evening News*, 8th February 1934, p. 6.

³⁹ 'Notes and Comments: President of West Coast Mission's Comment on Hebridean Religion', *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 41 (March 1936), p. 476.

⁴⁰ Rev. Donald Beaton (1872-1953) served as editor from 1921 until 1949. At this time he was minister of Oban to which he had moved in 1930, following a pastorate in Wick from

It is statements such as these by persons paying flying visits to the Highlands that are calculated to do a vast amount of mischief. The gloom of Highland religion has become a pet topic with a certain class of people. Our experience of the religion of true believers in the Highlands and Islands is that it will compare favourably with that of God's people in other parts in consecration and cheerfulness. Mr. Reid's words do serious injustice to Free Presbyterian and Free Church fishermen and the next time he visits the Islands he should be asked to produce proof or withdraw his statements. When Christ came it was not with the gospel of cheerfulness and laughter but with the good news of the grace of God.⁴¹

The reported remarks by the Mission President brought a further response from the Rev. John Colquhoun of Glendale in the pages of the *Free Presbyterian Magazine* in the following year.⁴² He wrote: "True religion in those who have it will give them such a cheerfulness that they will be "Kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another; not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer," and those who come into daily contact with the Lord's people in the Highlands can testify that these elements are in the Highland religion which the President of the West Coast Mission considers such a very gloomy thing."⁴³

6. The closing years to 1950

A major change in the Mission's nursing provision was reported in 1936. Its nursing stations at Garyvard and at North Tolsta in Lewis had come under the control of the Lewis Nursing Service sub-committee; the nursing station at Colbost in Skye had similarly come under the Inverness County Nursing Association. The Mission continued to contribute to the funds of each organisation and supply the nurses' cottages at Garyvard and Colbost.⁴⁴

Moves to reform the Mission's financial position came in 1939 when the Church of Scotland's General Assembly agreed to a proposal that the £25,000 held by the Mission be taken over the Home Board of the Kirk in an endowment fund. The work would continue. In that year, this work was listed as: 'Mission stations at Lemreway, Lewis; Island of Scarp, Harris and Marig (sic), Harris; Cullacknock and Kyclerhea, Skye; the island of Baleshare, North Uist; and the nursing station at Mangersta, Lewis.'⁴⁵ The proposed take-over by the Church of Scotland Home Board was challenged by the Free Church, and this resulted in a delay in implementing it. The Lemreway people were at that time mainly Free Church. Eventually it was agreed that Lemreway mission station, and a sum of money, be given to the Free Church.⁴⁶ However,

1901. He was the Church's divinity tutor from 1899 to 1952, having himself been taught by Professor Robert Watts of the Assembly's College, Belfast.

⁴¹ *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 41 (March 1936), pp. 476-477.

⁴² Mr Colquhoun (1896-1977) served as minister of Glendale from 1933 to 1974.

⁴³ 'Is the religion of the Highlands gloomy?', *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 42 (November 1937), pp. 286-290.

⁴⁴ Bardgett, *Devoted Service Rendered*, p. 321.

⁴⁵ *Scotsman*, Saturday 20th May 1939, p. 12.

⁴⁶ Bardgett, *Devoted Service Rendered*, p. 192.

having become part of the Free Church at the 1950 dissolution of the GWCM, almost all the Lemreway people left the Free Church in 1953 to join the Church of Scotland.

The dire economic circumstances some communities faced, during the war, were addressed in 1941 Annual General Meeting. 'Various schemes had been suggested...for the alleviation of distress in the Highlands and Islands, and it appeared...that considerable help must come from the government before these places could be put in a satisfactory economic position'.⁴⁷

The following year's Annual General Meeting saw the Mission underline that it had been able to 'maintain' its work in the isolated parts of the Highlands and Islands in 1941, despite having incurred a deficit of £134 in its funds. The President, William Clarke Reid,⁴⁸ said that the churches should 'bestir themselves and make the people realise that giving was an important part of Christian service'. A discussion about the conditions of the area took place in which the hope was expressed that 'the new interest that was being taken in the Highlands and Islands by political and industrial leaders' – an area which 'had been neglected in the past' – would result in 'greater prosperity in future'.⁴⁹ 'But for the heavy transport charges, even two islands of the Southern Hebrides – Islay and Colonsay – would supply the whole country with all with all the garden vegetables required', Mr Reid had claimed.⁵⁰

Post-war policies featured in the speech given by Professor T. M. MacRobert⁵¹ at the 1947 Annual General Meeting. He claimed that the present scarcity of educational text books had been aggravated by the huge quantities of paper allotted to 'the gambling industry', which employed over 300,000 people.⁵²

In 1949 the Annual General Meeting was advertised with a clear intention that the Mission would soon be discontinued. An advertisement in the *Scotsman* stated that the 1949 AGM would include a motion to amend the constitution. This would permit a majority of members present at a special meeting called for the purpose, 'to bring the society's activities to an end and to dispose of its assets in such manner as may be thought fit'.⁵³

The organisation was indeed wound up in 1950. At its 94th Annual General Meeting, held in the spring of that year, the terms of the new arrangements were spelled out clearly. The Free Church and the Church of Scotland were to take on the various mission stations 'in accordance with which is predominant in any mission district, as in the past'. In the case of the Church of Scotland areas, its Home Board would be the lead-agency

⁴⁷ *Scotsman*, 27th February 1941, p. 3.

⁴⁸ Mr Reid died on 16th August 1949 in Troon, aged 81. Scotland's People Statutory Register, Deaths 590/2 74.

⁴⁹ *Scotsman*, Thursday 26th February 1942, p. 3.

⁵⁰ 'Clans Honour Ain Folk'; *Daily Record and Mail*, 5th March 1941, p. 8.

⁵¹ Thomas Murray MacRobert (1884-1962) was a distinguished mathematician, and a recognised authority on hypergeometric series, which have applications in gambling among other things.

⁵² *Scotsman*, 6th March 1947, p. 3.

⁵³ *Scotsman*, 25th March 1949, p. 1.

in carrying on the work. The Mission's former president, William Clark Reid, had died since the last AGM and had been seen as a key element in the smooth running of the organisation. It was agreed at this last formal meeting to have the occasional informal gathering to 'allow members to keep in touch.'⁵⁴

7. Conclusion

The Glasgow and West Coast Mission did sterling work in bringing gospel preaching and medical care to remote parts of the Highlands and Islands from 1855 until 1950. A high standard of diligent labour was expected of the missionaries. The directors did not always show the same loyalty to an experimental experience of the Truth as they appeared to have expected from their paid missionaries. A paucity of primary sources makes assessment problematic. Newspaper articles give a flavour of key events but in the absence of minutes, a meaningful in-depth analysis of the Mission's policies and attitudes is not presently possible.

⁵⁴ *Stornoway Gazette*, 4th April 1950, p. 2.