

Gaelic Hymnody: An Auld World Beat with a New World Tempo

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A neglected area of Presbyterian history has been Gaelic hymnody in both Scotland and North America. Generally, studies have focused upon the singing of psalms in the period c.1750–1850, and if there is a deviation in discussion, it would be to the *Scottish Paraphrases*. It is not really until after c.1850–1900 that serious historical studies emerge beyond psalm singing with the rise of instrumental music and hymn issues.¹ The result has thus been an assumption that there was little creativity in singing by the many Scottish Presbyterians in the period prior to the second half of the nineteenth century.² This paper is a small effort to challenge this stereotypical portrait by exploring the place and role of Gaelic hymnody amongst those of the Scottish Presbyterian tradition. I will begin with a very brief sketch of the evangelical faith in the Highlands, then proceed to select Gaelic hymn writers, first in Scotland and then in the New World. Once in the New World, I will explore the widening circle and I will conclude with select examples.

Context: Evangelical Faith in the Highlands (c.1750–1850)

Efforts to precisely define “the Highlands of Scotland” have not always resulted in unanimous definitions. It is certainly more than geology and geography. It is also that elusive matter of ethnology. Should “the Islands” be included? Where exactly is that line between “lowlands” and “highlands”? Such are the issues for definition. I will leave it to others to continue the discussions, but for the purposes of this paper, there is a common Highland trait which defines our Highland scope—the use of Gaelic and the employment of a Gaelic way of expression. And this, too, has a certain allusiveness about it!

Historians for generations now have studied the coming of the Reformation to Scotland along the Lowland/Highland divide. I feel no compulsion to challenge that method of division, but neither can I chronicle here the full story of the coming of the Reformation to the Highlands in the sixteenth century. Suffice it to say that from 1690 onwards the Church of Scotland (Reformed) continued in various ways and with varying success to extend its influence over the Highlands. Clearly what did emerge were parties, and for this paper the party which chiefly concerns us is the emergence of the evangelical movement in the Highlands from the 1750s to the 1850s. The chief study on the subject still remains John MacInnes’s *The Evangelical Movement in the Highlands of Scotland*

¹ See Duncan Forrester and Douglas Murray, *Studies in the History of Worship in Scotland*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996) 98-99 for evidence on this characterization of the second half of the nineteenth century.

² The Forrester and Murray text remains the standard text on Scottish Worship and sadly makes no mention of Gaelic hymnody. The argument that it was not part of “formal public worship” does not explain this because the book contains much on music which goes beyond public worship.

1688 to 1800.³ The chronicle he gives is straightforward. The Highland parishes grew by the employment of missionary-ministers, itinerant catechists, the teachers/schoolmasters of the Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SPCK), probationers, the erection of more church buildings (e.g. after 1824 the Telfore churches), plus the publishing of Bibles, catechisms, psalters, and hymns in Gaelic. This can all be summarized by saying that this one-hundred-year period was a time of Protestant growth and consolidation of the evangelical party. It was also a time when there emerged strong evangelical ministers who assumed positions of significant leadership. Donald Meek refers to them as coming to possess “heroic status” as the tradition aged.⁴ I will mention two such leaders. Lachlan MacKenzie (1754–1819) was the parish minister of Lochcarron on the Black Isle between 1776 and 1819. He ranks as a bright light in the galaxy of renowned evangelical Highland ministers.⁵ Another was John MacDonald (1779–1849) of Ferintosh, known as the “Apostle of the North” and likened as a preacher to George Whitefield of the Great Awakening. He probably was the most popular and influential Highland preacher of the early nineteenth century.⁶

The broad characteristics of this movement were its evangelicalism and revival features, its value of the experimental or experiential, and its loyalty to the leadership. Only by properly understanding this evangelicalism and their acquaintance with revival/awakening is a context established for understanding certain features of the immigrant colonial Highland community. Donald Meek notes that these movements:

were generally known to Highlanders as *dùsgaidhean* (“awakenings”). The Gaelic equivalent of the English word “revival” is *ath-bheothachadh*, but it is much less frequently applied to the Highland movements. The keynote of the “awakenings” was the “awakening” of unbelievers who became conscious of their need of salvation. The evidence does, however, indicate that the “revival” of those who were already believers was sometimes a prelude to an “awakening.”⁷

I cannot stress too much this aspect of Highland Protestantism from c.1750–1850 as it relates to this paper. Meek even asserts that there is a “geography” to these evangelical movements—basically an arc or band from Perthshire to Kintyre and Arran. Then after the 1820s, they are found as far north as the Outer Hebrides. This was the primary “revival route.” The second included the glens of the northern mainland and the Black Isle, then east to Banffshire, south to Perthshire, and also across to Skye and the Outer

³ John MacInnes, *The Evangelical Movement in the Highlands of Scotland 1688 to 1800* (Aberdeen: The University Press, 1951). There are several other works which deal with the Highland revival movements, such as those by Alexander MacRae, Douglas Ansdell, and W. J. Couper. See Donald E. Meek, “Gaelic Bible, Revival and Mission: The Spiritual Rebirth of the Nineteenth-Century Highlands,” *The Church in the Highlands*, ed. James Kirk (Edinburgh: Scottish Church History Society, 1998): 114, footnote 1 for full bibliographic data.

⁴ Donald Meek, “Highlands,” *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* [DSCHT], org. ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1993) 405.

⁵ J. F. McIntosh, “MacKenzie, Lachlan,” *DSCHT* 522.

⁶ R. MacLeod, “MacDonald, John,” *DSCHT* 511.

⁷ Meek, “Gaelic Bible” 118.

Hebrides. Lewis thereby became a focal point of the two revival routes as a converging point.⁸ Sociologically this evangelical Highland movement grew amidst the incredible changes which emerged from the post-Jacobite rebellions, the clearances, and the tide of immigration of the period.

What I have examined here was a movement within the confines of the Church of Scotland in the Highlands, but by the 1790s this evangelical movement was beginning also to fragment and extend beyond this with the emergence of Congregational and Baptist churches in the Highlands.⁹ These were fruit chiefly of the labours of the Haldane brothers and their preachers. They were part of the evangelical movement in the Highlands and share many features in common with those within the Church of Scotland while also representing a fracturing of the church structures.

There was one other group which I need to recognize as part of this Highland evangelical movement to set the context for what I will discuss next. This is a group known as “The Separatists.” They were loyal to the Church of Scotland and never formally left Mother Kirk yet were also somewhat aloof. They were under the leadership of “The Men.” At the Disruption some went into the Free Church, but not all. They were known for their piety, doctrinal astuteness, and experimental and evangelical faith.¹⁰

Thus, these were the strains of the main evangelical movement in the Highlands during this one-hundred-year period, c.1750–1850. The movement expressed itself in a variety of ways, one of which was through hymnic poetry. I turn now to the great Gaelic religious hymn writers within the evangelical Highland communities.

The Great Gaelic Religious Hymn Writers

The eighteenth century has been described by John MacInnes as “the golden age of Gaelic secular poetry.”¹¹ Yet as the century advanced, one could equally say this for Gaelic religious poetry of a hymnic nature. This religious poetry borrowed much from the style and forms of Gaelic secular poetry. The Highland community knew well about a bard. He was the one in the clan who wrote praise poems for the clan chief, laments and elegies, and descriptions of battles fought or incitements to battle.¹² But following 1745 there were certainly many changes in the Highlands. Kurt Wittig says that before 1745 there was little religious emphasis to be found in Gaelic poetry, but this changed in the second half of the eighteenth century.¹³ Gaelic hymnody arose at this time and became a vehicle for biblical instruction and an aid in evangelism in forms familiar to the people, thus helping in memorization. The use of popular Gaelic tunes showed a cultural adaptability, now using the familiar for a religious purpose—devotion. With the passing of each revival, one sees the experimental emerging as a consistent theme.

⁸ Meek, “Gaelic Bible” 119.

⁹ MacInnes, *Evangelical Movement* 149-153.

¹⁰ MacInnes, *Evangelical Movement* 218-219; K. R. Ross, “Separatists” *DSCHT* 768. I have not included the Seceders as a separate strain of evangelical Presbyterians in the Highlands in this period.

¹¹ MacInnes, *Evangelical Movement* 6. A helpful reference work on things Gaelic is D. S. Thomson, ed., *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

¹² Trevor Royle, *The MacMillan Companion to Scottish Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1984) 22.

¹³ Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1958) 194.

In continuing to generalize about this Gaelic hymnic literature, we often find that it contains verse narrative of scenes from the life of Jesus Christ, a particularly constant theme being the passion. At other times the theme might be more autobiographical—telling of the writer’s own personal spiritual struggles. Thus, though they may have a very vague relationship to the *Scottish Paraphrases*, they do not conform to the convention here either. It is a scriptural canvas of a “freer” spirit, more like one telling a story.¹⁴

Two of the leading Gaelic hymn writers were Dugald Buchanan and Peter Grant.¹⁵ Buchanan (1716–1768) belonged to what Donald Meek appropriately called the “foundational stage of the evangelical movement in the Highlands.”¹⁶ In 1742 he heard George Whitefield preach at Cambuslang, although he did not claim to be converted at this point but rather two years later in 1744. In 1753 he became settled as an SPCK teacher at Kinloch Rannoch and also served as a catechist.

Buchanan’s poetry, according to Meek, does possess an indebtedness to Isaac Watts. Meek sees four prominent themes in his poetry: God’s majesty and Christ’s sufferings, judgment, repentance, and Christian warfare. Here is a sample from Buchanan’s “The Day of Judgment:”

- 1 Asunder shall the clouds be rolled,
 Like to God’s golden palace gate.
 Then shall our eyes the Judge behold
 In glorious and solemn state.

- 2 The rainbow’s splendour for His crown:
 His voice like torrents in the glen:
 His glance like lightning flashing down
 From dark clouds to affrighted men.

- 3 The sun, that bright torch of the sky,
 Shall pale before such radiant light;

The blinding flashes from His eye

¹⁴ K. D. MacDonald’s article “Hymnology, Gaelic” is a wonderful overview on this subject. See *DSCHT* 423-425.

¹⁵ I have been highly selective. There are many names I would have liked to pursue to show the breadth of the evangelical Gaelic hymn movement, such as the noteworthy Tíree Baptist Gaelic hymn writer Duncan MacDougall. See *The Songs of Duncan Ban MacIntyre*, edited by A. MacLeod (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd for the Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 1952); Duncan MacDougall, *Laoidhean Spioradail a chum cuideachadh...* (Glasgow, 1841). A noteworthy fact about Duncan MacDougall was that his sister Mary wrote the Gaelic hymn “*Leanabh an Aigh*,” now known as a Christmas carol, “Child in the Manger.” See also Donald Meek’s excellent article showing one region in the Highlands and the Gaelic literature there: Donald E. Meek, “The Gaelic Literature of Argyll,” *Laverock*, vol. 3, 1997 <<http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/ScotLit/ASLS/Laverock-GaelicLiterature.html>> (10 September 2005).

¹⁶ Donald E. Meek, “Buchanan, Dugald,” *DSCHT* 106.

Shall hide its brilliance from our sight.¹⁷

The allusions in part may be to the book of Revelation, but there is also clearly allusion to the world of the Highlanders.

Buchanan's hymns were popular for the informal setting of the home meetings, but not for the formal worship service. This brings us to a curious reality in Gaelic evangelical piety. There was place for the set form of psalm singing but also a place for those compositions which had a different purpose. There thus starts to emerge in Gaelic Presbyterian Christianity this theme of form and freedom held together in spiritual life. We can generalize then beyond Buchanan to say that usually these Gaelic hymns were composed for the Fellowship Meetings and the family. For formal worship the psalms were used, or, in Argyll and the southern Highlands, the psalms and the paraphrases were employed.¹⁸

Dugald Buchanan ranks at the top of the list as the most popular of all Highland evangelical poets. Magnus MacLean wrote: "No Gaelic book was printed so frequently as these (Buchanan's) poems, and no book (outside the Bible and the Catechism) has exercised such a profound influence upon all classes of Gaelic-speaking Highlanders." To this statement John MacInnis adds, "Highlanders have never questioned Buchanan's primacy among their religious poets. Debate there has been, but only as to whom should be given the honour of being next below him."¹⁹ From my limited understanding, both statements are surely correct. Alexander Duff, the noted missionary to India, expressed great admiration for Buchanan's hymns, and in 1873 was one of the subscribers for the erection of a monument to his memory in Rannoch.²⁰

Peter Grant (1783–1867) was probably the most popular of the nineteenth-century Gaelic hymn writers. Grant was born near Grantown-on-Spey and served as a precentor in the Church of Scotland. He was converted under the Haldane preacher Lachlan MacKintosh, who founded the Baptist church in Grantown-on-Spey. After MacKintosh left this pastorate, Grant became the pastor and was ordained in 1829. A skilful fiddler, he claimed to have been aroused spiritually by Dugald Buchanan's hymns:

His (Grant's) own hymns owe something to Buchanan, but are noticeably different in style and content. Their focus is the 'pilgrim's progress' in the life of faith. The Christian pilgrimage is followed from conversion until the believer's arrival in heaven. Grant extols the efficacy of Christ's blood, emphasizes the inevitability of death, and anticipates the joy of the eternal home [. . .].²¹

¹⁷ Hugh MacDiarmid, ed., *The Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry* (London: MacMillan, 1948) 304-305. The original poem contains 500 lines.

¹⁸ MacInnes, *Evangelical Movement* 274, referring to D. MacKinnon's *The Hymns of the Gael*, 76.

¹⁹ MacInnes, *Evangelical Movement* 280. For the quotation of Magnus MacLean, MacInnes is quoting from MacLean's *Literature of the Highlands*, 2nd ed., 114.

²⁰ MacInnes, *Evangelical Movement* 264.

²¹ D. E. Meek, "Grant, Peter," *DSCHT* 378.

Meek sees in Grant's hymns the experimental emphasis and thus draws the conclusion that they are "reminiscent of Methodist hymnology." There are some parallels, in piety perhaps and certainly as expressions of spiritual awakening, but I do not believe so in structure and form.

Grant's hymns were very popular well outside of his Haldane/Baptist circle, so much so that MacInnes claims that "multitudes who knew his hymns by heart were probably unaware of his denominational affiliation."²² Since Grant used popular Gaelic tunes, this allowed for quick learning and easy access. Grant in essence set a standard for the Highland tradition of hymn singing—experiential, popular, and poetic.

These evangelical Highland poets had links to an older Celtic tradition while still having their evangelical emphases. Many made use of singing in narrative form of Christ's passion, many were certainly engrossed with the doctrine of the Last Things. The poets themselves represented a myriad of social stations: gentlemen tacksmen, blacksmiths, weavers, schoolmasters, ministers, catechists, soldiers, and elders. It also seems very few of these Gaelic evangelical poets were both secular as well as religious poets. The one exception was John MacLean of Tiree, later of Pictou, who managed to be both the secular bard and the religious poet. "In his songs, he sang the praises of the Lourd of Coll; in his hymns, he sings the praises of his Saviour."²³

I have only highlighted the most significant of the Gaelic religious hymn writers, in part selected as they will relate to what follows—those of the New World. Gaelic scholars often try to classify the Gaelic hymn writers chronologically and by region. MacInnes sees three groups: the southern poets of Argyll and Perthshire, the poets of the Northern Highlands, and "the spiritual bards" influenced in some way by the Haldane movement.²⁴ The problem with these three divisions is that there are marks of exchange and relationship which make division somewhat arbitrary.

The last point to make here about the Gaelic hymnists is that as the Highland world began to experience immigration a new missionary theme would also emerge. This is particularly the case with the Gaelic poets who would immigrate. I now turn to a selection of these poets who ventured to the New World.

Some Gaelic Hymn Writers of the New World

I have limited the selection of Gaelic hymn writers of the colonial "New World" to three: John MacLean, James MacGregor, and Donald MacDonald.

John MacLean was born in 1787 in Tiree and came to Pictou County in 1819, settling first at Barney's River. It appears that the year prior to his immigration he had produced a book of Gaelic secular poems dedicated to the Laird of Coll, which assisted with the payment of his voyage.²⁵ Later he moved to Antigonish County and finally was buried in Glenbard. Affectionately known as "The Bard MacLean," he is usually

²² MacInnes, *Evangelical Movement* 151.

²³ MacInnes, *Evangelical Movement* 272, quoting from *Hymns of John MacLean*, ed. A. Sinclair MacLean, xi.

²⁴ MacInnes, *Evangelical Movement* 276.

²⁵ "John MacLean's 'Gloomy Forest,'" trans. Watson Kirkconnell, *Dalhousie Review*, 28.2 (1948): 158.

recognized for his Gaelic secular poems. He wrote no spiritual poems until he was in Nova Scotia. In 1835 an edition of his hymns was published in Glasgow by Maurice Ogle.²⁶ His grandson claims that MacLean wanted to produce a larger, second edition of hymns at about the time of his death. He was well acquainted with Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and also particularly familiar with Thomas Boston's *Fourfold State*. MacLean belonged to the Church of Scotland until the Disruption in 1843 when he went with the Free Church.²⁷ John MacInnes makes this very interesting comment about John MacLean, that he was "a disciple of James MacGregor" and then drops this fact.²⁸ I find it most interesting to find a Kirk evangelical and a Seceder in Nova Scotia so closely aligned. There is a story to be told here!

MacLean's hymns can be summarized as chiefly concerning personal devotion to Jesus and the world-wide mission of the gospel. "The Saviour" (*Am Fear—Saoraidh*) runs for twenty-four verses, starting with Jesus' birth in Bethlehem and the shepherds and proceeding through to the ascension. This style was standard fare, as well, with many Gaelic hymns back in Scotland.

Other hymn titles are: "The Saviour's Call," "Freedom by the Blood of the Lamb," "The Holy War," "Incitement to Battle," "Immanuel's Land," and "The Evangelisation of the Land." These are all standard hymn themes—the Saviour's passion, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, death, and heaven—with the exception of the last, evangelism, which shows the growing Highland awareness of the missionary movement. Perhaps, if anything, this last song shows parallels to James MacGregor.²⁹

To date I have found little reference to the way MacLean's hymns were being used in Nova Scotia. The current literature appears to ignore MacLean's contributions to Presbyterian hymnody there. One assumes they were utilized for home and family gatherings, but I have found nothing conclusive at this point. One wonders whether they were also used for "gathering" before worship.

Our second New World Gaelic hymnist is James MacGregor. James MacGregor's poems and hymns appear to have attracted little interest in Nova Scotia, but one gains a sense that they were much more popular in Scotland. If Nova Scotia did not appreciate MacGregor's hymns, does Prince Edward Island prove to be the New World stage? I believe this is so to some extent, and that through Donald MacDonald. They were composed while traveling "through the dreary wilderness of America" but all chiefly published in Scotland during his lifetime.³⁰

²⁶ A. MacLean Sinclair, MacLean's grandson, produced an edition containing several of MacLean's poems, both secular and sacred. *Clarsach na Coille* [Harp of the Forest], John MacLean, ed. A. MacLean Sinclair (Glasgow, 1881). Another edition appeared in 1928: *Clarsach na Coille*, John MacLean, ed. and revised by Hector MacDougall. The *MS* of MacLean's Gaelic hymns can be found at Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management. "Hymns of John MacLean" (Gaelic *MS*), *NSARM*, MG15, Series G, Vol. 22, No. 3.

²⁷ A. Sinclair MacLean, "Memoir," in *Gaelic Hymns by John MacLean* (Glasgow, 1881), xiv-xxi. Special thanks to William Wright of Glasgow, Scotland, for locating a copy of *Gaelic Hymns* at the University of Glasgow Library.

²⁸ MacInnes, *Evangelical Movement* 290.

²⁹ MacInnes, *Evangelical Movement* 290-291.

³⁰ George Patterson, *Memoir of the Rev. James MacGregor* (Philadelphia, 1859) 448-449.

MacGregor (1759–1830) was from Portmore in Perthshire and sent out in 1786 as an Anti-burgher missionary to Pictou. He appears to have been the first Gaelic speaking Protestant minister in Nova Scotia. Should he be given the title “the first Gaelic Bard in Canada” as Susan Buggey suggests?³¹ His Gaelic hymns (translated as *Poems to Assist Devotion* or *Poems to Promote Religion*) were first published in Glasgow in 1819 and reissued seven times,³² with the royalties all going to the Glasgow Tract Society. Again, the hymns were adapted to the music familiar to the Highlanders. George Patterson, MacGregor’s biographer, states that MacGregor’s hymns were particularly popular in the west Highlands. “Several persons from that quarter have assured me that it is quite common to hear mothers singing them to their children, as Watts’ divine songs are sung in many an English nursery.”³³ The 1819 collection has many doctrinal selections and biblical paraphrases (e.g., the Ten Commandments) but also a strong emphasis on gospel hymns of the free offer tradition—hymns on death, judgment, heaven, hell, and the spread of the gospel. There is a curious and, from all I have read, unique addition to this—translations from Ralph Erskine’s sonnets. James MacGregor was also translating into Gaelic the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, the psalms of David, and the *Scottish Paraphrases*, but all are only in manuscript form and were evidently never published. This may explain in part why some of his Gaelic hymns at the beginning of his hymnal have closer parallels to the *Paraphrases*.³⁴ Thus, while MacGregor’s Gaelic hymns cover many of the common themes of the Gaelic hymnists in Scotland, they take us slightly beyond this in the last points mentioned. The Erskine connection is easy to explain as MacGregor was a Secessionist Presbyterian.³⁵

MacGregor combined the secular and the sacred, composing songs which may be classified in both categories. He set his compositions to popular secular Gaelic tunes (e.g., “The Flowers of the Forest”), a practice that appears not always to have endeared him to some folk in Nova Scotia.³⁶

There is a connection between MacGregor’s hymns and our third Gaelic composer in the colonies, Donald MacDonald (1783–1867). MacDonald at first used the hymns of Peter Grant, Dugald Buchanan, and James MacGregor, all in Gaelic, as well as those of the Springer collection in English. This was prior to Donald MacDonald’s first collection, which was published in Charlottetown in 1835. (The 1835 hymnal did contain one verse of Buchanan’s.)³⁷

³¹ Susan Buggey, “MacGregor (McGregor), James Drummond, 1759-1830,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 6 (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1987) 459.

³² J. R. McIntosh and D. E. Meek, “MacGregor, James” *DSCHT* 515.

³³ Patterson, *Memoir* 452.

³⁴ A note on the *Scottish Paraphrases* and the evangelical movement may be worthy of remembrance. It was claimed by Millar Patrick that the General Assembly was slow to authorize the *Paraphrases* from 1706 to 1708 because the “collection was too evangelical in tone for the liking of the Moderates and so the matter was remitted year after year.” See Forrester and Murray, *Studies* 80-81.

³⁵ See *Ralph Erskine’s Complete Works*, vol. 7 (London, 1865).

³⁶ MacInnes, *Evangelical Movement* 274.

³⁷ Murdoch Lamont, *Rev Donald MacDonald: Glimpses of His Life and Times* (Charlottetown: Marley and Garnhum, 1902) 67.

MacDonald was also from Perthshire, born near Rannoch in 1783. Rannoch had been the home of Dugald Buchanan in his later years and many of his hymns had been composed there. The influence of Buchanan, thus, upon MacDonald is most significant. If we lose sight of this connection, we divorce MacDonald from his Scottish Gaelic heritage.³⁸ MacDonald's father was greatly affected by the ministry of the Haldane brothers, in fact to such an extent that he was baptized by immersion. Donald held the Haldanes in high regard according to Lamont, but never was immersed. He studied at the University of St. Andrews and also served as a teacher/tutor for a private family between sessions. While at St. Andrews MacDonald attended a dancing school. Thus music and Gaelic poetry were part of his early years. He was ordained in 1816 and served for eight years as a missionary minister in the Highlands of Glengarry. What follows in sketch form is well-known—his landing in Cape Breton in 1824, arrival on Prince Edward Island in 1826, and experience of “conversion” or spiritual relief in 1827.³⁹ I will refrain at this point from a full narrative of the course of his life to his death in 1867 and concentrate upon his hymns.

We have already noted MacDonald's employment of Grant, MacGregor, and Springer hymns prior to 1835. These were used at the home Fellowship Meetings and before the worship service on Sundays. There was nothing unusual in any of this, but rather this was standard Gaelic evangelical spirituality. During the years from 1835 until his death in 1867, I believe there were two separate editions of his hymnbooks published:

- 1835 Gaelic edition (1st)
- 1840 Gaelic edition (2nd)⁴⁰

Following his death there were six more editions of his hymnbook published:

- 1880 English edition (3rd)⁴¹
- 1885 English edition, Charlottetown (4th)
- 1887, Gaelic and English edition (5th)⁴²
- [1894?] edition, Boston (6th)
- 1910 edition, Charlottetown (7th)
- 1999 edition, Charlottetown (8th)

³⁸ Lamont, *MacDonald* 4-5. Lamont wrote in 1902, “His hymns (Buchanan's) are known wherever Gaelic is spoken.” Lamont was well aware of MacDonald's indebtedness to Buchanan.

³⁹ Lamont, *MacDonald* 37; David Weale, “McDonald, Donald,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 9 (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1966) 480-481.

⁴⁰ There is consistency about these first two editions, 1835 and 1840. Both are Gaelic only and contain 8 hymns and 16 hymns respectively. Lamont and Bishop both agree here. However, I cannot locate a copy of either edition. J. H. Bishop, *Church of Scotland in Prince Edward Island (MacDonaldite Section)* (N.p.: n.p., n.d.) 27. David Wheale in his Ph.D. thesis also acknowledges his inability to locate these two editions.

⁴¹ This third edition, English only, Bishop writes was published in 1880.

⁴² A close reading of Bishop reveals an 1887 Gaelic and English edition. A total of 36 hymns by MacDonald and Lamont in Gaelic. I have not been able to determine the exact number in English. It appears to have been at least a comparable number. The English hymns were by MacDonald, Lamont, Roberts, and Compton. Bishop, *Church of Scotland* 27.

However, though I have listed eight editions, we notice that particular hymns were circulating individually as well. This was done partly for “practice,” to see what folks thought and to allow tune masters to work with the pieces. I believe this explains in part why the latter editions contain more selections.

I will refrain from a full analysis of these eight editions but rather focus here on the place of Donald MacDonald’s compositions from the 1885 edition, which was all in English and may have been a “reprint” of the 1880 edition.⁴³

The first entry, “Sweet Home,” goes to the early nineteenth-century popular tune “Home, Sweet Home” and has thirteen verses plus a chorus. This was his first English hymn and was written around 1840. Thematically it contains nothing unique from most Gaelic hymns, taking up the related themes of earthy struggle, pilgrimage, death, and heaven. The same themes are repeated in “Gathering of the Twelve Tribes.” To date, I have been unable to identify the tune used in this hymn.

There are many hymns which all centre upon the praise, person, and work of the Lord Jesus. I would group together here: “Eulogy—A Hymn,” “Redemption by Jesus Christ,” and “Eulogy—To the Saviour.” I do not see the didactic element as the real focus in these hymns, but rather there is a profound exaltation of Emmanuel, the Lamb.

Yet there are hymns which are definitely in the didactic vein; for example, “Ode to the Bible,” with fourteen verses and to the tune “The Campbells are Coming,” and also “Eden’s Lovely Wood.” The teaching theme in the former is obvious, while the latter concentrates on creation and the fall for fourteen verses and then redemption in verses fifteen to twenty-one. The hymn “Triumph” combines the didactic and praise, producing in my estimation some of MacDonald’s best lyrical poetry.

There are two other categories of hymns by MacDonald that I will mention briefly, the more significant being the communion hymns. The first “Communion Hymn” has certain parallels to Morison’s *Scottish Paraphrase* “Twas on that night...” (No. 35), yet in no way is there a close textual paraphrase attempt. There is a rehearsal, but the focus is plainly for the ordinance to be known evangelically, as in verse twenty-nine, “Our soul’s desire is salvation.” It clearly ends with the final verses (thirty-three to thirty-four) as a pleading prayer—distinctive from the framework of the *Paraphrases*. This is Gaelic experimental singing for the sacrament. The element of the experimental was consistently present in most of the hymns, in which one will find mention of burden, conviction, awakening, and freedom.⁴⁴

The one hymn in the 1885 edition which does not seem to fit is “The Wail,” which is about the Indian Mutiny of 1857. It does not appear in any subsequent edition. If anything, it shows us something of MacDonald’s poetic skills and interests. The Highlanders were well represented in India, and it reflects more the Highland bardic tradition. Yet it also tells us that MacDonald, like MacLean and MacGregor (recall his poem on smoking), in some ways traverses the secular and the sacred.

The chronology of MacDonald’s “hymnbooks” shows a progressive movement from Gaelic to English. I believe this can be explained in part by the increasing attraction

⁴³ Donald MacDonald, *Hymns for Practice, not to be used in the Solemn Worship of the Sanctuary* (Charlottetown, 1885).

⁴⁴ David E. Weale, “The Ministry of the Reverend Donald McDonald on Prince Edward Island 1826–1867: A Case-Study Examination of the Influence and Role of Religion Within Colonial Society,” diss., Queen’s U, 1976, 112, 113, 114, 119. Weale quotes various hymns here showing these themes.

of non-Scots to the congregations which MacDonald was serving after the 1830 revival. By the 1840s the make-up of his churches included names like Compton, Bears, and Roberts—all non-Scots, a mixture of English/Welsh and other.

Finally, what of the new Gaelic evangelization impulse that we found in MacLean and MacGregor? Is it in MacDonald's hymns as well? It is indeed there to a degree, but not as prominently or boldly as in the hymns of the former two writers. It comes out more through types and antitypes in "Gathering of the Twelve Tribes." In "Lamentation Over the State of the World" there is certainly vivid reference to the various troubles all over the world—war, plague, flood, etc., but it is more for another purpose, that of awakening the soul's need and drawing him to Christ. The focus is not the stark call to the evangelization of the nations that we may find in the other writers. MacDonald certainly had an apostolic zeal like MacGregor in terms of "home mission," but he remained very much the "Colonial Apostle," and his hymns reflect this.

The Circle Widens: Gaelic Influenced Hymn Writers in the New World

In Prince Edward Island one encounters the Gaelic hymn in content and style, but finds it was not composed exclusively by those of Scottish Gaelic origins. The poets connected with Donald MacDonald whose compositions "passed muster" were Ewen Lamont, John Compton, George Bears, and Elias Roberts. Only the first of these men was truly Gaelic.

Ewen Lamont (1817–1905) was born in Bernisdale, Isle of Skye, and came to Prince Edward Island in 1829. He moved to Orwell Head (Lyndale) to be closer to Donald MacDonald's preaching station there. Ewen Lamont was an elder, a schoolmaster, and a noted poet.⁴⁵ If Ewen were the Gaelic poet, who was his tune composer? I believe it was the elder with whom he served, William MacPhail, the father of Sir Andrew MacPhail. William (1830–1905) was a noted schoolmaster and musician. Both Ewen and William understood the Gaelic hymn, and I believe *The Master's Wife* clearly connects William as the "tune master" for the Gaelic hymns being composed in Prince Edward Island.⁴⁶ The other three hymn composers were also attracted to MacDonald's ministry, and their hymns conform to the same characteristics—experimental, long-versed, and popular tune settings—but were all in English, not Gaelic.

George Bears⁴⁷ (1812–1876) was from Guysborough County, Nova Scotia. He lived with his Compton wife at Belle River, then Brooklyn, Prince Edward Island. He was a sea captain, traveling to Labrador to catch herring, and served as a "ministering elder." He composed several hymns, a number of which were added to the MacDonaldite hymnal. A quick analysis of his hymns will show the same experimental, long-versed, popularly set composition, following the Gaelic hymnic style, in contrast to John Newton and others. Bears did not only produce "pure" hymns, but also such a poem as "Farewell

⁴⁵ Harold S. MacLeod, *The Lamonts of Lyndale* (Charlottetown: Royal Bookbinders, 2003) 32-33.

⁴⁶ Andrew MacPhail, *The Master's Wife* (Charlottetown: Institute of Island Studies, 1994) 135.

⁴⁷ The spelling for the surname "Bears" is varied, such as Barrs, Barse and Bears. The name can be traced back to an Augustine Bearce who went to New England in 1638. He may actually have been of gypsy origin, but certainly the family were not of Highland Scot origin. The Bears were New England planters who moved to Nova Scotia prior to the Revolutionary War. Source, Austin Bears, *Bearce to Bears: Genealogy 1638–1982* (Clyde River, PE: C. Austin Bears, 1982) 22, 24, 25, 39, 72.

Dear Island Home,” thus marking him as a poet of a broader ability. Yet even this poem is still highly spiritual:

When the last trumpet shall sound
And the saints on high shall soar
Filled with immortal life I'll bound
Away from wild Labrador.⁴⁸

Elias Roberts was born in England according to census material and led a varied occupational career—schoolmaster, school visitor, carpenter, and farmer. His 1854 marriage was performed by Rev. Donald MacDonald. (Roberts was married three times.) There is no indication whatsoever of his belonging to the Church of Scotland prior to being on Prince Edward Island, yet his poetry is again reflective of Gaelic hymnody. Only two of his compositions made their way into the later editions of the MacDonaldite hymnals, yet a cursory look at these two hymns reveals no noticeable departure. The “Second” has thirty-nine verses!⁴⁹

The last hymnist we will mention in this widening circle of Gaelic inspired hymnists in the New World is John Compton. The Comptons were English Loyalists, some of whom had fled New Jersey and lived in New Brunswick and then Nova Scotia. John's father was William (c.1771–1867), born at Compton's Creek, New Jersey, and died at Belle River, PE. It is possible that while they were in Cape Breton they met Rev. Donald MacDonald before his move to Prince Edward Island. It is claimed that they came to Prince Edward Island to be under MacDonald's ministry.⁵⁰ John was born in 1812 and died in 1901. He served as an elder in the Church of Scotland and later as a “ministering elder” after MacDonald's death. There is only one of his hymns in *Hymns by the Rev. Donald MacDonald and Elders*. It is considerably shorter than most in the collection, only ten verses in length; however, the content clearly mirrors all the same themes of the Gaelic evangelical hymn tradition. It is simply entitled “Hymn” and is Christ-centred, experimental, and very devotional.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Harold MacLeod, *The Loyalist Comptons of Prince Edward Island* (Charlottetown: Royal Bookbinders, 2001) 72, 84.

⁴⁹ Biographical information on Roberts was gleaned from genealogical record cards in the Prince Edward Island Archives, Charlottetown.

⁵⁰ This has been an oral tradition in the Compton family, in support of which there appears to be solid circumstantial evidence. The Comptons were living in Cape Breton during the time when Donald MacDonald was living there. They were involved as a family in a sawmill and continued this when they came to Prince Edward Island, basically at the same time that MacDonald made his move there. Further research is still needed, but there are probably other families who may well have followed MacDonald from the mainland to the Island. It also raises more questions about his ministry prior to coming to Prince Edward Island, a period that has often been treated in a very cavalier fashion.

⁵¹ Harold S. MacLeod, *The Loyalist Comptons of Prince Edward Island*, with Tilly Compton MacLeod and Pamela Hatton Compton (Charlottetown: Royal Bookbinders, 2001) 8, 10, 93C, 94. The Comptons were probably Baptists while in America.

Select Examples of Gaelic Evangelical Hymns in the New World

Following, with brief notes, are three selections of evangelical hymns in the Gaelic hymnic tradition used on Prince Edward Island in the early to middle nineteenth century.

Sweet Home

(Tune: Home, Sweet Home by H. R. Bishop, for the operetta “Clari” performed in London in 1823—viewed as in the folk song category.)

- 1 Our time, O Lord, is fleeting, our days pass away,
Our journey still is sweet’ning, Thy strength is our stay,
And now bestow Thy blessing, Thou all our need dost know,
And joyfully we’ll travel and cheerily home we’ll go.
- 2 The frightful scenes that meet us are under Thy sway;
The lame, the weak, the feeble, are constantly Thy care,
So homeward bound contented we’ll sweetly glide our way,
And soon we’ll see the regions of blissful shining day.
- 12 Though trials sore afflict us, our comforts are not few,
Our souls are filled with pleasure, and sweet refreshing dew,
And as we grow in stature, our strength, O Lord, renew,
And homeward bound we’ll travel, and bid the world adieu.

*Chorus: Home, home, sweet, sweet home,
Preserve us, dear Saviour, for glory our home.*

– Rev. Donald MacDonald, his first English hymn, 1841

Triumph

(Air: Contrast) Metre, 8888 (double) (Tune has no affinities or matches, but appears to be a fiddle tune.)

- 1 Jesus, our Saviour’s ascended,
Highly exalted in Glory,
A Prince and a Saviour attended
In majesty royally rob’d;
Due Honors abundant surround Him,
Seated on high with His Father,
Crowned in excellent power,
Triumphant over His foes.
- 2 In childhood, though humbly descended,
Angels delight to behold Him;
Swaddled and laid in a manger,

Hosts in amazement adore;
The shepherds beheld them in chorus
Glorifying God in the highest,
Announcing salvation unbounded,
Messiah in manhood is born.

4 Suff'ring and death still before Him,
He views in sad'ning amazement;
Bows in submission to His Father,
And dies on the cross for His own;
Death and the grave could not hold Him,
He burst their fetters in triumph;
The legions of hell were opposed;
But could not the Conq'ror restrain.

18 All honor and power are due Him
And glory, by millions of saved;
When death on the cross He endured,
Our ransom in full He has paid;
Then loudly publish His praises,
He dwells forever in glory,
Preparing a place for His chosen,
And safely will carry us home.

– Rev. Donald MacDonald (1783–1867)

A Hymn

Metre, 8686 (Tune unable to name)

1 Bless, O my soul, the lovely Lamb
Who died on Calvary
To wash my soul from guilt and sin,
And pay the ransom free.

Chorus: *Oh! the Lamb the lovely Lamb!
The Lamb on Calvary!
The Lamb was slain and rose again
To intercede for me.*

2 Amazing love, no tongue can tell,
Lo! Jesus groan'd and bled
To save my soul from lowest hell
His precious blood was shed.

– George Bears, M. E. (1812–1876)

Conclusions

This historical study helps highlight the purpose and position of evangelical Gaelic hymnody: it was clearly preparatory to divine worship—an aid to prepare the congregation for worship; was instructive in biblical truth and theology; and made allowance for personal expression of faith and experiences in the pilgrimage. These three primary purposes were to be expressed in the corporate gatherings of the people of God and thus tell us much about the corporate piety and spirituality of these churches. But there were other purposes and positions which this evangelical Gaelic hymnody fulfilled. They were well known in the private dwellings during those Fellowship Meetings as well as in the cycles of daily work as meditative hymns. If we miss these additional uses, we miss a true recreation of the personal faith and piety of these folk. I believe we have tended to ignore much of this in our historical studies.

Next, I see here that frequently discussion about the MacDonalmites has been without an historical awareness of the larger faith communities in Scotland from which they emerged. I find myself making the seeming contradiction that they were unique, yet really not so unique. There is a strong theme of continuity from the Scottish Highland evangelical communities to the New World, and this theme can be studied through the Gaelic hymnic tradition.

Musically, theologically, and culturally there is much to consider here about cultural adaptation—dare I say it, “indigenous spirituality.” There are theological, musical, and cultural questions which are best treated in an interdisciplinary approach. There clearly remains much mystery at the musical level which one finds frustrating—no notations, oral traditions of “airs,” the questions of naming, identifying, and classifying—all which must be addressed if we are to avoid continuing to advance a mythic history of Scottish Highland Presbyterianism.

I believe this study challenges certain myths we have held concerning Gaelic evangelicalism between c.1750–1850. These hymns help us to see what Donald MacLeod says has partly been lost, namely that there did exist an “informality, spontaneity and freedom” within much of the Highland evangelical community. In fact, there was a virtual house-church movement.⁵² This paper opens a window into the spirituality of these communities, a spirituality much larger than we often imagine. It may appear as “contradictions” at first glance, but is perhaps expressive of some folk who were actually “big” people.

Finally, we need to press forward and widen our field to search out other colonial locations where Gaelic hymnody existed. In doing this, I do not think we need to limit ourselves to Canada. What about Africa, India, and Australasia? Who knows what we may find!

Gaelic hymnody in Scotland was transplanted to the New World, and in the process we can say it became an “auld world beat with a New World tempo!”

⁵² Donald MacLeod, “The Highland Churches Today,” *The Church in the Highlands*, ed. James Kirk (Edinburgh: Scottish Church History Society, 1998) 171.