
Short Note: The Sabbath Protest at Strome Ferry in 1883

NORMAN CAMPBELL

Resistance on the part of the Church to the policies and actions of the civil magistrate has been rare in post-Reformation Scotland, other than during the Covenanting period and the Ten Years' Conflict of 1833-43. Direct confrontation has been even rarer. This note examines the so-called Strome Ferry "riot" of 3rd June 1883 in south-west Ross-shire, a pro-Sabbath protest which was not sanctioned by the Church but for which sympathy was shown by some leading figures. It mentions some points that the incident highlighted, amongst these the leading role played by Rev. Alexander MacColl of the Free Church in Lochalsh and Dr. John Kennedy of Dingwall in shaping the Church's response.¹

1. The riot

The rail line to Strome Ferry had been opened in August 1870, steamer ferries providing passengers with the options of forward journeys by sea to Portree and Stornoway.² As pointed out in the main researched account of the affair, David McConnell's *The Strome Ferry Railway Riot of*

¹ Born in nearby Lochcarron in 1815, MacColl had studied at the University of Edinburgh while acting as parish schoolmaster in Uig, Lewis. He was ordained to Duirinish Free Church in Skye in 1852, translated to the Fort Augustus and Glenmoriston charge in 1870, and to Lochalsh in 1877; see William Ewing (ed.), *Annals of the Free Church of Scotland, 1843-1900* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1914), Vol. 1, p. 217. MacColl's role as school teacher in Uig is noted in Douglas Ansdell, *The People of the Great Faith: The Highland Church 1690-1900* (Stornoway, 1998), p. 67.

² The extension of the line from Strome Ferry to Kyle of Lochalsh opened in 1897; see H. A. Vallance, C. R. Clinker, and A. J. Lambert, *The Highland Railway: The History of the Railways of the Scottish Highlands* (5 vols., Colonsay, 1996), Vol. 2, pp. 38-9, 45.

1883, the Sabbath issue was beginning to emerge strongly in the next decade. For a number of years, fish caught in the North West and cured in Stornoway on a Saturday would arrive by steamer at Strome Ferry on Saturday evening. The pattern which emerged was for the fish to be quietly unloaded onto train wagons and it to be taken to Billingsgate market in London for the Monday morning.³ Even after the failure of the 1883 protesters to prevent Sabbath movements of goods, *passenger* services did not run on the Sabbath on the Skye rail line for many years afterwards: low demand seems to have been the reason.⁴

These 1870s and 1880s breaches of the Lord's Day had been the subject of protests by the Free Presbytery of Lochcarron. Following representations by local Church leaders in 1882, the Highland Railway company stressed that it "was vital for them to forward the fish traffic whenever it was available, and this, necessarily, included Sundays". The fishing industry had grown, and this was linked to the availability of the railway connection to the markets. "The views of the local people, disapproving of a few hours Sunday labour, could not be allowed to interfere with their operations of sending the fish fresh to London," stated the company. Matters seem to have come to a head after Sabbath 27th May 1883, during which cargo other than herring had been landed from the steamers to the train, including boxes, timber, and a boat. However, despite irritation at the extra goods now passing through, McConnell stresses that it "was Sunday labour resulting from the principal traffic which they intended not to tolerate in future".⁵

It was decided by local men to be present at the station on Sabbath 3rd June. At 11 p.m. on the Saturday, the steamer *Harold* from Stornoway was seen approaching by the Ardaneaskan people. As people gathered to protest, they began to push away the wagon onto which the rail staff were loading the fish. The man in charge of the crane was dragged away but rail staff continued working. The staff eventually gave up in the face of the crowd who drove them onto the steamer. They were then pushed towards the station. The station master telegraphed the police. A police force was dispatched following discussions between the authorities, including the sheriff, the procurator fiscal and the chief constable of

³ David McConnell, *The Strome Ferry Railway Riot of 1883* (Dornoch, 1993), p. 5.

⁴ Vallance, *et al.*, *The Highland Railway: The History of the Railways of the Scottish Highlands*, pp. 85-6.

⁵ McConnell, *The Strome Ferry Railway Riot of 1883*, pp. 6-10.



Strome Ferry pier as it appeared in the late nineteenth century. The image dates to the 1880s or 1890s.

[Photo courtesy of Highland Photographic Archive, Inverness Museum & Art Galley, High Life Highland]

Ross-shire, Donald Munro. Policemen arrived at Strome on a train at 11 a.m. on the Sabbath. The police were driven back on their first baton charge. After six further charges were met by sticks and stones, the police gave up and withdrew slightly from direct confrontation with the crowd of a hundred and fifty protestors. An outdoors religious service was held. By 11.30 p.m. there were two hundred and fifty people on the pier. Worship continued until midnight and the protestors then dispersed. Rail staff resumed loading from the two steamers.⁶

The value of the cargoes was £1,750 but between £100 and £200 of their estimated value in market had been lost by the delay. The *Northern Chronicle* newspaper specifically linked the “riot” to the 1882 disturbances on Skye at Braes and Glendale in the sense of crofters expressing a grievance through a public disturbance. Highland newspaper reaction after the riot was mixed, but the *Ross-shire Journal* commented: “we think

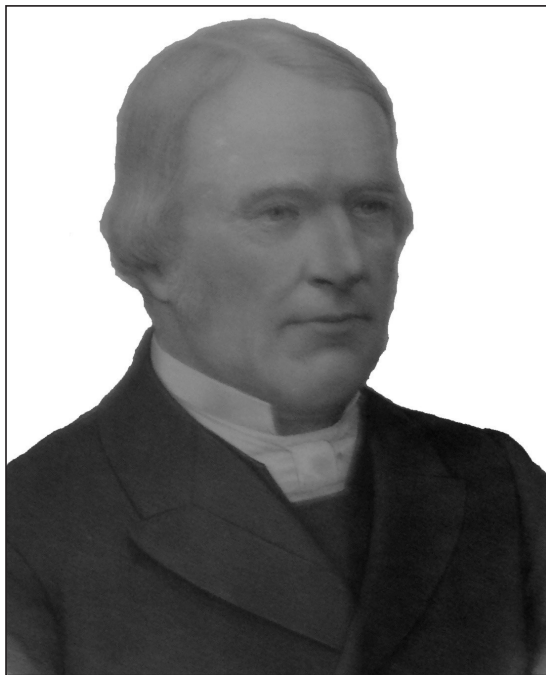
⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 6-10.

the possible gain of, say, five per cent more for herrings sent to market, reputedly fresh, over those sprinkled with salt, a poor return for wholesale Sabbath desecration and the outraging of the feelings, be they enlightened or otherwise, of a large and law-abiding community.”⁷

In the end, ten men were arrested in connection with the 3rd June disturbance. They were Roderick and Alexander Finlayson (Ardnarff), John MacRae (Portcuillin), Finlay Mackenzie (North Strome), Alexander Mackay (Jeanstown), Roderick Gillies (Ardneaskan), Donald MacRae (Ardneaskan), Donald Matheson (Ardneaskan), John Mackenzie (Slumbay), and Alexander Gollan (Slumbay).⁸

2. The aftermath

The next Sabbath, 10th June, a force of one hundred and forty-six policemen was present at Strome Ferry, including sixty from Lanarkshire who were said to have experience of riots. A hundred and twenty soldiers were on standby at Fort George if needed at Strome. In the event,



Rev. Alexander MacColl, 1815-89.

Rev. Kenneth MacDonald of Applecross dissuaded the 150-plus people who gathered from interfering in the unloading of fish. An outdoor public meeting had been held on Wednesday 6th June, when 250 people gathered in heavy rain at Strome Ferry. Rev. Alexander MacColl presided, supported by the ministers William Sinclair of Plockton, Donald Forbes of Lochcarron and MacDonald of Applecross, together with the Free Church ministers of Sleat, Raasay, Inverness and Burghead as well as virtually all the office-bearers of the Free Church in

Lochcarron and Lochalsh. A motion was passed which criticised the Sabbath work but disapproved of violence for defending the Lord’s

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 12.

⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 13-16.

Day while sympathising with the view of those who had stopped the work. It resolved to “use all lawful means” to stop the Sabbath work and underlined that Sabbath-observing fish-curers stated that they suffered no loss for delaying the departure of fish to market on the Sabbath. Another resolution set up a committee to campaign and gather funds, to petition parliament and to lobby the railway company again.⁹

Mr. MacColl’s speech at the 6th June meeting drew a parallel with the actions of the prophet to oppose Sabbath trade in Jerusalem as described in Nehemiah chapter 14. He asserted the principle that human law should be based on God’s law but also stressed his view that Sabbath work was forbidden by Scots law. He did not cite specific legislation but a newspaper account said that he maintained that it was “part of the common law of Scotland to keep the Sabbath free from work”. Mr. MacColl was also quoted as stating that he was “very proud” that the protestors “respected the Sabbath so much; but he confessed that in his opinion the people were wrong in the action they had taken”. He went on to stress the sinful nature of the Sabbath-breaking which the railway company had organised, underlined the need for the government to take action in defence of the Lord’s Day and called for Christians to campaign nationally for the defence of the Sabbath.¹⁰

The reaction in Stornoway seems to have been mixed. Mr. MacColl claimed that all but one of the fish-curers there had asked for the fish not be despatched until the Monday.¹¹ Nevertheless, the focus of one meeting in Stornoway in the days immediately following the riot was not the fish issue but to request greater links with Strome Ferry: those attending agreed to ask for the mail to be taken to Lewis via Strome Ferry rather than from Ullapool as had been happening up until then. The meeting heard that a Strome Ferry connection would allow the mail to arrive in Stornoway ten hours earlier than previously.¹²

But support was not lacking in some Church courts. A meeting of the Free Presbytery of Inverness in early July backed the protestors.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 18. Kenneth MacDonald of Applecross was a native of the parish and had been ordained to the Free Church there in 1859. Donald Forbes (1821-1898) had been ordained to Lochcarron Free Church in 1859. William Sinclair (1824-1899) had been ordained to Plockton Free Church in 1850; see Ewing (ed.), *Annals of the Free Church of Scotland, 1843-1900*, Vol. 1, pp. 157, 223, 317.

¹⁰ *Inverness Advertiser*, 5th June 1883, p. 7.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 7.

¹² *Inverness Advertiser*, 15th June 1883, p. 5.

The Presbytery was “satisfied that by far the greater blame for the disturbance lies at the door of the fish merchants and the rail company, who had conspired to break the law, and of the police force for endeavouring to aid them in doing so”. The Presbytery commended “the people for their forbearance when attacked by the police”, but hoped they would “not attempt any further display of physical force, but seek to secure their object by constitutional means”. Dr. MacKay of the Free North spoke strongly in their support.¹³ It was claimed that summer that none of the Presbyteries or Synods of the Church of Scotland had petitioned on behalf of the Strome men.¹⁴

Questions were also asked in the House of Commons about the issue on 21st August. The Home Secretary, Sir William Harcourt, was unhappy about statements at public meetings:

I cannot agree with the consideration that a criminal sentence should be influenced by the feeling expressed at public meetings. Indeed, I must point out to the Hon. Member that one of the great obstacles to the mitigation of this sentence has been found in the ill-advised speaking at these public meetings. So long as the unwise and ill-judged language of the friends of the prisoners, amounting at least to a palliation, if not to a justification of the offences, is continued, so long it will be impossible, with due respect to law, to exercise a leniency which would only be an encouragement to fresh outrages. It must be remembered that this offence was not the result of a sudden impulse, but of a deliberate plan. The original line of defence was an absolute justification by the accused of their right to vindicate the observance of the Day of Rest by a violent and organized riot.¹⁵

However, the door was open to some extent:

If it be true that these men, as stated, after their conviction expressed their sincere regret for the offence into which they had been betrayed, and if that view of their conduct is frankly accepted by those who advocate their cause, then, and not till then, the question of leniency will arise. If the matter is dealt with in this

¹³ *Inverness Advertiser*, 6th July 1883, p. 6.

¹⁴ McConnell, *The Strome Ferry Railway Riot of 1883*, p. 27.

¹⁵ *House of Commons Debates*, 21st August 1883, Vol. 283, column 1493 (accessible online).

spirit, I shall be prepared at the expiration of two months of the sentence to consult with the learned Judge as to whether the sentence can safely be mitigated.¹⁶

The ten men were eventually given a jail sentence but they were freed from Calton Jail, Edinburgh, at 6 a.m. on Friday 21st September – three days before the halfway point of their sentence. Seven of them travelled north immediately and seem to have arrived in Strome late on the Friday. The other three, who stayed in Edinburgh for a few hours, arrived home on Saturday. The three attended a “tea meeting” celebrating their release. The gathering had been organised by Dr. James Begg. Among the hundred guests who appeared, despite the short notice, were Principal John Cairns, Professor T. M. Lindsay and Dr. Moir Porteous. A collection for the ten men, also organised by Dr. Begg, was successful in raising £500. Their detention in jail had come at a critical stage of the year for the men’s income. Each instalment of each man’s £50 from the collection was to be delivered as the three administrators determined. These three were Rev. Alexander MacColl, Rev. William Sinclair, and Murdoch Ross, National Bank of Scotland, Edinburgh.¹⁷ Dr. Begg’s biographer, Thomas Smith, underlines the fact that this was the last public issue in which Dr. Begg involved himself before his death. Smith notes: “Dr. Begg had a very lively sympathy with these men, and led in a movement to express sympathy with them.”¹⁸

The leading Reformed preacher of the day in England, C. H. Spurgeon, also gave clear support to the principle being upheld by the rioters:

We feel bound at this, our earliest opportunity, to record our protest against the continued imprisonment of the men who endeavoured to prevent the public breach of the Sabbath at Strome Ferry. Whatever their error, they meant to do right. No one has ever hinted that they had any selfish or sinister motive: they conceived that God’s law was about to be broken, and they stepped in to prevent it. It is true they were violating the law of the land, and going far beyond their province in trying to compel others to be as regardful of the Sabbath as themselves; but surely for this

¹⁶ *ibid.*, column 1494.

¹⁷ McConnell, *The Strome Ferry Railway Riot of 1883*, pp. 25-6.

¹⁸ Thomas Smith, *Memoirs of James Begg, D.D.* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1885-8), Vol. 2, p. 536.

wonderful offence they have already suffered enough. The law has told them that even their religious scruples cannot justify them in riotous behaviour; can the law now teach them anything more? We consider that a longer imprisonment will answer no good end, but, on the contrary, will arouse indignation against the law which allows men to be thus punished. We wish we had a people in England good enough to be capable of this Scotch crime – the crime of fearing God so much as to use violence for the preservation of the day of rest. Little has been said but we can assure our rulers that the minds of Christian people, both in England and Scotland, would be greatly relieved if they heard that these mistaken but true-hearted men were at once set at liberty.¹⁹

The incident also attracted comment internationally with one New Zealand paper making pointed analysis:

Public feeling is much divided on the subject of the behaviour of the men in seeking to put Sunday traffic down by force. Leaving out of the question such prejudiced judges as the *Scotsman* newspaper, fair-minded persons generally seem to think that the fishermen had a grievance, but took the wrong way to remedy it. The landing of fish on Sunday is prohibited at Leith, and it is difficult to see why it should be legalised at Strome Ferry.²⁰

3. Varying reactions

One matter brought out was the prominent position occupied by Rev. Alexander MacColl, Lochalsh, about whom comparatively little is known. MacColl had already emerged as a bastion of orthodoxy in the north-west and his carefully nuanced support for the cause of the rioters would have added to that status. A Gaelic elegy published soon after his death in 1889 referred to MacColl's strength of character and loyalty to friends, as well as his "worthiness of understanding and quick, ready polish of speech". The poet also, perhaps pointedly, said that his converts would be seen in "unblighted bundle" in heaven.²¹ MacColl could be

¹⁹ *The Sword and The Trowel*, September 1883, Notes.

²⁰ *Nelson Evening Mail*, Volume XVIII, Issue 202, 29th August 1883, p. 6. Downloaded March 2012 at: <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast?a=d&d=NEM18830829.2.16.8>)

²¹ *Scottish Highlander*, 31st January 1889, p. 2. Poetic licence is seen in the couplet which states there had been no one more marked for zeal and consistency since the apostle Paul.

cautious when occasion required; one critical observer who asked him to pray for him was to recall his careful response, “That ought to be done”, as being the answer MacColl gave.²² An obituary stated: “He occupied a position among his Highland brethren second only to that which was occupied by Dr. Kennedy, of Dingwall; Dr. Mackay, of Inverness; or the present Moderator of the General Assembly [Gustavus Aird, Creich]. It was a position of consideration and honour. He was a power in the Presbytery and a leader in the Synod of Glenelg. . . . Mr. MacColl was an effective debater in the Presbytery and Synod, and was always distinguished for the clarity and strength with which he could place his arguments before his hearers.”²³ His speech of 6th June bears this out.²⁴



*Rev. Alexander MacColl's gravestone
in Kirkton cemetery, Lochalsh.*

However, Dr. Kennedy of Dingwall seems to have gone considerably further in his public statements about the protesters than Mr. MacColl's measured support for their principles but not their actions. Speaking at a rally in Dingwall after sentence had been passed, Dr. Kennedy emphasised the common view that the railway company's

²² E. MacKerchar (ed.), *James Noble Mackenzie, Missionary to the New Hebrides and Korea: an Autobiography* (London, n.d.), p. 13. Mackenzie believed he was under conviction of sin due to MacColl's "law" preaching that day at a service of the Plockton communion and speculated that the lack of much verbal engagement with the request meant that the preacher did not wish to do the Holy Spirit's work. That MacColl may have seen Mackenzie's need to pray for *himself* as a greater priority is not discussed. In later years Mackenzie joined the United Free Church.

²³ *Scottish Highlander*, 31st January 1889, p. 6. The obituary went on to emphasize MacColl's conservatism: "He hated 'innovations' in any form. No-one was more pronounced in condemnation of the views of Dr. Robertson Smith. He resolutely opposed the proposed union with the United Presbyterian Church; and he consistently condemned every step that has been taken within the church towards disestablishment."

²⁴ The inscription on MacColl's gravestone at Kirkton cemetery, Lochalsh, reads: "A Christian and a patriot. A powerful and impressive preacher, a stern reprover of sin, faithful and tender in his appeals to the unconverted and a son of consolation to the people of God."

Sabbath activity had itself been illegal. “I am not here to maintain that these men were not guilty of indiscretion in the exhibition of their zeal, but no one can blame them for taking the law into their own hands without blaming those by whom that law should have been administered,” he said. Citing Nehemiah’s activity on the Sabbath Day to prevent the sale of fish in Tyre as justification for the protest at Strome Ferry being made on that day, he continued:

But where among the constituted authorities is a Nehemiah to be found who evinces any zeal for the law of God? And where shall we find anything like a parallel to his (Nehemiah’s) conduct except in the action of the men who are now in the cells of a prison after having been branded as criminals. . . . When the prospectus of the Dingwall and Skye Railway was issued, the plea was used, to procure shareholders, that there was to be no Sabbath traffic. . . . If anything was proved at the late trial, it was proved to a demonstration that there was no necessity for the carrying of the fish landed at Strome on the Sabbath. The whole action of the Highland Railway Company in connection with this fish traffic falls under the operation of the Act 1661, according to which such traffic is utterly illegal.

Accusing the company of being “oppressive” Kennedy stated that he believed they had risked bloodshed in despatching troops to the area on the following Sabbath:

Rather than that a few herrings should lose a little of their flavour before reaching London – let human blood be shed! That was the remorseless behest of the Railway Company, and to fulfil it the executive and the Government proved themselves quite ready to help them.²⁵

The reaction of the Gaelic clergy was examined by the leading Gaelic poetess Mary MacPherson of Skye and Inverness (Màiri Mhòr nan Òran, 1821-1898) in a composition produced after the protesters’ release from jail. Having in a previous poem criticised ministers who failed to support the land agitation in the Highlands, she was to list and praise those who took the side of the Strome Ferry protesters in her song *Gaisgich Loch Carunn* (the Lochcarron Heroes). Describing Mr. MacColl,

²⁵ Alexander Auld, *Life of John Kennedy, D.D.* (London, 1887), pp. 213-7.



Photograph of Strome Ferry taken in 2012.

Mr. Mackay (Free North), Gustavus Aird and Mr. MacQueen of Daviot as “old worthies who’ll keep the course steady” she also praised Evan Gordon of Duke Street in Glasgow, Dr. Begg, and Dr. Kennedy – the last for being “the soldier/who often gladdened the flock/who was generous to the Sabbath/May he have an eternal Sabbath.”²⁶ She also claimed that Lachlan Mackenzie, an earlier minister of Lochcarron, had predicted such a “scandal” as had been seen in the Sabbath commercial activity at Strome Ferry, and linked it to his predictions about the religious decline prior to the last days.²⁷

Conclusion

The Strome Ferry riot is now largely forgotten but it brought out several interesting points. One of these was the question of what, if any, level of

²⁶ Donald Meek (ed.), *Màiri Mhòr nan Òran* (Glasgow, 1977), pp. 84-6, 133-4. George Mackay (1796-1886) was a well-known pastor of the Free North Church, Inverness. Gustavus Aird (1813-1898) was pastor of Creich Free Church and opposed the Clearances. John MacQueen (1814-1891) had been minister of Strontian Free Church before his translation to Daviot in 1867; see Ewing (ed.), *Annals of the Free Church of Scotland, 1843-1900*, Vol. 1, pp. 78, 234, 257.

²⁷ *Màiri Mhòr nan Òran*, pp. 133-4. Lachlan Mackenzie (1754-1819) was minister in Lochcarron from 1776 until his death. He was known for penetrating, analogy-rich preaching and credited with correctly predicting some future events. See Prof. J. R. McIntosh’s note in N. M. de S. Cameron (ed.), *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Edinburgh, 1998), p. 522.

civil disobedience was appropriate in defence of the Sabbath. The general view of those most in sympathy with the protestors was that the violence should not be condoned. Dr. Kennedy was the clergyman most outspoken in support of the protestors. The affair also highlighted the way in which commercial interests were being allowed by the State to over-ride the convictions of Highland people for whom the Sabbath was to be observed as the day of rest.

The riot was but one unusually dramatic incident in a long-running series of efforts to resist Sabbath erosion within the Highlands. Almost five decades later the same rail line – by now extended to Kyle of Lochalsh – was the focus of a fresh dispute. A deputation made up of a Free Church and Free Presbyterian minister, as well as MPs Sir Murdoch MacDonald and Ian MacPherson, lobbied the L.M.S. Railway Company in 1929 against proposed special Sabbath excursion trains from Perth to Kyle planned for that summer. The company refused to abandon the plan.²⁸

²⁸ *Glasgow Herald*, 4th June 1929, p. 13. The ministers were “Professor Macleod” (presumably Principal John Macleod) and the Rev. Ewen MacQueen, Free Presbyterian Church, Inverness.