

---

## Walter Macleod: missionary in France (1855–6)

NORMAN CAMPBELL

The last minister of the Lauriston Street, Edinburgh congregation of Original Seceders was Rev. Walter Macleod.<sup>1</sup> Given the extreme ecclesiastical separation of his later years, it is interesting that he began his public sphere of usefulness, not with the Secession but in the relatively ecumenical environment of the Free Church of Scotland; and not labouring in Britain, but serving as a missionary for the Free Church during the mid-1850s among Scottish people in the Brittany region of France. This short article examines this early stage of service, with its spiritual trials and exercises, by means of a diary that he kept at that time.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. For Walter Macleod, see A. MacWhirter, 'The last Anti-Burghers: a footnote to Secession history', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, Vol. 8 (1944), pp. 244–291, reprinted with further notes in *Scottish Reformation Society Historical Journal (SRSJ)*, Vol. 4 (2014), pp. 275–340; N. Campbell, 'Rev. Walter Macleod: a wise penman', *SRSJ*, Vol. 7 (2017), pp. 271–281. As mentioned in these articles, his congregation was not in connection with the Synod of the same name.

2. The diary is a jotter measuring 18cm by 12cm, with a mottled brown hard cover and a leather spine. The pages have light grey ruling 7mm apart. The title-page reads: 'Walter Macleod's Book, 69 Clerk St, Edinburgh'. The first diary entry is dated 19th June 1855, at p. 204, and the last is for 30th June 1856 on p. 380. The first 46 pages are missing, while those numbered 75 to 203 have been ripped out at some point. At p. 47 there is a heading 'Outlines of Sermons on Christ and His Work'. No preacher is given and the sermons are in very neat hand: they may have been composed by Walter Macleod. These run to p. 74. The diary starts at p. 204 and continues to p. 380, at the bottom of which are the words 'End of Vol i'. For the re-written diary entries, separately inserted, see footnote 21, below. The diary is in the Wright-Macleod archive (see N. Campbell, 'Rev. James Wright of Infirmity Street and Lauriston Street, Edinburgh', *SRSJ*, Vol. 5 (2015), p. 145, n.2).

## 1. Conversion and call to Landernau

Following some time as a teacher in Stirling-shire, Walter Macleod had fallen ill: on Friday 10th August 1855, he learned that he had consumption (tuberculosis). He felt that a ‘speedy summons to the bar of eternal justice’ might be imminent and also felt spiritual darkness.<sup>3</sup> He had suffered illness while working as a teacher near Plean House. The householder ‘Mr L’ had shown great kindness by taking him in for five days during his illness. Walter commented on how the Lord in this way had repaid in ‘extraordinary interest’ the sum he had allocated from his £50 annual salary for ‘the special purpose of advancing the Redeemer’s cause’.<sup>4</sup> The valuation roll volume covering the year 1855 to 1856 records Plean House as being the property of William Simpson’s Trustees *per* James Robertson, W.S. of Edinburgh.<sup>5</sup>

Walter Macleod traced his conversion to December 11th and 12th 1852. He recalled it three years later and it led to a renewed sense of the Lord’s love. He wrote:

Cast myself before my God – drew near in earnest – sought Him – told him ‘Lord thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love thee’. I put Him in remembrance – and He did so to me; for He brought to my mind powerfully the recollection of December 11th and 12th 1852 – that time of tenderest love – when He – the Gracious Triune God – passed by, and found me dead and filthy, and spread His skirt over me – and said, Live. These things He reminded me of, and gave me such another time of love, til I quivered and glowed from head to foot.<sup>6</sup>

---

3. MS. *Diary*, pp. 237-238.

4. *Ibid*, p. 207. Plean House was built on an area of ground once owned by the Earl of Dunmore but then bought by Robert Haldane of Airthey estate. In 1799, it was sold to pay debts. ‘In 1800, the estate was bought by Francis Simpson, the son of a clerk at Carron Company. He had served as a Lieutenant before joining the Merchant Navy and becoming a Captain working in the Far East. Having amassed a large fortune, he returned to Scotland and commissioned and built Plean House around 1819 together with the other estate buildings’ (see [www.pleancountrypark.org.uk](http://www.pleancountrypark.org.uk)).

5. ‘The occupier of the house is given as a Mrs Elizabeth Sutherland Dallas or Borthwick of Crookston as liferentrix and the tenant as John Campbell, Merchant’. See *Plean Country Park Conservation Management & Masterplan, Final Report March 2011*, TGP Landscape Architects, prepared on behalf of Stirling Council, p. 11.

6. MS. *Diary*, p. 241. This entry states that those for 11th and 12th December 1852 can be found at p. 106, but that page is missing in the volume.

His conversion seems to have been preceded by several months of turmoil in his life. In July 1855, during his time at Sunnyside, Edinburgh, he recalled in his diary:

Many interesting recollections arise in my breast in this place. I am in the very room where on the 13th of this month, three years ago, I experienced such a melancholy fall and where, in November and December following I enjoyed such precious communion of God and Christ in a time of love – the time of espousals. I have again visited the shady recesses in the woods where I passed through so much agony, wrestling, weeping, despairing, reviving and trembling hope. And while I see abundant cause of gratitude and praise to my Redeemer for upholding my goings in His divine paths since that time, I cannot help being ashamed, and confounded to find how far short of my promises and vows I have come – how much earthliness yet clings to me – how proud and self-complacent I have grown! I seemed then to be working out my salvation with fear and trembling – but now, I feel oppressed with sloth – carnality – a wandering mind, and a wicked inclination to conform to the world.<sup>7</sup>

Walter left Pleau for Edinburgh on 10th July 1855 with no employment lined up. A stay at Sunnyside in Edinburgh was spent in study, looking for work, and pondering his future. A prospect of working for the *Christian Treasury* periodical did not seem to develop into actual employment.<sup>8</sup> By November he was on the way to work in the Free Church mission at Landernau in Brittany. In the interval there had been much introspection and stock-taking, spiritually.

The precise circumstances in which Walter came to be a missionary in France are not clear from his diary. Work in France, both through sending missionaries and through supporting indigenous churches, dated to the very early days of the Free Church. At its 1844 meeting, the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland had set up a Committee in response to an address by Pastor Frederic Monod of the Evangelical Society of France. This Committee was to communicate with the French Protestants and with Christians in the Turkish Empire, to raise funds, and to lobby the British Government for the civil liberties of these people.<sup>9</sup>

---

7. Ibid, pp. 224-226.

8. Ibid, pp. 222, 233-236.

9. *Acts of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, May 1844* (Edinburgh, 1844), pp. 29-30, 63-4.

Walter at several points in his diary makes reference to receiving letters from ‘Mr Bonar’ in connection with his mission work in Landernau.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it was Mr Bonar who had interviewed Walter about his proposed mission work in France on 1st October 1855.<sup>11</sup> Almost certainly, this was Rev. John Archibald Bonar, D.D. (1802-1863) who had become convenor of the Free Church Colonial and Continental Committee in 1846. In 1854, he became secretary of the Committee. The son of Rev. Archibald Bonar of Cramond (1753-1816), he had served as parish minister of Larbert and Dunipace from 1826, where for a short period he had as his assistant Robert Murray M’Cheyne. Bonar had come out at the Disruption, and had been translated to Aberdeen South in 1846; two years later he became minister at Renfield, Glasgow. Bonar was a first cousin of the more famous Bonar brothers – John James (1803-1891), Horatius (1808-1889), and Andrew (1810-1892).

Landernau is a small town in the far west of Brittany, 20km east of Brest. In the eighteenth century, a large textile industry had been established and the town had 3,000 inhabitants. About 13 per cent of the women had been textile workers in the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>12</sup> In Macleod’s time, the local population was almost all Roman Catholic. Flax is a plant used for fibre and food, which is primarily employed in the production of linen. The use of flax and other similar products had soared in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> French production of linen had a long pedigree but had remained relatively backward and un-mechanised until the 1830s.<sup>14</sup> Finished textile products made up around half of the international value of French exports in the 1830s and the 1840s.<sup>15</sup>

---

10. For example, on 8th January 1856, Walter recorded that he had received ‘a letter of advice and encouragement’ from Mr Bonar (p. 325).

11. MS. *Diary*, p. 250.

12. Nancy Locklin, *Women’s Work and Identity in Eighteenth-Century Brittany* (New York, 2016), p. 73.

13. Despite wide fluctuations in the market, output increased. Technical innovations, the Crimean War, and the American Civil War all contributed to the trend. One manufacturing centre in Scotland, Dundee, imported forty times more flax, jute, and hemp by 1868 than it had at the turn of the century. See David Bremner, *The Industries of Scotland: their rise, progress and present condition* (Edinburgh, 1869), pp. 251-252.

14. M. S. Smith, *The Emergence of Modern Business Enterprise in France, 1800-1930* (Harvard, 2006), p. 145.

15. S. Becuwe and B. Blancheton, ‘French Textile specialization in long run perspective (1836-1938): Trade policy as industrial policy’, *Cahiers du GREThA*, n° 2016-17, p. 6.



*A scene in Landernau painted by Blanche McManus. Picture from Francis Miltoun, Rambles in Brittany (Boston, 1905). Project Gutenberg.*

A new company using Scottish labour had been set up in Landernau in 1847. The arrival of Scottish workers for this purpose in Landernau was noted by French and subsequently by Scottish newspapers:

The steamer *Finisterre* landed, a few days ago, at Morlaix, thirty-eight Scotch women, who are to be employed in the spinning mill of Landernau, which is to commence operations at the close of the month. The *Morlaisien* is to convey a similar number at her next trip. These women, who are to form the nucleus of the Flax-spinning Company of Finisterre, will be lodged and fed together in a building constructed for that special purpose. Most of them are young, very neatly dressed, and all wear bonnets after the English fashion. These women, who have worked in factories since their infancy, obey the voice, and even gesture, with a precision which would do honour to the best-drilled battalion. On landing from the steamer, they drew up on the quay to await their marching orders. Although allowed two or three hours to walk about before their departure, none of them had the curiosity to visit Morlaix, and all took their places in the coaches which were to carry them to Landernau with the carelessness and silence of a machine that obeys the impulses of a propeller. They were, nevertheless, anything but sad, for their countenances exhibited the satisfaction they experienced at having arrived in a country where they were certain to find employment and means of existence. *Moniteur*. These women will probably earn good

wages, but they will have to work night and day – there is no ten-hours law in France. *Sun*.<sup>16</sup>

In May 1854 it had been reported at the Free Church's General Assembly that the station at Landernau was now occupied by a Mr Frazer, a licentiate of the Aberdeen Presbytery.<sup>17</sup> Speaking at the 1855 General Assembly, the pastor at Lyons spoke of how evangelisation in his city had led to between 2,000 and 3,000 people being converted to Protestantism. The report of the Colonial Committee stated:

Much has been done in Landernau, France; and the Sabbath School, the increased attendance on the Sabbath ordinances, the interest taken, the kind expression of feeling in the place of cold indifference, when Mr Fraser closed his labours here, shew how much the residence of a minister will do, not only to preserve a people from a declining course, but even to recover them, when, by destitution of ordinances, and other circumstances, the experiment at first sight might appear peculiarly hopeless.<sup>18</sup>

A special collection for the work on the continent including Ladernau, was made in the Free Church in November 1855. No such collection had been made for it since 1852.<sup>19</sup>

## 2. The mission work begins

On 11th November 1855, Walter had an insight into the hard work that might lie ahead. He was on the way to Landernau and had arrived at Morlaix, where he was taken to the house of Rev. John Jenkins, a Baptist minister. Walter quickly learned from Mr Jenkins that he had laboured 'nearly twenty years' in the area and 'only now' was beginning to see the fruit of his work.<sup>20</sup> Although Walter's missionary work was to be different, focusing on Scottish migrant workers for his sphere of labour, Mr Jenkins' experience amongst the Bretons was salutary. Walter wrote of Jenkins:

---

16. *Montrose, Arbroath and Brechin Review*, 12th November 1847, p. 2. This and other newspaper references are courtesy of the British Newspaper Archive ([www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk)) and copyright the British Library Board.

17. *Northern Warder and General Advertiser for the Counties of Fife, Perth and Forfar*, 27th May 1854, p. 3.

18. *The Home and Foreign Record of the Free Church of Scotland*, Vol. 5 (1855), pp. 299-300.

19. The other stations in the appeal included Amsterdam, Louvain, Lille, Gibraltar, Italy, and Malta. *Scottish Guardian*, 16th November 1855, pp. 2-3.

20. *MS. Diary*, pp. 266-267.



‘Being a Welshman he has thoroughly mastered the Breton provincial dialect, and preaches to the peasantry in the surrounding districts, as well as to his own small congregation of French and English in the town.’<sup>21</sup>

Walter finally arrived in Landernau on Tuesday 13th November 1855. He commented: ‘At a short distance from the town I passed the gate of the Flaxworks where my countrymen are employed, and saw some of them lounging and smoking, whose aspect by no means tended to inspire me with hopes of a favourable reception.’<sup>22</sup>

Walter very quickly learned in researching his new mission field that the Scottish workers wanted to ‘be left alone’. However, many parents expressed approval of his plans to set up a school.<sup>23</sup> On Sabbath 18th November, he was woken early by the sound of church bells and wooden shoes worn by church-goers. He noted high attendance at mass, given the constant stream of people entering and leaving the churches in the town. However, the Sabbath was essentially over by 10am, when walking around and buying cakes at stalls became the main activity.<sup>24</sup> Walter was later disappointed that only eighteen people turned up at the service he held for the Scottish workers.<sup>25</sup>

Two days later, Walter was further discouraged by a conversation with the flax-mill’s manager’s brother. An artist to trade, it emerged that the man was respectful to religion when in Scotland but was very dismissive of the truth of the Bible.<sup>26</sup> The manager of the flax-mill himself, Mr Ogilvie, spoke to Walter a few days later. He was supportive of the mission. However, Walter was advised that the manager would not set an example to his workers by actually attending the services himself. On 22nd November,

---

21. Ibid, re-written diary entry for 11th November 1855, p. 13. Tucked into the diary are some re-written pages, in neater handwriting, numbered from 13 to 24. The dates in these inserted pages run from shortly into the entry for 11th November to almost the end of the entry for 18th November 1855. This covers Walter’s time at the home of Mr Jenkins, the Baptist missionary from Wales, until his first Sabbath in Landernau. The main changes are in the initial paragraphs. The re-written pages give more precise detail about Mr Jenkins’ trilingual efforts, whereas the jotter entry simply records his mastery of Breton (but a sentence referring to his having issued a Bible in the language is scored out, presumably because the information was wrong).

22. Ibid, re-written diary entry for 13th November 1855, pp. 13-14. This detail is not mentioned in the original entry in the jotter.

23. MS. *Diary*, p. 268.

24. Ibid, pp. 270-271.

25. Ibid, pp. 271-272.

26. Ibid, pp. 277-279.

Walter presented himself to the British Consulate in Brest to arrange the correct paperwork.<sup>27</sup> The same day he met the French Protestant pastor of the city. 'It was with feelings of no ordinary kind that I was thus brought into intercourse with the only authorised Protestant minister of Brittany...I felt as if in the presence of the tried servants, and beloved friends of the Lord Jesus.'<sup>28</sup>

Once back in Landernau, his next diet of public worship consisted of himself making a few remarks, and then reading a sermon by George Burder.<sup>29</sup> It is a sign of the atmosphere in France at this time that he received a letter from the British Consul warning him not to start work until he also got permission from the local mayor in Landernau.<sup>30</sup> A few days later he was warned during another visit to Brest that any attempt, once discovered, to convert local Roman Catholics would lead to the end of his work there. This was part of French law. In early December he held several meetings with young men from the flax-works to plan evening classes and was encouraged by the possibilities of doing good. He also enjoyed liberty in studying for the Sabbath-day service. The mood was to alter somewhat on the Sabbath itself when only children appeared for public worship.<sup>31</sup>

The ups and downs of mission work among indifferent Scots were further experienced in the following week. On Monday 3rd December he reflected on the motivation for the work afforded by the reading of Merle d'Aubigné's *Life of Luther*. The following Sabbath (9th December), he attempted to get a place to hold a meeting, but found that none was available. The only known believer among the flax-workers strongly advised him against interrupting the house-cleaning in which many of the women were engaged on the Lord's Day, as he had not intimated that he would visit their accommodation. This left Walter in a quandary: to seek the good of their souls by pastoral visitation there and then, or to leave the scene on the advice of a more experienced man. However, he eventually

---

27. Ibid, p. 280.

28. Ibid, p. 281.

29. Ibid, p. 283. The Independent minister, Rev. George Burder (1752-1832), preached in Lancaster, Coventry, and Fetter Lane, London. He was a founder member of the London Missionary Society. His *Village Sermons*, the first volume of which was published in London in 1798, ran to many editions.

30. Ibid, p. 285.

31. MS. *Diary*, pp. 285-290.



returned, distributing tracts and seeking to speak to them of their souls. They had finished the house-cleaning by this point.<sup>32</sup> The following day, he presented letters of introduction to the town mayor who ‘promised his support’ and later in the day he was told that the Scots women were ‘well pleased with his Sabbath visit’.<sup>33</sup>

A taste of the close watch Walter kept on his own soul, and of his zeal, is seen in his assessment of his needs, listed in the last diary entry of 1855. These were:

Love the Lord – get into the light of his countenance. Seek his face more earnestly. Be more calm and orderly in my affections – more spiritually-minded. More zealous for His glory. Rise earlier. Study to keep my body in order for serving God, by temperance and watchfulness. When I visit the families, expostulate with them about their neglect of the meeting. Fear not the face of man. Seek the strength of Christ – the communion of the Holy Spirit. Keep my armour in fighting trim. Devise means. Be faithful in the duties mentioned 2 Timothy 2:22-26 and 4:1-5. Be frank and kindly – do and say all in love. Try letters to those to whom I have little access. Ask Jesus to teach me how to fish for men.<sup>34</sup>

### 3. Looking for fruit

By the middle of June 1856, Walter was taking stock. He looked at his perceived lack of success in mission work:

I have much struggling and anguish of spirit on account of the terrible unfruitfulness of my work here. No one seems stirred up to give earnest heed to the great salvation: nay, it is often just after the most earnest and faithful warnings that I see them running to the greatest length in open ungodliness; just when I am beginning to hope well of one here and there, and to be comforted with some favourable appearances, immediately they are led away again to multiply their transgressions; not without evident signs of bitter despair and regret.<sup>35</sup>

He then cited his own unbelief, pride, and bodily ailments for this state of affairs.<sup>36</sup> However, he was able to see a wider context, rightly or wrongly:

---

32. Ibid, pp. 294-299.

33. Ibid, pp. 299-300.

34. Ibid, p. 315.

35. Ibid, p. 376.

36. Ibid, p. 377.

In looking generally over the vineyard of the world I grieve to see the same state of things in all places – barrenness, coldness, want of Spirit of Life...True, there are many instances of outward prosperity and a prosperous condition of the machinery of the Gospel in some churches; but everywhere there is a consciousness that the great, living, quickening, glowing power of the Spirit is wanting.

He went on to speak of the need of prayer that the Holy Spirit would come.<sup>37</sup> In what is perhaps an early precursor to his later views of the state of the visible Church, Walter went on to comment in his diary:

It is too apparent that there is a growing indecision and wavering from first principles, and from faithful practice in many of the high places of Zion. The church and the world are too much alike – the former descending to meet the latter by doubtful and suspicious compromising expediencies. Arise, O Lord plead thine own cause; the enemy is coming in like a flood. May thy Spirit lift up a standard against it.<sup>38</sup>

However, a fortnight later saw him on the mountain-tops; the last entry dated 30th June 1856 saw him refer to having ‘felt more of heaven on earth than were experienced before’; this was in the previous few days. Better physical health may have also contributed to this mood.<sup>39</sup>

#### **4. Conclusion**

Walter Macleod had an earnest desire for holiness of heart and life, and a great zeal for souls. This led in providence to his working among his fellow-Scots abroad. The experience showed him the desperate spiritual darkness in which some of his compatriots lived. His diary from the period gives a most favourable impression of his deep spiritual exercise, his faith in the face of discouragements, and his resilience in the absence of other Christians to support him. His difficulties with regard to evangelising French Roman Catholics in the legal and spiritual context in which he was placed find a counterpart in missionary work today in several parts of the world.

He enjoyed good relations with the few true Christians that he did meet in France, but at the same time, an awareness was dawning in his mind of the reality behind public pronouncements of ecclesiastical

---

37. Ibid, pp.377-378.

38. Ibid, pp. 378-379.

39. Ibid, pp. 379-380.

success and progress. The transfer of his allegiance to the small grouping of Original Secession congregations not in communion with the Synod occurred within less than a year of the final entry in the diary,<sup>40</sup> and this was followed by his call to the ministry, by a Church-split during his divinity training, by his appointment as assistant to Rev. James Wright in Lauriston Street, by his historical research to make a living, and by his eventual total ministerial isolation. At this stage there was little indication of the drastic changes that were about to take place, but his spiritual independence and his resolution were already apparent.

---

40. The April 1857 communion season at Lauriston Street Original Secession Church saw six new communicants admitted, including Walter Macleod, his address at that point being 7 Dalrymple Place, Edinburgh. See MS. *Minutes of the Session of the Congregation of Original Seceders under the pastoral charge of the Revd James Wright, Lauriston Street, Edinburgh. Volume II (1848-1864)*, meeting of 20th April 1857, p. 169.