
Short Note:

Ronald Connor (1855–1938), Gaelic poet

D. W. B. SOMERSET

Ronald Connor was born in the parish of Appin on 28th January 1855. His father James had been born in Ireland and was a farmer and postmaster, and his mother Mary Macdonald was from Appin. Ronald was the eldest child and there were four younger brothers and sisters. He was brought up a Roman Catholic, ‘fully believing, in using all diligence according to that creed, that I would be happy through all eternity’. This continued until about 1882 when he was aged 27. One Sabbath evening he went to hear a Free Church minister who was preaching in the township, with a view to having material for mocking him. A few minutes into the sermon, however, he changed his mind and started to listen seriously. Thereafter he attended the Free Church and became a communicant member. In 1893 he separated from the Free Church, joining the newly formed Free Presbyterian Church. He belonged to the Glasgow congregation. He worked as the master of a slate quarry and latterly lived at Luss. In 1933, he was active in collecting money for the purchase of a manse in Greenock.¹ His wife Isabella MacDougall was from Ballachulish. She predeceased him, and they had at least one son Donald.

I. Gaelic poems in 1928

In 1928, or thereabouts, some friends of Connor’s published his *Gaelic Poems with some English Translations*.² The editor of the collection gave his initials as ‘D.A. M’P.’ Connor contributed a short autobiographical preface, dated 21st November 1928, from which some of the information above has been taken.

¹ *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 38 (September 1933), p. 238.

² R. D. Connor, *Gaelic Poems with Some English Translations* (‘Published by Friends’, [Stirling], [1928]), 61 pages.

The Gaelic poems were twelve in number with five of them translated into English, apparently by Connor himself. The poems are of a religious nature, on various themes. The first, presumably written shortly after 1893, expresses loyal support for the Free Presbyterian Church:

*O how love I the Seers who trod
The way of probity,
And with the Cult of Babylon
Could not forsooth agree.
When as a flood upon our Church
False legislation burst,
They stood as headland firm and strong
Still faithful to their trust.*

*Long live the Reverend Donalds two³
And strengthened may they be:
Jehovah's sword agrasping it
They gained us victory
And setting up again on high
The banner given of old,
A Refuge they provided for
The ruddy scattered fold.*

Other poems are on the 'legion' of false teachers who had swarmed into the old Free Church and the United Free Church; on the Fleshy Mind; on Gramophones (the danger of making the right noises without having life – like a gramophone; a fear which he applies to himself in the last verse); on Christ's Sheep; on Sabbath-Breaking; on Watchfulness; on Exile (the poet's feeling of being a stranger in this world; the world's opposition to his distaste for Sabbath-breaking, dancing, and pride; and his need of divine preservation); and on the Millennium. He also has an elegy on the death of Captain Malcolm Turner (died 1926).⁴ The poems show considerable technical ability with internal rhymes and development of a theme, and they leave a favourable impression of his religion.

³ Rev. Donald Macfarlane (1834–1926) and Rev. Donald Macdonald (1825–1901) were the founding ministers of the Free Presbyterian Church. The poem must date before the death of the latter in 1901.

⁴ See obituary of Captain Turner by Neil Cameron, *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 30 (March 1926), pp. 428-432.

II. Controversial poem in 1937

In March 1937 Connor got himself into trouble with an anonymous Gaelic poem that he handed in to the *Northern Chronicle*. This was during the prolonged and complicated dispute between Rev. Ewen Macqueen and the Northern Presbytery of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland which issued in Mr Macqueen's separation from the Free Presbyterian Church in June 1938. The poem expressed warm support for Mr Macqueen and contained some insulting reflections on the members of the Presbytery. The Editor of the *Northern Chronicle*, George Mackenzie, was a friend and next-door-neighbour of Macqueen's,⁵ and seems to have published the poem without scrutinising it too closely. The minutes of the Northern Presbytery tell the story:

27th April 1937. The next business taken up was the publication which appeared in the *Northern Chronicle* of 31st March 1937, in the form of a Gaelic song. Mr Sinclair (Rev. R. R. Sinclair) said that this song eulogised the Rev. E. Macqueen, Inverness but the other members of the Presbytery involved in the recent Church dispute were referred to as perjurers. There was no doubt whatsoever, but owing to the very serious nature of the charges made, the matter would need to be looked into. Mr Macqueen said that he knew nothing about the song. He did not even read it. The Presbytery accepted what Mr Macqueen had said. The Clerk (Rev. D. J. Matheson) then moved that a deputation consisting of Mr Macleod (Rev. F. Macleod, Moderator), Mr Macfarlane (Rev. D. A. Macfarlane), and Mr Sinclair go to Inverness immediately after this meeting with instructions to find out from the Editor of the *Northern Chronicle* (1) Who gave in the song for publication? (2) If the one who handed it in was not the composer, who composed it? And (3) to demand a public apology for having published it. Mr C. Sutherland seconded this motion.⁶

Two days later, the Presbytery received the following report.

29th April 1937. Rev. R. R. Sinclair read the following letter he had received from the Editor of the *Northern Chronicle*, dated 27th April.

'Dear Sir, With reference to our interview this evening relative to the Gaelic poem which appeared in the Chronicle on March 31st, I regret to learn that it contains expressions to which you and certain of your fellow-Presbyters take serious objection as reflecting upon your personal characters and

⁵ MS 'Northern Presbytery Records', Vol. 2 (1916-1938), p. 379. This volume is currently in the Kingsview Christian Centre, Inverness.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 357-358.

your status as ministers of the Gospel. The poem was handed to me for publication by Mr Ronald Connor. I shall be glad to publish in our next issue a withdrawal of any such reflections and regret for their appearance. Yours faithfully, G. Mackenzie.⁷

The Presbytery responded with a letter to the *Northern Chronicle* and a petition to the Synod against Mr Connor. The Presbytery Clerk relayed the Synod response as follows.

27th May 1937. He had also to report from the Clerk of Synod that the Presbytery was directed by the Synod to send their petition to the Kirk-Session of St Jude's F.P. Congregation Glasgow regarding disciplinary action to be taken with respect to Mr R. Connor in view of statements in a Gaelic poem published on 31st March 1937 in the *Northern Chronicle*, Inverness. It was moved by Mr Sinclair and seconded by Mr D. Macrae and unanimously agreed that the Presbytery Clerk do so forthwith.⁸

The Presbytery duly approached the Glasgow Kirk Session, but for whatever reason, ecclesiastical wheels moved slowly. On 28th January 1938, Mr Connor evaded further censure by death. The Northern Presbytery minute of 8th February 1938 records:

A letter was read from Mr D. Macdonald, Clerk of the St Jude's Kirk-Session, intimating the death of Mr Ronald Connor.⁹

III. Translation of *Mgr MacCuinn*

Mr MacQueen

To the Tune: Leodhas beag riabhach, bha riamh san taobh tuath

I. Great was the respect people had/For Macqueen in every place/Which caused a noise in the Presbytery/Because self was pained;/Great men full of pride,/Whose pride rendered them an object of hate;/In people's opinion they were as unpleasant,/ As the cold dew in March.

II. But Macqueen despite twists/And sneakiness and hate,/With which they tried to shut your mouth/And to part you from the public./They broke their vows/Which were solemn and firm./Are furious vow-takers suitable/To make people happy?

⁷ Ibid., p. 362.

⁸ Ibid., p. 368.

⁹ Ibid., p. 390.

III. Woe that you did not remain,/As you were at the beginning/The truth was guarding you/And the people supported you./The provost stood at your shoulder/To overcome the 'pious'/And unspeakable blessing/Was among people and not envy.

IV. You'd go up to the pulpit/All bound with hardness/But then the hinges would move/With heavenly anointing oil./You'd enter the courts/Not crippled but quickly;/You'd give pomegranate and apples/And fragrant honey to the people.

V. Law and gospel especially/You always declared/Explaining it through grace/And there would be an impression afterwards/In strong consciences/The law wounding sharply/Defeating the pride/And also nature.

VI. You bring for direction and growth/Warm milk for the lambs/The sheep who are strong/You find often(?)./All of them reared/In the abode of good pasture/By the decree of the High king/From Abraham's day onwards.

VII. And the footsteps of grace/Are in each place he came to/Because special fruitfulness/Grows variously on him;/Some are low to the ground/Some got boldness to wrestle/They are secretly drawn/Each one of them apart.

VIII. You have a strong body/To go to each land/With the proven gospel/In your sermons with substance/That made people follow you/Because of the sweet-sounding new cry/You often raised up the feeble/And put a beneficial medicine in their mouths.

IX. From the day you began in the field/Women and men were caught/Law and gospel pouring/Generously and pleasantly/We know of no one/Who was in distress or straits/Under clergy's teaching/Who could reach to your generosity (gift?).

X. Every people respect you/Who go up to God's house/In the parishes around/The whole of this north area,/They fled from the quarrellers/Who disturb the flock/Who have no warmth but noisiness/And aren't valued at the feasts (Communions).

XI. Every creature that heard you/And heard the joyful sound/Are bound in heart to you/And that won't end in time/Stay clear of the proud ones/Who tried to clear you out through spite/Better the bond to a poor creature/Than the proud empty flattery.

XII. It's to you the needy will go/In their hard distresses/Not to injurious Diotrophes/With no usefulness in him but noise/You're the one who'll bind

together/Through God's word what makes him [the needy] pitiful/He'll get confidence and insight/And clear thoughts from above.

XIII. You had progress across the ocean/As was often heard/Canada was in the trouble/And didn't get you among them/To complete your journey/Explaining and telling/Unless born from above/That destruction will be in their skirts.

XIV. The order in the North/Was what told the people/About the deceitful devices/That were alive with north/What they said was 'Crafty Doctrine'/Dead, smooth and cold/We won't listen to it until Monday/As it lacks the usual substance.

XV. At the time of parting on Monday/The people were far from being happy/What they said was we've never heard/The likes of the misery that's come upon us/We'll send for Macqueen/To quickly come to us/With the gospel that frees/From everlasting Bondage.

XVI. The Sustentation has become gloomy/Among people everywhere/When Generous heard it, he said/I will not open my hand/The more the proud ones gain/Their pride increases/And poor missionaries/Without a small coin (prob. shilling) in their hand.

IV. Conclusion

There are two surviving photographs of Ronald Connor. One of these is at a communion season in Breasclete, Lewis, dated to around 1934; and the second – in which Connor looks considerably more frail – is also at a Lewis communion.¹⁰ This can very likely be dated to the spring of 1937,¹¹ by which time relations between Mr Macqueen and the Northern Presbytery had long since broken down. Mr Macqueen is also in the photograph, together with Rev. Malcolm Gillies, minister of the Stornoway Free Presbyterian congregation, whom Macqueen was presumably assisting. Mr Macqueen apparently went to the Strathy communion every year, but otherwise it is unlikely that he was being invited to communions in the Northern Presbytery by this time. The fact that he was being invited to Lewis communions shows that he had by no means lost the sympathy of the wider Church. Indeed Malcolm Gillies

¹⁰ In the published versions of these photographs, Connor is named as 'Ralph Connor', *One Hundred Years of Witness*, after p. 114. Possibly Connor was known as 'Ralph'. The name 'Ralph Connor' was the pen name of his contemporary, Charles William Gordon (1860–1937), who was a well-known Canadian novelist and Presbyterian minister, see *Wikipedia*.

¹¹ Indeed, it may have been on his way to or from this communion that Connor handed his poem to the editor of the *Northern Chronicle*.



A communion at Breasclete, Lewis about 1934. Ronald Connor is the short figure (back row, centre).



A Lewis communion about 1937. Rev. Ewen Macqueen is on the extreme left, Rev. Malcolm Gillies two along, and Ronald Connor has the walking-stick.

was one of the ministers, along with Revs. Neil Macintyre (Edinburgh), D. N. Macleod (Ullapool), John Colquhoun (Glendale), and Archibald Beaton (Gairloch), who dissented from the 1938 Synod decision against which Macqueen protested.¹² Whatever the merits, wisdom, and Christian charity of Ronald Connor's poem, it was giving outspoken expression to the widespread regard for Mr Macqueen in the Free Presbyterian Church.

¹² *A Review of Events in the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1925-1945* (Glasgow, 1948), p. 35. The 1938 Synod reversed its 1925 decision regarding the communicant membership of Miss Jeanie Grant. Mr Macqueen protested against this decision and was held as having separated from the Church.