

# Alexander Macleod of Uig

G. N. M. COLLINS

**We are grateful to Professor Collins of Edinburgh for this interesting article. It will have a special appeal to our many readers in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.**

It is New Year's Day 1829, and the minister of Uig in the Island of Lewis deems it an appropriate occasion for counting and acknowledging his blessings. In his study, with his diary open before him, he thinks back on all the way by which the Lord has led him since, forty-five years previously, on the other side of the Minch, which separated the Island of Lewis from the western sea-board of the Scottish mainland, the news of his birth had been circulated among the kindly community of Balchladich in Sutherland.

There is much, of course, that lies beyond the reach of his memory, and there were several incidents of early life that seemed of little account at the time, and yet which come back to him now with a profound significance.

He takes up his pen and begins to set down his thoughts on paper, little knowing that these pages will outlast himself and be read by other eyes after he is gone. For his purpose in writing is merely to stir up his own soul to praise God for the mercies of his pilgrimage. "Give a retrospective view, O my immortal soul" he writes, "to Jehovah's wonderful care of thee since ever you came into the world."

Some events in his review stand out with special prominence, and we wish he had told us more about them. "When eight, nine and ten years of age, think of the instances you remember in which the law of nature was checking you then, when you committed any actual sin—Sabbath or week-day—though you were then a stranger to grace."

The next references are more explicit, "Think of how early you were put to school in a remote district of the country, but under the religious instruction of pious parents and teacher. Think of how circumspectly they watched over your education and morals during your years of minority, and consider how strictly for your benefit they regard the laws of God and man, and trained you to pay a reverential regard to the former, and due respect to the latter, as thy Lord commands."

Then come allusions to early religious impressions made upon him in his middle and late 'teens, and to times of private prayer when he was so profoundly moved that he was made "a fountain of unceasing tears and love that could not be stopped in the presence of God".

From these jottings we can gather that Alexander Macleod was made

aware from early youth of his need of salvation, and of God's provision to meet the need. The ministry of John Kennedy, later minister of Killearnan, was particularly blessed to him, and visits to Ferintosh, Dingwall and other centres frequented by the great communion gatherings of those days, did much to develop his Christian life and character. His apprehension of a call to the ministry of the Gospel duly followed, and he recalls how he went to Edinburgh without money in his purse or, to his knowledge, any friend awaiting him there. Yet he recalls, in his soliloquy, "how soon the Lord raised friends for you there, and money as you needed, to prosecute your education until it was finished".

### MARRIAGE

A cryptic reference to his marriage is elucidated for us in the sketch of his life and ministry which appears in Norman C. Macfarlane's *Apostles of the North*. "Call to mind," he writes, "all the particulars of thy marriage, which took place in November 1814, the singular circumstance with which it was attended in all its bearings, and the remarkable interpositions of thy mighty Lord for thy protection and for accomplishing the desire of thy heart at this critical event."

This entry brings to light a romantic strain in Alexander Macleod that few would have suspected. From College, he had gone (on the recommendation of the College Principal) to the Isle of Skye to become tutor to the sons of a well-to-do farmer there. But while giving conscientious attention to his young charges he developed an interest of a different kind in their elder sister. His tender feelings for her were fully reciprocated, but what could they do about it? Paternal consent to their marriage was quite out of the question. Who was this impecunious tutor that he should aspire to the hand of a well-born lady? The lovers decided to solve the problem in the only way possible. They eloped! For a short time after their marriage they lived in lowly surroundings in Edinburgh, and then removed to the bridgeroom's native parish of Assynt where, for three years, they lived in a poor thatched cottage. Mrs. Macleod's family were furious. Her father did his utmost to keep his son-in-law being called to a parish, and one of her brothers actually waylaid him to be avenged of him. But under the shielding hand of God the danger to the young couple passed, and the offending tutor was forgiven and accepted.

### PROBLEMS

But this was only one of the problems that Alexander Macleod had to face before he realised his ambition to enter the ministry.

The minister of Assynt at the time was William Mackenzie. Mackenzie was of the "Moderate" school, and one of the worst specimens of

that party. In a worldly kind of way, he was not insensitive to the needs of his parishioners—needs, as his contribution to Sinclair's *Statistical Account of Scotland* reveals; were many and great but his concern for the salvation of his flock was nowhere in evidence. For "Parson William" took his pastoral responsibilities lightly, and much of his stipend went in maintaining his supply of intoxicating liquor. But he had a ministerial assistant, and to him most of the pastoral work was assigned.

It providentially happened that in 1806 the assistant was John Kennedy, later the gracious minister of Killearnan, and father of the yet more famous Dr. John Kennedy of Dingwall. John Kennedy's labours in Assynt were signally blessed from the outset. Two of the young men who professed spiritual indebtedness to him were Alexander Macleod and Norman Macleod, although Norman, in his Separatist days, turned against him. Norman was the senior of the Macleods, and by far the more dominating personality, with the result that Alexander came very much under his influence.

Norman set off for Aberdeen, and, later, Edinburgh, to study for the ministry, but became alienated from the Established Church by what he saw of her wider ministrations. Actually, the Evangelical Revival had begun in the Church, and signs of spiritual spring-time were beginning to appear, but Norman was blind to the promise. The Church was thoroughly bad, and he would have nothing more to do with it—not, at least, as a minister within its communion! So he struck out on his own and began to hold meetings in different districts of his native parish. The extremist will always find a following, and Norman found one even in his own country and among his own friends. His denunciations of the parish ministers appealed to them, for the conduct of their own parish minister had the effect of making Norman's accusations stick. And as for John Kennedy, if he was all that his admirers claimed for him, why was he serving with a man who had such an unsatisfactory reputation?

Some of the more sapient people of Assynt held their ground. Norman's denunciations were too sweeping. He made no distinction between the wheat and the tares and would have pulled them up and destroyed them together. If William Mackenzie was all that a minister of the Gospel ought not to be, John Kennedy was their idea of what the Gospel minister ought to be, and the Lord had honoured his work. And they well knew that there were others like him—faithful men whose prayers and labours were maintaining an evangelical witness in a trying and testing time. So they decided not to separate.

Alexander Macleod had been swept into Norman's following to begin with, but as time went on he had his misgivings. He could not cast aside his spiritual guide, John Kennedy, as lightly as Norman had done;

besides, there were some deeply exercised Christians in the parish who had taken the matter to prayer and claimed to have had special intimations from God as to their duty. And that was to support the godly minority in the ministry who were contending for the faith, and whose labours had the distinct seal of heaven.

### ORDINATION

Before he was licensed by the Presbytery of Tongue, Alexander Macleod was required by the Presbytery to renounce the separatist tenets of Norman. That was enough for Norman! Alexander was cast on to the scrap-heap with the rest! If he deigned to refer to him at all it was with disdain. A man so lacking in militancy was not worthy of respect! "*A chaora mhaol*" (the hornless sheep) he used to call him.

Their ways parted. Norman led a company of his followers to Nova Scotia where he formed a community of exiles over whom he ruled as with a rod of iron. In America he found a Presbytery (that of Genesee) sufficiently worthy to lay hands upon his rash head and ordain him to the ministry. Later, he set out for Australia with some of his flock to establish a similar community there. But Australia was not to his liking, so he moved on to Waipu, in New Zealand, where he founded a Presbyterian cause and a community of excellent Scottish emigrants among whom his word was law.

But that is another story, and it has been told in ample and interesting detail by various writers. Alexander Macleod's course was less spectacular, but it left a record of God-glorifying service in the annals of Highland evangelisation. His first two pastorates were of short duration. In 1819 he was ordained to the charge of the Gaelic Chapel, Dundee; and in 1821 he was translated to Cromarty. His ministry in Uig began three years later.

The Island of Lewis needed such a man as Mr. Macleod was. Its pulpits, at the time, were occupied, for the most part, by men whose prelections did little to enlighten their hearers in the Gospel. Mr. Macleod was warned, before ever he set foot in the parish of Uig that nobody there knew anything about Christianity except one herd-boy, and he was reputed to be off his head! The said herd-boy, it may be remarked in the passing, was Malcolm MacRitchie, who later became revered as the minister of Knock.

If Mr. Macleod thought that his informant had exaggerated, he was given ample reason to change his mind. Uig was indeed in a sorry plight. The religion of the people he found to be a compound of Romanism, Deism and sheer paganism. They told the minister that they believed there were seven sacraments. They regarded the death of Christ



as an unnecessary waste. They paid their homage regularly to the sun and moon. They bought and sold whisky and tobacco at the church door after the Sabbath services. And when Mr. Macleod called upon an elder to lead in prayer at the first prayer-meeting which he had held in the parish he could scarcely believe his ears when the poor man besought the Lord to let a ship be wrecked on their rocky shores so that they might benefit from its cargo! Yet there were upwards of 800 communicant members in the congregation.

Rightly concluding that the primary need of his people was elementary and systematic instruction in the Gospel, Mr. Macleod decided to discontinue the dispensation of the Lord's Supper among them until they began to show some understanding of the significance of the ordinance, and "bring forth fruits meet for repentance". His Presbytery opposed him, but he held to his decision with gratifying results. A new interest appeared among the people. Their church attendance improved, and an unwonted seriousness appeared to settle upon them.

#### TIMES OF REFRESHING

Let us hear from himself what happened when the sacrament of the Lord's Supper was again dispensed in Uig. It was in June 1827. He writes, "Yesterday the sacrament of the Lord's Supper was administered in this place, and much of the presence of the Lord appeared in the congregation... There were no more than twenty communicants in all. The whole of the unworthy communicants kept back, and a great many of our young converts did not take upon them to come forward. The congregation was much impressed through the whole day. When the elements were presented, there appeared as a shower of revival from the presence of the Lord through the whole congregation... But all this might be called the commencement of what happened afterwards, for when our young converts saw the uncommon liberty that was granted to the pastors in addressing those who sat at the table, they were still more impressed and filled as it were with new wine and holy solemnity. Much disappointment now appeared among several of them that they had not taken out tokens, and so were not prepared to come forward. Pungent conviction, towards the evening, took hold of some of them for not obeying Christ's command. It was a night ever to be remembered in this place, in which the whole of it was spent in religious exercises, whether in private or together with others, in cases mingled with unusual instances of joy and sorrow. While these things were carried on, the ungodly themselves were in tears, and iniquity for a time dwindled into nothing, covered her brazen face and was greatly ashamed."

Dr. John MacDonald, of Ferintosh, preached on the following day, taking as his text John 16:22—"And ye now therefore have sorrow, but

I will see you again, and your hearts shall rejoice.” “The Lord’s people,” recalls Mr. Macleod, “were greatly impressed and refreshed by this sermon; and they descended from the mount with songs and praises.”

Tidings of these happenings in Uig spread throughout the Island and attracted vast crowds of people to the services, especially at communion times. Some came to mock, but remained to pray. Lives were changed. God’s cause was strengthened. The Word of the Lord had free course and was glorified. For many generations, Lewis has been an emigrant isle, forced by circumstances, mostly economic, to give many of its best sons and daughters to lands overseas. By these exiles the influence of Alexander Macleod was extended to lands upon which he had never set foot, for those young people carried with them the teaching which had brought them into the family of God in their homeland and shared it with those who became their neighbours in the lands of their adoption.

#### DISRUPTION

Alexander Macleod’s pre-occupation with the evangelisation of his island parish did not mean that he lost contact with the wider life of the Church. The struggle over Patronage reached its climax during his Uig ministry, and when the hour of decision came in 1843 he cast in his lot with the Free Church of Scotland which then came into being. The entire congregation followed him—all except two women, one of whom was in her hundredth year. So the locals called the remanent congregation “the church of the hundred and one!”

In 1844 Mr. Macleod accepted a call to Lochalsh Free Church, and, three years later, to Rogart Free Church, where he remained for the rest of his ministry. In these later charges there were no such scenes of revival as there had been at Uig; but his ministry continued to bear the distinct seals of Divine acknowledgment to the very end.

Very little is left to us from which to judge the quality of his preaching, but what little there is (just four sermons) shows him to have been skilled in the art of “rightly dividing the word of truth”. His obvious aim is to bring his hearers face to face with Christ and, as Rutherford would say, “to bring on a fair match” between Him and them. There is nothing to suggest that he was a man of outstanding gifts; but rather that as a captive of the love of Christ he consecrated his all to the Master whose yoke he had taken.

Norman C. Macfarlane gives us a parting glimpse of him. He writes, “I remember his visit to the Lews shortly before his death. He stood, with frailness, in the pulpit of the old Free Church at Stornoway. His voice had lost its sweet ring and his message had the note of farewell,

and all over him were the blossoms of the grave! But it was a great thing for a lad to rest his eyes on this Apostle of the Lews, and to hear a voice that had carried life and grace to multitudes of men and women who have been, and will continue to be, the supreme glory of the Island.”

The warm after-glow of Alexander Macleod’s ministry lingers still in the favoured isle to which he gave such devoted service.

## New Testament Christians

### *‘MORE THAN CONQUERORS’*

S. MALCOLM JONES

To conclude this short series on New Testament Christians, I have decided to consider a phrase in Romans 8:37 which is a single word in the Greek language (*upernikao*) ‘More than conquerors’. We have discovered a number of things from the New Testament regarding christian experience. The christian life is a life of unparalleled blessing. It is a vocation of honoured responsibility and fierce conflict. Yet we must remember in times of joy and especially in seasons of difficulty that the christian life is a calling that enjoys surpassing victory.

The glory of this victory is such that the apostle coins the word *upernikao* in attempting to describe it. The actual word appears nowhere else in the New Testament. To this word and its theme, I want to briefly call your attention.

First of all the word group to which this phrase belongs denotes, victory or superiority whether it is used physically or spiritually, whether in times of conflict or peaceful competition. For example the concept of victory in battle is one heavily written into the pages of the Old Testament. The victory spoken of there is God’s, I Chronicles .29 ‘Thine O Lord is the greatness....power....glory....victory.....’. So when Israel and the prophets enjoyed victory, it was because it was God’s. God assured Ezekiel in Ezekiel. 3:8 with the words, ‘....behold I have made thy face strong against their faces’. In other words it was God who made the prophet victorious over all those who opposed him. Likewise in the New Testament it is clear that God’s will for the christian is that he should enjoy this victory experimentally through the energising power of the Holy Spirit. The foe arrayed against the believer is powerful, subtle, well marshalled and capably led, yet the christian is a supreme victor through Christ who has met them all and overcome them for us. The apostle rejoiced in this in I Corinthians