



A

PEEP

INTO

THE

PAST

## MINISTERS OF THE GOSPEL

### PARISH OF CONTIN (Since the Reformation)

Donald Adamson	- 1574
John Glas – reader	- 1576-1591
Robert Burnet	- 1587 (Vicar of Contin and Canon of Ross)
Alexander Mackenzie	- 1614 (Son of Rory Mor of Achilty)
Murdoch Mackenzie	- 1636
Colin Mackenzie	- 1641
Donald Ross M.A.	- 1651
John Mackenzie M.A.	- 1674
Andrew Ross	- 1684
Aeneas Morrison M.A.	- 1689
Donald Macleod M.A.	- 1720
John Robertson	- 1730
Murdoch Mackenzie M.A.	- 1732
John Maclellan M.A.	- 1742
Roderick Mackenzie M.A.	- 1775
James Dallas	- 1793
Charles Downie	- 1826
Colin Mackenzie M.A.	- 1852
John W. Tolmie M.A.	- 1863
James D. MacRae	- 1884
Andrew C. Maclean F.S.A., J.P.	- 1906
Alexander Aitken	- 1938
Frederic S. M. Walker M.A., B.D.	- 1948
Roderick Mackinnon M.A.	- 1960
Alexander MacDonald	- 1970
James Forsyth L.Th.	- 1983
John Ostler M.A.	- 1986
Margaret Liddell B.D.	- 1987
Thomas M McWilliam M.A., B.D.	- 1997
Gordon McLean L.Th.	- 2005
Fraser M.C. Stewart B.Sc., B.D.	- 2009

THE EARLY CHURCH AT CONTIN - based on the historical research of  
Rev.A.C.Maclean F.S.A.,J.P.

For what little is known of the early history of Contin Church we are indebted to the Rev.A.C.Maclean, minister of the parish from 1906 to 1937, and his research as a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries:-

Since Contin Church was dedicated in the name of St.Maelrubha, it must be assumed that it was actually founded by him. His name is connected with the churches of Applecross, Lochcarron, Isle Maree and Urquhart in Ross; with Lairg, and perhaps Golspie, in Sutherland; Bracadale in Skye; Harris; Kilarrow in Islay; Craignish in Argyllshire; Keith in Banffshire; Kinnell in Forfarshire; and Crail in Fife.

Of Irish royal lineage, St. Maelrubha was born in A.D. 642 and became a member of the monastery of his relative, Congal, in Bangor. He reached Applecross, by way of Iona, in A.D. 673, where he presided for fifty one years 'till his death in A.D. 722.

Until the beginning of the 19th Century there was still held, in August, within sight of Contin Church, a market called Feill Maree, removed in 1837 to Dingwall where it was held on the 1st Wednesday of September. Within sight of the church, too, is the resting site of St. Maelrubha - Preas Maree. This spot has been used as the burial place of the Mackenzies of Coul for over 200 years.

Historical references to Contin Church are few:-

In 1227, John, Vicar of Contin, was present at Kenedor, with other bishops of Moray and Ross, at the settlement of a dispute between the bishops of Moray and Ross regarding the churches of Kiltarlity and Ardersier.

In the lessons for St. Maelrubha's day in the Aberdeen Breviary, we are told the "prefati insulani" (i.e. Danes) invaded Ross and slaughtered the congregation, with over a hundred men and women in it, who were keeping the Saint's festival in Contan. The Ross men attacked them and slew all save 30 out of 500.

For neglecting the Saint's festival in harvest, the houses of the despisers were burnt, while those of the men who respected the saint remained safe.

In 1529 the Premonstratensian canons of Fearn had a yearly payment of 8lbs of wax in the town called Contin.

In 1550 Queen Mary presented David Stewart to the rectory of Qwentan, vacant by the death of one, Fores.

At the Reformation, the parsonage and vicarage belonged to Mr. Robert Burnet, who had two sons legitimated in 1575, and who appears in 1587 as vicar of Contin and canon of Ross.

Between 1485 and 1487 the Macdonalds and some of their allies (about 1,000 men) meeting at Contin, on their way to a punitive raid against the Mackenzies of Kinellan, discovered the church was filled with the aged men, women and children trusting to its sanctuary. Alexander Macdonald ordered the door to be shut and the building surrounded so that none could escape. He gave orders to set the church on fire, and everyone within - several hundreds - were burnt to death. Vengeance from the Mackenzies and Macraes was swift. After the battle at Pairc, one or two hundred out of 1,800 to 2,000 Macdonalds and their followers, who had eventually gathered at Contin, were left to escape as they might.

The present church was built in 1490. There were no openings in the north, east or west walls. During repairs in 1832 eight feet were added to the walls to allow headroom for galleries, altering the whole fashion of the church. Windows to light the galleries were opened in both gables, and a session house was added to the middle of the south wall. (Today only one gallery remains, and the pulpit has been removed from its position by the vestry door. During re-harling in 1986, clear evidence of two ancient doorways and windows was visible.) The main walls of the church were built of water-worn schist stones from the nearby river, set with hard white lime. Freestone was used for the jamb and lintels, and for the quoins at the corners of the church. During repairs in 1908, a sacrament house (dating, of course, from the late 15th Century) was disclosed in the north wall, which had been covered in lath and plaster during the 1835 - 1836 alterations. In the middle of the north wall, near the ground, is a recess for the effigy of "Mhiclea Mhoir", which has now disappeared.

Further evidence of the antiquity of the site rests in the two sepulchral slabs found in the churchyard and now on show within the church. One is a slab of schist, 2 metres long, carved with an elaborate floriated cross. The other stone shows a fine large wheel-cross head. Both are very old, and of very rare and unusual designs.

## THE EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY ON CONTIN ISLAND.

- as described by Rev. J.Forsyth, L.Th.

A later parish minister, Rev. James Forsyth, writing about Contin Church Island, describes the unique and strange atmosphere of the island, and how no one can live on the island for any length of time without experiencing the power of nature and the peace of God.

Mr. Forsyth emphasises how ideal Contin Island was for the quiet prayer and planning of St. Maelrubha and his small band of possibly 12 to 15 brethren. It provided security and privacy, and gave enough land to provide food and shelter. The island would have been gifted to St. Maelrubha by the local Pictish authorities and had, therefore, a certain amount of protection. St. Maelrubha had grown up among the Irish Picts and understood the pagan rituals and beliefs of his time, so that, when he gave up his position as Abbot at Bangor and sailed to Scotland, he would find it easier to bring the love of God to the hearts of these pagan peoples.

Prayer and meditation would be central to all his preparations. Contin Island would be his place of retreat, and the small Christian Community that developed there had the mark of deep spirituality. The Community would follow the pattern of the Bangor Monastery. It consisted of wattle huts in which the brethren lived; a large wooden or wattled church; and, later, a dining and recreational hall, workshops, and possibly a small school. The monks lived a very simple life, cultivating the land, divine reading and meditation, worshipping seven times daily, and reciting the psalms. From such a spiritual haven St. Maelrubha and his followers set out in missionary outreach as far as Lairg in the north, Keith in the east, and Crail in the south. These missionary journeys were indeed hazardous. The countryside was wild and full of danger, the ancient Picts were corrupt, and the Druidic religion unjust, selfish and often violent. The journeys would have taken months to complete, so no wonder a place of retreat, such as Contin Island, was so important.

A small school would have been established on the island, for it was the custom of all monastic communities, no matter how small, to have a school near to the community village. Converts to Christianity were brought into this school and taught not only the Christian faith but also elementary education and primitive farming techniques. After a lengthy period in the school, and after being baptised, they would work and live as part of the Community, and then be sent out, in mission, to form new cells or "families".

The missionary purpose of the early Christian Saints was threefold -

- to preach the simple Gospel and instruct the people in the Faith.
- to educate the people in reading and writing.
- to help the local people to cultivate their own land, and to introduce simple farming methods.

On the other hand, the Druid priests were little more than primitive medicine men and magicians.

Because of the ancient Christian Community on the island it bore the mark of Sanctuary for local people. This ancient law was broken twice, that we know of, in the long history of Contin Church - in the early 9th. century by the invading Danes, and in the 15th. century by the Macdonalds, both set of violators being destroyed in battle soon afterwards.

## THE YEARS BETWEEN 1850 AND 1900.

Of the local history before 1900 it is difficult now to find sources of information, but Contin School's logbooks reveal some insights and some rare "gems" of note.

The earliest logbook available began in March 1864, when the school was the building next to the hall - now the cottage home of Miss M. Rose. Incidentally, Roselea was then the schoolhouse, Oakview was the local pub - with a cobbler's shop behind it - and Pennygown Cottage was the police station.

The school staff consisted of the headmaster, Mr. Alexander McGlashan, his wife, who was the sewing mistress, and his daughter, Margaret, who was a pupil teacher. The master's salary was £50 per year - raised to £65 in 1868. The older boys studied Algebra, Latin, French and Greek.

Pupil attendance varied throughout the year, and was always affected by farm work - planting, harvesting etc., Colin's Fair, Ord Market, Pepper Market. If the master was away on business for a day then school was held on Saturday instead.

H.M.I. visited once a year and reported via the school managers, of whom the Rev. John Tolmie was secretary, and very much in evidence in the logbook throughout this period.

School holidays consisted of one day each for Harvest Thanksgiving, Christmas Day, New Year's Day, and the day after the Annual Presbyterial Examination in March (attended by several ministers of the area), and six weeks from the end of August to October.

In 1864-5 a measles epidemic was followed by smallpox.

School could never be dismissed until four hours instruction was completed.

In May, 1864, the gable of the school was taken down for extension, but school was kept due to mild weather. The Geography Class, however, was examined without maps "there being no way in which to suspend them". On July 1st. there was no school "due to the din caused by the carpenters working in the roof" - in fact the school was closed for two weeks.

In January, 1871, the attendance was 60 but 12 couldn't find seats, and it was too dark in the afternoons for a writing lesson. The owner of a "desk-cutting knife" was fined ½d to have it returned - proceeds to go to use of school i.e. sweets for P1.



In March, 1873, there was an election of a School Board for the Parish. 20 out of 40 ratepayers voted. 5 out of 7 candidates were elected.

The Militia Review was held at Ord every July, and there was an annual distribution of gooseberries by Mrs. McGlashan every August.

In December, 1873, the site for a new school was selected on the opposite side of the road, but, later in the month, it was decided to build westward. By January, 1874, there were 88 pupils on the roll. After the annual examinations by local ministers in August, Dowager Lady Mackenzie of Coul donated the prizes.

On November 15th, 1876, the new school buildings were formally opened - with medical sanction, for there had been no school for 3 months, due to an epidemic of scarlatina - but the plaster was still unfinished in January, 1877. The cold was intense - 28°F one morning - and the master was forced to let the children away earlier (but always after the prescribed 4 hours). The school was not normally closed for epidemics.

This era finished in March, 1902, when Mr. McGlashan retired after at least 38 years as headmaster, and over 30 years as an elder in Contin Church. A silver-mounted oak tray was presented to him by the Ross-shire branch of the E.I.S.

Miss Fraser, the first and only lady head of the school, succeeded him, and was also a member of Contin Church.

### THE 1900 TO 1940 YEARS.

The early part of the 20th. Century (1906 - 1937) saw a long and happy ministry under the Rev.A.C.Maclean.

Mr. Maclean was the last minister to work the glebe, along with the beadle who resided in the cottage on the island. It is interesting to note, from information passed on by Mr.Maclean's son, Rev.Nigel Maclean, that, as a family, they were self-supporting in eggs and potatoes, had their own small threshing mill which was used regularly on Saturdays, kept 3 cows, 2 garrons (small horses), and 30 sheep, the wool from which supplied tweed for suits - woven at Holm Mills, Inverness.

Mr.Maclean was interested in the history of the church and did a great deal of research into it. Copies of the sketches of the ancient stones and Sacrament house, which accompanied his paper to the Society of Antiquaries, hang beside the exhibits today.

Mr.Maclean conducted worship in Contin each Sunday at noon, and held monthly services at Scatwell and Tarvie.

During this period the Laird, Sir Arthur Mackenzie, was resident in Coul House, but as a family, they did not worship in Contin, preferring to adhere to the Episcopalian form in Strathpeffer. Nevertheless, it was around the estate that the whole village was geared for work, etc.

In the year 1911 the organ was introduced to public worship in Contin, and the organist then was Ian MacRae, son of John MacRae, the Garage. He was succeeded by Mrs.Bethune, the Post Office (now Millbrae), who was assisted by the precentor, Willie Munro ('the Badger'), East Lodge, Coul. Occasionally Miss Cairene Maclean, the Manse, and Mrs.Smith, the Garage, acted as organists. Miss J.Paterson was appointed organist in the 1940s and was succeeded by the present organist, Kenneth Cumming, in 1953. The original organ was a particularly fine 2-manual, German, reed instrument, which served the congregation faithfully until the introduction of the present electronic organ in 1978.

## THE YEARS FROM 1940 ONWARD.

This period begins during war time. The Rev.A.Aitken was parish minister, and acted as padre to troops based in Coul House, with its associated camp, when no resident padre was on site. Regular Church Parade took place before the normal morning service. For a period, in the early years of the war, Norwegian troops were stationed at Coul, and the local children watched, with interest, as they 'broke in' their horses, training them to pull loaded carts, gun carriages etc. A service at Contin Church, during this period, was conducted by the resident Norwegian padre.

It is also interesting to record that King Haakon and Crown Prince Olaf, of Norway, took the salute at Contin War Memorial as their troops marched past. Another regular sight, at this time, was the 'four in hand' horse-drawn coach which carried the officers from Coul House to Brahan Castle for Sunday evening dinner.

The Contin of these years was a small village, surrounded by estate farms, with sawmill, Post Office, garage, smiddy, and inn at Achilty. It was a common sight, with a quite unique smell to accompany it, to see several farm horses being shod each week. A thriving 'bobbin' mill, supplying the Dundee thread industry, situated west of Achilty Inn, was run by the Rose family, but it later burnt down.

Coul Garden was run as a market garden. Mr.George Stephen, the head gardener, was also Church Treasurer and a Sunday School teacher. Sunday School met at 11a.m. as it continued to do until 1989. Miss M. Aitken, the Manse, and Miss J,Paterson assisted Mr.Stephen.

With a return to peacetime change came. Contin began to grow, with the building of the first houses in Torview as a result of the erection of Hydro power stations and the expansion of Torachilty Forest attracting an influx of workers.

A new ministry, also, began in 1948 with the induction of Rev. F.S.M.Walker, M.A.,B.D., following the death of Rev.A.Aitken. A gifted preacher and scholar, he held a large congregation throughout a happy ministry. At Sunday School over 40 children met regularly, following the arrival of new families into Torview.

In 1960, after the death of Rev.F.S.M.Walker, a new era began in the parish with the union of Contin and Strathconon churches under the leadership of Rev.R.Mackinnon, M.A. Two services were held each Sunday, and, once a month, the 4.30p.m. service continued at Scatwell. A Youth Fellowship was formed in the 1960s, meeting in the school, to cater for the growing number of teenagers. A Young Wives group met regularly in members' homes and the Women's Guild and Church Choir also flourished.

During the 1970s, consequent to Mr. Mackinnon's translation to Barra, Rev.A.Macdonald became parish minister. A serene and gentle pastor, he was always warmly welcomed in every home in the parish. During this ministry, C.H.3 was introduced, in 1975. Copies of the new hymn book were gifted by the late Mrs. Fraser, Torachilty farm. In 1978 there was received, from an anonymous benefactor, the marvellous gift of an electronic organ - a 2-manual, with pedal board, Livingstone organ, specially built for church use. Electricity was installed, and new carpeting provided by Mrs. Mackay, Achilty.

The 1980s were heralded with the gift of the stained glass window in the west wall, from the Mackenzie family, Tigh na bruaich. After a ministry of nearly twelve years, Rev.A.Macdonald accepted a call to his home village of Cross, Ness, Isle of Lewis. Because of the decreasing number of ministers, Presbytery decided that Contin should have a minister on a terminable appointment, pending an eventual union with Kinlochluichart /Strathgarve. The Rev.J.Forsyth, L.Th., accepted the call and there began a successful, happy ministry of two and a half years, until his translation to Taynuilt, Argyll. During the ensuing vacancy, agreement was reached with the Kirk Session of Kinlochluichart/Strathgarve to proceed with union on the retirement of Rev.F.Macdonald, minister of Kinlochluichart/Strathgarve. Rev.J.Ostler accepted the call to Contin/Strathconon in deferred union with Kinlochluichart/Strathgarve in the autumn of 1986, but resigned in the spring of 1987.

In the autumn of 1987 Rev.Margaret Liddell, B.D. was ordained and inducted to the charge, still in deferred union - the first lady minister in the long history of Contin Church.

Within this period of the late 1980s, too, gifts were made to the church. A lectern and lectern Bible were presented by the Taylor family, Torview, and pew bibles in memory of the late Kenneth Leighton, Altnabreac.

The union with Kinlochluichart/Strathgarve was finalised in August 1989, and the parish returned to its former boundaries and its new, yet old, title - Parish of Contin.

### THE OTHER CHURCHES IN THE PARISH.

At this point it is interesting to reflect briefly on the history of the other churches in the Parish.

Contin and Strathgarve parishes had originally been united in the 16th. Century. The church at Strathgarve was dedicated to St. Fionn.

In 1560 parliament officially adopted the ideas of the Reformation and abolished the authority of the Pope over religious affairs in Scotland.

At first this reformed church was run in the same way as the Church of England, but soon the Scots decided that they preferred a Presbyterian system. King James 1 and King Charles 1 tried to make them accept the authority of bishops and the Prayer Book, but the signing of the Covenant in 1638 saw a long, fierce struggle between the Church of Scotland and the Stuart kings.

Under the rule of William and Mary a settlement was reached in 1689 but friction continued between church and state until 1929 when the Church of Scotland and the United Free churches were reunited.

During the early part of the 19th. Century strong efforts were made in Parliament to provide help to parishes which were unable to supply adequate places of worship for the inhabitants.

Eventually an Act of Parliament was passed in 1823 whereby Commissioners were appointed to supervise the erection of up to 40 churches - no more than £1,500 to be spent on any one site; the ministers stipend to be £100 a year; the precentor to receive £5 and the beadle £3.

Under the supervision of Thomas Telford, Chief Surveyor, in whose remit was the designing and construction of these churches, Kinlochluichart Church was built in 1827 for £1,489 -3s - 3d, and Carnoch Church in Strathconon in 1838 for £1,500. These churches were disjoined from Contin in 1864.

Carnoch and Strathconon churches were united in 1928.

Strathconon Church was reunited with Contin in 1960 and Kinlochluichart/Strathgarve was reunited in 1989.

And so the circle revolves!

Jean and Ken Cumming