EVANGELICALISM AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION IN ST KILDA, 1830-1841

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INTRODUCTION

Due to its remote location and storied past, the tiny Hebridean archipelago of St Kilda has received a considerable amount of interest over the past several decades. This phenomenon was noted and reflected upon from various angles in the 2010 edited collection *Rewriting St Kilda: New Views on Old Ideas*.[1] Taking a cue from the recent work of Donald Meek, Michael Robson, and others, the following focuses on a critical period in the life of the island in which the nature of local Christianity transitioned from a culture of religious transaction to cultural transformation. At the heart of the matter is the question of how the St Kildan people moved from relative unawareness and apathy to vital evangelicalism over a mere decade. In an attempt to answer that question, the following considers the character and role of the minister, the processes of transculturation, and the various ways in which minister and people interacted prior to a revival on the island in 1841.

Upon being presented to the people by the Rev. John MacDonald of Ferintosh in 1830 as the missionary minister of St Kilda, the Rev. Neil MacKenzie immediately knew that his goal of providing his parishioners with an orthodox Calvinist and deeply pietistic evangelical ministry would not come easily or quickly. But he stayed. He rolled up his sleeves and immersed himself in the lives and worldviews of the people of tiny Hebridean island. Weeks turned into months, months into years, and on the evening of Wednesday 28th May 1841, a revival began in the oil-lit church.[2] For thirteen-year-old islander Callum MacQueen, it was something he would never forget. Reminiscing in his later life, having emigrated to Australia in 1852, he vividly recounted:

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1 Bob Chambers (ed.), *Rewriting St Kilda: New Views on Old Ideas* (Isle of Lewis: The Islands Book Trust, 2010).

2 J.B. (John Bannatyne) MacKenzie, *Episode in the Life of the Rev. Neil MacKenzie at St. Kilda from 1829 to 1843* (Privately Printed, 1911), pp. 33-4.

> I remember Mrs. Gillies crying. There were nine or ten men in the meeting. I afterward heard one of the men telling some who were arriving with the boats from their day's work: 'I believe the Spirit of God was poured upon our congregation tonight.' This was the beginning of the revival.[3]

The revival that began that night continued on into the next year and had a profound effect on the life of the island. But it was more than a single event that caused such an effect. The occurrences of 1841 and 1842, as important and critical as they are to the history of Christianity on St Kilda, were just the tip of the iceberg. The years between 1830 and 1841 were pivotal, both for the minister and his family and for the people of St Kilda. At first there was disappointment. In the end, there was revival. In between, there was nothing less than a cultural transformation.[4]

NEIL MACKENZIE (CA. 1795-1879)

Much of what we know of Neil MacKenzie and his time on the island comes from the published account, *Episode in the Life of the Rev. Neil MacKenzie at St Kilda from 1829 to 1843*, gathered by his son, James Ban-

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[3] E.G. McQueen and K. McQueen, eds., *St. Kilda Heritage: Autobiography of Callum MacCuithinn (Malcolm MacQueen)* (Edinburgh: The Scottish Genealogy Society, 1995), p. 15.

[4] The themes and language of transformation and indigenization are also developed in Andrew Fleming, *St Kilda and the Wider World: Tales of an Iconic Island* (Bollington, Cheshire: Windgather Press Ltd, 2005), 123; Donald Meek, ' 'Eileanaich Cian a' Chuain" / 'The Remote Islanders of the Sea"? Towards a Reexamination of the Role of Church and Faith in St Kilda', in *Rewriting St Kilda: New Views on Old Ideas*, ed. by Bob Chambers (Isle of Lewis: The Islands Book Trust, 2010), p. 115. The study of MacKenzie and his role on the island draw most heavily from four primary sources: (1) E.G. McQueen and K. McQueen (eds), *St. Kilda Heritage: Autobiography of Callum MacCuithinn (Malcolm MacQueen)* (Edinburgh: The Scottish Genealogy Society, 1995); (2) J.B. MacKenzie (ed.), *Episode in the Life of the Rev. Neil MacKenzie at St Kilda from 1829 to 1843* (Privately Printed, 1911); (3) James Wilson, *A Voyage Round The Coasts of Scotland and the Isles,* vol. II (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1842); (4) Lachlan MacLean, 'Sketches of the Island Saint Kilda; comprising of Manners and Maxims of the Natives, Ancient and Modern; together with the Ornithology, Geology, Etymology, Domology, and other curiosities of that unique island; taken down, for the greater part, from the oral narration of the Rev. N. M'Kenzie, at present, and for the last eight years, Clergyman of the Island', *The Calcutta Christian Observer,* January to December, 1839.

natyne (J.B.) MacKenzie, and published in 1911.[5] In the front matter, the son provides the basics of his father's life and ministry. Neil MacKenzie was born in Glen Sannox, on the Isle of Arran, to a family originally from Kintail, Ross-shire. His father was a tenant 'of the mill and farm of Glen Sannox', and, according to J.B., a highly religious man who provided his family with a robust diet of Gaelic evangelical devotions. Somewhere in the middle of his university education, Neil MacKenzie witnessed the drowning of a friend and barely escaped the same fate. This highly charged experience caused a revitalization of his own Christian faith, whereupon he left the life of learning 'to become a preacher of the Gospel and to go somewhere as a missionary'.[6] He hoped to go to Canada to pursue these goals, but the place for which he applied had been filled. As he was willing 'to go to any place for which no one else could be got', he agreed in 1830 with Dr Daniel Dewar, the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge (SSPCK), and MacDonald of Ferintosh that he should prepare and go at once to shepherd the outlying Hebridean church.[7]

Of his character and role on St Kilda, his son recalled that his father acted as 'a sort of Governor of the island, presiding at their weekly meetings for settling the work they were to engage in during the week and arranging all kinds of petty disputes'. He also mentioned the religious temperament of his father: 'Though very strictly orthodox in his religious practices and beliefs, he was by no means a fanatic or ascetic'. MacKenzie's wife, Elizabeth Crawford MacKenzie, 'greatly assisted' her husband in his labours by teaching the St Kildan women new ways of conducting domestic chores, 'cooking and other sanitary matters', 'and of the virtues

5 MacKenzie, *Episode in the Life of the Rev. Neil MacKenzie*. According to J.B. MacKenzie, the data is Rev. MacKenzie's own, 'from some of whose notes this narrative has been compiled'. The son went on, 'His notes were written at various times, on all sorts of scraps of paper, and all that has been done by the Editor has been to piece them together, as far as possible, in the form of a more or less continuous narrative. It will easily be seen that they were never intended for publication, and that they were written by one who did his thinking in the Gaelic' (p. 3). Sadly, the son later went on to note that upon his father's leaving the island, the majority of his records were lost (p. 4).

6 With regard to the near-death experience jolting to life a dormant faith, MacKenzie joins other prominent evangelicals, such as Thomas Chalmers. Regarding his leaving school, James Wilson's account from 1841 corroborates this in noting that MacKenzie was 'probably not a person of finished education' (pp. 41-2).

7 MacKenzie, *Episode*, p. 3.

of soap and starch'.[8] She also raised several children on the island, whom James Wilson described as 'fine rosy-cheeked'.[9]

Other first-hand accounts provide further detail. James Wilson, who visited the island in 1841, made several descriptive comments regarding the minister. He wrote that he was 'a sincere, simple, kind-hearted, pious man, as we firmly believe from the impression which our subsequent intercourse with him produced'.[10] Regarding his roles on the island, Wilson noted that he bore the responsibility for the teaching and preaching, as well as numerous other unrelated duties, and was well-loved by the people for it.[11] During this same tour, Wilson invited the minister out to his boat for a visit, during which he discovered that MacKenzie was 'well-informed and intelligent'. The clergyman supplied the visitors with 'a great deal of information regarding the temporal as well as spiritual condition of the people, their habits of life, and customary occupation'.[12] Lachlan MacLean's earlier visit confirmed the same observation that the minister's care superseded his spiritual responsibilities, noting: 'He has labored there … paying assiduous attention not only to the religious, but to the moral and physical wants of the people'.[13] Finally, and in perhaps the most relevant of the firsthand accounts, Callum MacQueen recounted that MacKenzie was 'a good man and faithful preacher'.[14] In 1830, however, Neil MacKenzie had more pressing matters to attend to than the cultivation of his good character. Upon his arrival, he quickly realized that MacDonald of Ferintosh, who made several trips to St Kilda prior to MacKenzie's era, had overestimated the religious state of the islanders.

DISAPPOINTMENT

When MacKenzie arrived in 1830, he was dismayed with both the moral state of the St Kildans and the religious improvements MacDonald claimed to have made. Morally, he found the islanders wanting in virtue and lacking in 'every moral obligation', making note of their petty theft from the island's proprietor. Regarding their communitarian social ethics, he described how they shared the guilt of shorting the proprietor and were incredibly wary to guard themselves as a community from outsiders who might give information of their activities to the MacLeods of

8 Ibid., p. 4.
9 Wilson, *Voyage*, pp. 19, 10.
10 Wilson, *Voyage*, pp. 9-10.
11 Ibid., p. 12.
12 Ibid., pp. 41-2.
13 MacLean, 'Sketches', pp. 331-2.
14 McQueen and McQueen, *St. Kilda Heritage*, p. 15.

Dunvegan—who owned the island—or their agents. MacKenzie reported that they even went to murderous extremes by pushing a Skyeman off a cliff and strangling a woman who was the steward's servant. Beyond its violent expression, he further bemoaned their insistence on total egalitarianism. He wrote:

> Equal in their hopes and fears and habits, they in everything insisted upon an equality which had a deadening influence and effectually hindered any real progress. If anyone attempted to better himself he was set upon from all sides and persecuted by everyone. There must be no departure from what their fathers had done, unless, indeed, it were possible to do less. No one must be allowed to make himself much more comfortable than others.[15]

Other accounts also cite the ethos of equality as a hindrance to 'improvement'. Wilson wrote: 'The St. Kilda community may in many respects be regarded as a small republic, in which the individual members share most of their worldly goods in common…'. He went on: 'Indeed, a peculiar jealousy is alleged to exist on this head, no man being encouraged to go in advance of those about him in any thing…'.[16]

As for their spiritual state, MacKenzie wrote:

> When I went to the island in 1830 I was accompanied by my friend Dr. M'Donald, who during his short stay on the island preached several eloquent and powerful sermons, to which they apparently paid great attention; but I soon found that they were only charmed by his eloquence and energy, and had not knowledge enough to follow or understand his arguments. I found that it was the same with my own sermons—that they were too ignorant of the leading truths of Christianity and the practical effects which, under the influence of the Spirit of God, they were calculated to produce, to profit as I would like by my discourses.[17]

MacKenzie's assessment of the island's spiritual condition in 1830 poses a serious question: How could the St Kildan church, in light of MacDonald's seemingly effective preaching ministry over the course of the 1820s, have ended up lifeless and empty? On one hand, the four visits of the itinerating MacDonald indeed succeeded in introducing the people of St Kilda to the biblical, experiential, and theological world of evangelicalism.[18] This

15 MacKenzie, *Episode*, p. 30.

16 Wilson, *Voyage*, p. 24.

17 MacKenzie, *Episode*, pp. 31-2.

18 See John Kennedy, *The "Apostle of the North": The Life and Labours of the Rev. Dr. M'Donald* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1932; originally published 1866). The language of 'introduction' regarding MacDonald comes from Andrew

point must be stressed. Yet, this introduction was insufficiently transformational. What the St Kildan church needed in order to change was a minister who stayed for years, not weeks. As MacKenzie himself noted, 'To change the habits of such a people must be the work either of time or grace'.[19] What, then, could be done by MacKenzie to reach his goals of increased morality and 'practical effects'? The answer was simple. He needed to stay.

TRANSFORMATION

As MacKenzie continued his ministry on the island throughout the 1830s and into the next decade, the church and culture of St Kilda were transformed due to the interactions and exchanges between St Kilda's Gaelic culture and MacKenzie's evangelicalism, the all-encompassing improvements made by MacKenzie and the islanders, and a gradual rise of local self-determination. The transformation occurred in large part due to a two-way cultural transference. The dominant narrative of St Kilda church history from the more recent past paints a bleak picture of evangelicalism arriving on the island with MacDonald and subsequently wiping out the native culture through MacKenzie to replace it with a 'strict' or 'Puritanical' form of Christian culture.[20] This reading is overly reductionistic. If we take into serious account the world of ideas, it becomes clearer that the 'clash of cultures' on St Kilda in the period at hand involved a certain degree of transculturation.[21]

Fleming, *St Kilda and the Wider World: Tales of an Iconic Island* (Bollington, Cheshire: Windgather Press Ltd, 2005), p. 23.

19 Neil MacKenzie, journal extracts 1832-33, quoted in Michael Robson, *St Kilda: Church, Visitors and 'Natives'* (Isle of Lewis: The Islands Book Trust, 2005), p. 334.

20 Donald Meek notes the use of pejorative language like 'holy bigot' in Charles MacLean's *Island on the Edge of the World: Utopian St Kilda and Its Passing* (London: Tom Stacy Ltd., 1972), in Meek, 'Towards a Reexamination of the Role of Church and Faith in St Kilda', p. 132. Tom Steel attributes a degree of cultural death to the clergyman in *The Life and Death of St Kilda* (Edinburgh: R & R Clark, 1965), pp. 77-8. More balanced is Michael Robson's voluminous *St Kilda: Church, Visitors and 'Natives'*.

21 The 'clash of cultures' paradigm, focus on the world of ideas, and monist/dualist discussion that follow are used in David Bebbington's study of the Ferryden revival in Forfarshire in the later part of the century and have been helpful in my understanding of the St Kilda experience(s). See David Bebbington, *Victorian Religious Revivals: Culture and Piety in Local and Global Contexts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 159-92. 'Transculturation', as a concept, stresses the two-way channels that develop as two or

In the first case, there was indeed a cultural divide separating the islanders from the Evangelicals. However, rather than being a 'modern' as over against an 'uncivilized' split, as a nineteenth-century tourist might have seen it, it was instead a very real ideological divide between the pre-modern and modern in the philosophical sense of the words. The islanders held a highly embodied and supernaturalistic cosmology with little to no divide between nature and spirit. The Church, in a formal sense, influenced their worldview, but their day-to-day lives were influenced more by the pre-Christian and folk traditions of the island and other Hebrides from which their ancestors came.

MacDonald and MacKenzie, on the other hand, brought with them to the island a more modern worldview. Both trained for a time in the Scottish universities and would have been exposed to the dualistic world of the Enlightenment, which preached the twin gospels of reason and empiricism, while casting doubt on the supernatural. Scottish evangelicalism itself was coloured by the 'Spirit of the Age'. For David Bebbington, 'Evangelical theology … was simple, rational and practical. It shared the hallmarks of the Enlightenment.'[22] Scottish evangelicals were also influenced by the Locke-tinged theology of Jonathan Edwards as they 'learned … to place confidence in knowledge derived from sense experience'.[23] The evangelicals and the islanders, in sum, understood reality along different lines.

How did the transformation from two worldviews to one worldview take place? And which worldview predominated? Through the process of transculturation, a distinctly St Kildan form of evangelicalism emerged. There was no winner and loser, but a dialogical and gradual cosmological shift. A good example of this process comes via MacKenzie's relation of his discussion with the islanders on a specific folk tradition.[24] At one point during his tenure, he happened upon a group of St Kildans discussing a prophetic vision known as second sight. He heard them out and:

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more cultures interact over time. I owe thanks to Dr. Kathryn Long of Wheaton College (IL) for introducing me to this concept during my undergraduate degree.

22 D.W. Bebbington, 'Evangelicalism in Modern Scotland', *SBET* 9 (1991), 6.

23 Ibid.

24 As Robson here points out, MacKenzie's language and attitude toward the local customs and worldview were admittedly hostile and self-superior (i.e., calling them 'ridiculous and fanciful', 'folly and absurdity', and 'reveries'). My intention is not to 'whitewash' the elements of 'cultural imperialism' that did, in fact, appear from time to time in MacDonald and MacKenzie, but rather to provide a check to the idea of cultural 'invasion'. Cf. MacKenzie in Robson, *St Kilda*, p. 331 and Robson, *St Kilda,* p. 303.

> With an eye to the same thing, explained that part of the answer to the question, 'What is God?' 'God is a spirit'. I told them in the simplest manner what is a spirit, and what is not; that there are three spiritual existences, namely, the Supreme Spirit God, angels, and the souls of men; that the Supreme Being differed from all other spirits, in being infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in all his attributes; whereas angels and souls of men are but limited, changeable, and created beings.[25]

In this quote, upon hearing their views on spirits, MacKenzie attempted to outline the basics of orthodox Christian belief on the subject in order to provide a point of contact with which to further explain the evangelical message. Through the continuation of such conversations, the minister was able to draw the people from a pre-Christian belief to an evangelical faith that also took seriously the existence of a spiritual realm.[26]

In a second sense, cultural transformation also occurred between church and people as it related to St Kildan popular culture. To be sure, evangelicalism did impose an alien code of ethics in certain respects, such as its negative attitude toward dancing and 'music of a worldly character'.[27] However, the islanders' Gaelic culture was appreciated and recorded, as well as expanded and ultimately preserved, through the indigenization of evangelicalism on St Kilda.[28] The most vivid examples of this are the local enthusiasm for Gaelic psalm singing and the production of original Gaelic religious poetry.[29] Regarding the Gaelic psalm singing, Wilson recorded in 1841:

> The singing of psalms and hymns is even a favorite spiritual recreation of the people, and is resorted to frequently and voluntarily in their own houses, independent of the more formal meetings which may be occasionally called

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25 Neil MacKenzie, journal extracts 1832-1833, quoted in Robson, *St Kilda*, p. 331.

26 For more on this, see Elizabeth Ritchie, 'The faith of the crofters: Skye and South Uist, 1793-1843', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Guelph, 2010), pp. 138, 145.

27 Wilson, *Voyage*, pp. 23-4. Also see note 35. Wilson noted on his 1841 visit that 'Dancing is also now regarded by them as a frivolous amusement, and has ceased to be practiced even during their more joyous festivals.'

28 Donald Meek, 'Towards a Reexamination of the Role of Church and Faith in St Kilda', pp. 108-9.

29 David Paton provides a good analysis on evangelicalism and Gaelic poetry and singing in *The Clergy and the Clearances* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2006), pp. 114-120.

> for the express purpose. The spiritual songs may even be said to be of ordinary use almost as the *popular poetry* of the day.[30]

This was also not a phenomenon unique to St Kilda. Evangelicals throughout the Highlands and Islands of Scotland became known especially for their cherished Gaelic hymns.

As for native cultural production, MacKenzie later noted that, 'Before I left the island I got some of them to write out for me much of their poetry and traditions, but, unfortunately, almost all of these, and several other collections which I had made of things which had interested me, were lost on the way from St Kilda to Duror, and could never be recovered'.[31] As another indication that the minister encouraged cultural dynamism rather than eradication, J.B. MacKenzie remembers that his father 'encouraged the people during the long winter nights to cultivate the art of reciting their ancient stories and of singing their pathetic Gaelic songs'.[32]

Despite the accident between St Kilda and Duror, a number of the St Kildan poems survived and were published in the early part of the last century. Mary Harman provides two of them in their translated form. In the first sample, Neil Ferguson wrote of the 1841-1842 revival:

Alas, oh Lord, won't you help me
From my thoughts to an awakening
Before the time comes when I die
When there won't be time for repentance[33]

The second sample, by Finlay MacQueen, 'describes the nativity and the spread of the gospel to foreign lands and to St Kilda':

God of the moon, God of the sun,
God of the globe, God of the stars,
God of the waters, the land, and the skies,
Who ordained to us the King of promise.

It was Mary fair who went upon her knee,
It was the King of life who went upon her lap,
Darkness and tears were set behind,

30 Wilson, *Voyage*, pp. 23-4 (italics his).
31 MacKenzie, *Episode*, p. 32.
32 MacKenzie, *Episode*, p. 3. 'Pathetic' here is not derogatory, but rather descriptive, as the Gaelic bardic and poetic tradition emphasized elegy as a form.
33 Harman, *Hirte*, p. 241.

And the star of guidance went up early.

Illumined the land, illumined the world,
Illumined doldrum and current,
Grief was laid and joy was raised,
Music was set up with harp and pedal-harp.[34]

Both poems are rife with indications that by the time of their writing in the early 1840s, the process of worldview transformation introduced by MacDonald and furthered by MacKenzie was nearing completion. In Ferguson's revival poem, the line 'From my thoughts to an awakening' indicates that the islander had begun to adopt the evangelical preaching emphasis of the gospel's impact on the heart and affections as the ultimate source of conversion. The poem by Finlay MacQueen is equally telling, almost as if certain aspects of the transculturation process take verse form. The first stanza is especially unique. The first three lines extol the God of nature—a god with which the St Kildans could have associated prior to the introduction of evangelicalism. The final line, though, speaks of Jesus Christ as the 'ordained … King of promise'. Taken together, the stanza presents the new worldview—neither wholly St Kildan traditionalism nor alien evangelicalism, but rather St Kildan evangelicalism.

Along with the ideological and popular cultural elements, the transformation of St Kildan culture was also effected through a multifaceted attempt to improve the lives of the islanders. Ideas of social and agricultural improvement were tied up in the Enlightenment ideals of progress and societal betterment through scientific and modern means.[35] However, until the 1820s, very little attention was given toward the improvement of St Kilda. With the arrival of MacDonald of Ferintosh in 1822, the SSPCK and others began to take increased interest in the island's ecclesiastical provision. This not only resulted in the arrival of MacKenzie in 1830, but also with the erection of a new church and manse. James Wilson described the new buildings as a 'very respectable-looking slated house … with a little porch, and a longer and larger, but not much higher building (also slated) behind it, and separated by a narrow back court'.[36] It was this church and manse where MacKenzie spent much of his time between 1830 and his departure in 1843.

Under MacKenzie's guidance, the island as a whole underwent incredible changes—religiously and educationally, of course, but also agricul-

[34] Ibid., pp. 241-2.

[35] Michael Lynch, *Scotland: A New History* (London: Pimlico, 1992), pp. 344-345, 363, 370.

[36] Wilson, *Voyage*, p. 10.

turally and domestically. As per his disappointment with MacDonald's spiritual impact, MacKenzie quickly got down to the business of building the foundations of Christian thought and practice in the heads and hearts of the islanders. He wrote: 'I at once began Wednesday evening meetings, where I explained to them the Shorter Catechism, clause by clause, and almost word by word. Before they could properly understand and profit by preaching they had to be taught step by step, and in the simplest way possible, the leading facts and truths of Christianity'.[37] Thus MacKenzie met the people at the level of their own ability, rather than continuing to preach above them, which seemed to have hamstrung MacDonald's efforts. He went on:

> To test their progress we at other times had meetings for catechizing. In this way several evenings in the week were occupied. … I encouraged them to ask me questions, and these at times led to very profitable discussions. I soon had the great pleasure in finding that they were advancing in knowledge, and taking more interest in the subject.[38]

Again we can see a dialogical, rather than dictatorial, relationship at work between the minister and the St Kildans, as they engaged with MacKenzie's teaching in the process of appropriating evangelicalism into their own worldview frameworks.

Callum MacQueen also noted the religious diet of the islanders during MacKenzie's ministry. He remembered that 'services on Sundays were 7 a.m. Gaelic, 11 a.m. Gaelic and before separating, English service', followed by 'afternoon Gaelic'. He also noted that 'at one time Bible class at 2 p.m. for 2 ½ hours, many married men and women', plus 'a meeting every Thursday to explain the Shorter Catechism', 'service in the church' on Wednesdays nights, a communicant meeting on Thursday evenings, and 'Friday evenings a preparatory class'.[39]

Despite the increase in Christian learning, however, MacKenzie remained unsatisfied. After all, he was preaching, as was characteristic of his evangelical foundations, toward the peoples' hearts. Though he improved their knowledge via catechesis and discussion, he 'could not see for several years any real spiritual fruit'.[40] It would take time, he was realizing, for the islanders to make his piety their own.

There was also an improvement in the islanders' education and literacy. MacKenzie wrote that he started a Sabbath School for the locals to

[37] MacKenzie, *Episode*, p. 32.
[38] Ibid.
[39] McQueen and McQueen, *St Kilda Heritage*, p. 15.
[40] MacKenzie, *Episode*, pp. 32-3.

further their Christian education. This was unsuccessful due to a high rate of illiteracy among St Kildans. To remedy the situation, the minister 'started a day school, and, as all attended, I was able to teach them not only to read but also write and do arithmetic, so that before long I left the island they were almost all good scholars. They could read fluently and write with accuracy and intelligence'.[41] By raising the islanders' beyond illiteracy to fluency, MacKenzie further transformed the culture of St Kilda.

What distinguished Neil MacKenzie from any previous minister, however, was not his attempt to evangelize and educate the people of St Kilda. He was much more successful than they in that respect, but that was not what made him stand out. Neil MacKenzie also laboured, alongside the locals, to improve the overall material wellbeing on the island. In the broadest sense, what MacKenzie accomplished agriculturally and domestically was the transition of the land from a centralized township with common land re-appropriated on three bases to a new system of crofting whereby each family lived separately in houses along a new village 'street' with individual plots of arable land and shared pastures.[42] This process was not uniquely St Kildan or original to MacKenzie, but took place throughout the Highlands and Islands.[43] Callum MacQueen noted that each man farmed 8 or 10 acres, indicating that this system had been initiated by the time he was a boy in the 1830s.[44] Along with the land redistribution, MacKenzie also introduced an 'English spade' to replace a less productive local tool and improved the land drainage.[45] Finally, J.B. MacKenzie mentioned that his father also built a sea wall to protect the crops from ocean spray and dug new wells.[46]

As for the domestic improvements, Wilson's account from 1841 provides an excellent, if somewhat stuffy, summary. He noted that:

> Some years ago an accomplished gentleman of fortune, Sir Thomas Dyke Ackland, visited St Kilda in his yacht, and being much interested in the natives, and distressed by an inspection of their incommodious, and as he thought highly unhealthy dwellings, he left a premium of twenty guineas with the

41 Ibid., p. 32.

42 Mary Harman, *An Isle Called Hirte: History and Culture of the St Kildans to 1930* (MacLean Press: Isle of Skye, 1997), pp. 198-201.

43 T.M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation: 1700-2007*, 2nd edn (London: Penguin Books, 2007), pp. 189-90.

44 McQueen and McQueen, *St Kilda Heritage*, p. 10.

45 Wilson, *Voyage*, p. 22.

46 MacKenzie, *Episode*, p. 3.

> minister, and to be given to the first person or persons who should demolish their old house and erect a new one on a more popular and convenient plan.[47]

MacQueen's memory corroborates Wilson's observations. He wrote, 'At the time of my father's marriage the houses were grouped together but my when I was 8 or 10 surveyors cut the place up in lots and each man had to go onto his own new low and new houses were put up.'[48] As Callum was born in 1828, this would place the building process between 1836 and 1838. After the houses were built, MacKenzie hoped that he might find a way to provide the islanders with a number of more modern furnishings. Lachlan MacLean noted that the minister went to Glasgow on 'an errand of mercy' around that time to acquire 'beds, chairs, stools, mills, nay, even glass windows!'[49]

In sum, St Kilda was rejuvenated through the efforts of Neil MacKenzie to holistically improve the lives of the islanders. However, it was not merely a case of an improving landlord forcing the people to change their ways of life. In all of his efforts—religiously, educationally, agriculturally, and domestically—the Rev. Neil MacKenzie worked alongside the people. His son remembered that 'all the time they were at work he remained with them, doing as hard work as any'.[50] MacKenzie knew that in order to reach the people of St Kilda with his evangelical message, he needed to work incarnationally within the community. His tired eyes, sweaty brow, and calloused hands would tell of his care for the people as much as his words.

The rise of insular self-determination was the third and final manner in which the culture of St Kilda was transformed during the ministry of Neil MacKenzie.[51] This process occurred primarily in the ecclesial context, yet enabled the locals through the means of the church to assert a greater degree of responsibility and independence. It was through this process, as well, that the St Kildans began to further appropriate the piety of evangelicalism into their own lives. The sacrament of communion, or the Lord's Supper, was reserved for those within a given church community who exhibited in their faith and daily lives the markings of being 'truly converted'. To be a communicant in a Highland church, then, was to be among the elect in both a socially powerful and personally assuring

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47 Wilson, *Voyage*, p. 32-3.

48 McQueen and McQueen, *St Kilda Heritage*, p. 6.

49 MacLean, *Sketches*, pp. 331-2.

50 MacKenzie, *Episode*, p. 3.

51 This theme has also been highlighted by Bill Lawson, 'Hiort in Pre-1930 Writings—An Overview', in *Rewriting St Kilda: New Views on Old Ideas*, ed. by Bob Chambers (South Lochs, Isle of Lewis: The Islands Book Trust, 2011), p. 21.

way. So it was, too, in the case of St Kilda. By 1838, MacKenzie was satisfied with the spiritual maturity of enough St Kildans to celebrate a communion.[52] As a result, the island received some visitors.

MacKenzie remembered: 'When this intention was made known to the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge, the late venerable Dr. Dickson, its controller, along with Dr. M'Leod of Glasgow, came to the island in order to personally satisfy themselves of their fitness'.[53] Along with the goal of assuring that St Kilda's parishioners were ready for the sacrament, MacKenzie was hopeful that the two SSPCK envoys would satisfy another of his desires: 'to constitute a Kirk Session'.[54] Upon arrival, Dickson and MacLeod 'examined minutely those who were intending to partake of the holy ordinance, and found their knowledge and state of mind such as to justify them in putting into their hands the sacred symbols of the love of their crucified Savior'. In total, 'the number who at this time were admitted into the Church was fifteen or sixteen'.[55] When Wilson arrived three years later, he would report that 'There are about twenty communicants, and about twenty more who are under serious instruction and preparation with a view to the partaking of that sacred ordinance'. He further noted, 'Several of the older men among the natives are very fluent in prayer, and never fail to conduct a kind of public worship during the few occasions in which the minister is absent'.[56]

Two specific items from the testimonies of MacKenzie and Wilson speak most directly to the way in which the people of St Kilda came to assert a greater degree of communal identity and ambition. First, MacKenzie noted that he hoped to establish a kirk session on the island. Within Presbyterianism, the primary 'building blocks' of church polity are church or kirk sessions. A session is essentially a board of several elders who, along with the ordained parish minister, carry out or see to the carrying out of all that the local church does. What MacKenzie was attempting to do, then, was something that no previous St Kilda clergyman had ever done: give the islanders, through the eldership, a determinative role in the faith and culture or the island. Hence, MacKenzie further transformed the church into an institution through which local issues received local attention from local leaders.

The second way in which the evidence describes this rise in self-determination is fascinating and distinct to the evangelical traditions of the

52 MacKenzie, *Episode*, p. 33.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Wilson, *Voyage*, pp. 23-4.

Highland and Islands. Here, we refer to *na Daoine*, or 'the Men'. Surely, the 'older men among the natives' who Wilson observed to be both 'very fluent in prayer' and personally responsible for maintaining religious observance in the stead of MacKenzie bring to mind the characteristics of the class of lay catechists and elders who began to develop in the Western Islands around this time.[57]

CONCLUSION

In revisiting the original question, it becomes clear that it was the translation of evangelicalism into a St Kildan cultural context, the far-reaching improvements made by Neil MacKenzie both alongside and for the islanders, and the integration of the locals into the by-then-powerful ecclesiastical infrastructure that resulted in a true paradigm shift from a transactional church-culture relationship to a transformation of both church and culture. The process was not a one-sided game of evangelical colonizer vs. helpless native, but rather a complex and gradual dialogue, as evangelicalism became 'St Kilda-ized' and St Kilda became 'evangelical-ized'.

[57] Devine, *The Scottish Nation*, p. 373.