
Man of Skye: Rev. Roderick MacCowan (1871-1948)

JOHN SMITH

Roderick MacCowan's early life coincided with a time of great controversy within the Free Church of Scotland. The issues of Disestablishment, the Declaratory Act, and the proposed union with the United Presbyterians, stirred particularly strong feelings in the Highlands, large parts of which were unsettled by the land reform issue. In the wider world, there were bewildering changes, with the rise of secularist and socialist ideologies and, later on, the outbreak of a fearful World War which devastated many Highland communities. MacCowan's forthright views provide an insight into the response of Evangelical orthodoxy to these changes and controversies.

1. Skye background

Roderick was born at 5 Camustianavaig, Braes, Portree, Isle of Skye, on 8th February 1871.¹ The name MacCowan is uncommon, although it occurs most frequently in Argyllshire and it seems likely that the family originated there. The Gaelic spelling of the name is Mac Gille Comhghain. Roderick's father, Donald, who was born in Snizort in 1833, was a crofter and his mother Christina (née Campbell), came from Bracadale. They were married in 1860 at Snizort.² Each year, Donald

¹ Gravestone. Other information courtesy of Portree Registrar's Office. Other natives of the village included Rev. Ewan MacQueen (1866-1949) and Rev. J. P. MacQueen (1894-1961), both prominent ministers in the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland.

² Census of Skye 1871, 1881, 1891.

worked at the East Coast herring fishing. In his 1902 book, *The Men of Skye*,³ Roderick gives a detailed account of his paternal grandfather, John MacCowan (1798-1858), who was a close friend of Donald Munro, “the Blind Fiddler” and catechist for Maighstir Ruaridh (Rev. Roderick Macleod, Bracadale and Snizort), regarded by many as the father of Evangelicalism in Skye.

During Roderick MacCowan’s childhood, the population of the Braes townships was swollen by people who had been evicted from other parts of the island in order to allow for expansion of the deer forests. At this time, estates sought to cash in on a growing demand for deerstalking among the aristocracy and other wealthy guests. Thus, the Braes were seriously overcrowded and many holdings had to be subdivided. As a result, during the “Crofters War”, the Braes people were particularly active in the struggle for land reform.

In 1882, the famous Battle of the Braes took place near Camustianavaig. The people had seen the victory gained by the crofters in Glendale and Kilmuir in the north of the island⁴ and hoped to win back their traditional grazing rights on the slopes of Ben Lee, which had been turned over to deer since 1860. When the proprietor, Lord MacDonald, rejected their petition, the Braes tenants informed him that they would refuse to pay rent. In the hope of intimidating the others, the estate evicted a dozen of the leading activists, but a large crowd forcibly prevented the sheriff officers from serving the summonses.

The authorities, who were worried that Irish style radicalism would spread to the crofting counties, resolved upon decisive action. A force of fifty Glasgow policemen – the local Sheriff had requested a hundred soldiers – proceeded to the Braes to arrest the men in question. Reporters from the national press followed them, hoping to witness the anticipated clash. The *Illustrated London News* sent its war correspondent. On their way back, the police were met by a large crowd which attacked them with stones and sticks. After a fierce struggle, the forces of the law broke through and brought their prisoners back to Portree but there were rumours that the Braes people intended to break open the jail and release the prisoners. The local Volunteers were called out and paraded on Somerled Square but their services were not required.⁵

³ *The Men of Skye* was republished in 2013 by the Scottish Reformation Society.

⁴ See I. M. M. MacPhail, *The Crofters War* (Stornoway, 1989), pp. 25-44.

⁵ Norman Maclean, *The Former Days* (London, 1945), p. 102ff.

The defaulters were sent to Inverness to be tried. Although they were found guilty, supporters present in court paid their fines and they were released. Cattle continued to graze on Lord MacDonald's deer forest and eventually the Government sent gunboats and Royal Marines to quell the discontent in the isle of Skye. In Glendale the marines were entertained to tea by the locals. But the authorities realised that the causes of the discontent needed to be addressed and a Royal Commission on Crofting was established in 1884. The Braes school, which the MacCowan children attended, was the venue for its very first hearing. Following the Commission's recommendations, crofters were given security of tenure and the right to pass on tenancy rights to their children.⁶

Donald MacCowan was a prominent crofting activist and President of the Braes Branch of the Highland Land Law Reform Association (HLLRA).⁷ Indeed, when *HMS Jackal*, carrying a detachment of marines, army officers and legal officials, anchored in Camustianavaig Bay on 15th October 1886, Donald was the first person served with a summons for non-payment of rent: he owed £16 but claimed that payment was difficult as he had a family of eleven, there was no fishing, and it had been five years since he had obtained more than a stone of meal from his croft.⁸ The family's goods were poinded the next month, although they were later returned when the arrears were partly paid.⁹ In February 1887, a public meeting was held in the Braes by the Crofters Commission. Donald was one of those who gave evidence. He stated that he had a family of twelve, had five acres of arable land and owned a horse, five cows, and two stirks. Donald MacCowan's share of the common sheep stock was £5 the previous year, but when the price

⁶ See A. D. Cameron, *Go Listen to the Crofters: The Napier Commission and Crofting a Century Ago* (Stornoway, 1984).

⁷ The HLLRA was formed in 1883 and soon developed a comprehensive set of branches all over the crofting counties. For several years it organised large-scale demonstrations, rent strikes, and other activities against the authorities. Its President was Sir Donald Horne MacFarlane, a native of Caithness, who made his fortune in India and subsequently converted to Roman Catholicism. He became an Irish Nationalist M.P. for County Carlow before returning to Scotland, where he was elected as Member for Argyll, as a Crofter's Candidate, defeating the Marquis of Lorne, heir of the powerful Duke of Argyll. See Donald Meek, "The Catholic Knight of Crofting", *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, Vol. 58 (1994), pp. 70-122.

⁸ See short biographical sketch of Roderick MacCowan in Norman MacDonald and Cailean MacLean, *The Great Book of Skye* (Portree, 2014), p. 141. The article erroneously states that Roderick was a *councillor* for the Aird district of Inverness-shire (see below).

⁹ See *Aberdeen Journal*, 16th October and 17th November 1886.

of wool was at its highest it was as high as £15. In 1877 about half an acre of his croft had been swept away in a flood but he had since restored half of it.

The subject of the Church's attitude to land agitation has been extensively discussed by Dr. Allan MacColl¹⁰ but it is noteworthy that both Donald and Roderick MacCowan saw nothing objectionable in identifying themselves with a political cause which many of their Free Church compatriots in the Highlands regarded as suspect. Sorley Maclean certainly believed that "the shadow of [Roman] Catholic anti-imperialist Ireland" tended to "cool any pro-crofter radicalism among the inner circle of the [Highland] Free Church – the five per cent of its people who were clergy, lay preachers, elders, deacons or just communicants".¹¹

After the Disruption, almost all the Braes people, with the exception of "two or three families", adhered to the Portree Free Church.¹² However in 1893, "a large section" of the congregation joined the Free Presbyterian Church.¹³ "The influence of the Secession was felt more in Portree Parish than anywhere else in Skye."¹⁴ Rev. Norman MacLeod, who succeeded Mr. Reid in 1894, subsequently joined the

¹⁰ See A. MacColl, *Land, Faith and the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh, 2006).

¹¹ Sorley MacLean, "Vale of Tears: a view of Highland History to 1886" in Malcolm Maclean and Christopher Carrell (eds.), *As an Fhearann: from the Land* (Stornoway, 1986), p. 16.

¹² Norman MacLean, *Set Free* (London, 1949), pp. 18, 23. The parish minister, Rev. John Darroch (1829-1916), was an Evangelical who vetoed the introduction of instrumental music to his church. He also opened a small mission church in the Braes in 1879. *Great Book of Skye*, p. 61.

¹³ Ewing's *Annals of the Free Church* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1914) inaccurately (or wishfully) states, "several members seceded because of the Declaratory Act in 1892" (Vol. 2, p. 232.) Contemporary newspaper reports state that when the seceders held services at Portree on 9th July, "the meetings were crowded and the Free Church services deserted". *Northern Chronicle*, 12th July 1893.

¹⁴ S. Lindsay Hamilton, "The Parish of Portree", in Hugh Barron (ed.), *Third Statistical Account of Scotland: The County of Inverness* (Edinburgh, 1985), pp. 485-505 states that after 1893, the Free Church in the parish consisted of "only a fragment of the congregation". Mr. Reid's successor, Rev. Norman MacLeod, "favoured the Union and his congregation followed him almost to a man". The post-1900 Free Church did not even attempt to hold services there. At the opening of the new Free Church (ironically a former United Presbyterian Church building) in September 1919, Rev. Donald MacLean claimed that the Free Church had delayed recommencing services for eight years but "the Free Presbyterian Church, under whose ministry they had till now been content to leave her people, had declined to make common cause with the Free Church in the maintenance of Evangelical thought and practice", *Free Church Monthly Record*, February 1919. In fact the Free Church was struggling to attract support, as both Rev. Alexander MacRae and Rev. Norman MacLeod were highly able men, the latter being the only United Free minister in Skye whose congregation retained the property after the House of Lords'

United Free Church. Roderick MacCowan's father Donald probably remained in the Free Church, as it is recorded that he sent his apologies to an Anti-Union meeting held at Inverness in 1899.¹⁵ Roderick, however, was a Free Presbyterian.

2. Glasgow and *The Men of Skye*

At some point in the early 1890s, Roderick moved to Glasgow, where he probably pursued his secondary education and was later employed as an assistant house factor. In 1901 he was living at 27 Westend Park Street, Kelvin, in lodgings owned by Johann MacDonald, a native of Lochalsh.¹⁶ The Mains Street (later Hope Street) Gaelic Free Church was traditionally the preferred congregation for Skye people resident in Glasgow.¹⁷ In 1893, the minister, Rev. Evan Grant, made it clear that he would remain in the Free Church in spite of the Declaratory Act. However, his assistant, the divinity student Neil Cameron, was in no doubt about where his duty lay and was the driving force behind the establishment of the St. Jude's Free Presbyterian congregation, which initially consisted almost entirely of people who had left Mains Street.

Among Roderick's Glasgow friends were two much older men, who assisted him in gathering material for *The Men of Skye*. Both of them had been associated with the Mains Street congregation and worked in the Clyde shipbuilding industry. Peter Campbell¹⁸ was born in 1833 and was brought up in Glendale. He was converted under the preaching of Rev. Alexander MacColl and went to Glasgow as a youth. Peter was one of a group of godly men who held prayer meetings in each others' houses and spoke often of "the dishonour done to Christ and His Word by the Free Church, and deplored it exceedingly". He became an elder in St. Jude's in 1897. Donald Kelly¹⁹ was born at Mugeary, Portree, in

decision in 1904. See MacDonald and MacLean, *Great Book of Skye*, pp. 249, 347. In his speech, Mr. MacLean also expressed confidence that, like the United Free Church, the Free Presbyterian Church was "comparatively a new creation", and just as the United Free and Established Churches would soon amalgamate, it was "inevitable that it and the Free Church would have to become one, as in all respects they were already one", *Inverness Courier*, 9th September 1919.

¹⁵ *Scotsman*, 17th May 1899. Donald MacCowan died on 14th May 1911 and Roderick's mother Christina died on 29th January 1915.

¹⁶ 1901 census of Glasgow.

¹⁷ See Ian R. MacDonald, *Glasgow's Gaelic Churches* (Edinburgh, 1995), pp. 34-6.

¹⁸ See obituary in *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 12 (1908), pp. 427-30.

¹⁹ See obituary in *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, reprinted in Neil Cameron, *Ministers and Men of the Free Presbyterian Church* (Skipton, 1993), pp. 137-41.

1849 and also went to Glasgow as a young man. It is recorded that “he had a large store of the sayings and doings of the worthies of his early days . . . and none could relate them more correctly than he”. An elder in Mains Street, he later became a member of Mr. Cameron’s first Session.

The Men of Skye was published in October 1902 by John MacNeilage (1858-1931), also a Free Presbyterian elder in Glasgow, who produced various other Reformed books, including *Memoirs of Thomas Boston*. His brother, Archibald, was editor of *The Scottish Farmer* in the early 1900s and of the *Free Church Monthly Record* until 1917, when he handed over to Alexander Stewart. The December 1902 *Free Presbyterian Magazine* contains a review in which “JM” – almost certainly MacCowan’s friend Rev. John Macleod – states: “A distinct service has been done to the memory of the Fathers of Skye . . . we have read his work with great interest.” He goes on: “In an author’s first work immaturity of thought and defective execution may well be expected; but though traces of both are to be found in this volume, it is pleasing to find that there is so little of either. At times there are references to questions of mainly local and private interest in which the writer is inclined to state very positively his own sentiments.”²⁰ The review in the *Scotsman*, however, was less generous: “A zealous and honest set were these old worthies, but too frequently narrow and intolerant . . . they did as much mischief by their ignorant and puritanical enthusiasm as the so called Moderate ministers did by their indifference.” In a swipe at MacCowan’s Church, the reviewer wrote, “the spirit of the Men still survives among a certain sect in the North, and to them this volume will be a perfect God-send, as it will be amusing if not specially edifying to the less righteously minded”.²¹

A similarly condescending attitude was exhibited by D. T. Holmes, who travelled the Highlands at the behest of James Coats, the Paisley cotton magnate and philanthropist, to whom his book is dedicated. Holmes read MacCowan’s book when visiting Skye and interestingly observes, “I never read a more markedly Scriptural book than *The Men of Skye*, nor one that displays such intolerance to the school of Laodiceans”. Holmes sneeringly comments that the book “gives a wonderful insight into the religious psychology of the Celtic zealot. I am afraid the pious

²⁰ *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 7, p. 359.

²¹ *Scotsman*, 13th November 1902.

author will regard me as little better than one of the wicked when I say that I had many a hearty laugh at its contents.” While claiming to be “averse to laugh at honest heartfelt beliefs”, he mocks MacCowan’s “quaint metaphors, droll tenses and unlicensed syntax” and claims that “the language in which the book is written is not Gaelic but it has not quite reached the stage of English”.²² Considering MacCowan’s scholarship and lifelong interest in book collecting, these comments seem misplaced.

The conservative *Northern Chronicle* exhibited a commendable appreciation of MacCowan’s spirituality. After making the dubious claim that “doctrinally Moderatism meant no lapse at all from the standards of the Church”, it went on: “But without doubt a good many of the Moderate ministers were taking matters easy and their congregations were without religious fervour . . . by the middle of the century the spirit of the Men ruled throughout the islands in the Free Church. But what room has the teaching of the professors in the United Free Church left for it now? That is really the question which, so to speak, forms the moral of this book . . . that [the Men] were narrow in their views and uncharitable in their judgements must be admitted. But they aimed at a high ideal of Christian life, were sincerely zealous of good works and certainly helped to raise the standard of morals public and private, wherever they held any influence.”²³

Apparently Roderick attended Glasgow University with the aim of becoming a solicitor, breaking off without graduating, before commencing divinity classes under Rev. John R. MacKay in Inverness. He is listed on the roll of Free Presbyterian students for the ministry in 1894. At the January Presbytery that year, grants were made to the students. MacCowan was allocated £7 “on condition of his entering a secondary school preparatory to his entering University”.²⁴ In 1904, the Synod agreed to treat Roderick MacCowan’s two irregular sessions of study under Mr. MacKay, as regular.²⁵ At the 1905 Synod, it was agreed that the Arts studies of MacCowan and Norman Matheson, should be taken as complete.²⁶

²² D. T. Holmes, *Literary Tours in the Highlands and Islands* (Paisley, 1909), pp. 150-1.

²³ *Northern Chronicle*, 10th December 1902.

²⁴ Alexander McPherson (ed.), *History of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1893-1970* (Glasgow, 1970), p. 90.

²⁵ *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, December 1904.

²⁶ *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, August 1905.

3. Departure to the Free Church

Following the 1900 division of the Free Church and the minority's eventual victory in the property case, many of the Highland section of the "legal Free Church" would have welcomed union with the Free Presbyterians. In spite of the lingering resentment over events of the 1890s, this might have been possible had it not been for an influential element which was anxious to maintain the "national" character of the denomination and had ambitions to expand in the lowlands and cities. To do this would necessitate a more inclusive approach in order to avoid alienating potential supporters, some of whom had a soft spot for hymns, organs, and social events.

Thus, when the Free Church finally got round to repealing the Declaratory Act in May 1905 (after the property had been secured), it was done in a manner which would be unacceptable to many conservatives – "this church adheres, as it always has, to her subordinate standards". A disappointed Rev. Donald Munro (Ferintosh), for instance, wrote to his friend Rev. John Macleod (Kames), "I am afraid it will be regarded as quite objectionable by some of your men . . . the older ministers will insist on some such phrase, and will carry the day".²⁷ This seriously weakened the position of those Free Presbyterians who were keen for union and the July 1905 Synod decisively rejected a motion to confer with the Free Church.

Although outright union with the Free Presbyterian Church was now impossible, some within the leadership of the Free Church were intent on cherry-picking some of her best preachers. In December 1905, John Macleod (Kames) and George Mackay (Stornoway) and Alexander Stewart (Edinburgh), jumped ship. Mackay was inducted to the Free Church in Stornoway in an apparent effort to win over his former congregation as well.²⁸

Along with several other Free Presbyterian probationers and students, Roderick MacCowan also applied for admission to the Free Church. He was recommended by the Presbytery of Lewis, and was admitted by the Commission of Assembly in November 1906. According

²⁷ James L. MacLeod, *The Second Disruption: The Free Church in Victorian Scotland and the origins of the Free Presbyterian Church* (East Linton, 2000), p. 249.

²⁸ See John MacLeod, *Banner in the West* (Birlinn, 2008), p. 220ff. Kenneth MacRae regarded Mr. MacKay as a "rare" and "matchless" preacher, *Diary* (Edinburgh, 1980), p. 256. Alexander Stewart, too, was a gifted expositor who published three books of sermons and was awarded a D.D.

to the late Rev. Donald MacLean, Glasgow, a contributory factor in MacCowan's departure for the Free Church was the disapproval that he had encountered in the Free Presbyterian Church for absenting himself from the Monday service of a Communion season in order to attend a book auction.²⁹

In spite of the fact that MacCowan had taken all the University classes required by the Free Church College, with the exception of Natural Science, and had completed his course in Divinity, his admission was opposed by several ministers, including Rev. Henry Carmichael (Coatbridge), who maintained that the Church could not receive him without doing injustice to its own students and insisted that three years' training with the Free Presbyterian Church was not equivalent to the same period of study in the "better equipped" Edinburgh College of the Free Church. Archibald MacNeilage, however, defended MacCowan's admission, stating that "it had been the constant practice . . . from the Disruption onwards to accept Gaelic-speaking men, in exceptional circumstances, with a shorter course than was asked from English-speaking men. One reason for this was that they were bilingual and able to serve the church in a way that English-speaking men could not."³⁰ MacNeilage's motion was carried.

The irony of this controversy can hardly have been lost on many commissioners, in view of the fact that John MacLeod, who had been a Free Presbyterian divinity student, was regarded as good enough to be appointed as Professor of New Testament Exegesis in the Free Church College, and later became Principal. And in 1919, John R. MacKay, the very man who taught MacCowan, was appointed to the same Chair after he had moved to the Free Church in December 1918.

4. Settlement at Kiltarlity

MacCowan was ordained and inducted to Kiltarlity Free Church on 1st September 1907. Rev. James MacKay, Ardersier, presided and Rev. Donald MacLean, Edinburgh (convenor of Admissions Committee and the Supply Committee) and formerly of Moy, preached a Gaelic sermon. Following the service, dinner was served in the manse and speeches were given by Rev. Murdo MacKenzie, Free North, Rev. John MacLeod (Free Church College), and Rev. Archibald MacDonald, parish minister, who

²⁹ Courtesy of Mr. Roy Middleton.

³⁰ *Free Church Monthly Record*, December 1906.



Kiltarlity Free Church (built 1846).

was a prominent Gaelic scholar.³¹ The new minister was presented with a roll-top desk and a well-filled purse of sovereigns.³²

The Kiltarlity congregation had been divided in 1900 and it was found that neither of the parties had an inherent right to the church and manse. In fact, Lord Lovat, whose family had paid for the buildings, was legally entitled to settle the matter. It was reported in August 1901 that “the temper of the parties was inclined to be excitable”. Despite some incidents of ministers being verbally abused by crowds when attempts were made to share the church, there was no serious trouble and Lovat, who was fighting in the South African War, sent word that he had ordered his factor to make temporary arrangements and that he would

³¹ Hew Scott (ed.), *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae, Vol. 6, Synods of Aberdeen and Moray* (2nd edn., Edinburgh, 1926), p. 371. Mr. MacDonald was a native of South Uist, where his father was a minister. He was the author of several works on the Clan Donald and Gaelic poetry and, like MacCowan, a member of the Gaelic Society of Inverness. Contemporary newspaper reports reveal that he was frequently present at concerts, ceilidhs, and other social events. Mr. MacDonald was President of the local branch of An Comunn Gaidhealach.

³² *Inverness Courier*, 4th September 1908.



Beaufort Castle (built 1880-6), from a postcard of about 1914.

[Kindly supplied by Miss E. Campbell, Dingwall]

sort out the matter upon his return. A clear majority, 468 people over the age of 14, were associated with the Frees.³³ A joint occupancy arrangement was made which, “due to his lordship’s fairness and tact”, worked admirably for five years. In January 1907 the parties met with him at Beaufort Castle to settle the matter finally, and it was agreed that the property should be valued by an independent arbitrator. The Free Church was given the buildings and the United Frees a portion of the funds in proportion to their numbers.³⁴

Kiltarlity is a quiet rural parish in Inverness-shire. The ancient heartland of the Fraser clan, the population in 1921 was 1,817 and included a considerable crofting element. Gaelic remained predominant until the early twentieth century and Gaelic services were held in the Free Church until 1940.³⁵ The main landowner was Simon Fraser, the

³³ *Aberdeen Journal*, 21st and 26th August 1901.

³⁴ *Aberdeen Journal*, 30th January 1907.

³⁵ Rev. William Fraser, “The Parish of Kiltarlity and Convinth”, in *Third Statistical Account of Scotland: The County of Inverness*, pp. 218-24.



Belladrum Home Farm, typically prosperous agricultural land in Kiltarlity parish.

14th Lord Lovat (1871-1933), whose seat, Beaufort Castle, stands to the north of Kiltarlity village on the banks of the River Beaully. Lovat was described as with “a breezy, cheerful personality” and “a good mixer” who among his tenantry “attained a popularity probably unequalled by any Scottish laird”. During the South African War, in response to the Boers’ guerrilla tactics, he recruited the legendary Lovat Scouts, a mounted regiment of sharpshooters, largely gamekeepers and shepherds, who were “masters at stalking and the use of the telescope”. During the First World War, Lord Lovat was appointed a Brigadier General and subsequently served as a Government Minister in the Colonial Office and as Convenor of the County of Inverness.³⁶

The Lovat Frasers are one of the leading Roman Catholic noble families in Scotland. In 1876 Lord Lovat³⁷ gifted the old Fort Augustus

³⁶ Obituaries of Lord Lovat in *Ross-shire Journal*, 24th February 1933, and *Press and Journal*, 20th February 1933. His son “Shimi” was also a noted soldier, famous for his role with the Commando Brigade during the D-Day landings.

³⁷ The family were mainly Protestant until the title passed to Captain Thomas Fraser of Strichen in 1815. An interesting story is told of him. One Sabbath, in a fit of

buildings to the Benedictine Order and also contributed substantially towards the construction of a monastery, college, and school on the site. It was the first abbey built in Scotland since the Reformation. Kiltarlity and the adjoining parish of Kilmorack have always had a substantial Roman Catholic population and there are impressive chapels at Beauly, Marydale (Cannich), and Eskadale.³⁸

5. Early ministry

Professor R. A. Finlayson wrote, "Though [MacCowan's] pulpit gifts were not of the spectacular kind he was a lover of the Evangel and devoted to the old paths".³⁹ In later years MacCowan frequently assisted at communions in Lewis, where it is recalled that his three favourite themes were the chicanery of the Vatican, the immorality of British society, and interpretation of symbolism in the Book of Revelation. The story is told of two old Lewis worthies who were considering whether to go to the Back Communion. One asked the other who was to be there and, upon hearing that it was MacCowan, he said that he did not think he would be well enough to attend. When his friend pressed him to accompany him, he refused, saying in Gaelic, "My soul will dry because I have heard it all before".⁴⁰

In the early years of his ministry, MacCowan regularly travelled with the herring fleet down the coast to East Anglia. In 1911 it was stated that "young people from the Highlands, and increasingly the Lews, migrate in ever increasing numbers to the fishing centres of the country. The duty of the Church to follow them with the means of grace to those places of industry, where they are surrounded with many temptations and far from parental control, is becoming every year more urgent." The scale of this enterprise is evident from the fact that that year the Fraserburgh Old Free Church, which could accommodate 1,500 people and had been allocated to the Free Church by the Churches

Protestantism, he destroyed a statue of the Virgin Mary and various pictures of saints in the Lovat mansion before setting off for the service at Kirkhill Parish Church. His servants, however, intercepted him before he reached the church and escorted him home. See Joseph Mitchell, *Reminiscences of my Life in the Highlands 1884* (2 vols., reprinted Newton Abbot, 1971), Vol. 2, p. 17. The Lovat Mausoleum is located in the old Wardlaw churchyard, Kirkhill. Nearby is the grave of the famous Fraser dynasty of ministers. The Roman Catholic Lovats are buried at Eskadale.

³⁸ See O. Blundell, *Ancient Catholic Homes of Scotland* (Glasgow, 1907), pp. 97-122.

³⁹ *Free Church Monthly Record*, October 1948.

⁴⁰ Anecdote courtesy of Mr. Norman MacLeod, London.

Commission, was filled to capacity.⁴¹ At the 1914 Assembly it was reported that the church building had been dilapidated for some years and that only seventeen congregations had responded to an appeal to fund its repair. MacCowan reported that “the townspeople of Fraserburgh took a great deal of interest in the congregation”.⁴² In 1915, German naval activity led to the suspension of the fishing industry in the North Sea and the services at herring ports were no longer required. The west coast fishermen, large numbers of whom were Naval Reservists, were called up.

The outbreak of war in 1914 saw the whole country thrown into turmoil, and the churches were no exception. At the Free Presbytery of Inverness MacCowan stated that “while they looked on war as unchristian, they looked on self defence as perfectly and absolutely justifiable. He might mention that he had been asked by a section of the Lovat Scouts to accompany them, and he said that he would go. (Applause.) He informed the men that he would have to put himself in communication with his Church in connection with the matter. Lord Lovat said that he would be very glad that he should go.”⁴³ But the Commission of Assembly later maintained that “ministers can best contribute to the strength of the nation by discharging their spiritual functions in their present sphere”.⁴⁴ In the event, he did not go. In November 1915, Rev. John MacLeod (Free North Church, Inverness) warned that “many [divinity] students were in munitions work or had enlisted and churches were half-staffed. In view of this there was a clear call to stick to their work”.⁴⁵

In April 1915, the Inverness Presbytery considered the rising calls for prohibition for the duration of the conflict. MacCowan proposed that the Presbytery should commend the good example set by the King and Lord Kitchener, both of whom had voluntarily given up drinking until the war was won. However, he said, “prohibition was a different matter owing to the number of people who made their living from the liquor

⁴¹ *Free Church Monthly Record*, June 1911. Stewart and Kennedy Cameron, *The Free Church of Scotland: The Crisis of 1900*, p. 413.

⁴² *Aberdeen Journal*, 27th May 1914. After the war over £1,000 was contributed and the church renovated. Medical facilities and a library of Christian books were provided. See *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 7th July 1925.

⁴³ *Aberdeen Journal*, 2nd September 1914.

⁴⁴ *Aberdeen Journal*, 8th December 1915.

⁴⁵ *Aberdeen Journal*, 3rd November 1915.

trade”.⁴⁶ Later that year there was a discussion at the Presbytery regarding observance of the Day of Humiliation and Prayer appointed by the Commission of Assembly. Mr. MacKay (Kingussie) stated that he had three diets of worship (one in Gaelic) on the day, while MacCowan said that the day had been well received by the various congregations, expressing his pleasure that Highland people “were not offended by the words humiliation and prayer. They were delighted that their people did not take their religion from the newspapers. If they were led by the *Scotsman*, they would not recognise a day of humiliation and prayer. In some parts of the country there had been a great deal of opposition to the word humiliation. They could not get over the fact that a humble person in the sight of the Lord was the person who had the promises.”⁴⁷

After the introduction of conscription, MacCowan was a member of the Aird District tribunal, which considered appeals for exemption from military service. In the absence of the Chairman, he presided at some of the hearings. A Beaulieu joiner was informed by the minister, “joiner work could lie over until the end of the war”, and a Drumnadrochit coachman with aged parents was told, “if I were you I would button up my coat and go. Your parents will be looked after.”⁴⁸ The owner of Reelig Mill, Kirkhill, successfully protested that he was the only miller in the parish and could not find anyone else to take on the work, but MacCowan commented, “If I were the military, I would keep an eye on this case as an old man can be advertised for”.⁴⁹ Although MacCowan argued that the work of the two clerks in the Lovat Estate Office could be done by girls, they were given exemption.⁵⁰ Predictably, in the case of a crofter, he was more inclined to be lenient. The man’s parents were in their late seventies and MacCowan insisted that “the cultivation of crofts is essential to the country. There must be no trifling with crofts.” He was granted temporary exemption to put down the crop.⁵¹

Between 1916 and 1918, MacCowan assisted Revs. Samuel MacIver (Rogart) and Roderick MacLeod (Knock) in holding services and

⁴⁶ *Inverness Courier*, 9th April 1915.

⁴⁷ *Aberdeen Journal*, 7th April 1915.

⁴⁸ *Aberdeen Journal*, 29th April 1916.

⁴⁹ *Inverness Courier*, 2nd May 1916.

⁵⁰ *Inverness Courier*, 11th April 1916.

⁵¹ *Inverness Courier*, 25th March 1916.

providing pastoral care for Gaelic-speaking naval ratings stationed at Portsmouth, Devonport, Chatham, and Sheerness.⁵²

6. Land and education issues

Deeply conscious of his Skye background, MacCowan was an ardent defender of the crofting community, which he described as “the finest specimens of the race in the British Empire”.⁵³ In 1909, his interest in land issues was evidenced by his comments at an election meeting at Kiltarlity for the Unionist candidate for Inverness-shire, Sir Reginald MacLeod of MacLeod, when “he deplored the fact that so much land in the Highlands was devoted to deer”.⁵⁴ He also attended a meeting in the Kiltarlity Public Hall at which Lord Lovat, who had introduced a Land Bill in the House of Lords, invited the tenants on his estates to hear him explain the details of the proposed measure and answer their questions. MacCowan raised questions regarding the rating of croft houses.⁵⁵

Following the First World War, the land question returned to prominence in the North. The able Robert Munro, the Scottish Secretary, was well known to be sympathetic to land reform and landlords were extremely wary of him. In 1918 he stated, “where the hottest of the fighting has been, there the Highland Regiments have been found. After the war every Highland soldier who desires to do so should settle in the homelands and not be shipped to the colonies.”⁵⁶ The Free Church lent her support to the cause; for instance the Inverness Presbytery in 1917 sought to “impress upon the Government the necessity of taking thorough and immediate action with a view to the best economic use of land and the resettlement of the people upon it”.⁵⁷ At the 1918 Free Church Assembly, an Association for the Betterment of the Highlands and Islands was formed by ministers and elders. The following year its members were addressed in the Presbytery Hall by

⁵² *Free Church Monthly Record*, May 1917 and June 1919.

⁵³ *Scotsman*, 7th May 1923.

⁵⁴ *Inverness Courier*, 17th December 1909.

⁵⁵ *Aberdeen Journal*, 22nd December 1909.

⁵⁶ Ian F. Grigor, *Highland Resistance: The Radical Tradition in the Scottish North* (Edinburgh, 2000), p. 177. Robert Munro (1868-1955), later Lord Alness, was a distinguished lawyer and Liberal MP who also served as Lord Justice Clerk and Lord Advocate. As Scottish Secretary he was instrumental in bringing in the 1918 Education Act. His father, Rev. Alexander Rose Munro (1833-1903), was a Free Church minister and his mother Margaret was the daughter of Rev. John Sinclair, Bruan.

⁵⁷ *Aberdeen Journal*, 8th November 1917.

Robert Munro himself.⁵⁸ The 1918 General Election saw Highland Land League candidates win over 20% of the votes in the seven Crofting Counties. It was the land issue which inspired MacCowan to enter the political arena.

In 1919, in terms of the recent Education Act, elections were held throughout Scotland for the new County Education Authorities. In March that year, a joint letter from the Highland Committees of the Established, United Free, and Free Churches pointed out that the wording of the Act was that "Education Authorities shall be at *liberty* to continue religious instruction in schools" and emphasised that this noncommittal phrase meant that the duty of church people was to ensure that the members elected "shall make it a prime concern to maintain religious instruction".⁵⁹ MacCowan stood as a candidate and in his address to the electors he wrote, "If you vote for me I'll do my best for you. I strongly approve of the Bible and *Shorter Catechism* being taught in schools, as the best instruments of education the world has ever seen and of keeping education in the Highlands abreast of the times; and also of economy in the management of public money. I have ten years' experience in school board work. On other public questions you know my views."⁶⁰ He was elected in the Aird District which he continued to represent for three terms. In 1919, out of the four members, three were Free Church ministers.⁶¹ He had already served on the Kiltarlity Upper Parish Council since December 1913⁶² and the Kiltarlity School Board since April 1909.⁶³ Throughout the Highlands, many Free Church ministers were elected to the Education Authorities and the *Monthly Record* claimed, "The overwhelming strength of the Church in the Highland area has seldom been more effectively demonstrated. In not a few districts – Dornoch, Inverness, Lochalsh, Gairloch and Lewis, a Free Churchman stands at the top of the poll."⁶⁴ MacCowan's friend, Rev. John MacLeod (Free North), was appointed chairman of the Inverness

⁵⁸ *Inverness Courier*, 27th May 1919.

⁵⁹ *Inverness Courier*, 14th March 1919.

⁶⁰ *Inverness Courier*, 8th April 1919.

⁶¹ The others were Revs. John M. MacLennan (Glenurquhart) and Duncan MacDougall (Fort Augustus).

⁶² *Aberdeen Journal*, 4th December 1913.

⁶³ *Aberdeen Journal*, 4th April 1914. He was fourth out of seven candidates – six were elected and the parish minister came last.

⁶⁴ *Free Church Monthly Record*, May 1919.

Authority. He retained the post for several years and made every effort to promote his mother tongue. "He sponsored an experimental scheme whereby, in selected schools, the children of Gaelic-speaking parents should be taught entirely in their mother tongue for the first year. It was also his aim that where the language was a living force in the home the schools should have at least one Gaelic-speaking teacher." Of course, no member was keener to support this than MacCowan.⁶⁵

Because of the land issue, MacCowan also stood against Lord Lovat in the autumn of 1919 in the Kiltarlity ward of the Inverness-shire County Council election. At an eve of a poll meeting in Glenconvinth School, he gave vent to some of his most deeply held convictions. "The state of the roads was disgraceful . . . produce could not be disposed of unless there were good roads. The roads were cut up by timber traffic and the men who destroyed them should repair them at their own expense . . . he thought there should be more roads and more railways in the county. It was as cheap to have railways as to repair the roads, and they would bring work to the people and help to bring them back to the glens." He advocated radical land reform, insisting that, "before the deer forests could be broken up, they would have to consider the rates. The creatures to pay rates were men, not deer. Much of the present unrest was caused by the bad land system. So far as he knew, nothing had been done to the county by the landlords to give land to returning soldiers."⁶⁶ Unsurprisingly he was defeated by Lovat, but only by 79 votes to 54.

The monthly Authority meetings provided a platform for political debate on all manner of subjects and frequently educational issues were forgotten. MacCowan's voice was often heard and he regularly caused controversy. He was indeed "a racy commentator on passing events in church and state".⁶⁷ MacCowan was a persistent champion of any and every cause which related to the crofting areas, the Gaelic language and especially his beloved home island of Skye. Serious destitution came to the Hebrides in 1920, with crop failures and a poor fishing season. At a meeting of the Authority the situation was discussed. Rev. D. A. MacDonald (parish minister of Kilmuir) stated that in 32 years he had never seen people in such distress owing to want of food and poor

⁶⁵ G. N. M. Collins, *John MacLeod, D.D.* (Edinburgh, 1951), pp. 115-116.

⁶⁶ *Inverness Courier*, 2nd December 1919.

⁶⁷ *Free Church Monthly Record*, October 1948.

transport connections. MacCowan fumed at “the County Council which was a useless institution (laughter) and was doing nothing. Skye had 14,000 [actually 12,000] of a population and only one small steamer called twice a week. The people were worse off than convicts.” He urged that representation should be made to Government, pointing out “the deplorable conditions now prevailing in Skye and the Western Isles” and “urged upon the meeting the necessity of dealing with the matter immediately to save the children”.⁶⁸ The following month the conditions on the west coast were noticed in the *London Observer* and *Glasgow Herald*. MacCowan insisted at the Education Authority, “we cannot enforce attendance at the schools because of the terrible conditions”.⁶⁹

After the war, the Board of Agriculture bought up several small estates for subdivision into crofts, but their efforts were woefully inadequate and discontent grew.⁷⁰ Land raids in which crofters occupied areas of deer forest, pegging out crofts and planting crops, took place all over the Highlands, but especially on the west coast. At the June 1919 Education Authority meeting, MacCowan moved “that in view of the proposed increase in smallholdings, a School of Agriculture be established at Inverness as soon as possible”. The following month his motion was agreed. “The Government had promised land,” he said. “In Kiltarlity 30 men had applied for land under the scheme. In the county nothing was done for training in agriculture. In proposing he assumed agriculture would be taught in the schools of the County more than it had ever been. The Act gave the Education Authority power to acquire land anywhere for the teaching of agriculture. He suggested the school should be in Kirkhill.”⁷¹

In August 1921 it was reported that “the example of ex-servicemen in the Western Isles is about to be followed by colleagues on the mainland. In Kiltarlity, ex-soldiers say they are tired waiting.” A meeting at Kiltarlity was chaired by MacCowan who stated that Bruiach farm had been given up by the tenant and then it had been let to someone else, even though the Board of Agriculture had been negotiating with Lovat estates about settling it with ex-soldiers. The meeting resolved that unless action was taken they would take possession of Bruiach and Teanacoil

⁶⁸ *Inverness Courier*, 23rd March 1920.

⁶⁹ *Inverness Courier*, 30th April 1920.

⁷⁰ See Leah Leneman, *Fit for Heroes: Land Settlement in Scotland after World War One* (Aberdeen, 1989), pp. 20-38.

⁷¹ *Inverness Courier*, 27th July 1919.



Rev. Roderick MacCowan in later life.

farms. In the event, nothing further came of this.⁷² Seemingly, Lord Lovat was not keen on breaking up farms and when the Board of Agriculture were attempting to purchase farms in Stratherrick, he dragged out the negotiations in order to scupper the scheme.⁷³

MacCowan had a great enthusiasm for the advancement of knowledge; in 1923 he attended a conference convened by the Carnegie UK Trust, which funded so many libraries in the Highlands and Islands. He spoke in favour of a postal lending scheme for the Northern Counties which suffered because of their scattered nature. "While in the South they had libraries and other facilities which the North did not possess, he would remind them that from the North they were sending them more valuable things than books. They were sending them the young men and women of the Highlands (Applause). They were supplying them with . . . ministers, doctors, schoolmasters, constables (much laughter) – and they wanted them to come to their help in the matter of libraries."⁷⁴

The year 1922 saw the appointment of Thomas B. Morison, member for Inverness-shire, to the post of Lord Advocate, which led to a by-election in the constituency. Two candidates came forward, Murdoch MacDonald, a National Liberal, who supported the governing coalition, and A. MacKenzie Livingstone, who stood as an independent Liberal. The *Aberdeen Journal* announced on 3rd March, "A story has got abroad that Rev. Roderick MacCowan will contest the seat untrammelled by party policy, and wave the banner of the Land Leaguers, but this is only uninformed gossip. Mr MacCowan loves his little joke – *vide*, his behaviour at meetings of [the Education Authority], but he considers a search for Parliamentary honours to be beyond his sense of humour. Keen as he is on the land question, it seems he has no intention of giving up the digging of the garden of his Highland manse for the privilege of ploughing a furrow at Westminster."⁷⁵

In fact MacCowan had been approached by several parties and had seriously considered standing. Rumours of this were flying around at the time of the Kiltarlity Communion. His only comment to reporters on the Saturday was, "I have felt the cry and have thought of launching out upon the county".⁷⁶ *The Scotsman* reported, "in a statement this

⁷² *Aberdeen Journal*, 8th August 1921.

⁷³ L. Leneman, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-9.

⁷⁴ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 8th June 1923.

⁷⁵ *Aberdeen Journal*, 3rd March, 1922.

⁷⁶ *Aberdeen Journal*, 6th March 1922.

morning after the Sacramental fast which since Thursday had compelled him to put such worldly considerations as politics out of his mind, Mr. MacCowan explained that he had been influenced in arriving at this decision by the probability of an early general election. He said if he came forward now it would just divide the forces and allow the coalition to benefit from the split vote.”⁷⁷ Murdoch MacDonald, who eventually won, was described as the preferred candidate of the Free Church, having been brought up in the denomination, a factor which may have influenced MacCowan’s decision.⁷⁸

Meanwhile in Skye, seven men from Strathaird occupied deer forest land, claiming that they were doing no wrong in seeking to cultivate some of the lands held by their forefathers for centuries. In June 1923, six land-raiders from Elgol were imprisoned for two months in Calton Jail in Edinburgh. At the Education Authority MacCowan supported a motion from Rev. Hector MacLean (parish minister of Strath) to send a protest to the Secretary of State about the crofters’ case. He said, “they in the Highlands did not want the sentence reduced, they did not want the sympathy of anybody. Those men had committed no sin against the moral law. They did not consider it a sin for men who had no outlook and no prospect of getting land from which their forefathers had been cruelly evicted. To condemn ex-servicemen who had left their limbs in France was unworthy of a Christian country.”⁷⁹ The day they went to prison, they were visited by MacCowan, “who”, the *Scotsman* reported, “has taken an interest in their case from the beginning. He opened a subscription list for them and collected £50.” In the event they were released after ten days.⁸⁰

In 1924, a public meeting was held under the auspices of the Inverness Trades and Labour Council, in support of two jailed Skye crofters, both badly wounded ex-servicemen, who were imprisoned for 25 days for having allegedly deforced a sheriff officer. Only 120 were present. MacCowan, the principal speaker, lamented, “He was afraid the

⁷⁷ *Scotsman*, 8th March 1922.

⁷⁸ Sir Murdoch MacDonald (1866-1957). A native of Inverness, whose family came from Strathglass, he was a prominent civil engineer who was involved in the construction of many famous structures, including the Aswan Dam in Egypt. His local knowledge and business acumen was evident in an extremely well-organised campaign. Sir Murdoch held the seat until his retiral in 1950 at the age of 83. In 1925, he backed the claims of the Free Church to a share of the endowments of the Established Church in the Highlands.

⁷⁹ *Inverness Courier*, 5th June 1923.

⁸⁰ *Scotsman*, 6th June 1923.

blood in Highlandmen was getting weaker, and was not as strong as it was in the veins of their forefathers when stronger protests were put forward. They should not forget the Raasay men who were sent to prison, and after they came out, went back to the land they had taken possession of, and had not been again molested. (Applause.)” In any case, “the men in prison did not touch the sheriff officer. No Skyeman would become a sheriff officer. (Laughter.)”

“How could the Board of Agriculture move when they had Lord Novar⁸¹ at the head of Scottish affairs?” MacCowan had written to him and “had never corresponded with anyone so evasive . . . for the past hundred years the Highlands had been sending Tories and Liberals to parliament, one making greater promises than the other. Whenever they were elected and got across the Grampians, they shook themselves clear of these promises. (Laughter.)” “The country should condemn the Board of Agriculture and bring it to an end. This corpse should be buried. The Board was made up largely of factors and he thought some landlords were trying to get on the Board. Would anyone put a fox as shepherd of his pens.”

All the Board of Agriculture did, he claimed, was “send Commissioners round in motor cars. They called on, say Donald MacDonald, and asked if he had applied for land to the board. Donald said, ‘Yes’, and then the Commissioners asked, ‘What money have you got for the land?’. Fancy asking that of a man who had served his country for four years and was paid a shilling a day. What an absurdity!”

At Beaulieu, they had got the land broken up into crofts, “good land too, where they had twenty-five good homes in a part that had been practically a wilderness”. Arguing that it might be right to break the law, MacCowan said that the first Land Leaguer was the mother of Moses. There was a law in Egypt that male children should be drowned but she refused to carry that law out and had been commended for what she had done.

In Skye, the population was less than 12,000, “but if the island was properly devoted to its possibilities, it could keep a population of 40,000. (Applause.) He knew every inch of Skye. The world had heard of destitution in Skye and some people were blaming the rain that came

⁸¹ Robert Munro-Ferguson, 1st Viscount Novar (1860-1934), was Liberal M.P. for Ross and Cromarty 1884-5 but was defeated by a crofter candidate. Subsequently he was private secretary to Lord Rosebery and Governor General of Australia before his appointment as Secretary of State for Scotland.

down from heaven, but he blamed the landlords and the tyranny of not giving the land to the people. (Applause.) He thought the whole show of deer forests should go and the sooner they did the better. (Laughter.) They heard a lot about sport, but they would not find the word 'sportsman' from the beginning to the end of the Bible. Sport should be thought of after the necessities of the people had been met. (Applause.) The pledges given to men who fought in the Great War should be implemented." A Petition to the King was signed at the close of the meeting.⁸²

One unusual matter which raised MacCowan's hackles was a proposal to convert the former Skye Poorhouse, which he claimed was once used as a Consumptive (Tuberculosis) Hospital, into a hostel for girls attending Portree High School. He insisted, "he would not send a dog whose life he valued within its walls" and "would submit to no man and would oppose the proposal until his dying day. (A laugh.) He did not think the scheme would work as they would never get the Skye people to send their children to that building." Another board member, Nicol Martin, said "they were always struck by Mr. McCowan's extravagant talk as he generally went too far. . . . There had only one wing been used for one consumptive patient. He asked Mr. MacCowan if that was a reason why they should destroy the building ('Yes')." Martin argued that the facility was badly needed as many girls were in "deplorable lodgings and could only walk the streets at night". Anyway, he pointed out, there was not a hotel, or even a home in Skye, where a consumptive person had not at one time resided, and went on to quote the Medical Officer of Health's opinion that the building was no danger to public health. "A man much more able to judge the matter than a minister who might be a saver of souls but certainly knew nothing about the body." MacCowan, he averred, "went to the meetings of the Authority and posed as the friend of Skye", but the residents of the Island "had their interests more at heart than a man who resided on the green fields of Beauly".⁸³ Ironically, MacCowan was included in the platform party when the Earl of Elgin opened the building the following year.⁸⁴

⁸² *Inverness Courier*, 4th January 1924; *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 5th January 1924.

⁸³ *Inverness Courier*, 30th November 1923.

⁸⁴ *Scotsman*, 1st October 1924.

7. Church courts

In Church courts, MacCowan supported the conservative side of the Free Church. Reflecting the tension which rapidly arose between the Highlands and “Edinburgh”, and was an ongoing feature of the post-1900 Free Church, at the 1912 Assembly, MacCowan drew attention to the fact that the salary of the General Treasurer, Mr. MacCulloch, had increased from £150 to £400. “He said that in the Highlands the complaint was made that the central offices were overstaffed and that too much money was spent upon them.” His colleague, Rev. John MacNeilage, minister of Dunbeath and Berriedale, “declared that the salary was disproportionate. One minister in Caithness who had a wife and family had only £1 per week and a few potatoes thrown in.”⁸⁵

Conservatives in the Free Church were keen to maintain the principle that the Church should confine its activities to the purely spiritual and refrain from getting involved in the running of social events or secular activities. This view was strongly backed by former Free Presbyterians like MacCowan.⁸⁶ At the 1914 Assembly, MacCowan supported an overture from the Synod of Moray asking the Assembly to take steps to discourage secularisation in the Church. “Bazaars, sales of work, soirees and socials,” he argued, “were not mentioned in the Bible (laughter). The question has not been put whether Moses built the Tabernacle by a sale of work (laughter). Exorbitant prices were put on articles for sale. Moses would not have paid such prices. These things were unconstitutional, not being found in the *Confession of Faith*. The Church should not be a coffee house. They served as traps and snares in the hands of unscrupulous men to take people away to the Established and United Free Churches. In the Highlands it might be difficult to get tea – something else and potatoes and herring might be given (laughter).”

The venerable Principal J. D. MacCulloch was not impressed. He “could not see anything sinfully secular about having a cup of tea. He could not see any difference in principle between sending goods to market and selling them at sales of work.” The Assembly “recorded its sympathy with the objective of the overture” but refrained from expressing an opinion on the matter. Diplomatically, Kirk Sessions were

⁸⁵ *Scotsman*, 23rd May 1912. John MacNeilage (the publisher of *Men of Skye*) had left the Free Presbyterian Church and become a Free Church probationer in May 1908.

⁸⁶ I. R. MacDonald, *Aberdeen and the Gaelic Church 1795-1900* (Edinburgh, 2000), pp. 271-2.

advised “to be careful to avoid giving offence”.⁸⁷ In 1922, Rev. Kenneth A. MacRae (Kilmuir and Stenscholl), submitted a petition against socials and sales, claiming that “Christ has condemned the spirit of merchandise in His Father’s House”. An exasperated Principal stated that it was not competent to bring [the matter] before the house this way year after year, although Rev. Norman Campbell (Dingwall) responded that there was no reason why not.⁸⁸

In *The Men of Skye*, MacCowan commends the practice of the Fathers of the Island in admitting people to Church membership, which was to wait for about three years before admitting them. Indeed, for those subject to a saving change, rather than obtaining membership, “the great thing was to make sure they were in Christ”. By contrast, “in many congregations now, many no sooner take an interest in religion than they are singing from the highest branch of the tree of profession. Such profession soon becomes stale and flat because it has no vitality.”⁸⁹

At the 1913 Assembly, there was a heated controversy over a stained-glass window in the Lochranza Free Church on the Isle of Arran. Successive Assemblies had ruled that the window should be removed but the congregation stubbornly resisted. The Presbytery of Glasgow attempted to find some kind of accommodation and consulted with the donor, Mrs. Kerr, who had gifted the window in memory of her husband. She agreed to pay for various alterations to the design, but was unwilling to remove the crown from the head of “the figure” which was in fact a “representation” of the Saviour. The wife of the minister responsible for its installation had already defected to the Church of Rome, to be followed by the minister himself, Rev. Alexander James Grant, a couple of years later.⁹⁰ Principal MacCulloch argued that “the window belonged to the local trustees and the denomination could not go and interfere with other people’s property without finding themselves landed in the

⁸⁷ *Aberdeen Journal*, 26th May 1914.

⁸⁸ *Aberdeen Journal*, 27th May 1922. MacCulloch had been minister of Latheron from 1867 to 1889 when the parish was a stronghold of “The Men” and this may have made him impatient of more conservative Highland religion. Donald Beaton says that in the 1860s Latheron “witnessed an extraordinary revival which was as a rule discountenanced by those whose discernment and piety gave weight to their opinions”, *Ecclesiastical History of Caithness* (Wick 1909), p. 233. MacCulloch was moderator of the 1901 Free Church Assembly and Principal of the Free Church College from 1905 to 1926.

⁸⁹ Roderick MacCowan, *The Men of Skye* (2013 edn.), p. 154.

⁹⁰ Grant, a native of Caithness, resigned his charge in 1908, Ewing, *Annals of the Free Church*, Vol. 1, p. 174; J. A. Lamb, *Fasti of the United Free Church of Scotland, 1900-1929* (Edinburgh, 1956), p. 288.

Police Station". He eventually conceded that the Glasgow Presbytery "could smash the window but although it might satisfy some people, it was not a right principle and could mean extinguishing small congregations". Several office-bearers of the Lochranza Church had threatened to leave if the window was removed. The leadership of the denomination, including Principal MacCulloch, Walter Rounsell Brown, and Professor John Kennedy Cameron, were in favour of compromise but MacCowan successfully moved that the image should be removed. When Rev. Finlay MacRae (Plockton and Kyle) suggested that if they could not get the image removed they should build a new church, the Principal could not disguise his irritation. "[His] cold blue eyes turned towards the speaker with the admonition he ought not to make nonsensical remarks."⁹¹ It is evident that this matter was developing into a trial of strength between the two sides of the Church.

Two years later, MacCowan and his friends once more clashed with the Principal over the issue. The *Aberdeen Journal* observed that, "the Principal's delivery was clear and impressive even if there be an atmosphere of frigidity in his presence and tones". The young MacCowan "it was soon seen, was an out and out iconoclast. Let them clear away this abomination entirely, he said. Celtic fire sparkled in his tone and it was soon evident that he had struck a sympathetic note in his audience. Mr. MacCowan, when the vote was taken, got quite excited, so much so that he lost count. His motion carried by a large majority."⁹²

At the 1916 Assembly, one elder, Robert Reid, Campbelltown, claimed that the church could be "an idol temple for devout Papists" unless the window was taken out.⁹³ But the congregation continued to defy the Presbytery and Assembly. The window was one of several issues which effectively scuppered any chance of union with the Free Presbyterians. Rev. James S. Sinclair wrote in the 1915 *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, "If the Free Church has no right to touch the window, she is under obligation to withdraw her services from a place of worship defiled by an idolatrous figure".⁹⁴ Eventually, in 1917, it was agreed to remove

⁹¹ *Aberdeen Journal*, 24th May 1913.

⁹² *Aberdeen Journal*, 24th May 1915.

⁹³ *Aberdeen Journal*, 27th May 1916.

⁹⁴ *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, July 1915.

the crown and sceptre from “the figure” so that it represented “the faithful servant” rather than the Saviour Himself.⁹⁵

In 1927, the Assembly considered a proposal to repeal the rule which gave Gaelic an equal standing with Mathematics as an entrance qualification to the Free Church College. Rev. David MacKenzie (Nairn) insisted that if the move was intended as a blow against Gaelic it would never have originated in the Presbytery of Inverness. His colleague from Kiltarlity was less convinced. “Gaelic was a great subject,” he insisted. “It was once the language of the whole of Europe.”⁹⁶ Moreover, “the Inverness people would feel insulted over the matter because they wanted a Gaelic College to be raised in Inverness”.⁹⁷

Speaking of the Inverness Free North congregation’s application for a grant for Home Mission services, he pointed out that one of the “services” mentioned was mothers’ meetings. “I think,” he said, “while other congregations have the greatest difficulty in making ends meet, it is a mistake to spend money on mothers’ meetings. We have tried them in the country and they were no use. They are just a nuisance.” Rev. Kenneth Cameron (Free North) responded that the meetings were not chargeable to the Free Church but they were “conducted quite as well as anything under the regime of Mr. MacCowan”. MacCowan quipped, “What about the gas for the meetings? (a laugh). Who pays for the tea?” But Mr. Cameron insisted, “We are doing good work in connection with these meetings. The grant is used for a student missionary.” The matter was dropped.⁹⁸

In 1930, the Free Church was attempting to negotiate union with the Original Secession, Reformed Presbyterian, and Free Presbyterian Churches. After the Free Presbyterian Church declined to enter into talks, the Committee asked to be reappointed to continue negotiation with other two Churches. At the 1931 Assembly, MacCowan seconded Kenneth MacRae’s motion that the move should be abandoned if the Free Presbyterians were not interested, as he feared that bringing in the Original Secession people would only strengthen the “Lowland ultra-progressive element” in the Free Church unless they could be countered by the conservative influence of the Free Presbyterians.⁹⁹ Their fears

⁹⁵ The window in its altered form, can still be seen in the Lochranza Parish Church, although now divided into two panels. See their website.

⁹⁶ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 28th May 1927.

⁹⁷ *Scotsman*, 28th May 1927.

⁹⁸ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 9th August 1933.

⁹⁹ *Scotsman*, 23rd May 1931.

were well-founded because when the Original Secession Church decided to disband in 1956, all but one of its twenty or so congregations joined the Church of Scotland.¹⁰⁰

A sea trip to Rome in 1933 opened MacCowan's eyes to the degeneracy of wealthy society in Europe, though it must be said that it was a bizarre choice of holiday. Aboard ship, "on the Sabbath morning, the arrangements for the day were written on a blackboard. At 11 o'clock there was divine worship, at 8 o'clock in the evening dancing on the main deck and at 9.30 talkies. That was on the Lord's Day, said Mr. MacCowan, so I ran to my cabin to escape it. During the week there was nobody worshipping God and the whole 500 passengers, young and old, were taken up with nothing but their own vanities." After landing at Monte Carlo, he saw the casino.¹⁰¹ "I have never seen a more beautifully furnished building. There were 10,000 people crowding the gambling tables from ten or eleven o'clock at night until daybreak, their eyes going out of their sockets in their excitement to rob their neighbours . . . in France every town has its casino. A statement was made by a former member of the French government that of the 40 million of the French people, 35 million were atheists. Mr. MacCowan said he did not believe that. They may not know the living God, but their god was at the gambling table."¹⁰²

Closer to home, Highland society was changing, with a growing diversity of fashionable "entertainments". Speaking at the Welfare of Youth debate at the Synod of Moray, MacCowan commented: "many parents did their best to ensure adequate religious instruction, but unfortunately there were others who did not. He had read recently of a case of a mother who went out to a WRI whist drive and dance leaving the children at home. Where were these children getting their religious instruction from?" And regarding "community drama" he warned, "everyone knew that drama meant the theatre. Many millions in money had been lavished on the theatre. For that money no return was being got just now because cinema had killed the theatre. Now an attempt was

¹⁰⁰ The single exception was Kilwinning in Ayrshire, which became a Free Church congregation.

¹⁰¹ Monte Carlo is in the Principality of Monaco, which has been ruled for centuries by the Grimaldi dynasty. The casino was opened in 1856 to save the royal family from bankruptcy and gambling has remained Monaco's main source of revenue to the present day.

¹⁰² *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 25th October 1933.

being made to get at the children and teach them the drama in early life so they would patronise it when older.”¹⁰³ In 1935 MacCowan lamented that “children nowadays are attending to every mischief and have not a sparkle of the fear of God in them”. He referred to the growth of the dancing craze in the Highlands noting, “in some places, the ministers taught even the children to play cards and to dance, and encouraged whist drives”.¹⁰⁴

The schools, too, were being caught up in the flood of modernism. In 1931, MacCowan said “that at a conference in Stirling a couple of years ago, it was stated that the system of religious instruction should be changed and that instead of beginning with the Book of Genesis, the instruction should begin with the Gospels. When it came before the Inverness-shire Education Committee, some objected to it because they thought, as he did, that that would be preparing a way for the doctrine of evolution into the schools.”¹⁰⁵ On one occasion, MacCowan picked up a copy of Arthur Conan Doyle’s novel, *His Last Bow*, in a school library. He told the Education Authority that he had read it from beginning to end and that “he was surprised it should bear the stamp of the authority. If he was going to teach a class of young men to commit murders and robberies he would take this book as his text book. Such literature should be strictly examined before being allowed in schools.” It was agreed that the offending work would be forbidden in Inverness-shire schools.¹⁰⁶

In 1932 a controversy arose in Abriachan on Loch Ness side where the Dores and Bona Church of Scotland and Free Church congregations used the schoolroom for evening services on alternate weeks.¹⁰⁷ When a new village hall was built, the Aird district School Management Committee refused to allow continued use of the school for services. The Free Presbytery of Inverness discussed the issue. It was noted that the school had been used for many years for Free Church services but the usual policy of the Committee was to refuse use of schools where alternative premises were available. The objectors were unhappy as

¹⁰³ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 24th April 1935.

¹⁰⁴ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 24th May 1935; *Scotsman*, 24th April 1935.

¹⁰⁵ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 11th November 1931.

¹⁰⁶ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 28th April 1923.

¹⁰⁷ See Katherine Stewart, *Abriachan: the story of an upland community* (Inverness, 2000), p. 147. Rev. Murdo MacKay, who was resident supply in Dores Free Church, was described as “a disciple of Drs. Begg and Kennedy” and “outspoken on such issues as the Sabbath and Romanism” (*Inverness Courier*, 24th March 1936). He published *Divine Religion* (Dingwall, n.d.), a collection of sermon outlines by himself and Dr. Kennedy.

the hall had been erected primarily for dance and entertainments. MacCowan insisted that as a former member of the Committee he knew the regulations and that they had no right to refuse use of the school. He suggested that the Presbytery send a delegation to Abriachan to tell the people they had a right to use the school. Rev. D. MacKenzie (Nairn) thought they should give the Committee an opportunity to reconsider but MacCowan “thought there was no chance of that. There is no use in carrying on with this humbug and I still think we should go to Abriachan ourselves and demand the school.” Both the Presbytery and the Kirk Session of Dores Free Church sent letters of objection. The Committee, however, were not to be persuaded and all the Presbytery could do at its subsequent meeting was express its disappointment.¹⁰⁸

8. War memorial controversy

Following the First World War, memorials to the fallen were erected in almost every parish. Given the appalling numbers of casualties it is not surprising that people wanted to honour the war-dead. But some politicians and clergymen used extravagant language regarding those who had given their lives, even blasphemously likening their actions to the Sacrifice of Christ. Rev. Donald Beaton wrote, “Far be it from us to utter a word that would indicate that we did not owe a debt of gratitude to the flower of our nation . . . but neither gratitude to the fallen nor the common claims of humanity demand that we should exalt them to places where they divide honours with the Son of God”.¹⁰⁹ Some of the prayers used at remembrance services were universalist, and implied that the war-dead were somehow guaranteed a place in heaven. Rev. K. A. MacRae was moved to write to the *Ross-shire Journal* regarding services held in connection with unveiling the new memorials: “the whole aim of which seems to be to inculcate the pagan doctrine of death in battle meaning salvation”. In particular, at Alness, Romans 8:31-36 was read, Paraphrase 68 sung, and it was stated that their death “ushered them straight into the Presence where they heard the great ‘Well done!’” MacRae accused the ritualistic party within the Presbyterian Churches of using such occasions to advance their agenda.¹¹⁰ Thus, remembrance

¹⁰⁸ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 3rd August and 5th October 1932.

¹⁰⁹ “Remembering our heroic dead”, *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 28 (1923), p. 261.

¹¹⁰ “Ritualism in Ross-shire”, *Ross-shire Journal*, 14th October 1921.



Kiltarlity war memorial.

seemed a Christian memento, which, from the fact that it dated before the time of any church separation, could not be regarded as of sectarian origin". It seems that it was Lord Lovat's idea. One speaker stated, "Lord Lovat had been through various wars, and had seen many monuments, good bad and indifferent, and they would make no mistake in carrying out his suggestion". An ex-serviceman noted that the war graves in France were marked by wooden crosses and the veterans "thought it

services at war memorials were regarded with disquiet by many conservative Protestants in the Highlands.

In October 1919 there was a meeting at Kiltarlity about the proposed war memorial. Two alternatives were discussed: a nurses' house incorporating memorial tablets or an obelisk with bronze plaques along with a new shinty pitch. Lord Lovat successfully moved that estimates should be procured and the options put to a further public meeting.¹¹¹ On that occasion, Rev. Archibald MacDonald, parish minister, moved that the memorial should be in the form of a Celtic cross instead of an obelisk. He was seconded by Father Geddes, Eskadale. A letter from Lord Lovat was read, which advocated the cross, and suggested that any surplus should go towards the nurses' house. He stated his opinion that "a Celtic Cross

¹¹¹ *Inverness Courier*, 10th October 1919.



St. Mary's Roman Catholic church, Eskadale (built 1826).

most fitting that the memorial should be in the form of a cross". MacCowan proposed that a stone monument be erected, but not a cross. Probably owing to Lord Lovat's intervention, the ex-servicemen present, mainly Lovat Scouts, voted 37 to 1 in favour of the cross.¹¹²

Afterwards, MacCowan intimated his resignation from the war memorial committee in a letter which he copied to the *Inverness Courier*. He objected to the fact that the general public, though assembled by intimation, were not permitted to vote on the issue and insisted that "a stone cross, Celtic or otherwise, is not a Christian symbol but a relic of the dark ages, and serves to revive the superstition which was rejected by our forefathers. No cross marks the graves nor is made to serve as monuments to the protestants of this parish, and should not be used now."¹¹³ His distaste was no doubt fuelled by the fact that the graveyard of St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church, Eskadale, is a veritable forest of Celtic crosses.¹¹⁴

¹¹² *Inverness Courier*, 28th October 1919.

¹¹³ *Inverness Courier*, 31st October 1919.

¹¹⁴ See photograph. The largest cross marks the grave of the mysterious Sobieski Stuarts, the brothers John and Charles Edward who claimed to be the legitimate heirs of Prince Charles Edward. In 1838, the 13th Lord Lovat built a hunting lodge for them on the

Rev. Archibald McDonald responded that “a Celtic cross is a symbol of all that we hold in reverence and respect. That it is associated with the world’s redemption.” But MacCowan insisted “Mr. MacDonald, like others before him, wishes us to go back to the early centuries for authority on these questions. He directs us to the dark ages. Donnan and Talorean are not authorities here now. John Newman and the Tractarians went for their authority to the early centuries and marched into the Church of Rome. A symbol of the Cross of Christ is not needed now. Symbol . . . means type. The time of types was the Old Testament. We don’t need them now. We are asked to look to Him on the Cross, not to a stone cross without Him. No authority is given in the New Testament to erect stone, wood or iron crosses. The Apostles never erected them. One cross was enough for them. We all know the position taken by the church at the Reformation in Scotland on these questions. All the stone symbols and relics of the dark ages were swept away.”¹¹⁵ But MacCowan’s protests were unavailing and the Celtic Cross went ahead. Despite this controversy, MacCowan was obviously still fairly popular among the veterans, for in December the same year, sailors being rather scarce in Kiltarlity, he was invited to reply for the Navy at an ex-servicemen’s dinner.¹¹⁶

9. Romanism

Roderick MacCowan was “a militant anti-Romanist who was ready in season and out of season to expose the sophistry and tyranny of the Vatican especially in National and International politics”.¹¹⁷ It is said that the Eskdale priest often met him when walking on a Saturday. The priest used to ask him if he was prepared for the next day and if MacCowan said no, he always replied, “Oh well you can just abuse the Catholic Church!”.¹¹⁸

beautiful 60-acre island of Eilean Aigas, where they lived in some style. Known as “the Princes”, they invariably wore Highland dress and used to be rowed up the river in a barge to attend Mass at Eskdale. When they appeared in public, the gentry would bow, the ladies curtsied, and the tenantry would back away from them. They learned Gaelic and wrote books on Clan history and tartans. See L. Longmore, *Land of Churches* (*Inverness Courier*, 2000), pp. 57-62. It is noteworthy that the Lovat Scout Monument in the Square at Beauly, erected in 1905 in memory of the officers and men of the Regiment who fell in the Boer War, is in the form of a cenotaph and bears no cross.

¹¹⁵ *Inverness Courier*, 18th November 1919.

¹¹⁶ *Inverness Courier*, 30th December 1919.

¹¹⁷ Obituary by R. A. Finlayson in *Free Church Monthly Record*, October 1948.

¹¹⁸ Courtesy of Mr Fraser, Kirkhill.

The 1911 McCann kidnapping case in Belfast caused an upsurge in anti-Roman Catholic feeling in the United Kingdom. In the autumn of the previous year, Alexander McCann, a Roman Catholic whose wife Agnes was a Presbyterian, suddenly absconded, probably to the USA, along with the two children of the marriage and most of the furniture, leaving his wife without any means of support. Roman Catholic clergy insisted that the marriage was invalid and the children illegitimate, owing to the infamous *Ne Temere* decree, promulgated by Pope Pius X in 1911.¹¹⁹ In the aftermath of the case, MacCowan, as Moderator of the Inverness Presbytery, commented, “in view of the intermarrying of Roman Catholics in this country, it was important that a clear statement should go forth from this Presbytery”. Rev. Murdo MacKenzie (Free North) stated that “mixed marriages led to confusion and disorder”.¹²⁰ In 1912, with the looming threat of Irish Home Rule, MacCowan presented an overture from the Inverness Presbytery which warned that the proposed Irish Parliament “would chiefly be constituted of Roman Catholics, and would be a menace and danger to the Protestants of the country”.¹²¹

In the early 1920s, particularly, Scottish Protestants across the board were united in concern at the “alarming increase of the Roman Catholic population of our great industrial centres, due to . . . the invasion of these centres by great numbers of Roman Catholics from Ireland, with large families”.¹²² Strong words were not confined to the more conservative denominations. A leading Church of Scotland minister, Rev. Dr. Cameron, Kilsyth, raged, “Scotsmen are being elbowed and jostled out of their jobs and a constant stream of the best of them is emigrating”. He referred to mixed marriages as “a woeful symptom of Scottish life” and bemoaned how girls were “betraying the faith of their fathers and also their country by entering into mixed marriages”.¹²³

¹¹⁹ The *Ne Temere* decree also insisted that the father of any mixed marriage conducted by a priest had to sign a document promising that the children would be brought up as Roman Catholics. See November 2011 *Newsletter of the Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association* (available online).

¹²⁰ *Aberdeen Journal*, 8th February 1911. The issue strengthened the cause of the Knox Club, which was founded in 1910.

¹²¹ *Scotsman*, 25th May 1912.

¹²² Report of meeting of the Scottish Reformation Society. *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 30th March 1923.

¹²³ *Aberdeen Journal*, 29th May 1922.

But men like MacCowan could see that Romanism had also already extended her influence over much of the professedly Protestant Church: "In Britain today they were seeing the Reformation cancelled. They had seen the present government and their Prime Minister moving and backing a Prayer Book with the Mass in it, but they remembered alongside of that John Knox, a greater than they, had said he would rather see an army of ten thousand marching through this country than one Mass. The Government had done that and only missed passing it into law by a very small majority." Closer to home, "in the Church of Scotland, there are ministers who are preaching or writing pure Popery. Some of these ministers are preaching Purgatory, invocation of the saints, [and] prayers for the dead. That is true in the Church of Scotland, and one of the arguments in London for the Prayer Book was that religion in St. Giles and St. Cuthberts was not what it had been." Of the United Free Church, MacCowan declared, "they had professors in the colleges denying the virgin birth . . . these men were allowed by the General Assembly to teach the rising ministry. A Church which denied the virgin birth was not worthy to be called a Christian Church at all." He warned, "It is for us to be warning our people not to be carried away with this flood and all this business about Union. We stand against these things."¹²⁴

MacCowan's particular bugbear was the state-funding of Romanist schools through the 1918 Education Act. At the 1923 Assembly, Rev. Alexander Stewart (Edinburgh) spoke before MacCowan on the issue, emphasising how there was "tremendous indignation Popery was being subsidised under the Education Act . . . and its coffers were being filled from the pockets of Protestant ratepayers".¹²⁵ In 1925 MacCowan tabled a resolution at the Inverness Presbytery regarding the repeal of the Act. The country, he insisted, was ignorant "of its danger to Protestantism and its encouragement to Popery. By the terms of the Union the Crown was bound to maintain Protestantism in Scotland. The Free Church should devote its energy to oppose the Act. If they took in Popery as they were doing in the Act, they were taking in the curse of God. He was glad to see that his Free Church friends in Dingwall did not attend the ceremony of the unveiling of the Popish cross there"¹²⁶ . . . the Established

¹²⁴ *Inverness Courier*, 26th April 1929.

¹²⁵ *Scotsman*, 6th July 1923.

¹²⁶ The Cambrai Cross, a rustic wooden cross originally set up at Fontain Notre Dame in France as a memorial to the 4th Battalion Seaforth Highlanders killed at the Battle of Cambrai in November 1917 but brought back to Dingwall, the regimental headquarters,

Church Presbytery of Glasgow had unanimously declared for the repeal of the Act and so should every Presbytery of the Free Church. They should . . . return to the old school board system. The seeds of the Reformation were destroyed in the Act.”¹²⁷

The following year, MacCowan and two local United Free ministers successfully opposed the amalgamation of the Protestant and Roman Catholic schools at Marydale. A public meeting at Cannich resolved, “we will not send our children to a school taught by a Roman Catholic teacher who is not allowed by his creed to teach the history of this Protestant country and further that the atmosphere of a Roman Catholic school would be detrimental to the spiritual wellbeing of our children”.¹²⁸

At the 1935 Assembly, a debate on Public Questions was wound up by MacCowan whose speech, reported the *Press and Journal*, “proved so interesting that even after the Moderator ruled that his time had been reached the house voted that he be given a further period. He declared that the greatest menace of the present day was not Sabbath desecration but Popery for it violated the first commandment. It was aided by the Education Act and the devil was coming into the country through the schools.” He suggested a special day be appointed on which ministers might preach on the danger of Romanism.¹²⁹

In the spring of 1923, it was announced that King George V and Queen Mary were to visit Pope Pius XI while on a state visit to Italy. In view of the fact that the Act of Settlement (1689) explicitly bans from the Throne any “who shall be reconciled to or shall hold communion with the See of Rome”, Protestants all over the United Kingdom raised strong objections. A mass meeting was held in the Albert Hall, London. The Knox Club wrote to all Scottish Presbyteries encouraging them to object. Most did: even the United Free Presbytery of Edinburgh voted 30-28 to send a Protest letter.¹³⁰ At the Free Presbytery of Inverness, MacCowan, described as “a well known Highland minister”, “asked if the King was to visit the Pope would he fall on his knees before him. He greatly

and re-erected in Station Square (opposite the Free Church) in 1925. See *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 13th March 1925. In 2014 it was replaced by an exact replica for the third time (*Ross-shire Journal*, 9th June 2014).

¹²⁷ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 3rd April 1925.

¹²⁸ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 16th August 1926.

¹²⁹ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 24th May 1935.

¹³⁰ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 3rd May 1923. Ironically, Principal Alexander Martin (son of Hugh) voted against.

objected to the king, whom they greatly respected and loved, going to the Vatican to bow before the Pope of Rome.” Professor MacLeod stated that the required etiquette “would be degrading to the King” and Rev. John F. MacLennan (Glenurquhart) said “the King and his advisors had to be reminded that he was King because he was a Protestant”.

But George V was not the first monarch to meet the Pope. His father, Edward VII, called on Pope Leo XIII on 29th April 1903. When this was first suggested, the Cabinet expressed the view that it was inappropriate. According to accepted protocol, the King could only meet the Pope in a formal State Visit but the Papacy lost its status as a sovereign state when its territories were annexed by Italy in 1870. Prominent Romanists, however, especially the Duke of Norfolk, the Earl Marshal of England, felt that it would be an insult to their co-religionists if the meeting was cancelled.¹³¹ Although the visit did go ahead, it was considerably scaled back, as a result of the strongly worded protests of Protestants. The King went to the Vatican as a “private visitor” wearing civilian clothes and in a closed carriage. Although it was still intended that Italian troops should line the route and a cavalry escort and military band would accompany him, on the day the King requested the Italian Minister of War to cancel these arrangements.¹³² Nevertheless, the *Aberdeen Journal* enthused, “there is a picturesqueness about [the visit] which appeals vividly to the imagination. It was a thoughtful courtesy on the part of the King . . . a small section of ultra-Protestants has fulminated against it but the protests emanating from the Protestant Alliance and cognate bodies have found no echo in the country. Nobody really imagines that the courteous consideration of King Edward for the aged and venerated Pope is to be construed as an act of homage.” It was also emphasised that the visit would go down well with Irish Roman Catholics, whose loyalty to the Crown was being tested by the rise of Irish Nationalism.¹³³

Following George V’s visit in the spring of 1923, the British Press printed gushing reports. The *Press and Journal’s* reporter was obviously so bedazzled by the impressive ceremonial that the wider significance of the event passed him by. As the procession came up the marble staircase, “the scene was one of sheer loveliness and colour, harmonising perfectly

¹³¹ Matthew Glencross, “Visiting the Pope”, *History and Policy* (on Twitter).

¹³² *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 8, pp. 74-75.

¹³³ *Aberdeen Journal*, 30th April 1903.

with the exquisite marble and paintings adorning the fifteenth century Hall”, which was lined by the Garde Nobile and the Swiss Guards. “King George was attired in naval full dress uniform and Queen Mary wore a black mantilla and black dress.” The reason for the Queen’s choice of clothing, that her Protestantism compelled her to wear black as a sign of penitence, was ignored, as it invariably is in Press accounts of Royal audiences with the Pope.¹³⁴

In 1929, Mussolini and Pius XI concluded the Lateran treaty which formally handed over the Vatican buildings and grounds along with £19,200,000 to compensate for the loss of the Papal States. Following this, the Vatican City was recognised as a sovereign state by many countries, including the United Kingdom. In 1934 the provision was formally incorporated in the King’s Regulations. At the Free Synod of Moray, MacCowan strongly criticised a Government decision which meant that the Pope was recognised as a temporal sovereign and warships obliged to fire salutes for himself as well as papal nuncios and legates.¹³⁵ He stated that this “could not but be offensive to Protestants in the Royal Navy. Altogether it was a dangerous thing for the realm. Those who had served in the Navy during the war knew the tender feelings of officers and men on that question.” Rev. Murdo Campbell (Glenmoriston) added, “If the Pope was to be recognised as a temporal sovereign just because of his toy kingdom at the Vatican, every crofter in Lewis or Skye was just as much a king”.¹³⁶

After her defeat in the First World War, a humiliated Germany chafed under enforced disarmament and the other harsh terms of the Versailles Treaty. France maintained a huge army in order to keep her former enemy in a state of permanent subjection. The rise of the Nazi movement and the appointment of Adolf Hitler as Reich Chancellor on 31st January 1933 made resolution of the tensions between the two nations a matter of the highest priority for Europe’s statesmen. The

¹³⁴ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 10th May 1923.

¹³⁵ See Albert Close, *Jesuit Plots from Elizabethan to Modern Times* (London, 1930), pp. 20-23, 32-39. The 1934 announcement was mysteriously downplayed by most leading newspapers. In fact, diplomatic recognition was given to the Papacy in December 1914, for the first time since almost 400 years, when Sir Henry Howard was appointed Extraordinary Minister Plenipotentiary to the Vatican, ostensibly only until the end of hostilities. The reason was that the British Government was afraid that the Papacy was too pro-German. A Diplomatic presence has, however, been maintained ever since although it was not until 1980 that a full Ambassador was appointed. (Wikipedia.)

¹³⁶ *Inverness Courier*, 25th April 1934; *Scotsman*, 25th April 1934.

British Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, and Foreign Secretary, Sir John Simon, announced that they would take part in talks in Paris, Geneva and Rome, in an effort to secure international disarmament in order to placate the Germans and defuse the situation. At the request of Miss Ishbel MacDonald, who was accompanying her father, the party were flown from Geneva to Rome by the Italian Aviation Minister. There, they met with Mussolini and also Pope Pius XI.

The Free Presbytery of Inverness objected to the impending visit, claiming that it “countenances a system inimical to the Protestant constitution of the realm” and involved “tacit approval” of the Papacy’s “extraordinary claims over the lives and consciences of men”. It also demanded the withdrawal of the British representative to the so-called Holy See. Rev. D. MacKenzie (Nairn) commented that “coquetting with such a system is fraught with danger to British liberty”. MacCowan went further claiming, “the Parliament seemed to be playing with the country. Mr. Lloyd George had put forward the suggestion that all the churches in Christendom should meet, with the Pope as chairman, and make a declaration for peace. The most bloodthirsty character in the world today is the Pope and he is to be appointed chairman. Thus speaks Mr. Lloyd George as if by a wave of his hand he can turn the church, but not the Church of Rome. Protestantism is a sleeping lion.”¹³⁷ A letter was sent to Sir Murdoch MacDonald, M.P. for Inverness-shire, but he maintained that the goal of disarmament justified the visit and wrote, “sound Protestant though I know myself to be, I cannot agree with or support the resolutions your Presbytery came to”.¹³⁸

In the House of Commons, Winston Churchill was scathing in his criticism of MacDonald’s visit to Rome, saying that it gave Mussolini the same sort of pleasure that a Pope had long ago when the Emperor visited him at Canossa. Many MPs were “astonished at the severity of his invective”. Churchill insisted that MacDonald’s policy had made Britain weaker and brought her closer to war. He also questioned the wisdom of pressing France to disarm.¹³⁹

MacCowan clearly infuriated the editor of the Romanist newspaper, *The Tablet*, who complained, “Upon our writing desk at the moment there lie cuttings, from Scottish newspapers, measuring nearly

¹³⁷ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 22nd March 1933.

¹³⁸ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 11th April 1933.

¹³⁹ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 24th March 1933.

three yards in length and they are practically all devoted to Presbyterian outbursts of ‘No Popery’”. But MacCowan’s words in Inverness seem to have particularly annoyed the editor who fumed, “not a single member of the Presbytery discharged the duty of protest” when MacCowan made his “abominable statement”.¹⁴⁰ In June, following the Free Presbyterian Synod, which discussed a report on “betting and gambling, sweepstakes and [Sabbath] desecration”, *The Tablet* queried, “would our Presbyterian friends think well of us if a Catholic priest read out to an ecclesiastical gathering a report of an official character on Presbyterianism, intemperance and swearing?”¹⁴¹

Although the Presbytery again expressed their dissatisfaction at Sir Murdoch’s views, he stood firm, informing them that “the Prime Minister himself saw the correspondence in the press and spoke to me about my reply”, and going on, “the facts of history, however cogent in themselves have little to do with the necessity of impressing today on all mankind . . . that it is desirable to reduce armaments”.¹⁴²

Surprisingly, MacCowan was present at a requiem mass for Lord Lovat at Eskadale, following his sudden death while watching his son, the Master of Lovat, compete in an Oxford University point-to-point race in February 1933.¹⁴³

10. The Sabbath

MacCowan prophetically warned, “when all these new buses, trains and steamers come, they will just kill Christianity. When the Sabbath is broken, man has broken the last link connecting him with God.”¹⁴⁴ In September 1927, at the Free Church Presbytery of Inverness, there was a discussion regarding road work on the Sabbath on the A9, which as a trunk road was maintained by the Ministry of Transport rather than the county council. Mr. MacCowan said that “the country was rapidly going to destruction and it looked as if they could not stop the growing practices to destroy the sanctity of the Sabbath Day. They read in the press that man was descended from the apes. That was blasphemy. Was it for the apes that Christ died?”¹⁴⁵ In 1933, when the Presbytery was discussing

¹⁴⁰ *The Tablet*, 8th April 1933.

¹⁴¹ *The Tablet*, 10th June 1933.

¹⁴² *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 16th May 1933.

¹⁴³ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 23rd February 1933.

¹⁴⁴ *Inverness Courier*, 26th April 1929.

¹⁴⁵ *Scotsman*, 21st September 1927.

the violation of the Sabbath by holding funerals on that day, MacCowan obscurely stated, “he thought they only took place in Iceland”.¹⁴⁶

In those days, ministers of all denominations in the Highlands were committed to maintaining the public Sabbath. In 1914, MacCowan submitted a motion that the Free Church Presbytery write to the Town Clerk of Inverness against opening the reading room of the Public Library on Sabbath. He suggested that this “would create a trap for young men from the country residing in lodgings in Inverness. Young people belonging to the town resided with their parents, who could look after them. The literature of the reading room was not suitable for Sabbath reading. It included socialist journals in which atheism was promulgated.”¹⁴⁷ At a 1933 meeting of the Inverness and North of Scotland Branch of the Lord’s Day Observance Association of Scotland, MacCowan colourfully referred to “four great Sabbath-breakers [who] met on the Sabbath day recently: Ramsay MacDonald, Sir John Simon, Mussolini and the Pope of Rome, who met to consider international political questions. That was a very bad example to set in statesmanship and it was no wonder that God punished nations as he was doing.”¹⁴⁸ At this time there was concern over newsagents’ shops in the Highlands, ironically mainly those run by Italian immigrants, opening on the Sabbath.

In Skye, a more unusual kind of Sabbath-breaking had been censured by MacCowan in *The Men of Skye*. Around the coasts of the Island, salmon netting was carried on by the firm of Johnstone’s of Montrose and the bag nets were left open on Sabbath, even though the law of the United Kingdom, then as now, forbids fishing on the Sabbath. The men employed got a share of the fish, including some who were members of the Free Church. MacCowan noted that “Skyemen have now got accustomed to this great evil and public desecration of the Lord’s Day that they think nothing of it”. Moreover the pre-1900 Free Church Presbytery decided that those involved in “this cursed work” were not guilty of any sin which deserved refusal of the ordinances.¹⁴⁹ It is notable that Norman Munro (Missionary, Staffin), a friend of MacCowan who assisted him in compiling his book, had incurred the displeasure of his

¹⁴⁶ *Scotsman*, 23rd September 1933.

¹⁴⁷ *Aberdeen Journal*, 7th January 1914.

¹⁴⁸ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 7th April 1933.

¹⁴⁹ Roderick MacCowan, *The Men of Skye* (2013 edn.), p. 94.

fellow-elders in the Free Church when he attempted to have Church privileges withdrawn from those involved. He subsequently joined the Free Presbyterian Church in 1893.¹⁵⁰

11. Conclusion

After retiring from Kiltarlity in 1936, MacCowan supplied various vacant congregations. At the induction of his successor there, Rev. William Fraser in 1938, it was stated that MacCowan was preaching in the overwhelmingly Roman Catholic island of Barra, primarily to meet the needs of the Free Church adherents who followed the herring fishing.¹⁵¹ The Free Church had been allocated a mission house there in 1904. By 1940, however, MacCowan moved to the island of Raasay, where he provided regular pulpit supply for the small Free Church congregation there which had been vacant since 1934.¹⁵² Mr. MacCowan resided at Holoman House (postal address “The Manse, Raasay”), which was the original Free Presbyterian manse and looked across the water to his childhood home.¹⁵³ He was very well liked by the Raasay people.

An anecdote is recorded of the old minister being invited to dinner by a Raasay family in the 1940s. When asked to say grace, “the honoured guest went into geographical detail in his one-sided discourse with the Almighty, ending up with a vivid description of the beautiful bens of Skye, before setting off at some pace to deal with the state of the nation. When at last we tucked into the fried haddock it was no longer juicy. The minister said it was very good and I am sure he said so sincerely. He was a regular and welcome visitor and a bit lonely. He had great charisma and was a scholar in the truest sense of the word.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ Like Donald Kelly and Peter Campbell, as a young man Norman had worked in the Clyde shipyards. As missionary, he officiated at Staffin and Kilmuir in rotation with the minister. In 1892, at the time of the Free Presbyterian separation, the minister appeared in Staffin in Matheson’s place one Sabbath and told the people that there were “two ministers going about the Highlands seeking to draw the people to themselves and if they should come here I will give you two reasons why you should not go [to hear them]. First they are against the crofters, and second they are like Rehoboam King of Israel, counselled by young men who are too rash”; see “The Late Norman Munro, Staffin, Skye”, *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, March 1904, pp. 427-431.

¹⁵¹ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 16th July 1938.

¹⁵² G. N. M. Collins, *Annals of the Free Church 1900-1986* (Edinburgh, 1986), p. 57. Since the translation of Rev. Archibald MacDonald to Sleat in 1934, the congregation has never had another resident minister.

¹⁵³ Address given in *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, Vol. 75 (1941), p. xxiii.

¹⁵⁴ John Nicolson, *I Remember: Memories of Raasay* (Birlinn, 2002), p. 132.

MacCowan had an unfortunate accident one day when out fishing in the Sound of Raasay. He fell out of his boat and was left hanging on to the side for a long time until someone spotted him from the shore and summoned help. For the last few years of his life he never fully recovered his previous robust health.¹⁵⁵ He thereafter stayed with his niece at Camustianavaig, moving eventually to Portree hospital where he died on 19th September 1948. He was buried along with his parents, and his brother Ian who died in 1968, in the Sronuirinish cemetery. The stone is inscribed with the verse, “My presence shall go with thee and I will give thee rest”.

A scholarly man, “his collection of Gaelic and general Highland literature was perhaps the largest and most valuable in any private library”. His library suggests that he was a man of varied and erudite interests. It included sets of the Spalding and New Spalding Clubs, the *Scottish Historical Review*, a set of the *Scots Magazine* from 1739 to 1824, the *Celtic Review* and English County Histories, as well as works on India and Japan, Naval History, Antiques, Geology, Ornithology, and Heraldry. Following his death, it was auctioned off in Edinburgh.¹⁵⁶ As a member of the Gaelic Society of Inverness, he presented several papers, including *An Ciaran Mabach: A Skye Bard of the 17th Century* in 1930¹⁵⁷ and *Skye Under the Norse Occupation* in 1935,¹⁵⁸ and he also gave public talks on historical subjects, particularly relating to the Isle of Skye. MacCowan became a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1924.¹⁵⁹

He was indeed “a deeply interesting and lovable personality, to stranger and familiar friend alike he was always the Christian gentleman and a genuine lover of his fellow men”. The Inverness Presbytery in its tribute stated: “reared in an Evangelical environment and helpfully influenced by the traditions of the piety of ‘the Men’ and ministers whose witness enriched the neighbourhood of his birth, he was a lover of good men, given to hospitality and possessed a carefully collected library and a well informed mind”.¹⁶⁰ A lifelong bachelor he was remembered as “a keen politician, usually agin the government”.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁵ Anecdote courtesy of Mr. Andrew Gillies, Raasay.

¹⁵⁶ *Scotsman*, 29th June 1949, gives a detailed list.

¹⁵⁷ *Inverness Courier*, 2nd December 1930.

¹⁵⁸ *Inverness Courier*, 11th January 1935.

¹⁵⁹ See *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries*, Vol. 59 (1925), p. xxiv.

¹⁶⁰ Inverness Presbytery minutes, 5th October 1948.

¹⁶¹ *Northern Chronicle*, 22nd September 1948.

When assisting at the Aultbea Communion he went swimming in the sea each morning.¹⁶²

MacCowan was a prominent figure in the Highlands for a generation and he probably attracted more headlines in the Press than any other Free Church minister of his day. He combined theological conservatism with political radicalism and it is obvious from reports of his speeches that he had a ready wit and popular touch. One wonders whether his fascination with politics and the land issue was regarded as an unsuitable use of time for a Free Presbyterian divinity student and possibly contributed to his move to the Free Church. MacCowan's political career does seem surprising in view of his strong criticism of professing Christians getting too involved in unspiritual activities. While he seems to have been a rather impulsive character, MacCowan was unswervingly committed to maintaining Biblical and Reformation Principles.

He also exemplifies an age in which people in general were much more willing to speak their mind, both in secular and ecclesiastical circles. In subsequent generations, particularly in Church courts, a reluctance to engage in plain speaking has had its own baneful effect in the gradual removing of the "old landmarks", with scarcely a voice raised in protest. In the light of the events of their younger days, Roderick MacCowan and others of his generation were well aware of how the Church could lose its grip on important principles when diplomacy took the place of speaking out on the side of the Truth.

¹⁶² Angus MacKinnon, *Highland Minister* (Sydney, 1997), p. 386.