

**The Priestly Life of Fr Allan MacDonald  
1859 -1905  
'Striving for Improvement'**



## INTRODUCTION

I am grateful to the organisers of this symposium for their kind invitation to me to offer the following thoughts on the priestly life of Fr Allan MacDonald.

During my research for this presentation, I was struck by the fact that John Lorne Campbell entitled one of his pamphlets on Fr Allan: 'Fr Allan MacDonald: Priest, Poet, and Folklorist'. We may speculate as to whether or not this description of Fr Allan and the ordering of the words 'Priest, Poet, and Folklorist' are purely accidental, which I doubt. However, we can be certain that in terms of priority Fr Allan saw himself as a 'priest', first and foremost. His whole life from a very early age had been focussed on training for the priesthood and for twenty three years that is what he lived. He preached the word, taught the faith, celebrated the sacraments, and led his people to improvement in the spiritual life and to improvement in their social and economic condition. From the diary that he wrote from September 1897 to June 1898 we receive insights into his own spiritual development. We are made aware from the Diary, too, that he was extremely conscious of his own weaknesses, of his lack of, as he calls it 'regularity'; he was conscious, too, of his intemperate nature, of his chronic illness, and of his loneliness.

Fr Allan MacDonald was a priest who was also a poet and a folklorist. He was not a poet and a folklorist who happened to be a priest. It is his priestly life which 'informs' much of his 'bardachd' and inspires him to work so assiduously to find new ways of expressing the faith.

Avoiding the twin temptations of either demythologising him or canonising him, we ought to examine the priestly life of Fr Allan in the ecclesiastical and theological context of his time, along with the spirituality which he would have been immersed in. In this presentation, then, I aim to describe some of the formative influences on his life and on the particular character of his priesthood.

My presentation of the Priestly Life of Fr Allan will be both chronological and analytical covering the following headings:

1. FR ALLAN – THE EARLY INFLUENCES
2. CHALLONER'S CATECHISM: HAY'S 'SINCERE, DEVOUT, AND PIOUS CHRISTIAN': FABER
3. SUMMARY OF FR ALLAN'S PRIESTLY LIFE IN 1882
4. FR ALLAN – OBAN, DALIBURGH: BISHOP ANGUS MACDONALD
5. ERISKAY – THE DIARY (1897-1898)
6. THE APOSTOLIC UNION OF PRIESTS
7. FR ALLAN – AN ASSESSMENT OF HIS PRIESTLY LIFE

# **1. FR ALLAN – THE EARLY INFLUENCES**

## **a. Fort William – Blairs**

Fr Allan, as we know, was born in Fort William in 1859. A great deal of research has already been done into his family background. I won't repeat information which can be found elsewhere.

During Fr Allan's childhood, the catholic community in Fort William was developing very rapidly. It was becoming a confident institution. The parish priest from 1854 to 1871 was the legendary Fr Coll MacDonald – 'legendary' because during the 1853 evictions in Knoydart he gave shelter in the church grounds to many families. In 1854 he was transferred to the developing parish of Fort William where he remained until 1871.

In 1867 the new church in Fort William (the present HIE building) was opened. It was debt free – a rare thing indeed for that or any other time! A first cousin to the mother of Blessed Mary MacKillop, Fr Coll was typical of the best of the priests who came from Lochaber, confident in his own faith but also highly respected within the broader community and at ease with people of all denominations.

In 1870 the young Allan MacDonald went to Blairs (he would have been no more than twelve years of age). We have no direct evidence that he was selected as a possible vocation for the priesthood by Fr Coll but that would have been the case since it was the pattern of the time. He would have seen in him a potential vocation on the basis of intelligence, family background, piety, and character.

Allan MacDonald did not like his time at Blairs and he made no secret of it! It was a harsh environment from the point of view of study, discipline, and the lack of food! There was no teaching of Gaelic but there was a great deal of exposure to the classics, both Latin and Greek, the latter being a subject that Allan MacDonald had a life-long aversion to.

## **b. The Royal Scots College, Valladolid**

On 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1875 he arrived at the Royal Scots College, Spain. He was sixteen, the youngest student at the college. Incidentally, he would not have been home throughout the entire time of his training and during this period both his mother and his father died! To our sensibilities this absence from home and lack of family contact may appear inhuman, if not brutal, but it has to be emphasised that training for the priesthood in those days, and up until relatively recently, involved complete separation from the 'world' and 'family' was part of the 'world'. In the same spirit, 'particular' friendships were banned amongst the students. As well as being seen as unhealthy in themselves, a

life free from particular friendships was seen as the preparatory prerequisite for the parish life where the priest was not to have friends amongst his parishioners.

A week before Allan MacDonald's arrival, several other new students had arrived some of whom, I suggest, had a significant influence on the formation of Fr Allan. These were: Duncan MacQueen from Kintail (his mother was a MacRae) who became the long serving priest of Inverness from 1889 to 1918; James Chisholm from Strathglass who became Parish Priest of Castlebay 1882 to 1903 and built the present church in 1888; Donald MacLellan from Kilpheder who left on 13<sup>th</sup> June 1880 due to ill health, completed his studies in Glasgow, and served in Morar from 1888 until his death 1903. They were joined in 1880 by John MacKintosh, another native of Lochaber, who was the esteemed parish priest of Bornish from 1882 to 1900 and who figures in both Fr Allan's 'bardachd' and in his diary.

Although MacQueen, Chisholm, and MacLellan were five years older than Allan MacDonald, they were all in the same year together. They were all native Gaelic speakers, apart from him.

### **b. 1 Fr David MacDonald**

But probably the most influential individual in relation to the early development and formation of Fr Allan was Fr David MacDonald, 'Don David'. From Fort William, and a native Gaelic Speaker, he had arrived in the college in Spain as a professor in 1865, teaching humanities and philosophy. In 1876 he became Vice Rector and moved to teaching theology. Finally, he became Rector of the College in 1879, a position that he held until his retirement in 1904.

He has been described as *'open, candid, generous, opposed to all hypocrisy and pretence, with a complete lack of tact. In fact, David MacDonald probably regarded 'tact' as another word for hypocrisy'*. He is also described as *'a Scot of Scots, tall, thin, and sinewy, a Highlander, a scholar and a linguist, withal a gentleman'*. There is, to my mind, little doubt that the young Allan MacDonald modelled himself on 'Don David': the qualities that he admired in others and the vices that he despised are parallel to the attitudes of 'Don David'

With the encouragement, approval, and insistence of Fr David, and learning from the other Gaelic speaking students, Allan MacDonald developed his Gaelic. There was a small but powerful Gaelic community within the College.

All the teaching at the College was done 'in house'. The students did not attend the local ecclesiastical college run by the Augustinians but were taught by the members of the staff, using the standard manuals of philosophy and theology which they themselves would have learned from. But it wasn't a stale intellectual environment free from the stimulus of new ideas. A new Vice Rector arrived in 1875, the year that Allan MacDonald entered the College. He was Fr James MacDonald, a priest of the Northern District. Fr David says of him after Fr James had returned from a visit to Scotland: *'Fr*

*James arrived all sound and safe but as Thomistic and pugnacious as ever.....that little firebrand came back, setting us all at loggerheads with questions about the haecitas of something, matter and form etc until we have all threatened to silence him by an argumentum a posteriori*'. This was the College reaction to the 'new' philosophy and theology that was sweeping through the Catholic Church in Europe – Thomism!

## **b. 2 The Academy**

One of the features of the life of the College in Spain was the weekly 'Academy'. It was revived in 1873 and was in full flight during Fr Allan's time. In fact, as an institution, it survived until modern days. Meetings lasted from sixty to ninety minutes. Their structure was formal. Students would prepare essays on any subject and would have them criticised by other designated students. Its original purpose was 'to foster eloquence so that students would later excel in the pulpit'.

The College in Spain had a reputation, at least by its own account, of producing great preachers. This may in fact have been true. I remember my grandmother having a saying: 'France is for the worker; Spain is for the preacher; and Rome is for the learned man'.

A college magazine was produced, the Academician, to which the students were encouraged to contribute essays, poetry, and plays. Alongside this, a Gaelic magazine was published (of which, I believe, one copy survives) that contains Allan MacDonald's first efforts at Gaelic poetry.

The College was a stimulating and productive literary environment where the students were encouraged through constructive criticism to improve their literary technique, where opinions (not just in philosophy and theology, but also in politics) were formed and then dismantled to be re-formed and honed. A characteristic of Fr Allan in later life is not just the breadth and depth of his reading, both secular and religious, but is the confidence with which he makes critical judgments on works of literature – a confidence which I am sure he picked up in the hothouse of the Academy in Spain.

For instance, in his diary entry for 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1898, he writes: '*Read Rob Donn for vocabulary purposes. His vocabulary is more valuable than his poetry. His subjects are often coarse and treated coarsely. His reputation is greater than his merits*'.

Plays and operas were performed in the College theatre.

## **b.3 The College Programme of Life**

To our eyes today, the students' programme would appear to be tough and rigorous. The College rules had been put in place by Bishop Murdoch in 1859.

They rose at 6am, 5am from Easter to October. Then followed ½ hour to wash; ½ for prayer and meditation; ½ spiritual reading; then Mass; 1hr study before breakfast; 10am to 12.45am class; Rosary; 1pm Dinner; recreation until 3pm; 3pm -7.30pm study and

classes; on vacant days they would all walk out in a body at the time and to the place appointed by the Rector; 7.30 Litany and lives of the Saints; 8pm Supper followed by recreation; prayers at 9pm; lights out at 9.30pm.

For five weeks each year, late September to the end of October, the whole College decamped to the villa at Boecillo. At the villa there were less communal exercises. Each day they went walking for an hour and a half after breakfast and after dinner but *'they were not to go into villages nor cross rivers, nor remove from the house more than one league.....nor purchase wine, spirits, milk, eatables, nor accept if offered – nor carry grapes or any kind of fruit to the house'*.

Amongst the students and the staff there was a great fear of disease: cholera; smallpox; and, above all, tuberculosis. Regularly, students were sent home suffering from chest pains only to die shortly after arrival in Scotland.

Curiously, the spiritual formation of the students was entrusted to the 'decano', the senior student in the college. This was something that Fr James MacDonald in particular strongly objected to considering, as he did, that such an important role should be entrusted to a priest, but his was a lone voice. The staff generally didn't get much involved with discipline and training. These areas were left to the 'decano'. The rules were there. They had to be kept!

## **2. CHALLONER'S CATECHISM; BISHOP HAY'S 'SINCERE, DEVOUT, AND PIOUS CHRISTIAN'; FABER.**

As well as his theological and philosophical formation, his literary and gaelic formation, Fr Allan was strongly influenced by the standard catechetical and devotional works of the day: Challoner's catechism, the predecessor of the Penny catechism, Bishop Hay's catechism, and the devotional and spiritual writings of Faber, whom Fr Allan particularly admired.

Because he was using it almost daily, we will look at the five volume compendium of Catholic doctrine, spiritual improvement, and piety, called 'The Sincere, Devout, and Pious Christian' published between 1781 and 1786 by Bishop George Hay (1726 -1811), Bishop of the Lowland District. Fr Allan uses it in his instructions during his time in Daliburgh and Eriskay. He is influenced very strongly by its devotional exercises. For instance, I have heard it said that Fr Allan's sung Gaelic commentary on the Mass is entirely original. This is not strictly true. He follows the model outlined in Bishop Hay's work where the prayers to be recited privately during Mass are listed along with the times that they are to be said. A quotation from Bishop Hay's work will show what I mean:

Prayers at Mass according to the four great ends of sacrifice

Prayer of humiliation as Mass begins

From beginning of Mass to Elevation

Adoration  
Thanksgiving  
Propitiation  
Petition  
At the consecration and elevation  
After the elevation to Pater Noster  
Oblation and commemoration of the Passion  
After the Pater Noster  
A Spiritual Communion  
A Prayer after Communion  
At the Blessing

Fr Allan's genius and originality comes with his ability to simplify these prayers, translate them into Gaelic verse, and to have them sung together by the people, not to have invented them.

While the content of Bishop Hay's work, the Sincere Christian, (a compendium of the belief of Catholics) appears regularly as the source for Fr Allan's instructions and his sermons and is reflected in his religious poetry, the Devout Christian and the Pious Christian are one of the standards against which he measures his own progress in the spiritual life, and that of others.

The sixth chapter of the Devout Christian concerns our happiness in this life if we keep the commandments. Bishop Hay makes two clear statements: *'True happiness is not to be found in worldly enjoyments'* and *'We must not seek happiness in worldly things'*. He goes on to make what, to our ears today, is a startling statement: *'If, therefore, a life of piety and obedience to the commandments of God be the natural effect which a lively faith produces in our conduct, where faith gives none of these effects which are proper to its vitality, and still more if it does not deter us from sin, which is directly opposed to its light, we must conclude that it is dead, a mere phantom, and far from that faith by which we live to God'*. Put simply: a life of piety and devotion indicates a living faith whereas the absence of these indicates a faith that has no depth.

One might be forgiven for assuming that the writings of Bishop Hay, a convert to Catholicism from Episcopalianism, contain much of the supposedly characteristic Presbyterian 'despising the world' but 'despising the world' was a common phenomenon of Catholic spirituality of the time as was the theory of 'meritorious' acts.

The purpose of life, according to Bishop Hay and other spiritual writers, is to win the salvation of your soul. How is this to be achieved?

Salvation is not seen and lived as something that has been won for us by Christ where, as a consequence, our role in life is to co-operate with his grace. Rather 'salvation' is something that I win for myself. How is this to be done?

The answer lies in the theory of grace which insists that acts which in themselves are good only become 'meritorious' (i.e. grace filled) when they are performed as a result of the proper motivation being applied to them. No matter how much good a person may do this is worthless in the terms of one's eternal salvation if it is not done for 'meritorious' motives. Consequently a great deal of time and energy is to be spent in the 'purification' of motives.

### **3. SUMMARY OF FR ALLAN'S PRIESTLY LIFE IN 1882**

If we were to paint a picture of Fr Allan in 1882 we might come up with the following components. He was young – only 23 at the time of his ordination. He was bright, energetic, full of zeal for the mission. He would have been influenced by certain personalities along his journey to the priesthood, principal amongst those was Fr David MacDonald, rector of the seminary, gaelic speaker, and a native of Fort William. His formation would have been theologically and philosophically adequate but with little encouragement towards speculation. He would have been accustomed to scripture being used to justify or prove theological points of doctrine. He would have been used to a 'regular' life, enjoying the support and company of fellow students. Through the Academy he would have begun the development of his literary abilities and would have composed in both Gaelic and English. But his fluency in Gaelic, I suspect, would have been relatively poor. His spiritual life would have involved the celebration of Mass, the saying of the Office, the recitation of the rosary amongst other devotional exercises, and his own salvation would have been governed by the performance of 'meritorious' acts.



#### **4. FR ALLAN – OBAN AND DALIBURGH: BISHOP ANGUS MACDONALD**



Bishop Angus MacDonald 1844-1900  
Bishop of Argyll and the Isles 1878-1892  
Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh 1892-1900

##### **a. The Diocese of Argyll and the Isles – Bishop Angus MacDonald**

In 1878 the Western District, which was formed in 1829, was split into three dioceses: Glasgow, Galloway, and Argyll and the Isles. The poorest of all, both financially and in terms of clergy resources, was Argyll and the Isles. Most of the best of the priests of the Gaeltachd had gone either overseas or to the central belt. The first Bishop of the Diocese, Bishop Angus MacDonald, lamented that there were no churches, only chapels, no catholic schools; the people were very poor and he considered that the diocese was in such bad straits that it should be joined with Glasgow! He struggled particularly in the area of Catholic education to try to achieve rights for his people.

Bishop Angus was a remarkable man. He was one of the MacDonald's of Borrodale, a native Gaelic speaker, who trained at Ushaw, and who was a priest in Arisaig when he was appointed Bishop. He established the headquarters of the new diocese at Oban. There were only four Catholic families in the town, and it is said that he was accompanied around the streets of Oban by his bodyguard for fear of being stoned by the natives of the town. He recognised that Oban would become an important route centre and wished his Cathedral to be positioned as close as possible to Iona. He had bought Loyola (a holiday house for the Glasgow Jesuits) – the present Cathedral and Bishop's house. There he lived, initially by himself, and ran the diocese.

He was an indefatigable supporter of both his priests and his people especially in the land struggles of the early 1880s, as the evidence contained in the Napier Commission reports shows.

In the first years of his incumbency a number of priests were ordained and their names deserve to be remembered: Allan MacDonald, Donald MacLellan, James Chisholm, Sandy MacKintosh, John MacKintosh, James Dawson. Four of them died in the early years of the twentieth century.

Allan MacDonald was appointed to Oban in 1882. There would have been a couple of reasons behind his appointment. First of all, he was needed. The Bishop would be away quite regularly. The second reason would have been that he was appointed there to improve his fluency in Gaelic in the company of the Bishop. Fr Allan was very fond of Bishop MacDonald, admired him greatly, but did not have anything like the same fondness or admiration for his successor!

His ministry of two years in Oban appears to have been uneventful.

### **b. Daliburgh**

In 1884 he was appointed to Daliburgh parish in succession to Fr Sandy MacKintosh who became Parish priest of Fort William. Not only was Daliburgh one of the largest of the parishes in the Diocese (about 1500 parishioners at that time), with all the demands that that would have meant, but Fr Allan was very young when he went there – only 26 years of age. Residing in the house with him was the recently retired parish priest of Bornish, Fr Alastair Campbell, who died at Daliburgh in 1893. It is from him that it is believed that Fr Allan took his interest in Hebridean folklore.

The pastoral work of the parish would have been grinding and unrelenting: up to ninety baptisms a year, the usual round of Masses, confessions, instructions, marriages, funerals, walking everywhere.

It was a time, too, of social ferment. The Napier Commission had carried out its work in South Uist in 1883 but the Crofting Act of 1886 had yet to be passed when Fr Allan was appointed. The priests of the islands, along with the Bishop, were unanimous in their public support for Crofters' rights. In fact, Bishop MacDonald went so far as to say that the statement of the case on School Boards and the appointment of Catholic teachers to public schools in the predominantly Catholic areas *'will tend to show the existence of a widespread evil, in the dependent and degrading position in which tenants are apt to be placed – with no security of tenure, no guarantee of removal at will, and with the fear constantly hanging over them, that if they venture to assert their rights they may be made to suffer for it, without having power to obtain redress. Nothing could be conceived more certain than this position to foster a low and cringing disposition, or more opposed to the formation of a manly, independent, enterprising spirit'*.

Fr Allan shares his Bishop's view.

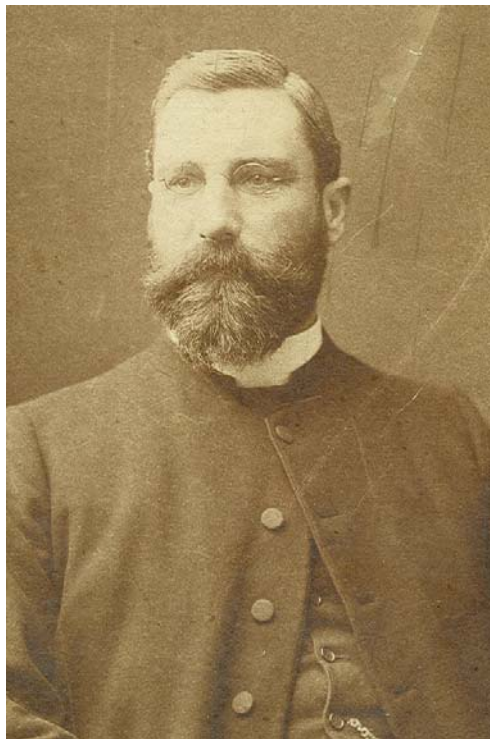
I think that I should show some pictures of some of the priests that Fr Allan mentions from time to time. First is Fr Sandy MacKintosh. Then comes Fr George Rigg, Fr Allan's successor in Daliburgh and the one whom Fr Allan admired most of all; Fr John MacKintosh, parish priest of Bornish, contemporary of Fr Allan in Spain and the one for whom he composed his poem. He was threatened with eviction by the Estate for poaching! In the next slide we have Fr James Chisholm, again Fr Allan's contemporary in Spain and the builder of the present church in Castlebay, and Fr Alastair MacDougall, a native of Morar, he was parish priest in Benbecula from 1890 -1903 and in Daliburgh from 1903 to 1920.



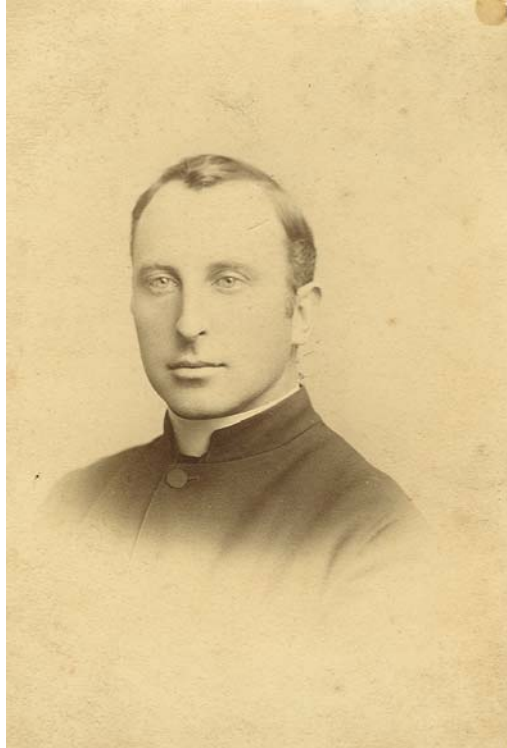
Fr Sandy MacKintosh (Sagart an Gearasdan)  
Born Arisaig 1854 Ordained Glasgow 1877  
Daliburgh 1880-1884: Fort William 1884-1922.  
Died 1922



Fr George Rigg  
Born Stornoway 1860: Ordained Paris 1891  
Knoydart 1891-1894: Daliburgh 1894-1897  
Died of typhus fever 1897



Fr John MacKintosh (Sagart mor nan Each)  
Born Roy Bridge 1859: Ordained 1882  
Bornish 1882-1900: Campbeltown 1900-1903  
Died 1903



Fr James Chisholm  
Born Strathglass 1854; Ordained 1882  
Moidart 1882; Barra 1882-1903; Arisaig 1903-1925  
Died 1948



Fr Alastair MacDougall  
Born Morar 1859; Ordained 1890  
Benbecula 1890-1903; Daliburgh 1903-1920; Glenfinnan 1920-1921; Castlebay 1921-1925; Knoydart 1925 –  
Died Bracara 1944

Fr Sandy MacKintosh, Fr Allan's predecessor at Daliburgh, presciently put forward five specific recommendations to the Napier Commission:

1. the present holdings of the crofters should be enlarged to give to each tenant land for grazing and cropping according to his ability and requirements.
2. Fixed fair rents were to be put in place taking into account the inferiority of the soil.
3. Encouragement for improvements and compensation for all improvements made.
4. Fixity of tenure
5. To give to crofters more adapted to fishing holdings adjacent to the best harbours.

Bishop MacDonald's view and Fr Sandy MacKintosh's submission are simply two indications of the unanimous view of the Catholic clergy in relation to the great social question of the time.

I suspect, though, that while he strongly sympathised with the views of the other clergy and of the people, Fr Allan would have been expected to take on the duties and the style of leadership of his predecessor; public duties that have become the uniquely characteristic norm for priests working in the Catholic islands. This style of political involvement he found distasteful.

He comments on this distaste in his diary. January 8<sup>th</sup>: *'Fr MacDougall discussing Parish Council, County Council and School Board matters. He is in earnest about them. How little I liked to be drawn into serious conversation about these things. They so annoy and worry me – the discussion of the disagreeableness attached to these duties'*

### **c. Crisis**

However, it has to be said that all this 'activity' had a detrimental effect on Fr Allan's health and made him later deeply reflect on whether or not it had all been worthwhile. Some have said simply that his health broke down as a result of overwork. I think that his 'crisis' goes deeper. It seems to me that towards the end of his time in Daliburgh, to coin a modern phrase, he may have been suffering from 'burn out'. In his very revealing diary, written between September 1897 and June 1898, he states at the outset: *'The life I have gone through I should not like to live through again. It looks more painful in the retrospect that I ever actually felt it.....God knows that my work was like the work of a machine and perhaps no more meritorious. It went on like a steam engine, careering on wildly without even one truck load of good after it. The machinery was out of gear at last. The ill regulated enthusiasm wasted the natural strength. The wheels should have been*

*better oiled. My ministry was barren because it was not a ministry resting on prayer. It was too human, as depending on myself and not on God.'*

Whatever had happened in Daliburgh, Fr Allan was disillusioned by its people and from time to time in his diary he reserves some of his bitterest words for them. Maybe it was that the 'low and cringing disposition', characterised by Bishop MacDonald, and which was so ingrained, had not really been removed. Perhaps he couldn't move the people of Daliburgh to that 'independent, enterprising spirit' which both the Bishop and he saw as essential to 'civilization'. Perhaps he had suffered at the hands of an individual or a group.

While he was always concerned for the welfare of his people and for their betterment, and certainly supported the aims of the reformers, his method of advancing things was to stay on friendly terms with the authorities and he thought that little would be gained through confrontation in the long run. 'Confrontation', which would have inevitably come with public office and public expectation at that time, would have caused him great distress. He would certainly have questioned the validity of the priest being involved in such things.

## **5. ERISKAY - DIARY**

### **a. The Diary**

As I have alluded, Fr Allan kept a diary from September 1897 to June 1898. It is a remarkable document. In it, he not only records the events of the island and of the parish but also he records his own spiritual journey. He gives vent to his strong views but at the same time shows his gentleness. The diary tells us a great deal about the internal dispositions of Fr Allan and of his spiritual struggles.

### **b. The Diary as a 'window' on the life of Eriskay and on Fr Allan's life**

We can see from his remarks the nature of the things that he was concerned about: the weather; the visits of his friends; the activities of the people, especially the fishermen whom he admired greatly, since they had, in the words of Bishop MacDonald, a 'manly, independent, and enterprising spirit'. He was worried about them getting into debt: *'How simple it would be for a proprietor in these parts to get all the people here out of the benefits of the Crofters' Act by conniving with a merchant to get them hopelessly in debt, and then have them declared bankrupt by which their rights as crofters would be forfeited'*.

He records the illnesses of people, his attendance to them, and some of the local 'treatments' offered: *'Poor Roderick MacIntyre, Kilpheder, was ordered as he had acute pneumonia to have a poultice applied. They envelop the old fellow in porridge without a particle of linen to cover the poultice with, or to protect it from his shirt, and he becomes*

*a mixed up thing, his shirt and body all sticky and damp and cold finally. He spent a night I think this way. No wonder he went to another world quickly.'*

Again and again he returns to the subject of the people of South Uist accusing them of 'sneakiness'. What does he mean by this? He gives an example involving the people of Eriskay: *'Hit off the sneaks who would be unwilling to contribute to the general good in securing the pier at Haun, and then would sneak round the contractors for a job afterwards'*. Then he gives the reason why this should be the case: *'disheartening Estate management, which takes the soul out of a poor man and degrades his character'*.

He 'crusades' against the domestic habits of the time, which he considered to be unhygienic, where cattle were in the same house as people and where the dwelling houses and their environs were the breeding grounds for disease.

He gives vivid descriptions of weddings and 'reitachs' but isn't very complimentary with regard to the 'elegance' of the ladies in dancing, describing one such dance as a 'the melee of a battlefield'.

He is widely read, from Shakespeare to Guy Mannering, from Darwin to Tom Sawyer, to the Gaelic poets. He is confident in his criticism of their works, particularly the Gaelic poets that he refers to.

He reads the Oban Times, the Scottish Highlander, and the London Weekly Times. He is politically liberal and strongly supports the land movements. He has a wide circle of mostly Protestant friends from the middle classes; the merchants, doctors, others with literary interests. Friendships with parishioners would have been anathema. But he cannot talk 'shop' with his friends and finds himself always having to talk about what interests them!

Of course, he has his interest in collecting folklore and in etymology but he considers it to be a bye-study. Referring to the students for the priesthood, Campbell and Morrison, he writes: *'It would be satisfactory to know that each of them had a liking for some bye-study. Such a study is a life long joy and recreation, and needed where one is isolated'*.

In his diary he records that he did not enjoy good health. Repeatedly, he refers to feeling 'seedy', 'exhausted', 'being unable to do anything', 'my paleness and emaciation attracting attention'. He tries various remedies, drinking coffee instead of tea, reducing his smoking, drinking porter. He worries about his lack of exercise and the lack of opportunity for exercise.



Significantly, a gentleness and empathy with the circumstances of people comes through. One moving example will suffice:

*'Fire at Ludag, dispatched boat. Telegram announcing poor Neil Campbell, Ru Bain's, death on Xmas morning at Arisaig where he went to work on the railway. Death simply from overwork and insufficient food. His large family and his struggle to keep them broke his heart. He was always so cheerful and so industrious, and so pious – a good man who made his soul of it and turned his lot in this world to the best account. When I came to Eriskay first he was the only one who could serve Mass. The poor widow. It was sad breaking the news to her. She has done nothing but faint continuously. Went to see her at night and staid for a couple of hours. Made her some soup. I do hope she will recover poor soul'.*

On other occasions it is his sympathy for newly married couples who have nothing that is striking or his remark after visiting a sick woman that all she had was tea and bread: *'How can you recover on that?'*, he asks.

### **c. The Diary as a record of Fr Allan's Self Criticism**

The Diary tells us that theologically and spiritually, Fr Allan is well read and keeps up his reading of the Church Fathers, along with the devotional writers of the time, particularly Faber. For instructions he uses Bishop Hay. The topics for his instructions are, amongst others: sanctifying each daily action, mortal sin and the occasions of sin, hell and purgatory. He has his confirmation classes and the school which he supervises. Yet he is seeking new ways of inculcating at least one idea into the people:

On 28<sup>th</sup> September he writes:

*'In one of the 'tales' the avoiding of 'uisge taimh' is inculcated as one of three precepts and perhaps it is because it is so inculcated that they lay it to heart. I wonder who the sanitary novelist was who hit upon the expedient of so teaching them. He knew how to get at the people, and gives me not a bad wrinkle. The recital of St Adamnan's 'Vision' was a lesson given in the same way and more effective than a hundred sermons. Could I devise a Tale of the kind that would fix even one useful idea indelibly on their minds. I might compose one such, but I doubt if I could make it interesting or classical enough to take with them. The Old Catechist the short winded dancing master McLachlan whose religious influence in the country probably equalled if it did not surpass that of any priest in the district was philosopher enough to adopt this plan, and he flooded the country with tales religious and secular. He did not speak Gaelic elegantly either nor classically.'*

If one reason for his own perceived lack of success in inculcating these ideas was the means through which they were delivered, another is his own lack of adequate

preparation at times. He is powerfully self-critical as though he was back in the Academy in the College in Spain.

October 12<sup>th</sup>: *'The Instruction (on the torments of the damned by Bishop Hay) though scriptural evoked sundry yawns!!! A string of texts is excellent no doubt, but they irritate and become wearisome if not woven together into one completed piece. I did not give the attention to the arrangement of the matter that I should have. I only gathered matter into one heap and scattered it about aimlessly. Method and arrangement were wanting tho' I had some general heads, but they were so like separate magazines from which one drew in turn, rather than one magazine with compartments where each thing is stored properly, and arranged side by side in the order in which they are generally called for. A peasant's yawn is the sincerest criticism and the truest on a subject that is meant to be so treated as to make it interesting and intelligible to his capacity.'*

Fr Allan exhibits the concern that is always evident amongst the best of preachers and catechists: not just that the content is correct but that it is delivered in a manner that captures the imagination of the hearer and in that way is much more likely to be retained. This is the motivation that prompts him to teach the mysteries of the faith in rhyme, to turn the gospel accounts into verse, to compose and translate hymns. As a teacher of the faith, Fr Allan excels. At some stage in his priestly life he began the process of transferring what he had learned in the manner that he had learned it to another medium which was intelligible to his people. This does not just show his intelligence but it also shows his empathetic relationship with his people and his concern for the preaching of the gospel and the teaching of the faith.

#### **d. The Diary revealing his loneliness**

One cannot speak of the priestly life of Fr Allan without saying something of his loneliness'. When he writes of it the descriptions are heart-rending, perhaps none more so than what he writes on St Stephen's Day, 26<sup>th</sup> December 1897:

*'At present I have nothing to my credit and some pounds of debt, and I lived as frugally as I could and I didn't buy a book during the year, though I was forced to let slip opportunities of buying desirable books at reasonably reduced prices. Without books, without company, without material to add to the folklore notes (having practically exhausted my immediate neighbourhood), without the ability of walking whither I may get more, without getting the opportunity of getting away for some weeks as I need in my present state of health, without one absolutely thorough near friend in whom I can confide trouble and with whom I can interchange views to say nothing of the solatium humanum which the enjoyment of such friendship throws over one's life, it is no wonder I feel solitary, and find myself to a certain extent left painfully alone and poised somewhere in vacuity.'*

He occasionally attributes this feeling of loneliness to missing Fr George Rigg who died in 1897 from typhus as a result of heroically discharging his duties.

He was deeply fond of Fr Rigg, his successor in Daliburgh, and admired in him what he did not see in himself – regularity of life. In a moving sentence, where he combines his admiration for Fr Rigg with his dislike of Uist, he says: *‘I could not endure to think of being buried in Hallan hitherto even though I should die in Uist. I now wish to be buried if I die in the Islands by the side of my truest friend and most loved and esteemed comrade, and hope I may participate in his reward’.*

On September 9<sup>th</sup> he gives a different response to the question of loneliness:

*‘The loss of the want of a thorough friend who can thoroughly understand you and can sympathise with you and to whom you lay open your mind and views without reserve is a privation but not to us so great who live isolated as to many others, as we are bound to be trained by having the years of experience of being without a single near absolute friend to this state of negative privation. Cardinal Manning says that the priest’s true friend is Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. God knows how little I have cultivated this friendship, but I have felt the strength and consolation that comes from this Divine friendship when my lukewarmness and sloth and sinfulness did not hinder me from having recourse to it. What have I not to answer for deliberately neglecting to draw from the only fountain of happiness. The Blessed Sacrament!’*

These two quotations on loneliness indicate the two sides of the spiritual dilemma which preoccupies Fr Allan. On the one hand, he has everything to hand which should prevent him feeling the way that he does – the sacraments, the scriptures, the teaching of the Church, the Office, his prayers – but still he feels the way that he does. What is the answer? What can he do? Where is the fault?

He must strive for holiness. He prays in the diary: *‘May God give me the grace to trample on my pride and sloth, but my pride is so pronounced so that the joy may be to humble myself frequently and thoroughly and effectually. St Bernard says ‘No one is humble who does not wish to be humiliated’ and I don’t. Ergo I have the characteristic of God’s enemy. I am following the wrong standard. Help me, O Jesus, to curb and crush the pride that is in me and to wish to be humbled and to love the Saving humiliation of Penance. Would that the writing of these sentences really effected my heart and were not merely words or self deceit. Give me my God a thorough spirit and not a canting hypocritical changing spirit, today tropical tomorrow arctic but how rarely anything but less than arctic in my relations with Thee. I say or rather write that I long to begin in earnest to save my soul..... When I backslide and turn deliberately off the from the right path, O my God, bring me quickly to a sense of sin and let me not lie down hopelessly in the mire*

*of my sinful habits with a frozen self-complacent conscience. Keep me from a reprobate sense.'*

## **6. THE APOSTOLIC UNION OF PRIESTS**

In 1897 he begins again the programme of the Apostolic Union of Priests. Fr Allan says in the introduction to his diary: *'One year only I look back to with less regret than to any other – a year in which I lived by the Rules of the Society of Priests called the Apostolic Union'*. The Apostolic Union was an organisation founded in France in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to 'support' priests after they were ordained through the following of a daily, rather intense, programme of spiritual exercises. It also put forward pastoral ideals for the secular priest. Part, too, of the programme was what we might call spiritual direction through the keeping of a spiritual diary whose contents would be sent monthly to an allocated spiritual director.

Four pastoral priorities were laid out by the Union for its members:

- Preaching was to bring out the infinite amiability of Christ and preachers were to set themselves to instruct their hearers
- Catechetics: the greatest energy was to be given to the instruction of children and the ignorant and priests were adapt their teaching to the capacity of the classes
- Sacrament of Penance: priests were to display the charity of Christ and were not only to hear confessions but were to direct.
- The sick, poor, and afflicted: the priests of the Union were to have a special regard for these groups.

While it is evident that Fr Allan in his pastoral work was inspired by these ideals, it was much more difficult for him to follow the ideals of the personal spiritual programme that were laid down by the Union.

The knowledge of Jesus – the foundational principle of development in the spiritual life according to the Union – was acquired by the study of the Scriptures, the Church Fathers, Theology, History, and the Human sciences.

The daily programme of the Apostolic Union involved the following:

Fixed hour for rising after 7hrs of sleep

½ hour prayer

Mass

½ hour Bible Reading

Study of theology each day especially Moral Theology

Read the Life of Christ

Bed before 10pm ¼ hr preparation for next day's meditation; undergo examen  
They should note every evening on a bulletin exterior violations of the Rule  
Confession every week or at least fortnightly  
Day of Recollection each month; each month the bulletin of faults is to be sent to the Superior  
8 day Retreat each year

Some of the other rules are interesting, if not amusing.

*'The Associates are to keep themselves on their guard against the flood of newspapers and of empty pamphlets from which there is nothing, or next to nothing, to be gained.'*

There was to be no playing cards; no journey was to be undertaken which has curiosity for its object; pay few visits for politeness sake; avoid, as far as possible, being alone with people of the opposite sex.

*'Apprehendite disciplinam'*, Fr Allan says should be his motto - 'Get a grip of discipline'. But he finds it difficult to keep the Rule. Sometimes it is ordinary disturbances that prevent this, sometimes an event which distresses him, but mostly he blames his own sloth and lack of perseverance.

Writing on the 1<sup>st</sup> October he declares, *'it is to my shame and confusion I own, that tho' I have a keen enough notion of much that my duty and my vocation require of me, I have spent a useless, sinful, ungrateful life, and these rhodomontades expose rather passing whim and veilities, I am sorry to say, rather than sincere downright spiritual reflexions emanating from serious holy meditation, and sound resolutions arising therefrom made with a determination to keep them unswervingly.'*

He wishes to do everything 'ex toto corde' 'with complete sincerity'. He struggles to keep the programme laid down by the Apostolic Union and amazes himself when he manages to keep it even indifferently for a few weeks. Yet he is convinced that it is his lack of sincere prayer from the proper motivation that lies at the route of his lack of holiness: *'the uselessness of great physical effort if it be not the result of internal piety and devotion. To be a good priest prayer is the chief requisite and strong physical action if not starting from a spirit of prayer is simply beating the air, softens no heart, and may harden the heart that rests complacently upon such labour, as a due fulfilment of the duties of the priesthood'*.

For the first couple of months, his diary is a combination of a record of events and a record of his spiritual thoughts and his keeping or breaking of the Rule. On the 16<sup>th</sup> November he writes that he has read an excellent thing in Faber's Blessed Sacrament p 253:

*'Never keep a spiritual journal, a record of pious thoughts, or any vestige of religious autobiography. I do not mean to say that saints have not done it. But you must not do it. You will live in a land of dreams and conceits if you do, and tho' perhaps you do not believe it now, you will come at last to do and say follies, in order to write them down afterwards. If you know of how the infatuation of keeping a journal is entangled with every root and fibre of self-love, throw your journal into the fire, and you will find out etc.*

His general regard for Faber was so deep that I am sure he found with him the opinion that he was looking for - one that conformed to his natural instincts.

After recording that, Fr Allan largely ceases describing his spiritual progress, confining himself to recording community events and his views on these types of things.

However, the doubts about the merits of the activities of his life remained. The final sentence of his diary reads: *'Success earns not the crown, but to have striven. Would that I had striven!'*

## **7. FR ALLAN MACDONALD – AN ASSESSMENT OF HIS PRIESTLY LIFE**

As I begin this assessment of the priestly life of Fr Allan, I must confess to being slightly nervous. It is a dangerous thing for one person to judge another far less for one priest to judge another. I have to remember that Fr Allan is not here to defend himself. If he were, though, I suspect that he would be much harder on himself than I will be.

Fr Allan was a priest to the core of his being. According to the standard modern criteria of judging the priestly life – the Priest as King, Priest, and Prophet – Fr Allan MacDonald more than fulfilled the requirements.

As 'King' he ruled the communities entrusted to his care as their shepherd. We have seen the evidence of his care for his people – not just his care for their spiritual welfare but also his care for their material welfare. He was with them in their suffering, but he was not a passive observer or sympathiser with everything. We have seen how he encouraged improvement in living conditions and how he approved of the 'manly, independent, and enterprising spirit of the fishermen of Eriskay. He could also be condemnatory, we cannot disguise that. As a character he was very sensitive but the sensitivity that meant that he was often easily hurt meant too that he had a natural empathy with people, with

the wonders of the created world, and with the situations that his parishioners found themselves in.

His sensitivity means also that he intensely feels loneliness. It is this same sensitivity that makes him the poet that he is.

As 'Priest' he assiduously celebrated the sacraments of the Church. He explored the theology of the sacraments. He was widely read in the theological works of his time and in the Fathers. It is clear from both his hymns and his religious poetry that he had a deep understanding of the faith, that he was, indeed, a man of faith.

As 'Prophet' or teacher of the faith, Father Allan took his obligations very seriously. He instructed and he catechised. A man of quite extraordinary intelligence and learning, inspired by the best ideals of the Apostolic Union of Priest, he found innovative ways of teaching the people entrusted to his care in a way that they could understand and appreciate. While it is true that he often simply delivered the standard catechetical texts of the time, he was not content with that. He questioned the validity of doing this and found new ways of communicating the essentials of the faith according to the culture, age, and ability of his hearers. But I don't think that he patronised his people. He gave to them but they also gave to him. He was amazed at how they survived. From them he received folklore but he also saw himself in the area of language as being inadequate in comparison to them.

On January 1<sup>st</sup>, he writes in his diary:

*'But how I envy the people who can speak fluent well-pronounced Gaelic. I can't. In spite of diligence, youthful practice is better. That is where I lost – brought up in a village half lowland and half highland, without so much as even a Paternoster itself (in Gaelic), without speaking of my Gaelic schooling, but confined from dawn to dusk in an English school – in a Latin and Greek school if you like – while the language that was most expressive and most natural to me was forbidden. The effect of that is the twist English put in my mouth then is still there and will be. In consequence I will never be completely at ease in Gaelic, and though I hate it with heart and spleen, my Gaelic will always have the harsh, stammering, unpleasant accent of the English speaker which a tongue-tied, limping, stiff-worded English education has left in my head.'*

Yet this is the man who not only wrote Gaelic poetry of a very high standard, both religious and secular, but taught the pupil teachers in Eriskay school to read, write, and spell Gaelic. He comments that 'they are improving'!

Finally, in this assessment, I would have to say that Fr Allan appears to have been deeply aware, and perhaps over-aware, of his own faults – his pride, his sloth, his intemperate nature – and to have struggled with them and with finding the appropriate means to ensure his own betterment and salvation. The strict seminary programme which he had been educated under and the strict discipline of the Apostolic Union were a burden which he could not carry due to the circumstances that he found himself in and his awareness of his own limitations of character. He thought that these rules were the only way to achieve

holiness. He wished to do everything 'ex toto corde'. He was in the 'straight jacket' of a particular system of spiritual improvement. That he couldn't adhere to this system bothered him greatly.

At the end of his diary, as I have already quoted, Fr Allan says: *'Success earns not the crown but to have striven. Would that I had striven!'*

For me, the striking thing about Fr Allan MacDonald, and this is something which is common to most priests but isn't often said, is that he had, indeed, striven. Despite what he himself thought, he had striven to overcome his limitations of character, his lack of fluency in the Gaelic language, his almost constant ill health, his pride and his occasional tendency towards sarcasm and arrogance. He had all his priestly life striven to preach the gospel, to make Christ present amongst his people, to improve 'civilisation' (his word for Christian living), to find new ways of bringing those in his care to the knowledge of God and the mysteries of our faith.

As a postscript, I wonder what Fr Allan might make of South Uist and Eriskay of today?

So many changes! The improvement in health and sanitation he would have approved of. He would lament the end of fishing in Eriskay. The causeway is a huge improvement on the relatively isolated existence that he experienced. I think that he would have approved of it. He would be surprised that a symposium was being held on him and I suspect that he would see it as inductive to pride and self conceit. Although he could never have imagined the possibility, I think that he would have approved of the community ownership of South Uist Estates if it finally brings an end to 'disheartening Estate management, which takes the soul out of a poor man and degrades his character' and promotes the establishment of a 'manly, independent, enterprising spirit' and Christian civilisation.

I suspect, also, that Fr Allan would be very pleased that Gaelic is still spoken in the islands. He would lament the passing of so many elements of the oral tradition but he would approve of the standard of literacy in Gaelic.

But most of all, Fr Allan would be pleased that the faith which he lived and loved, and which he did so much to promote and teach, is still being lived in the islands that he loved and that the hymns that he composed and translated are still being sung in the liturgy.

When I look at his legacy, I have to say that his greatness does not just lie in the fact that he had striven but that eventually so many of his initiatives and campaigns proved to be successful in ways which he could not have imagined.

MAY HIS GOOD AND STRIVING SOUL REST IN PEACE.