

MEMOIR of ANDREW MACLEAN

Scholar and Preacher

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To place a stone on the memorial cairn of one who, having served his day and generation, has gone to receive the "Well done," is a task that requires no apology. In this case, however, apology is due, inasmuch as it is impossible to do justice at short notice to the subject of this review.

Andrew Maclean, like all who reach the appointed span, survived amidst a generation which knew him not. Much that is interesting and instructive in such a life has gone into oblivion. The history of the early difficulties and struggles of such men, which might prompt and encourage others, are subjects of which those who have borne their part in such struggles rarely speak. Such at least was the case in this instance.

Andrew Maclean was born at Brae Findon in Ferintosh in or about 1840. The name survives on the map, but there is now no trace to be seen of any of the twenty-four crofts which formed the township where he first saw the light.

His parents were crofters of the old type, and it is interesting to note the extent to which certain characteristics were hereditary in the family. Andrew's grandfather and namesake, whose familiar name, Andra Mhiceal, is still remembered in his native parish, was an elder under Dr. Macdonald, the famous minister of Ferintosh (Parish Minister from 1813; F.C. Minister 1843-1849). He was also known as Andra nan Duan "Andrew of the Songs", probably in reference to poetic gift. His son, Eachain Mor, father of the younger Andrew, was a poet and singer of no mean order. He was connected with a singing class in Brae Findon, regarding which a pleasant story is told. Dr. Macdonald, himself a poet and a credible performer on the pipes, was naturally interested in this class, and meeting Hector on the road, inquired as to its progress, remarking also that for the mere learning of the Psalm tunes, he thought that some secular verse should be used in place of the Psalms of David, which reverence required should not be put to secular use. "Well," said Hector to the Doctor, "you should give us a practice verse yourself," to which request Dr. Macdonald responded by improvising the following lines:

An aite ciuil 's e cumha 's caoidh
'Us sileadh dheuradh searbh,
An oidhreacht fhuaradh leinn gu truagh,
'S ud toradh cionnt dearbh.

The anecdote serves to illustrate the interval which the uncorrupted Highlander placed between the sacred and the profane, an interval which has now all but disappeared.

Andrew Maclean began his education in Braefindon F.C. School, a building which still exists, a last fragment of a vanished past. The quern song and the thud of the flail have given way to the American reaper and steam threshing-mill, changes now inevitable, but the sad aspect of which is that there are now no people in Brae Findon except a few migratory ploughmen.

Dr. Macdonald died in 1849, and Hector Maclean subsequently removed with his family to Saltburn, in the parish of Rosskeen. Here he published (Invergordon, 1872), with much diffidence, the "Elegy on Dr. Macdonald," by which he is now best remembered. This poem deserves more than local appreciation; it contains verses which, in the opinion of many, are equal to the best written by the famous Dugald Buchanan, the master of Gaelic sacred song. The elegy was not composed for publication, but simply because the writer delighted to recall past scenes. As he says in modest preface, "his thoughts frequently reverted to the days of power and sweet enjoyment which the Master vouchsafed to the favoured people of Ferintosh, when he gave them, and left with them for so many years, such a zealous evangelist and vigilant pastor. The author took delight in embodying his thoughts on such occasions in verse, and this was the origin of the Elegy, such as it is."

One verse may suffice to indicate the lofty thought and the mastery of expression which marked Hector Maclean's writing in his native Gaelic:-

Ged bu phaipeirean na speuran ard,
'Us ged bu dubh an cuain,
'Us ged bu pheann gach beileag-fheoir
A chuir an talamh uaith',
'S ged bu chleirichean na naoimh gu leir,
'S na h-aingle treun tha shuas,
Troimh'n t-siorruidheachd cha sgrìobhadh iad
Mu mhead a sholais bhuan.

Surely no "mute inglorious Milton" ever showed in loftier language how impossible it is for the finite to measure even one attribute of the Infinite. Such was a simple crofter educated in a remote Gaelic school of the early nineteenth century. It would now, alas, we fear, be vain to search for a crofter who could think such thoughts, or embody them in such language. For the benefit of -- shall we dare to call the modern Anglicised Highlander -- the uneducated, the following paraphrase, which spoils but may give some idea of the original, must suffice:-

"Though Heaven were of white parchment made,
Of ink the ocean fair,
A quill there were for every blade
Of grass that breathes the air;
Though writers swift were all the Saints,
And mighty hosts above,
Eternity would not suffice
There to record His love."

How much such an atmosphere affected Andrew Maclean's life, and how much was inherited from Andra nan Duan and Eachan Mor, must be left undecided, but the effect showed itself early. When about the age of fourteen at Brae Findon school, Andrew used to urge on his schoolfellows the duty of Bible reading and the benefit to be derived from it, saying in Gaelic, "If the Bible is good enough for reading on the Sabbath, how much better for the week day." The above anecdote was told to the writer by an old lady who had been a school companion of Andrew Maclean, and who heard the remark.

From Braefindon school Andrew Maclean went to the famous Grammar School of Aberdeen, where he came under the influence of Duncan Matheson, the well-known evangelist. On leaving Aberdeen, Maclean was appointed schoolmaster at Clava, and married. He was next sent as a teacher to the Isle of Lewis, where he lost his wife and two children. Subsequently he married again. After leaving Lewis, he gave up teaching as a profession and became a Free Church missionary. In this capacity he was sent to minister to the spiritual wants of the workmen employed in building a lodge in Glenmoriston, who were lodged in bothies. Mr. Maclean used to relate many anecdotes of his experiences there. The men were a coarse, drunken set, and when he came into the bothies on the Sabbath morning to conduct worship, he was subjected to frequent interruptions and even threats of personal violence by the crowd of half-drunken roughs. In this dilemma he was befriended by a sturdy Irish Roman Catholic, who set himself to see fair play. Having barred all exit by placing a bench across the door, this ally ensured silence by the hint that threats of interruptions would be summarily dealt with by himself. The immediate result was a quiet hearing for the missionary, who often said that had he known what was before him he would have given in, and could never have lived through the trial but for his Irish protector, who replied in his brogue: "Oi loike you, Mr. Maclean, and oi niver met such a low lot of drunken, rascally, blackguards, and begorra, you just say the word, and I'll put off me coat and foight for you." Needless to say the offer was declined.

Andrew Maclean was appointed missionary at Alness under the late Rev. A. R. Munro. On the appointment of a colleague and successor to Mr. Munro he left Alness, and shortly afterwards was placed in charge of a mission under the Church of Scotland. But Maclean's heart was with the Free Church, and after the Union of 1900 he regained it, and was by that Church continuously employed up to the end of his life.

After leaving Skye, Mr. Maclean settled on the Muir of Tarradale, in the parish of Urray, naming his abode "Covenant Cottage." There was then a pleasant wood behind his dwelling, and this became the good scholar's Patmos. Here he would pass such leisure as his duties left him in solitary study and meditation. Much of both reading and writing was done in this "aite ciuil." And here, after several years of beneficent labour in his Master's service, Andrew Maclean heard the voice which called him home. Illness, which ultimately proved fatal, obliged his removal in 1910 to Inverness, where for a time he became a patient in the Northern Infirmary. From one of the friends who visited him there, we have had a moving description of his perfect resignation and wholehearted acceptance of God's will. Great suffering had left his kindly happy smile undimmed. Mr. Maclean partially recovered, but not sufficiently to return to his work in Urray. Some months ago he took up his residence in the vacant F.C. manse at Dores. But he longed once again to minister to the people of Urray, amongst whom he had gone in and out so long. He reached the hospitable manse of the Rev. John Macleod just before midsummer's day, but only there to fall dangerously ill again. When able to rise from his bed, he returned to Inverness, and, after a further sojourn at the Northern Infirmary, he passed away on August 5, 1911. Five days later his mortal part was laid to rest in Dores Churchyard.

Mr. Maclean's only surviving son had long before emigrated to America, but his wife's devoted care attended him to the last.

There is a Gaelic saying that an innocent child, a ship on the sea, and a good man's death-bed are the three most beautiful sights on earth. Andrew Maclean's life may be said to have comprised all three, and now his ship has entered the haven where he would be.

Andrew Maclean inherited his father's poetic gift, and among other poems composed an elegy in English on the late Rev. John Noble (Lairg), with whose family he had been employed as a herd when a boy in Ferintosh. He frequently visited the friends and scenes of his childhood, and used to express his grief as, one by one, the old landmarks disappeared. His preaching, like his father's elegy, was characterised by loftiness of thought, and one felt in listening that here was a man who thought out things for himself. Such a spirit as Maclean's is now sadly rare. He always carefully prepared his sermons, and to show the spirit in which he worked it may be mentioned that he acquired a knowledge of Greek the better to understand the sacred text; and when sixty years old commenced the study of Hebrew, which he occasionally employed in his private correspondence.

Andrew Maclean's English was polished and fluent, and his Gaelic was remarkable for its grammatical accuracy. His vocabulary in that language was exceptionally extensive, whilst his preaching was at once poetic and exact. He was a rare type of the "Men" of old Ross-shire, combining the spiritual experience of the Highlander of a past age with a refinement and education which made his preaching particularly interesting. His favourite study was the present day interpretation of the prophetic parts of the books of Revelation and of Daniel, and in this connection he published a tract on Christ's second coming.

The present writer remembers the pleasure he derived as a boy from the visits of Andrew Maclean to the Free Church Manse of Ferintosh. Though then too young to appreciate his preaching, his fund of anecdote and his dramatic power of recital, combined with a fine voice, made it a treat to hear him recount stories of the ministers and the "Men" of our own and a past generation. As a friend expressed it, "You could imagine you heard Mr --- preaching, if you shut your eyes, when Andrew was telling some reminiscence or repeating some anecdote."

Andrew Maclean had the poet's gift of retaining and cherishing the memories and associations of his childhood vivid to the end. As a trifling illustration, one day years ago he met one of his flock with a little silky terrier. Mr. Maclean stopped, and looking at "Bran" very earnestly, exclaimed, "What a delightful little doggie! His shape but not his colour, reminds me of a little dog I had myself when I was a boy." "That was not yesterday," interposed a bystander. "No," was the gentle reply, "that was indeed not yesterday, but I remember my doggie as if it were yesterday, and how I always saved the half of my porridge and milk for him." So too, when on a rainy day, a kindly ploughman's wife set out tea for him on a chair by her fireside, Mr. Maclean exclaimed, with a happy laugh, "This is like old times! That is just the way my mother used to give me tea, and I could almost think myself by her fireside once more."

Andrew Maclean has gone to his reward. His place shall know him no more, and a generation will arise which knew not Joseph, but it is right that some memorial should be placed on record of this faithful servant of Christ, who was known by his works.

I cannot do better than conclude by quoting from the letter which prompted this sketch. My correspondent wrote: "Mr. Andrew Maclean was well known and greatly beloved in many parts of Ross-shire. As I know how deeply he was valued and respected, and what a truly beneficent life was led by this gentle old scholar, I venture to call your attention to his modest, earnest career of beautiful, cheerful devotion, in the hope that you may give him the only commemoration he is likely to receive in this world; in another his name is assuredly recorded in letters of gold. He had a smile and kind word for everyone. Strict with himself, he was never harsh in his judgments of others; much esteemed as an exponent of Scripture, his own good life was perhaps his best sermon. He had much spiritual insight combined with a keen but ever kindly sense of humour. I write of him without any bias, for to my regret I never saw Mr. Maclean, and am myself an Episcopalian. But I would not think it right to let such a man pass away without attempting to lay a stone on his cairn."