
Caithness religious conservatism: an individualist or corporate phenomenon?

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Those making a stand for biblical truth have usually done so alongside others of a similar persuasion, whether as small groups or as an organised new denomination. This article analyses the view promoted by one Caithness author, William Mill, that godly reformed people in the county gravitated towards worshipping alone rather than joining with the like-minded. It also compares his promotion of individualist separation with the actions of people in that area at key junctures in the last two centuries.

1. William Mill and *The Despised Fathers of Caithness*

In 1884, William Mill published a booklet called *The Despised Fathers of Caithness*.¹ William Mill was a farmer in Achingills in the parish of Thurso. Around the time he wrote it, he was living with his wife Ann and five children, employing a dairymaid, a shepherd, a farm servant, and a cattle herder.² William Mill seems to have given up the tenancy of Achingills farm in late 1893 or very early in 1894.³ He died on 28th August 1900 in Thurso.⁴

1. W. Mill, *The Despised Fathers of Caithness* (Inverness, 1884), 45 pages. The booklet is very rare; there are copies in the National Library of Scotland and the Wick Library.

2. Scotland's People, 1881 Census, 041/8/5. Mill adds in a note before the title page: 'The following pages were written about three years ago, though published now for the first time, and most of the persons therein referred to have been removed by death. W. Mill. March 1884'.

3. *John O' Groat Journal* (hereafter *JOGJ*), 26th January 1894, p. 4. All references to the *JOGJ* in this article are courtesy of the British Newspaper Archive (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk) and copyright the British Library Board.

4. Scotland's People, Statutory Deaths, 041/75. For the death notice, see *JOGJ*, 31st August 1900, p. 4.



Achingills farm, the home of William Mill until about 1893.

The basic structure of the booklet is to give potted biographies of twenty people whom Mill describes in the preface as ‘a few of the despised people of God, the Sion that no man seeketh after’. The first group of five had fallen on hard times and appeared in some cases to have had a nervous breakdown. The other fifteen are compared to ‘the lily among thorns’ from the Song of Solomon. These fifteen are further sub-divided into three groupings. The sub-sections are: those who had passed away by the time of writing; those who were still alive; and those still living who had resigned from office in the visible Church. The last few pages are taken up with the issue of Disestablishment.

Mill appears to have been stimulated to biography by the publication of a book with a similar title but very different spirit: *The Fathers of Caithness*. This was a long poem by a man in Wick, William Crowe, which read as a spiritual tour of the county’s landmarks associated with past and present godly people.⁵ It is also possible that Alexander Auld’s *Ministers and Men of the Far North* (1868) was on Mill’s mind. Mill’s first words in the main body of his booklet were:

It seemed good to Christian men, historians, and poets to raise up and keep in memory the names, the sayings, and the doings of the good Fathers of Caithness ... we may now conclude it to be the belief of the party referred to

5. [W. Crowe], *The Fathers of Caithness and Other Poems* (4th edn., Glasgow, 1896), 32 pages. The first edition appeared in 1870. William Crowe is identified as the author in his obituary in *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 4 (April 1900), pp. 463-468.

that they selected and raised up the names and memories of everyone that would be useful or edifying to the church, and every name they thought unfit for such a purpose should be allowed to rot, or lie in oblivion forever but the King of Kings ... has chosen the base things of the world, and the foolish things, to confound the things that are mighty.⁶

It is highly unlikely that Mr Auld or William Crowe had any such idea in their writings.

Mill went on to justify his publication by citing a remark of the late Rev. Archibald Cook. Cook had accused the Pulteney congregation of neglecting 'poor broken-hearted creatures' and, instead, of favouring the well-known Christians in the area and competing to get the 'famed Christian' into their homes.⁷ Mill seems to be confused about Mr Cook's intentions in administering the rebuke. There is no doubt that Archie Cook stood up for the poor but Mill seems to be equating the literal material poverty of those he celebrates in the book, with the godly poverty of soul which Cook often commended.⁸

The first 'Despised Father' whom Mill describes was Adam Fail who lived in Helmsdale. Mill misses the irony of celebrating Caithness worthies by starting the list with a Sutherland man. This must have caused a wry smile even to sympathetic readers. Mill recounts how Adam Fail spiritualised the words of the Psalmist: 'All ye that evil doers are, from me depart away' (Ps. 119:115, Metrical Version). Fail's explanation was that the Psalmist did not say these words to his neighbours, nor to his own household but 'to the evil thoughts of his own heart'. Mill adds that he was told that Fail was 'foolish, and could not acquit himself in any company': the local men were very reluctant even to allow him to pray in public.⁹

This theme of people not being able to 'acquit' themselves socially runs through the first five mini-biographies that Mill penned. Gordon Ross of Helmsdale, George Douglas of Halkirk (who had 'lost all his faculties'), as well as William Waters a former missionary to the South Sea Islands, and Thomas Buchan (Watten), were also either suffering mental distress and/or living as tramps.¹⁰

6. *The Despised Fathers of Caithness*, p. 5.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

8. See, for example, N. Campbell, *One of Heaven's Jewels: Rev. Archibald Cook of Daviot and the (Free) North Church, Inverness* (Stornoway, 2009), p. 60.

9. *The Despised Fathers of Caithness*, p. 10.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-18.

Mill's group of fifteen 'lilies among the thorns', begins with five deceased men whom he describes as spending 'their time and strength in admiring, adoring, and praising the wonders of redeeming love' and who 'delight to sit in the lowest room'.¹¹ None of these five men had sat at the communion table, although deeply respected by those around them for their godliness. John Ross (miller in Gerston, Halkirk) is described as being 'out of his element when he was not among the true people of God'.¹² William Levach would sometimes present, giving out the line, but his health broke before he fulfilled his vow to profess faith at the Reformed Presbyterian communion in Wick.¹³ Donald Macpherson of Reay was a schoolmaster who died young.¹⁴ Farquhar Mackenzie was a native of Assynt who was confined to his bed for thirty years, and his words and actions were often recounted in the area. Mill admits that William Crowe had referred to Mackenzie in his *Fathers of Caithness*.¹⁵ The last deceased 'Despised Father' was George Mackay (a native of Sutherland) who evangelized his fellow fishermen in Thurso, his death leaving his familiar surroundings as 'a barren desolation'.¹⁶

A number of points arise from this section. It is unscriptural to claim, as Mill does, that a reduced number of non-communicants constituted a 'proof that the Lord is leaving the land'. While the traditional Scripture-based respect for the Lord's Table was by 1881 in tension with more lax views of the qualifications necessary to participate in the sacrament, Mill seems to make a virtue of godly people not making a profession of saving faith.¹⁷ Another point is that William Levach had more options for professing his faith publicly than just the Reformed Presbyterians in Wick, a fair distance from his home-parish of Bower.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

17. The attitude of the godly Rev. John Munro of Halkirk in the 1840s to participation in the Lord's Supper is seen in the following comment: 'The number of communicants in the parish is 110. These bear a small proportion to the population; but it is better to have a few whose walk and conversation is in conformity with the faith and the doctrines of Christianity than to admit a promiscuous multitude, whose only motive might be the enjoyment of the outward privileges conferred on the partakers of this sacrament.' See 'Parish of Halkirk' in *The New Statistical Account of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1845), Vol. 15, p. 80.



Gerston mill, Halkirk where John Ross lived.

The second subsection of the fifteen feted by Mill consists of five individuals who did not attend church but who appeared to have marks of grace. Donald Grant of Latheron had considered going to the Lord's Table but was put off by many people being admitted to the Lord's Supper who showed no sign of self-denial. Mill says this increase in new communicants was the result of 'a revival movement'. This 'seemed to spread over the far north and our spiritual guides seemed to think a good deal of the same'.¹⁸ He describes others as being 'wearied with beholding the empty show of worship that is being carried on in his visible church' or as having been refused admittance to the Lord's Table on the grounds that ill-health prevented regular attendance on the public means of grace.¹⁹

It was perhaps unwise of Mill to praise men in print in the glowing terms which he did, before they passed away. It was arguably a misuse of scripture to justify their separation from the public means of grace by stating that God had prepared a table in the wilderness for his people.²⁰ The example of the Saviour's leaving Jerusalem to go to Bethany is also cited as precedent for boycotting public worship but this seems a misapplication of

18. *The Despised Fathers of Caithness*, pp. 22-23. For another account of Donald Grant, see Rev. George Sutherland, *Donald Grant: A Caithness Worthy* (Wick, 1932), 16 pages (reprinted from *JOGJ*, 12th and 19th February 1932).

19. *The Despised Fathers of Caithness*, pp. 24-26.

20. As Mill does in the case of Donald Grant, *ibid.*, p. 23.

the Saviour's action.²¹ A further point is that the poor transport links and the very scattered nature of a dispersed rural community, often on marginal land, may have made it difficult for some to leave their own immediate neighbourhood regularly in pursuit of worship with the like-minded.

Mill's most extended comments are reserved for the five last 'Despised Fathers', all of whom had once held office in the Church but had resigned. The five in question did so in protest at their own congregations' discontinuing the practice of 'reading the line' (more commonly known today as 'giving out the line').²² It is again doubtful whether resigning over 'reading the line' was wise. In each case, however, there were other issues at stake. Hugh Stuart believed that dropping the line would offend 'the little ones' of the flock,²³ and that it was likely to be the first in a series of declensions which would culminate in disrespect for the Bible itself.²⁴ Another former office-bearer, William Mill (the author's father), was cited by one observer as the kind of elder no longer in fashion in the Free Church of the day. The man remarked to Mill junior: 'The kind of office-bearers that the Free Church needs are clever, shrewd, business men – men that can make a good bargain.' Mill also claims that priority was given in the Free Church to 'fussy, bustling men that keep their left hands blazing abroad what their right hands are doing'. It is also true that supporters of the line were prepared to quote Scripture in support of retaining the practice. One text was Luke 4:16 – 'As his custom was he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read'. Another Scripture cited was the apostle Paul's statement in Acts 28:17: 'Though I have committed nothing against the people or customs of our fathers'.²⁵

There were other issues in play. Several of the respected believers in Caithness were perturbed by seeing ministers driving about in their gigs (small horse drawn carriages) from church to church on the Sabbath. It is the case that many churches throughout Britain campaigned strongly against the use of commercially-run public transport on the Lord's Day, including horse drawn carriages, by people attending church.²⁶ However,

21. Ibid., pp. 24, 26.

22. Ibid., pp. 27, 34, 39, 40.

23. Ibid., p. 27.

24. Ibid., p. 28.

25. Ibid., pp. 31-34.

26. See N. Campbell, 'Rev. James Wright of Infirmary Street and Lauriston Street, Edinburgh', *Scottish Reformation Society Historical Journal (SRSJHJ)*, Vol. 5 (2015), pp. 145-209 (pp. 181-3).

there is ambiguity in the way Mill handles the issue of the gig. At one point he indicates that the minister owned the gig in question, but in another instance he talks of the minister employing a gig, a beast, and a coachman to drive him on the Sabbath rather than use his own vehicle and servant.²⁷

Having criticised some aspects of Mills' strong praise for the 'Despised Fathers', it has to be said that he provided a very able critique of the downgrade in the Free Church of Scotland in his day. Although he was perhaps somewhat sycophantic in describing Rev. John Kennedy (Dingwall) as an ecclesiastical 'Cedar of Lebanon' and calling him the 'Joseph of Christendom', other parts of his diagnosis seem very apposite.²⁸ One passage illustrates his ability to describe the destructive changes coming into the Free Church and the new preaching of the Gospel:

This other Gospel is contented with another Moses, with other Prophets, and with other Psalms; it is contented with another emaciated, mutilated Moses, that has been deformed, soiled, and besmeared by the cutting, spittings, and spewings of Professors Smith, Davidson, Candlish and co. And it is contented with other Prophets, Prophets that are poor, puny, purloined things that cannot see beyond their own day; they cannot look into the dark future and rejoice and be glad over things that are afar off and they can do with other Psalms – they do not require the Heavenly choir – David and his band they cannot understand. They are pleased with a choir of less noble birth that can sing over beauties they see on the earth. The Heavenly choir sing glory to God in the highest, but the earthly choir sing glory to the idol self in the highest and a proportionate share is given to all the lesser deities – learning, eloquence, music and popularity; and the household deities, an increasing communion roll, an increasing stipend, and an increasing general fund. To the latter a morning sacrifice of thanksgiving has been offered again and again in the great Assembly ...²⁹

While there seems to be no evidence that Mill's claims were publicly challenged, it is true that the cut and thrust of public contention over conservative churchmen's actions could see inaccurate claims made. The claim that changes in public worship had led one man, William MacAdie, to cease attending public worship was challenged in the public prints in April 1894. A correspondent to the *John O' Groat Journal*, signing himself 'A lover of truth and justice', stated that the claim had caused 'righteous

27. Ibid., pp. 38-39.

28. Ibid., p. 40.

29. Ibid., pp. 7-8.

indignation' among his neighbours. The correspondent continued: 'it was well known that bodily affliction, at times pretty severe, prevented his attending the public assembly. Though he had his peculiarities, I have never heard of deceitfulness or hypocrisy being among them.'³⁰

Mill was certainly capable of stirring rhetoric. In a critique of divinity students, he quotes the Rev. Archibald Cook as saying: 'Feed a child on ass milk and he'll have the nature of the ass till his dying day'. Mill offers his own supplement to this proverbial anecdote, in relation to divinity students at the Free Church's three divinity colleges: 'We see many in the Highlands that had gotten good milk in their youth but there is no signs of it on them today, but the bad milk they got at Edinburgh and Glasgow, and Aberdeen will show on them till their dying day'.³¹

By 1881, when Mill wrote his Jeremiad, the good as well as the unsatisfactory results of the 1859/1860 revival of religion, and the Moody and Sankey movement of 1873, were visible in Caithness. Mill's view was quite clear. He commented: 'When people are said to be turned to the Lord sometimes we see our divines going a great distance to see the sight. Some from the far North have gone to Ireland, to the continent and to America, and, after wasting time and spending money they found the new converts giving all the glory of their conversion to man; but, if they had gone to the north eastern slope of the braes of Latheronwheel, they would find a couple in one house that gave all the glory of their conversion to God'.³²

There is great ambiguity also in Mill's analysis of the Disruption era. He states: 'There was then in Scotland a large class of the people of God that was generally acknowledged to be the very essence of the church ... and they were valued and esteemed as such by the then church although the one half of them remained outside of her pale.' The other half, according to Mill, were *inside* its pale. He adds that after the Disruption the half that were outside the Church were regarded as 'obstructionists and obstacles' while those on the inside 'were considered useless cumberers of the ground'.³³ The problem in relating this analysis to conditions in the Far North is that Mill does not define 'the church'; nor does he explain at this juncture whether by 'those outside' he means the North Country Separatists, or the Secession Churches and Reformed Presbyterians, or something else.

30. *JOGJ*, 20th April 1894, p. 2.

31. *The Despised Fathers of Caithness*, p. 12.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

The North Country Separatists had boycotted most services (apart from communion seasons), normally preferring to gather in groups at the homes of their leaders for devotional exercises.

However, Mill does claim a continuity of sorts between the famous Separatist, Joseph Mackay, and some of those who left office in the Free Church.³⁴ He states, for example, that John Budge of Halkirk and Thurso, among others, believed that the Disruption ‘was not to be a great blessing to the land’. Mill states that for forty years this class of people believed that the Free Church would turn from ‘holiness and newness of life’, and instead she would ‘turn aside and go about with other lovers’.³⁵ Comparing the Free Church to a large ship that had left her moorings, not before taking on board a great number of passengers, particularly young people, he says that nothing was to be spared for the young people’s ‘pleasure and attraction’ and that the great ship was to be steered wherever the youth wanted while ‘the captain, the helmsman and the good old compass had all to succumb in silence’.³⁶

Not all the godly people in Caithness joined the Separatists, James Macdonald, the father of Rev. John MacDonald (the Apostle of the North), being perhaps the most prominent example. The evangelical ministers were prepared occasionally to challenge the more extreme statements made by the Separatists. At a communion-season Fellowship meeting in Latheron, Sandy Gair had denounced ministers, office-bearers, and members of churches, but had given no mark of grace as would be expected at a Question Meeting. He had then rudely refused to say something of the way of recovery for lost sinners when urged to do so by the Rev. John Munro of Halkirk. This drew forth the following retort by the minister: ‘Cursed be that doctrine which tells me of my lost state by the fall without telling me the way of recovery through Christ’.³⁷

2. Reaction to the publication

William Mill’s book *The Despised Fathers of Caithness* was the subject of a rather mixed review in the *John O’ Groat Journal* when it appeared. The reviewer did say that, although ‘rather highly priced’, it was ‘well worth

34. Ibid., p. 34.

35. Ibid., p. 35. Mill seems to have in mind Hosea 2:7-13.

36. Ibid., p. 35. Ironically, this statement has echoes of an earlier poem by William Crowe, ‘The Free Church Ship’.

37. David Stephen, *Gleanings in the North* (Haddington, 1891), pp. 43-44. His robust approach to Sandy Gair on this occasion led to Mr Munro’s receiving unpleasant mail.

reading'. The reviewer challenges Mill's claim that the disappearance of people with learning difficulties from being tramps in the county was a sign of the Lord's leaving the land. Instead the reviewer states that such people are shut up in 'mad houses' and that there 'they are kept clean and free from vermin, and properly taken care of'. The reviewer also describes those who never professed faith as people who 'set up a claim to special sanctity'. The reviewer goes on to state: 'This little book is worthy of study and should not be tossed aside'. Describing it as showing that 'ignorance, superstition and hypocrisy' still exists in Caithness, the reviewer continues: 'It is a disgrace to Christianity and to civilisation that the production of such a book should be possible at all, and there must be something radically wrong somewhere, which imperatively demands to be put right'.³⁸

The reviewer states that the reading of the line was for the illiterate or for the poor and was envisaged by the compilers of the *Directory of Public Worship* as a practice which would be given up as soon as possible. He continues: 'Such, however, is the native tendency in some districts towards superstition and idolatry that the Men of Caithness, of whom this book speaks, have magnified this badge of ignorance and poverty into a fetish which they ignorantly worship, simply because they're ignorant of its origin and source. We blush for the County of Caithness when we think of such superstition and ignorance; we blush still deeper when we consider the hypocrisy which is associated with it, and earnestly hope that the time may not be far distant when all such will be a thing of the past, relegated with the reading of the line and all such stupidities to the limbo of forgetfulness'.³⁹

3. Discussion

In order to assess how widespread Mill's favoured practice of individual separation was in Caithness, we have to examine the wider history of the Reformed Faith in the county in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

i) The situation up to 1850

Rev. Donald Beaton believed that the eighteenth century was a time of 'darkness' in the pulpits of Caithness.⁴⁰ Some impetus was given to evangelicalism by the formation of a Baptist congregation in Keiss in

38. *JOGJ*, 22nd May 1884, p. 2.

39. *Ibid.*

40. D. Beaton, *The Ecclesiastical History of Caithness* (Wick, 1909), pp. 124, 129-130.



The former Secession Church, Durness Street, Thurso, which later became Thurso Carriage and Motor Works. It was demolished in the 1930s.

PIC. COURTESY OF WICK SOCIETY/JOHNSTON COLLECTION

1750.⁴¹ The Secession Church began services in Caithness in the 1760s, while the visit of the Haldane brothers in the 1790s led to the formation of Congregational churches in Wick and Thurso.⁴²

James Haldane first preached in the county on 31st August 1797, attracting a congregation of ‘not more than 300 persons’ in Thurso. Ten times that number were to attend his preaching on Sabbath 3rd and Sabbath 10th September in the town, with many more in country areas hearing him in the intervening weekdays. Similar attendances were seen on the following Lord’s Day, surpassed only by the estimated 4,000 present on the 24th, his last Lord’s Day evening in Thurso of this tour. This service saw ‘individuals from every parish in Caithness.’⁴³ Further engagements and large congregations followed in Wick.⁴⁴ In August 1799 Haldane returned to Thurso, also visiting

41. Alexander Auld, *Ministers and Men in the Far North* (3rd edn., Inverness, 1956), p. 25; C. Lumsden, *A Rich Inheritance: Sir William Sinclair and Keiss Baptist Church* (Baptist Historical Society, 2013).

42. Beaton, *Ecclesiastical History of Caithness*, pp. 152-159, 336; Auld, *Ministers and Men in the Far North*, p. 26.

43. Alexander Haldane, *The Lives of Robert and James Haldane* (1852, rep. Banner of Truth, 1990), pp. 175-179.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 180-185.

Wick and meeting converts from his previous labours in the county and meeting the two ministers settled there under his connexion.⁴⁵

As a result of the Haldane connexion efforts, an Independent Chapel was built in Wick's Parliamentary Square, while another was erected in Thurso in the Esplanade Street/Market Street area.⁴⁶ The Thurso congregation lost an occasional supply-preacher, Edward Mackay, when a Scotch Baptist cause was set up in 1805. A Baptist church was formed in Wick in 1808. In 1836 the Wick attendances varied from 650 to a peak, fishing-season number, of 800.⁴⁷ Attendances that year at the Thurso Independent Chapel fluctuated from 300 in the morning to between 350 and 400 in the evenings. There were sixty communicants.⁴⁸ The Wick and Thurso Congregational Churches were linked in 1955-56. Thurso closed for almost two years in the 1950s but recommenced in 1956. Wick finally closed in October 1962.⁴⁹

Until the Haldane tour, the Secession and Reformed Presbyterian causes were the main alternatives to the Established Church. Following an evangelistic tour by the Nigg minister, a group in Thurso applied to the Anti-Burgher Seceders in 1773 and a church was built. Due to poor supply, some of the Thurso group successfully sought admission to the Constitutional Presbytery in 1808, but returned to the General Associate Synod a few years later, supply being no better from their new ecclesiastical compatriots. There was a strong conservative element in the congregation and they continued within the Anti-Burgher line of thinking, helping form the Original Secession Synod in 1827.

However, most of them joined their fourth minister, Rev. David Burn in the Union of 1852 with the Free Church of Scotland. A law case ensued in which the minority in Thurso, refusing this union, won title to the property.⁵⁰ The Wick and Thurso Anti-Burgher congregations appear to have both begun meeting in 1767. The Wick group left their Newton

45. Ibid., p. 271. Further details of lasting fruit in Caithness are recounted in pp. 676-678.

46. Ibid., p. 229.

47. W. D. MacNaughton, *Early Congregational Independency in the Highlands and Islands and the North-East of Scotland* (Ruaig, Tiree, 2003), pp. 233-236.

48. Ibid., p. 238.

49. W. D. MacNaughton, *The Scottish Congregational Ministry, 1794-1993* (Glasgow, 1993), pp. 479, 484.

50. D. Scott, *Annals and Statistics of the Original Secession Church* (Edinburgh, 1886) pp. 434-436.

building in 1815 for a new one in Pulteneytown across the river.⁵¹ Thurso Anti-Burgher congregation had three ministers before the majority joined the Free Church.⁵²

Beaton saw the ministry of Alexander Gunn in Watten, which began in 1805, as a key change in the Established Church. He also assigns great significance to John Munro's ministry. This began in the Achreny mission in 1806 and continued after his translation to Halkirk Parish Church in 1822.⁵³

There is much evidence that believers in Caithness would walk long distances in order to hear the Gospel preached, bypassing Moderate or unsatisfactory ministers in the process. Rev. Alexander Gunn of Watten (1773-1836) was one of those preachers who attracted them due to his reformed and experiential teaching. Auld notes that in time people from other parishes began to gather in Watten.⁵⁴ He adds that 'from the remotest parts of the county persons might be seen on a Sabbath morning traversing the distance between their own homes and the church of Watten'.⁵⁵ People would even walk there from Wick.⁵⁶ A previous generation of Caithness believers used to gather in Halkirk to hear the Rev. John Sutherland, minister of the Established Church from 1745-1765. Some of these came from as far as Canisbay parish.⁵⁷

One of those Caithness men who crossed parish boundaries to hear Rev. Alexander Gunn of Watten was David Steven (1789-1873). It is said that every Sabbath a group of people used to walk back to Bower parish, where David Steven lived, discussing the sermon they had just heard.⁵⁸ Steven's home became well-known for its hospitality, and as evangelical religion increased in the county people would come to stay with him at communion seasons from every parish in Caithness and from as far away as Strathy and Farr in North Sutherland.⁵⁹

51. R. Small, *History of the Congregations of the United Presbyterian Church, 1734-1900* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1904), Vol. 2, pp. 475-480.

52. *Ibid.*, pp. 480-481.

53. Beaton, *Ecclesiastical History of Caithness*, pp. 165, 212.

54. Auld, *Ministers and Men in the Far North*, p. 34.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

Auld points out that English-speaking believers gravitated towards Watten, but that Gaelic-speakers unhappy with unscriptural preaching were attracted to Rev. Archie Cook's ministry in Bruan and Berriedale. Mr Cook laboured there from 1823 to 1837. Auld adds that those willing to travel distances, and who spoke both languages, might sometimes be in a quandary as to which direction to take, depending on which minister suited their current exercise of soul.⁶⁰ Some people would even travel from Wick to Bruan to hear Cook.⁶¹

Even when the evangel had taken deep root, respected godly men and women in Caithness would happily cross a parish boundary. One observer of the scene in Halkirk and Reay (the latter having Finlay Cook as its minister) noted: 'As the parishes of Halkirk and Reay were adjoining one another, and the worthies of that time had their preferences, according to experience, of ministers, some of them went to hear Mr Cook in Reay, and others sat under Mr Munro in Halkirk'.⁶²

There was of course a broader context: that of people going to the communion seasons of other congregations. The Reay communion attracted crowds of over 3000 people. 'For the whole week every home would be filled with strangers who came from all over the north. Many came even from Lewis, Inverness and Ross-shire. Sutherland sent hundreds...' Archibald Cook often assisted. 'There were always three congregations – one in the church and two out in the open. At the Gaelic service, which was always outside, there was a wooden tent where the preacher stood...'⁶³

ii) A Free Church dissident: J. R. Anderson in 1854

The willingness of Caithness people to leave their own ministers in order to listen to dissident preachers, is illustrated by the vast crowds that gathered for services held in 1854 by Rev. Jonathan Ranken Anderson. Between 18th August and 26th September 1854, the Glasgow minister preached in Castletown, Thurso, Halkirk, Wick, Dunbeath, and another location simply called 'S' in his diary.⁶⁴ Anderson's visit to Caithness followed his departure from the Free Church in controversial circumstances. He and

60. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

61. *Inverness Advertiser*, 16th May 1865.

62. *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 14 (March 1910), p. 427.

63. Donald Mackay, *This was my Glen: Caithness Notebook No. 2* (Thurso, 1965), p. 23.

64. H. B. Pitt (ed.), *Life and Sermons of the late Rev. J. R. Anderson* (2 vols, Glasgow and Trowbridge, 1934-c.1937), Vol. 2, pp. 35-47.

his Glasgow congregation had separated from the denomination over declension in doctrine and attitude. The visit of such a talented preacher who had taken himself out of the Free Church cannot but have added to concerns locally about ecclesiastical change.

On 7th September he preached to a crowd of 1,200 in a quarry and the following Sabbath (10th September) to a congregation of 2,000 people. The next day he was told that there had been people from almost every parish in Caithness, including some from Reay, present at the Sabbath meeting. On Sabbath 17th September 1854 Anderson estimated that well over 2,000 people gathered to hear him at Dunbeath. Some of the services were held in parish schools and on one occasion he got the use of the Reformed Presbyterian building in Wick.⁶⁵

However, Anderson failed to sustain a permanent organised presence in Caithness. Although he had held a meeting with friends on Wednesday 20th September 1854, who appeared enthusiastic about the idea of organising tract circulation, 'and to get preaching when they can', there is no evidence that steps were taken in this direction.⁶⁶ As noted by Roy Middleton, two years previously some in Anderson's Glasgow congregation were unhappy at his frequent supplying of the small group in Aberdeen who adhered to him. A further extension northwards of his labours might not have been welcomed by all.⁶⁷

Anderson did note that there was opposition in Caithness to his efforts.⁶⁸ Two years later this hostility to Anderson surfaced as a result of an Inverness minister, Rev. Archie Cook, having baptised the child of a William Sinclair. Cook had baptised the child against the advice of the Wick Free Church minister, Rev. Charles Thomson. Sinclair had been involved in controversy in the Pulteneytown congregation, but the real issue may have been that Sinclair had invited people to attend Jonathan Ranken Anderson's services and had not taken communion in the Free Church for a period of time before then. The Free Church Presbytery of Caithness had issued a 'Statement to Congregations' urging them not to attend Anderson's services.⁶⁹

65. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

67. R. Middleton, 'Jonathan Ranken Anderson and the Free Church of Scotland, Part II', *SRSJHJ*, Vol. 5 (2015), pp. 211-318 (p. 294).

68. Pitt, *Life and Sermons of the late Rev. J. R. Anderson*, Vol. 2, p. 41.

69. Campbell, *One of Heaven's Jewels*, Appendix 3 – The Wick Baptism Case, pp. 264-269.

iii) Rev. David Campbell of Dunnet as a centre of dissent

Rev. David Campbell of Dunnet Free Church was described by Rev. James S. Sinclair as ‘one of the best and most faithful ministers of the gospel, settled in the far north shortly after the Disruption of 1843.’⁷⁰ Mr Sinclair added that ‘several worthy people walked many miles every Sabbath to hear him’. He also described Mr Campbell as ‘a faithful witness for the original principles of the Free Church’ who opposed the Union proposals. Mr Campbell had been ‘an attached friend of the late Rev. Archibald Cook of Daviot’.⁷¹

Campbell’s ministry was a gathering point for constitutionalists looking for a clear testimony from the pulpit. In his obituary of him, William Crowe of Wick wrote:

The despised few, who, for conscience’s sake were driven out of other congregations, found in him a tender, sympathising father and friend. His church became a rendezvous for the wounded, where they were always entertained with the finest of the wheat, where the services were conducted with becoming solemnity, and where the precious Psalms were sung without accompaniment or frisking balladry. No innovations were countenanced on the Hill of Barrock. Zion has lost a faithful minister, one that fed their souls with rich experimental food...the Voluntaries have got rid of a warm opposer, one who neither courted the smiles nor feared the frowns of any man.

Evangelical at the core, his pulpit was not thrown open to everyone who fancied he had a call to preach the gospel. While the vexed Union question was perplexing and embarrassing the church, Mr Campbell, no, not for a moment, submitted to any mutual concessions, not even when many of his co-presbyters were vacillating and too often evincing a compromising tendency. He was never known to hang out the white flag, and gave no uncertain sound on the subject.⁷²

iv) Revivalism and declension

A challenge to people’s discernment in Britain came in 1873 and 1874 with the arrival of the American evangelist Dwight L. Moody and his colleague Ira D. Sankey. Claims were made of many conversions. Their evangelistic campaign reached Caithness in the summer of 1874.

70. Ibid., p. 178.

71. Ibid.

72. *Northern Ensign*, 9th March 1876, p. 3; republished in *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 16 (September 1911), p. 179.

Moody and Henry Drummond began working in Wick in August 1874. There had been meetings to pray for their visit for a number of months before they came north. Meetings were held in the Parish Church and the Free Church as well as the Pulteneytown Free Church. Rev. George Renny of the Free Church in Wick was at the centre of these events.⁷³

An open-air service was held on the evening of Sabbath 15th August, attended by an estimated 6,000-7,000 people.⁷⁴ There was standing room only at the enquiry room set up in a follow-up meeting that evening in the Wick Free Church. It was found that 200 men 'confessed themselves unconverted and anxious for salvation'.⁷⁵ By the time Mr Moody had finished counselling them, 150 of the men claimed that they had 'now committed their souls to Christ'.⁷⁶

Mr Moody travelled to Thurso on Monday 16th August. The previous few days had seen a number of evening meetings in which a new method for the town was put into practice. Rev. Walter Ross Taylor (Kelvinside) 'announced, in the most explicit terms, that only those were to remain to the after-meeting who were either already Christians, or desirous to become Christians that very night'. Three quarters of the audience remained. Half of those had never before 'made a public profession of being decided for Christ'. Moody held meetings from the Monday to Friday evenings inclusive. One feature of the Thurso meetings was that people would stand up at the end of the after-meetings and declare their acceptance of Christ as their own Saviour.⁷⁷ Mr Taylor (1838-1907) was son of the Thurso minister of the same name. As an old man, he presided as the moderator of the last General Assembly of the old Free Church in 1900, and then acted for the Free Church partners at the General Assembly of the new United Free Church of Scotland in October 1900. He was regarded as second only to Principal Robert Rainy in power and influence.⁷⁸

The 1859-60 revival movement had affected a number of areas in Caithness but the accounts given of it indicated that people went quietly to visit their minister when they came under concern of soul. While there

73. Alexander Macrae, *Revivals in the Highlands and Islands in the 19th Century* (Tent-maker, 1998), p. 135.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

77. *Ibid.*, pp. 140-142.

78. *Scotsman*, 7th December 1907, p. 4.

was excitement, and physical symptoms, there does not seem to have been the same prevailing use of over-persuasive techniques as was to be seen in the Moody campaign of 1874, nor the same pressure immediately to state publicly in church services that one had just been converted.⁷⁹

Another work of evangelism around this time, by two Gaelic-speakers who had joined the Plymouth Brethren, led to assemblies being formed in Helmsdale, Wick, and Thurso. It is thought that another assembly was formed in Halkirk.⁸⁰ Donald Ross (1823-1904), a Gaelic-speaking former Free Church evangelist from Alness parish, had helped set up the Open Brethren in the north-east in the early 1870s. His evangelistic tours took him to Thurso in that period. Unlike normal Highland Calvinists, he thought assurance was of the essence of faith. Ross's fellow-worker, Donald Munro (1838-1908), was born near Wick of Sutherland parents. He also remained a Calvinist. Both evangelists eventually emigrated to North America where they helped form the Open Brethren there.⁸¹

Ross and Munro evangelised in July 1874 at Castletown. This was in the hope of gaining converts among the 300-strong quarry work-force, their families, and others involved in the local economy. The work-force had been strengthened by relatively good wages at the quarries. Ross noted that the attendance at the Established Church was increasing and that at the Free Church decreasing. He implied that the latter had attracted many through superstition and ignorance at the Disruption. Sabbath worship at the three local churches involved a preaching service at 12 noon and an evening meeting at 6pm which the ministers did not usually attend and which was 'supposed to be conducted by "the men" of whom there are few now left. The Lord's stock is decreasing; the old sheep die out, and there are few lambs to take their place.'⁸²

79. Macrae, *Revivals in the Highlands and Islands in the 19th Century*, pp. 127-140.

80. N. R. Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland, 1838-2000: A Social Study of an Evangelical Movement* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), p. 99. For Thurso, Dickson lists and cites: (i) G. Robertson's house (by 1904-after 1922); J. W. Jordan, *List of Some Meetings in the British Isles and Regions Beyond* (London, 1904), p. 164; (ii) Thurso Christian Fellowship (1961-6); *The Witness*, 71 (1961), p. 476; *ibid.*, 92 (May 1962), p. 196; *ibid.*, 96 (August 1966), p. 36. For Wick, Dickson lists and cites: New Rifle Drill Hall (fl. 1897-1911); J. W. Jordan, *List of Some Meetings in the British Isles and Regions Beyond* (Greenwich, 1897), p. 136.

81. Ross's work features in a new publication which argues that the early Brethren espoused a form of Calvinism: M. R. Stevenson, *The Doctrines of Grace in an Unexpected Place: Calvinist Soteriology in Nineteenth-Century Brethren Thought* (Eugene, Or., 2017). As with all Brethren references in this article, I am grateful to Neil R. Dickson for this information.

82. *The Assemblies*, 1st July 1874, pp. 26-27. The writer acknowledges the help of Jessica

A meeting was held by the Free Church minister of Halkirk on 2nd July 1874 to oppose the teaching of Munro and Ross, but a 'considerable number' of those attending then decanted to the evangelists' tent straight afterwards. The Established Church minister then started to frequent the tent gatherings. On Monday July 6th the Brethren distributed 'thousands of both English and Gaelic tracts' at a large market. On the Sabbath of Halkirk communion (July 19th) they again distributed tracts in that village, held their own communion service and an evening service in the tent. Large crowds attended. This was despite their activities having been denounced at the Question Meeting two days before.⁸³

By August, Ross was looking at Halkirk as a strategically important transport hub due to its being on the new rail line, giving access north to Thurso, south-east to Wick, and south to Sutherland. He also wrote that in Halkirk, 'the Lord gathered in a nucleus' of converts and followers of the Brethren position. He claimed that the local people were inclined to look 'to the Spirit's work in them, instead of Christ's finished work for them'.⁸⁴ Further opposition in Thurso receded somewhat and large numbers attended their meetings. Of the Moody crusade which had taken place recently, they commented: 'As to fruit, we are not able to say much... that a great deal of bad work has been done, not by Mr Moody, but by persons who never saw an anxious soul on earth is equally true.'⁸⁵ Services at the tent continued in Thurso until early autumn. Readers of the Brethren periodical were asked to pray for those assembled in the far north: 'They have to encounter religious bigotry of a most intense description.'⁸⁶

v) Dr John Kennedy in Caithness

Mill referred to Dr John Kennedy. His visits to Caithness began in 1861 and continued until the 1880s.⁸⁷ Alexander Auld refers to Kennedy

Smith, Archivist of the Christian Brethren Archive at the University of Manchester for this and similar material.

83. *The Assemblies*, 1st August 1874, p. 30.

84. *The Assemblies*, 1st September 1874, pp. 33-34. Ross's account does not clarify the exact section of society to whom he refers. On the surface his criticism chimes with the position taken up by the great Highland preachers such as Dr Macdonald of Ferintosh (a native of Halkirk parish), who said in one spiritual song that the believer should look to 'what the Saviour did and suffered' and not 'to each grace bestowed'. (Translation: Norman Campbell).

85. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

86. *The Assemblies*, 1st October 1874, p. 39.

87. A. Auld, *Life of John Kennedy, D.D.* (London, 1887), pp. 142, 147.

preaching at a Thurso communion in 1864, returning in 1867 as part of a deputation of the Free Church Sustentation Committee. One visitor during the latter tour travelled twenty miles to hear him.⁸⁸ A subsequent supply arrangement in 1869, where Kennedy preached to the Gaelic-speaking fishermen on a Sabbath during the fishing season at Wick, also involved the Dingwall minister in week-day preaching throughout the county. Auld remarks that he 'visited almost every parish'. He adds that some of Kennedy's listeners during his week-day engagements 'followed him from place to place'.⁸⁹

Kennedy remained in regular contact with several people in Caithness, including David Steven, Bower.⁹⁰ Another means of Kennedy's influence being spread in the area was that he assisted at the Odrig communions for thirteen years running.⁹¹ The Kennedy/Auld friendship was also instrumental in Dr Hugh Martin's paying visits to the county in 1873 and 1874. Martin attended a public meeting in Wick, accompanied by Dr Begg in connection with the National Education Bill.⁹²

It thus seems that two separate and opposing streams were to be found in the Free Church in Caithness in the late nineteenth century: one looking to Dr Kennedy and Dr Begg in a rear-guard attempt to conserve adherence to the experimental Calvinism of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and to purity of worship; the other more evangelical than reformed and more revivalist than Calvinist, unwilling to stand against the denomination leadership's heresy.

In September 1884, a Salvation Army corps was commenced in Wick, and by the following May had between 200 and 300 people regularly attending its services. 'On some occasions they get as high as 15 converts a night', claimed the writer of a newspaper article, praising the two female Salvation Army officers for their success. The article also claimed that the two women had led 'close on 200 of both sexes' to the 'penitent form'. The writer expressed astonishment that there were some in the community who affirmed that the work was not of God, claiming that the 'Fathers' and in particularly their leader 'in the Academy' were among the sceptics. The

88. Ibid., pp. 142-143.

89. Ibid., p. 144.

90. Ibid., pp. 145-146; Auld, *Ministers and Men in the Far North*, p. 193.

91. Auld, *Life of John Kennedy*, p. 147.

92. Ibid., pp. 157-158.

'leader' referred to would almost certainly have been William Campbell, later to join the Free Presbyterian Church.⁹³

On the other hand, an example of the revivalist stream in the Free Church is seen in the Canisbay communion in the summer of 1886, at which Rev. John Sinclair of Bowden near Melrose assisted.⁹⁴ Sixty-one new communicants were added to the communion roll on that occasion, the previous total having been around 150. Mr Harper of the East Coast Mission had organised evangelistic meetings in the months before and great interest had been shown.⁹⁵

Believers in Caithness, aware of movements in the south, saw further decline in the Free Church in 1890. The Dods Case was watched with interest in the north. Marcus Dods, junior (1834-1909) was a minister and Professor of New Testament in New College who spread Higher Critical views of the Scriptures. Despite his opposition to the doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible, in 1890 the General Assembly of the Free Church allowed him to remain in office. Rev. George Renny of Wick gave a lecture on 5th January 1890, defending Dods junior.⁹⁶ This lecture was published and sold out within a week.⁹⁷ The Dods case came up at the meeting of the Free Church Presbytery of Caithness on 7th January, two days after Mr Renny gave his lecture. The Presbytery voted 14 to 7 in favour of a motion by Mr Gunn of Watten. This called on the College Committee to institute 'a judicial process for heresy against

93. *JOGJ*, 27th May 1885, p. 6. The article begs the question as to why attendances never seemed to be even close to the combined total of almost 400 claimed converts of both sexes. The 'penitent form' was an empty bench at the front of the meeting where those wishing to be converted could identify themselves and be prayed with; it was thought to have been brought to prominence by the American revivalist Charles G. Finney.

94. John Sinclair was born in Caithness in 1847. In 1890 he resigned from Bowden and went to America where he became minister of the first Presbyterian Church, St Paul's, Minnesota. See W. Ewing (ed.), *Annals of the Free Church of Scotland, 1843-1900* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1914), Vol. 1, p. 317.

95. Rev. John Sinclair, Bowden, 'A Caithness Communion', *Free Church Monthly Record*, 1st September 1886. Source: bound scrapbook with various Caithness revival accounts collected by John Mowat, held at the Nuclear and Caithness Archive, Wick.

96. *JOGJ*, 7th January 1890, p. 3.

97. Rev. George Renny, 'The Rev. Marcus Dods, D.D., his views reviewed: a lecture delivered in the Free Church of Wick, on Sabbath evening, 5th January, 1890' (Edinburgh, 1890), 16 pages. A second edition was published in March of that year. *JOGJ*, 25th March 1890, p. 4; *ibid.*, 22nd April 1890, p. 5.

Dr Dods, in the courts of our church'. The motion argued that this was necessary 'in order that the authority of God's word, and the orthodox standing of God's Word, be vindicated.'⁹⁸

vi) **The Declaratory Act – a further sifting in the Far North**

In 1891, Church legislation was proposed to accommodate those in the Free Church who no longer held to the *Westminster Confession* in its entirety. This Declaratory Act was passed in 1892 by the General Assembly, and underlined by the Assembly's refusal in 1893 to rescind the Act. The Act sheltered heretics. In 1892 the Free Church Presbytery of Caithness voted 13 to 11 to express their disapproval of the Act. Revs. F. M. Harper (Martyrs, Wick) and N. C. Robertson (Pulteneytown) supported the Act, while it was opposed by Dr Taylor (Thurso) along with Revs. A. Auld (Olrig), W. Murray (Bruan), D. Mowat (Dunnet), A. Mackay (Westerdale), D. Davidson (Canisbay) and J. Winter (Bower), plus the elders W. Mackay (Thurso), D. MacAdie (Watten), Aeneas Craig (Wick), James Budge (Dunnet), D. Bruce (Thurso) and John Wyllie (Bower). Those opposing it were not united in their view of the Act, with some stating their agreement with parts of it.⁹⁹ The opposition of Dr Taylor, a veteran of the Free Church, must have weighed with many on the Presbytery.¹⁰⁰

In April 1892, the Free Church's Synod of Sutherland and Caithness voted, again 13 to 11, to ask for the Declaratory Act not to be made 'a standing law' in the Church. The successful overture in the Synod requested the Assembly 'not to pass the Declaratory Act into a standing law of this church' on the basis of several premises. An amendment by Rev. N. C. Robertson (Pulteneytown) asked the Assembly to delay a decision for a year and for the Act to be returned to Presbyteries.¹⁰¹ The overture's premises included the statement that the Act was 'uncalled for and unnecessary', that it propounded 'doctrines, some of which are such as there is no sufficient Scripture warrant for, others that are opposed to the Word of God and Confession of Faith.' The overture also said that the Act's distinction

98. *JOGJ*, 14th January 1890, p. 3.

99. *JOGJ*, 2nd February 1892, p. 3. The moderator had no deliberative vote, and several present abstained.

100. Moderator of the Free Church General Assembly in 1884, Rev. Walter Ross Taylor, D.D., had ministered in Thurso since 1831. For his obituary, see *The Free Church of Scotland Monthly*, December 1896, p. 304.

101. *JOGJ*, 19th April 1892, p. 3.

between major and minor points of doctrine opened ‘the door for great laxity of doctrine’.¹⁰²

In January 1893, the Caithness Presbytery discussed the proposed new Act anent changes to the Questions and Formula to be put to probationers at their licensing and to ministers and office-bearers when being ordained and/or inducted. They voted 11 to 8 not to change the existing Questions and Formula; that having been moved by Mr Ross, Dunbeath and seconded by Mr Fraser, Halkirk.¹⁰³ At this meeting a somewhat surprising admission was made by Rev. George Renny of Wick Free Church.¹⁰⁴ This was that the Declaratory Act reflected his own emphases: ‘he had held the views of that Act before ever it was an Act, and preached them without feeling that he was traversing the Confession of Faith in doing so. He, however, had regard to the sensitive feelings of other people.’¹⁰⁵ Mr Renny had been much involved with helping Moody in 1874, opening his pulpit to the evangelist and allowing the use of the ‘inquiry room’ method.¹⁰⁶

April 1893 brought a further example of compromise by Rev. George Renny of Wick Free Church. That month, matters had come to a height at a stormy meeting of the Free Church Synod of Sutherland and Caithness. Renny sought to remove an entry in the minute of the Presbytery of Dornoch. In this, it had been recorded that at his induction, Mr MacDonald of Dornoch stated that he did so ‘wholly irrespective of the Declaratory Act’. Renny was also to claim that the historic Church of Scotland had always qualified its adherence to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. In mitigation, he reminded the Synod that he had seconded the motion at the General Assembly of 1892 that the Free Church should have further time for deliberation on the Act. Perhaps

102. *JOGJ*, 19th April 1892, p. 2. The successful overture had begun as a motion merely to ask the Assembly to consider these premises; but its mover, Rev. Charles Ross of Dunbeath, accepted Rev. Hector Fraser of Halkirk’s suggestion to add the request that the Act not be made ‘a standing law’.

103. *JOGJ*, 17th January 1893, p. 3.

104. George Renny (1830-1897), had acted as assistant to Rev. William Taylor in Pulteneytown, Wick in 1855-56. After ministry in Aberlemno, South Africa and Strathblane, he was translated to Wick itself in 1871. See his obituary in *The Free Church of Scotland Monthly*, September 1897, p. 224.

105. *JOGJ*, 17th January 1893, p. 3.

106. Macrae, *Revivals in the Highlands and Islands in the 19th Century*, p. 136.

in order to show respect to a father of the Church, Renny in the same meeting of the Synod actually defended the retention in the Caithness Presbytery's minutes of Mr Auld's statement of protest against the Act at a recent Bower induction.¹⁰⁷

It is surely significant that an obituarist sympathetic to his outlook remarked of Renny:

He will be largely remembered as the pioneer and advocate of more liberal thought and toleration in the north. Absolutely fearless and honest in the expression of his views almost to hardihood, it was impossible that he should not have met with opposition and misrepresentation; but he lived to see the principles of church polity he advocated, and the liberty of thought which he claimed, tolerated by almost all and adopted by many. That, and a kindlier spirit in dealing with questions on which men feel strongly, were among the changes wrought out during the last quarter of a century.¹⁰⁸

vii) The Free Presbyterian movement

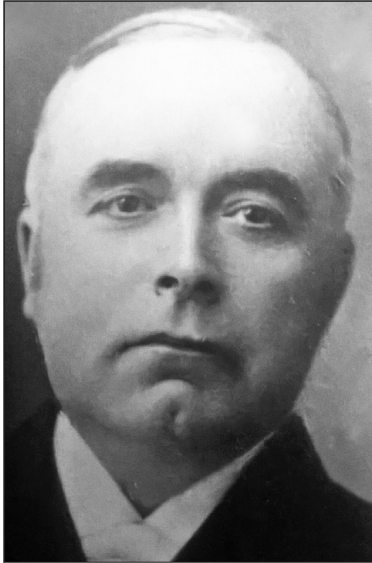
The genesis of the Wick Free Presbyterian congregation illustrates how some people in Caithness had reacted to the decline of the Free Church. Some had responded by worshipping in the 1880s at services held outwith her control. The town's Gaelic mission met in the Pulteneytown Academy. In 1881 William Campbell became the stated preacher at the mission. He had separated from the Free Church around 1871 due to the proposal to unite with the United Presbyterian Church. Campbell opposed uniting with a Church that did not believe in national religion, and that held a subtle form of Arminianism. The Gaelic mission in Wick was no longer under the control of the Free Church, and so was able to utilise Campbell from 1881. There was a Gaelic service in the morning and an English one in the afternoon.¹⁰⁹

107. *JOGJ*, 18th April 1893, p. 3.

108. *The Free Church of Scotland Monthly*, September 1897, p. 224. Part of Renny's character is also seen in the further words of his obituarist: 'To rich and poor he was courteous, kindly, and accessible. To the poor he was generous; to the sick, the bereaved, and sorrowful, sympathetic and helpful ... He never cherished a grudge, and after a stormy debate in presbytery or synod he was as friendly with his opponents as if no debate had taken place. Nor did defeat sour his temper or mar social intercourse, and often he helped in their difficulties those who most bitterly opposed him.'

109. *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 9 (January 1904), pp. 356-357. All the *Free Presbyterian Magazine* obituaries cited in this article are also to be found in the new publication, N. Campbell and R. Dickie (eds.), *Witnesses in the Far North* (Stornoway, 2017).

The afternoon service was better attended because numbers were swollen by people who ‘while still retaining their connection with the Free



Church, lamented and condemned the views and practices of the backsliding majority within her’. Rev. James Sinclair comments that Campbell provided both spiritual doctrine ‘of a soul satisfying nature’ as well as a ‘testimony for truth as against error’. The people got very little of the former and none of the latter from

Rev. James S. Sinclair (1867-1921) was a native of Caithness who helped organise the Free Presbyterian Church in his home county. He went on to edit the Free Presbyterian Magazine and pastor the smaller of the denomination’s two congregations in Glasgow.

PIC. COURTESY OF MARGARET AND CATHERINE TALLACH

their own pulpits, claimed Sinclair. Shortly after the separation in May 1893 by the fathers of the Free Presbyterian Church, Mr Campbell joined them and became their missionary.¹¹⁰

Following the separation of Rev. Donald MacFarlane from the Free Church by his protest tabled at the General Assembly of 1893, the movement spread. A public meeting was held in Wick on Wednesday 28th June 1893 to further inform the people. It was addressed by a number of divinity students including J. R. Mackay, James S. Sinclair, and George Mackay. J. R. Mackay stressed that in forming a Presbytery, Rev. Donald Macfarlane and his supporters ‘were not forming a new Church at all but abiding by the Church of 1843’.¹¹¹

Regular services commenced at Wick and a communion season was held in late April 1894, in the Academy. The assisting ministers were Rev. Donald MacDonald, Sheildaig and Rev. Allan Mackenzie, Inverness. The Friday Question meeting saw men from Halkirk, Wick, Scourie, Watten, Strathy, and one divinity student speak to the text. Two Gaelic services had been held in connection with the Sacrament.¹¹² In April 1895, the new church building on Breadalbane Terrace for the Wick Free Presbyterian congregation was opened, the preacher being the Rev. John R. Mackay.¹¹³

110. *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 9 (January 1904), p. 357.

111. *JOGJ*, 30th June 1893, p. 5.

112. *JOGJ*, 4th May 1894, p. 4.

113. *JOGJ*, 7th April 1905, p. 1.

One wonders if Mill ever went to any of William Campbell's services. It has to be added that Campbell was a very able speaker, with the result that he was sometimes mistaken for 'a regularly equipped and ordained minister'. He focused on doctrine and experience; one woman who had been under the preaching of the Rev. Archibald Cook stating that she 'got help through Mr Campbell's preaching that she did not get through Mr Cook's'.¹¹⁴

William Campbell provided powerful oratory, and clarity over the need for separation, to the movement in Wick, but he was not alone. Three others – William Crowe, Captain Robert Ross, and divinity student James S. Sinclair also played strong roles.

William Crowe belonged to Dunnet but after a short time at sea commenced a fish-curing business at Wick where he eventually became employed by the harbour authorities. There he also became the companion of a circle of godly people which included William Sinclair, the rope merchant. Mr Crowe was to take a growing interest in Church politics and the decline of confessional loyalty in the Free Church. An obituarist wrote:

He was at pains also at other times to show his sympathy with the witnessing party, and there was hardly any Constitutional conference that met at Inverness but he was present at it. He was much grieved with the compromising attitude of the leading ministers and others of the Constitutional party, and was not slow to express himself to this effect when opportunity offered. When the well-known Declaratory Act was passed in 1892, he felt that an important crisis had come, that it was a question of Bible or no Bible, Atonement or no Atonement, and he at once gave his cordial support to those who were prepared for separation.¹¹⁵

Such was his standing that he was asked to speak at the first public meeting held by the embryonic Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland in Inverness.

The high esteem with which William Crowe was held in the town was reflected by the Wick and Pulteneytown Harbour Trustees, with whom he had been employed as a treasurer and collector of rates. The trustees attended Crowe's funeral *en masse*. They recorded, too, in their minutes their assessment that he had 'the general respect of the whole community' as well as stating their appreciation of his 'kindly and benevolent disposition' and his 'quiet and unostentatious manner'.¹¹⁶

114. *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 9 (January 1904), p. 358.

115. *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 4 (April 1900), pp. 463–468.

116. *Northern Ensign*, 13th March 1900, p. 6.

The piety of William Crowe had been described after his death in remarks made by John Robertson, a preacher of another denomination in Wick:

Early called by grace he was enabled all through his Christian course to maintain a rare standard of excellence by a life and conversation becoming the gospel...Never perhaps were his ministrations more highly prized than beside the sick and the dying, where he so often poured out his heart in effectual fervent prayer on behalf of the sufferers. His kindness to the poor was no mere sympathy in words, for we have often known him to supply the temporal needs of many.

Mr Robertson added that it was when Mr Crowe saw it his duty to join the Free Presbyterian Church that 'the breadth of his sympathy shone clearly out, and the largeness of his heart could still embrace his friends who did not see eye to eye with him.'¹¹⁷

Scourie-born Captain Robert Ross had been a regular hearer of Rev. Archibald Cook, being one of those who walked from Wick to Bruan to hear him preach. He was a strong believer in the Establishment Principle and an opponent of Arminianism. He held services in later life and was known for warm-hearted sympathy for those in distress.¹¹⁸ Captain Ross's home was a centre of hospitality and fellowship in the town. On one occasion, when Dr Kennedy had preached at the April communion season in the town, the captain asked people to his home. A young man under concern of soul remarked afterwards: 'What a blessed day! And that little company in Captain Ross's and their singing of the 45th Psalm, "Behold the daughter of the King", was more like heaven than earth!'¹¹⁹

The other main centre for the Free Presbyterian movement in the county was Halkirk. Services had been held in the Halkirk Schoolhouse on Sabbath 18th June 1893 by James S. Sinclair. The following evening a 'Mr R. Mackay, MA, of Strathy' presided. He stressed the necessity of separation from a Church that had made 'an open question of the doctrine of the infallibility and inerrancy of the Holy Spirit'.¹²⁰

117. *Northern Ensign*, 6th March 1900, p. 6.

118. *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, March 1902, Vol. 6 (March 1902), pp. 419-424.

119. His Mother [C. R. Auld], *Memorial of Walter R. T. Auld* (Oxford, 1896), pp. 18-19. The writer is grateful to Miss Margaret Tallach for pointing out this anecdote. The *Memorial* was first published in 1881, with a second edition the same year. An abridged edition was published in 1896 and reprinted in 1967.

120. *JOGJ*, 23rd June 1893, p. 5.

On Sabbath 25th June 1893, the Halkirk Free Church minister, Rev. Hector Fraser read a statement to his congregation. In it he said that he had always considered the Act ‘unnecessary and uncalled for’ and that there were ‘some things’ in it of which he entirely disapproved. However, he denied that the Act did away with the *Confession of Faith* and said: ‘This Act is not imposed on me and does not bind me, being what is called a relieving or permissive act. Those who want relief on some points can have it and those who don’t want a relieving act need not accept it or put themselves under it.’ Mr Fraser added that he was ‘quite satisfied’ with the *Confession of Faith*, did not need any Declaratory or Relieving Act, and that he did not accept it and would vote for its repeal. He implied that those who spoke of secession were guilty of schism and should be providing ‘an unbroken front to the foe’.¹²¹

Mr Fraser’s lecture drew a response by James S. Sinclair in the form of a long letter to the *John O’ Groat Journal* in which he stated: ‘Those who have taken the present stand outside the so-called Free Church desire ... not to join with Drs Rainy, Bruce and Dods in perpetuating to generations yet unborn the soul-ruining heresies which have molested the church of God in every age.’ Mr Sinclair finished his letter by ‘solemnly urging upon all who are adherents, members or office-bearers in the so-called Free Church as they shall answer at the Great Day the duty of separation from that from unfaithful body.’¹²²

Meantime on Friday 7th July, the Halkirk School Board had discussed a written application by Free Presbyterians for use of the school building during the normal hours of worship in the village on the Sabbath. The Board refused, but offered its use outwith these times. On an earlier Sabbath, a permit had been signed by three members of the School Board granting its use but this had been countermanded by another document signed by four of the members.¹²³ The Free Presbyterian congregation later worshipped in a workshop owned by David and Jane Mackay until the building was erected on Bridge Street in 1896.¹²⁴

At the October 1893 Wick Free Presbyterian communion season, most of the parishes in the county were represented.¹²⁵ However, Caithness

121. *JOGJ*, 30th June 1893, p. 3.

122. *JOGJ*, 14th July 1893, p. 5.

123. *JOGJ*, 21st July 1893, p. 6.

124. *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 49 (February 1945), p. 202.

125. *JOGJ*, 3rd November 1893, p. 6.

Free Presbyterians looked beyond their own county boundary; some travelled to the other end of Scotland to be present at the Free Presbyterian communion season in Millhouse, Tighnabruaich in Argyll in May 1894. Revs. J. R. Mackay and Donald Macdonald preached, as well as Neil Cameron who was then a divinity student. Services were in both English and Gaelic, Mr Macdonald on Sabbath morning preaching ‘a sermon of wonderful power in Gaelic’. Strangers were also present from Glasgow, Greenock, Rothesay, and Tarbert (Lochfyne).¹²⁶

The leaders of the new Free Presbyterian Church continued to hold public meetings in the Far North, including Helmsdale. The congregation there was, in time, to be linked with Halkirk. In August 1894 services were held in Gaelic and English in the Artillery Hall, and in the Portgower School. On Tuesday evening, Neil Cameron, Rev. James S. Sinclair, and the divinity students John MacLeod and Alexander Stewart held a public meeting. Bilingual in format, the event saw Mr Cameron explain what the ‘faith once delivered to the saints’ was, contrasting it ‘with the present-day teaching in the Free Church as allowed and countenanced by the Declaratory Act’.¹²⁷

As time went by, the Helmsdale congregation was linked with Halkirk, the minister going to Helmsdale once a month. Strathy had a series of missionaries including Murdo Mackay but was always under the Wick Kirk Session.

At times the three parties into which the Free Church was divided were reminded of a more united and orthodox past, by Churches outwith her pale. William Crowe spoke at a public meeting held in Wick in 1895 where many of the other main speakers were of the Established Church. The meeting was held in defence of the principle of the national recognition of religion, i.e., as was stated by the chairman of the meeting, that ‘in a Christian country such as ours, the State should recognise the Christian Church’. In his speech, Mr Crowe said that he had been an office-bearer in the Free Church for more than a quarter of a century, and ‘now when old age was coming on he found there was no Free Church to get hold of.’ The principles taught at the Disruption had been ‘shamelessly abandoned, thrown aside and bartered away for Voluntaryism’, he added.¹²⁸ Another reminder of better days came in 1896, when the Church of Scotland minister at the Shurrery mission,

126. ‘The Kilfinan Secessionists’, *Northern Chronicle*, 23rd May 1894, p. 6.

127. *JOGJ*, 24th August 1894, p. 3

128. *JOGJ*, 12th July 1895, p. 6.

Rev. Alexander Cameron, passed away. A newspaper obituary commented: ‘Seldom have we seen one with purer and loftier spiritual aims, and although belonging to the old school of theology his preaching had the true ring of one possessed of very lofty ideas. Having been acquainted with the Messrs Cook, we need not wonder although he held ever a deep veneration for both their memories. In his preaching he much resembled “Mr Archie” and loved to relate stories and anecdotes regarding him.’¹²⁹

viii) The Union of 1900 and the Free Church post-1900 minority

Caithness had a strong body of conservatives within the Free Church who decided to live with the consequences of the Declaratory Act by remaining within her pale after 1893 while continuing to oppose the Act. In 1894, the Free Presbytery of Caithness had voted 18 to 5 to overture the General Assembly asking for the Declaratory Act to be rescinded.¹³⁰

The union of the United Presbyterian Church and the old Free Church on 31st October 1900 brought matters to a head. In Caithness there was much support. At their meeting of 4th September 1900, the Caithness Presbytery of the Free Church had voted by a large majority to approve the overture for union with the United Presbyterian Church, sent down by the General Assembly. Rev. W. Murray, Bruan had moved against approval. He argued that the Declaratory Act was now ‘brought forward and had a place in the basis of union’. This was despite their having been assured when the Act came into force that ‘they would not be asked to approve of it, or even to take it into their lips.’¹³¹ On 2nd October, however, the Caithness Presbytery had unanimously adopted an overture drafted by Mr Murray that they ask the forthcoming Assembly ‘to declare that the Church still holds the Headship of Christ over the nations’.¹³²

Many conservatives, particularly in the Highlands, refused to join the Union – remaining separate and claiming to be the true Free Church. Mr Auld of Olig was the only minister in Caithness to refuse to join the Union, followed by the vast majority of his congregation.¹³³ Nationally, the

129. *JOGJ*, 28th February 1896, p. 4.

130. *JOGJ*, 13th April 1894, p. 3.

131. *JOGJ*, 7th September 1900, p. 2. Mr Auld was not present at the meeting. His congregation of Olig was dropped from the list of the congregations in the west of the county to have a presbyterial visitation.

132. *JOGJ*, 5th October 1900, p. 4. This meeting also agreed to visit Olig on 11th October.

133. A ‘pastor colleague’ for Mr Auld, W. C. Munro, was appointed in Olig Free Church in 1901. *JOGJ*, 4th November 1904, p. 3.

conservative minority began a legal bid for title to the property of the United Free Church. This they won in the House of Lords in 1904. The government set up a Commission under Sir John Cheyne 'to endeavour to arrange for temporary joint occupation where congregations were divided'. The Free Church minority were opposed to this Commission. A Royal Commission was then set up by the government to adjudicate at local and national levels.¹³⁴

The 1904 victory for the minority Free Church party triggered a small stream of defections from the United Free Church to their ranks. Caithness saw new groups turn to the successful litigants in Reay, Pulteneytown, Lybster, and Keiss.¹³⁵ The court success for the minority Free Church also led to some Free Presbyterians joining their ranks in Caithness. When the Free Church took the United Free Church to court in order to claim the Keiss building, the United Free Church replied:

None of the complainers were members of the Free Church at Keiss, at the date of the Union in 1900...two of the complainers that are described as elders were until recently members of the Free Presbyterian Church or of the Established Church. On 15th January last, the first service held by a Free Church minister was conducted in Keiss, and the persons adhering to the Free Church are for the most part, it is said, the same persons who prior to that time were connected with the Free Presbyterian Church.¹³⁶

In Lybster, a commentator noted: 'One interesting feature of the situation is that the Free Presbyterians who held aloof are now joining the Wee Free movement just as if the Declaratory Act was not in existence.'¹³⁷

Some sense of the Free Church's numerical strength in 1900 can be gained from the claims that the minority party made in 1905. These statistics were the subject of controversy. In alphabetical order, the pre- and post-division figures for 'strength of congregation' provided by the minority Free Church were as follows: Berriedale, 464, 336; Bower, 435, 232; Bruan, 402, 214; Dunnet, 398, 126; Keiss, 313, 240; Latheron, 413, 262; Lybster, 713, 549; Olig, 670, 622; Pulteneytown, 509, 121; Reay, 528, 317; Watten, 471, 283.¹³⁸ It is interesting that the Free Church did not claim any

134. Hew Morrison, *Manual of the Church Question in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1905), pp. 22-23, 33-35.

135. *Ibid.*, Appendix 31; p. 227. Similar situations arose in Campbeltown and other places. *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, Wednesday 23rd November 1904, p. 6.

136. 'Answers by the UF Church: the church at Keiss', *JOGJ*, 21st April 1905, p. 2.

137. *JOGJ*, 24th March 1905, p. 3.

138. *Manual of the Church Question in Scotland*, Appendix 31, p. 227. In Reay, the Free

of the main properties in Thurso, Halkirk, or Wick. In Caithness, all of the Wick and Thurso Free Church buildings plus Canisbay, Dunnet, and Halkirk were allocated to the United Free congregations.¹³⁹

One example of how vastly different claims were made as to the relative strength of each side, is to be seen in the case of Latheron. According to the Free Church representative who gave evidence to Sir John Cheyne, the United Free Church credited the Free Church with only twenty-eight people while the Free Church itself had compiled a list of 260 people with signatures. The United Free Church representative at the hearing produced a statement signed by eighteen people expressing regret that their names were on the Free Church list and that they had been entered on it without their permission. The Free Church representative countered by saying that these names were not on the list.¹⁴⁰

Although robust in terms of attendance, the Free Church had not generally been strong financially in Caithness, even before the division of October 1900. In the year up to 15th May 1900, only three of the eighteen Free Church congregations in the Presbytery of Caithness had given more than the £160 target for the Sustentation Fund. The rest were classified as 'aid-receiving'. Of the three 'aid-giving' charges, only Pulteneytown was among the nine charges later claimed by the Free Church minority of 1900.¹⁴¹

A survey of church attendance in the main towns of the north of Scotland on the morning of Sabbath 28th April 1901 was published by an Aberdeen newspaper later that week. It was based on information provided by local correspondents in each area. Its coverage of Caithness was poor. Information was not available for Wick. In Thurso the following attendances were noted: Parish Church 83; United Free 311; West United Free 149; Episcopal 48; Original Secession 36; Congregational 102; Reformed Presbyterian 19; Free Presbyterian 6; Salvation Army 52; YMCA children's service 108. The statistics for Thurso were skewed by several factors. Only the ministers of the Congregational and Episcopalian charges were present in the town that morning. The Free Presbyterian, Reformed Presbyterian, and original Secession congregations only held

Church in Shebster had over 600 attending in the 1880s. It was seated for 700 people. See *This was my Glen: Caithness Notebook No 2*, p. 67.

139. Donald A. Young, *The Book of Lybster* (Lybster, [c.1997]), p. 220.

140. *JOGJ*, 27th January 1905, p. 5.

141. *Manual of the Church Question in Scotland*, Appendix XXV, p. 189.

Wick Free Presbyterian Church
Minister - Rev. R. R. SINOLAIR.

COMMUNION SERVICES

Thursday (FAST DAY) **27th APRIL**
At 12 Noon and 7 p.m.

Friday . . . **28th APRIL**
At 12 Noon (Prayer Meeting)
At 6.30 p.m. (Men's Fellowship Meeting)

Saturday . . . **29th APRIL**
At 12 Noon and 5 p.m. (Prayer Meeting)

Sabbath . . . **30th APRIL**
At 12 Noon and 6.15 p.m.

Monday . . . **1st MAY**
At 12 Noon

PREACHERS

REV. NEIL MACINTYRE EDINBURGH
REV. WILLIAM GRANT HALKIRK

A poster found in the Wick Free Presbyterian Church, not dating further than the late 1940s.

PIC. COURTESY OF REV. ROSS MACASKILL

prayer meetings on that occasion; and the Free Presbyterian figures were lower than usual because many of the congregation were attending the Wick communion service.¹⁴²

Anti-Burgher Secession influence, a very strong Free Church heritage, and powerful reformed ministries did not prevent error creeping into Caithness and becoming the mainstream attitude over time. Perhaps no clearer example can be given than that of Zion Chapel in Wick. After Dr James Morison was expelled from the United Secession Church, sympathisers were found in Wick; by 1851 they had been joined by a number from the Congregational church in Wick and they had erected the

chapel as an outpost of the Evangelical Union. A minister was appointed. By 1903 the congregation decided to dissolve and to join the United Free Church, who took over the chapel premises as a hall. At its official opening, one speaker remarked: 'those worshipping in the Zion Chapel found that their mission had been accomplished, as their doctrines were being preached in almost every church in Scotland'.¹⁴³

ix) Seven women's reactions

That ecclesiastically disillusioned Caithness people could and would change Churches, as opposed to practising the individualist home-based separation praised by Mill, is seen in the case of several godly women for whom biographical detail is available. All seven of them left the Church in which they had been born, but were able to find another one with which to associate themselves.

An important woman of the Disruption era in Caithness was Janet Macleod in Sandside, Reay. She was described as being 'of large public spirit'. When she heard that Rev. Finlay Cook was presented to the parish of Reay in 1835, she exclaimed, 'Lord, bless the whole earth!'. Her home

142. 'Church-going in the North', *Aberdeen Journal*, Tuesday 30th April 1901, p. 4.

143. *JOGJ*, 2nd October 1903, p. 4.



Sandside harbour, Reay was built in 1830 by the Major William Innes whose mother showed great kindness to John MacDonald, Ferintosh as a boy.

was the venue for the fortnightly congregational fellowship meeting in the parish; but in 1843, with many others in Caithness, she left the Established Church and joined the Free Church. She died in April 1862, aged 69.¹⁴⁴

A woman who took a more involved ecclesiastical route was Kitty Cormack (1777-1867), today best known for her edifying exchange with Rev. Archibald Cook on the street in Thurso.¹⁴⁵ Miss Cormack was a poor small-holder and teacher who nevertheless helped the destitute and was seen as an example of practical godliness.¹⁴⁶ One of Robert Haldane's early hearers in Caithness, she initially moved from the Established Church to the Congregationalists.¹⁴⁷ An increasing appreciation of the Presbyterian form of Church government, but aversion to the 'dry harangues she was accustomed to hearing from the pulpits of the Establishment', led to her joining the

144. Auld, *Ministers and Men in the Far North*, pp. 79-80, 219.

145. The meeting between Mr Cook and Kitty Cormack was described in Rev. J. R. Mackay's 'Memoir' of Cook, printed in *Sermons in Gaelic and English by Rev. A. Cook* (Glasgow, 1907), pp. xxvi-xxvii; A. MacPherson (ed.), *Sidelights on Two Notable Ministries* (Inverness, 1970), p. 39; *Eternal Reality: Sermons by Archibald Cook* (Free Presbyterian Publications, 2015), p. 30.

146. F.M.H., *Life of Kitty Cormack*, (3rd edn., Wick, 1907), pp. 14-16, 19-20, 27. The first edition was printed by John George of Pulteneytown in 1871, using material 'understood to be from the pen of a young man in Wick'; see *JOGJ*, 23rd February 1871, p. 2. The second, enlarged edition appeared in 1882. Presumably 'F.M.H.' was F. M. Harper, later the minister of Martyrs' Free Church, Wick.

147. *Life of Kitty Cormack*, pp. 8-9.

Seceders who had a church on the Hill of Newton near Wick.¹⁴⁸ However, by the early 1830s she was leaning to the Reformed Presbyterian Church as she believed it to be the duty of the civil ruler to subscribe the Covenants; and in 1838 she formally joined their Pulteneytown congregation.¹⁴⁹

Miss Cormack was noted for her kindness to all she met, as well as for vocally defending the Sabbath to the extent of challenging her land-owner for a breach of it, and for publicly opposing the celebration of Robert Burns' poetry which she regarded as demoralising.¹⁵⁰ She was also a Mother in Israel, rebuking where necessary; as seen in her warning a girl who was claiming conversion but who nevertheless was following the latest clothing fashions and hairstyles of the day.¹⁵¹

Despite her unhappiness with the Churches, at no point does Kitty appear to have considered worshipping at home on her own and avoiding the public means of grace. Rev. David Burn of the West Free Church, Thurso (1804-1882) responded to a comment about the large crowd who attended Kitty's funeral: 'Them that honour me, I will honour.'¹⁵²

Another woman from Caithness, Maggie Budge, was born in 1863, a few years before Kitty Cormack died. She lived in Thurso and died at the early age of thirty-two in 1895. She had formally separated from the Free Church the previous year, over its defections and those of the visible Church, joining herself instead to the Free Presbyterian Church. Her autobiographical writings, initially published by James S. Sinclair in 1896 in Wick, and now recently reprinted, show the spirituality with which the Far North was richly endowed in previous generations.¹⁵³

Another woman of decided opinions and an exemplary life-style was Mrs Elizabeth Crowe, the wife of William Crowe of Wick. She moved from the Free Church to the Free Presbyterian Church with her husband in 1893, and died in 1915. An obituary for her stated: 'Before a minister was settled at Wick, Mr and Mrs Crowe entertained the ministers for a number

148. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

149. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

150. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15, 19, 22-23.

151. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

152. *JOGJ*, 11th May 1882, p. 6. Mr Burn, and most of his Anti-Burgher congregation in Thurso, had with the majority of the Original Secession Synod, joined the Free Church in 1852; see Scott, *Annals and Statistics of the Original Secession Church*, pp. 566-567.

153. J. S. Sinclair (ed.), *A Memorial of Maggie Budge* (Wick, 1896; 2nd edn., Huntingtonian Press, Southampton, 2017).

of years at the Communion seasons, and her recollections of those days of pleasant intercourse on divine things with God's servants were bright spots in her life, to which she delighted to look back. She was a woman of kindly disposition, and bestowed gifts freely upon the deserving and needy with discretion. Sterling honesty of character was another outstanding feature, for however much one might differ with her, there was always the feeling that she was one that shunned crooked and tortuous ways.¹⁵⁴

The decisions made by another Caithness woman help to illustrate the dilemmas faced by those who held to the reformed faith. Jane Ronaldson, née Watt, was born in Latheron in 1828. Raised in the Church of Scotland, she followed the Disruption party in 1843 that formed the Free Church of Scotland.¹⁵⁵ Mrs Ronaldson was perplexed by seeing 'good men' on both sides of the Union controversy from 1863 onwards, and she decided to search the Bible for clarity in the matter. The result was that she came strongly to support the Establishment Principle, particularly the duty of the civil magistrate 'in his public as well as in his private capacity' to honour Christ and the Scriptures.¹⁵⁶ Mrs Ronaldson then became increasingly grieved by 'the attacks made upon the authenticity and inspiration of the book of Moses and other Scriptures by some Free Church College Professors, who were favouring the Union'. The result was that she would not receive a communion token from any minister or elder who supported these attacks on the Bible, nor 'listen with comfort to any minister who condoned them'.¹⁵⁷ Mrs Ronaldson did not boycott communion services but was selective in which ministers she would listen to. She also 'saw



Picture thought to be of Mrs Elizabeth Crowe, Wick, who helped her husband William Crowe (1820-1900) establish a Free Presbyterian cause in the town.

PIC. COURTESY OF
WICK SOCIETY/JOHNSTON COLLECTION

154. *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 20 (May 1915), p. 35.

155. Angus Mackay, *Memoirs of a Caithness Mother in Israel, Mrs William Ronaldson, 1828-1919* (2nd edn., Wick, 1948), pp. 7, 20. The first edition appeared in Inverness in 1920.

156. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

157. *Ibid.*, p. 21.



Mrs William Ronaldson (1828-1919).

a new religion spreading fast' which held to the doctrine of 'man's ability to save himself'. She wrote in a letter to a friend: 'the more they preach this, the more the Lord laid me on my back and made me feel my utter helplessness; for, whatever hope I might have in believing in His sovereign mercy I had no hope in my own ability'.¹⁵⁸

Matters came to a height for Mrs Ronaldson in 1889, following the appointment of Dr Marcus Dods, Jnr as a Professor in the New College, Edinburgh. Mrs Ronaldson joined the Reformed Presbyterian Church in 1891 after seriously and prayerfully examining its standards.¹⁵⁹ She remained in close contact with old friends and 'manifested considerable sympathy with the Free Presbyterian Church'. However, she also 'hailed with delight the decision of the House of Lords in 1904 as vindicating the minority's identity with the Free Church of 1843'. She saw the House of Lords' decision as a fulfilment of words in Psalm 128:6 which had comforted her many years previously about the decline of the Church. It was said that she agreed with the Rev. J. R. Mackay's desire to unite the Free Church minority and the Free Presbyterian Church but would also have supported co-operation between these two bodies and the Reformed Presbyterians and the Original Secession.¹⁶⁰ It would have to be said that while Mrs Ronaldson appears to have valued several different stands made for the truth, at the same time these stands were to some degree mutually exclusive.

Another eminent Caithness woman who was in various denominations was Christina Ross Auld, a daughter of Rev. Dr Walter Ross Taylor of Thurso. A girl at the Disruption of 1843, she left the Established Church with her family and joined the Free Church. Like her father, she was alienated from the decline in the old Free Church; and in 1892 she was opposed to the Declaratory Act, and so took an entirely different trajectory to her brother, Rev. Walter Ross Taylor (Kelvinside). She was married to the Rev. Alexander Auld of Olig (1821-1904), but unlike her husband, who remained

158. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

159. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

160. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

in the Free Church in 1893 and stayed out of the Union of 1900, Mrs Auld's sympathies were with the Free Presbyterian Church, which she joined after her husband's death. In later years she was a living link with the high tide of godliness in the county, able to recall Dr MacDonald of Ferintosh and the Cook brothers' labours and also to encourage contemporary believers and the ministers. She died at the age of 94 in 1928.¹⁶¹

One final Caithness woman to mention was the outstanding Christian, Charlotte Mackay, the sister of Rev. J. R. Mackay, who died in 1946 at the age of 84. Familiar with many godly people in her home area of Strathy in her youth, she lived latterly in Thurso. Her reaction to the decline of the Free Church was described by her obituarist:

A few months after the separation of 1893 she attended a Communion gathering at Odrig, Caithness, and referred to it thus: 'What I heard came so far short of what the times required that I became a Free Presbyterian by conviction that day.' Later she visited the late Rev. Mr. [Alexander] Munro, of Alness, whose ministry she had much appreciated. She discussed with him the Declaratory Act (then passed). As he failed to separate from it she told him she could not follow him any longer and did not attend his meeting that night. Mr. Munro no doubt felt the rebuke but continued to show her Christian kindness.¹⁶²

x) The early twentieth-century onwards

A significant part of Caithness reformed spirituality was the five-day communion season. Even a sceptical but affectionate observer of Highland spirituality observed of communion seasons in Westerdale, Caithness: 'By five in the morning the more devout were up again and out at the dyke-sides praying on their own.'¹⁶³ Many people travelled from area to area for weeks on end through the local cycle of communion seasons. The general atmosphere of the late nineteenth century is reflected in a further comment by the same writer: 'The sight of a venerable head bowed in the ditch was too common for ordinary wayfarers to give any special notice.'¹⁶⁴ The communion season gradually faded away in the county, but Caithness newspapers continued to advertise and report on communions long after the convulsions of 1893, 1900, and 1904.

161. *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 33 (October 1928), pp. 225-230.

162. *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 52 (January 1948), pp. 176-7.

163. Alastair Phillips, *My Uncle George* (Glasgow, 1954), p. 48.

164. *Ibid*, p. 49.

Another aspect of Caithness piety which continued into the twentieth century was an interest in experimental (experience-focussed) religion. This was provided for in the preaching of the biblical ministers of the day to varying degrees. One aspect of this phenomenon, among Caithness Free Church people who became Free Presbyterians, was a fondness for the Gospel Standard Strict Baptist preacher Joseph Charles Philpot. This also continued in the twentieth century, with the later addition of the sermons of James K. Popham, pastor of Galeed Chapel in Brighton. The experimental and doctrinal flavour of their writings and preaching was attractive to people in the north and in other parts of Scotland. For example, Captain Robert Ross of Wick had a taste for the writings of J. C. Philpot.¹⁶⁵ This interest was encouraged by the reprinting of extracts from Philpot's writings, and positive reviews for his material, in the *Free Presbyterian Magazine*. Rev. James Macleod, Greenock, encouraged the purchase of Philpot's sermons, 'Winter afore Harvest' and 'The Heir of heaven walking in darkness', in a review in which he stated: 'On the cardinal doctrine of justification by faith, and faith alone, Mr Philpot, probably resembles Rev Archibald Cook more than any we ever read'.¹⁶⁶

Mr Popham preached in the Halkirk Free Presbyterian Church on Sabbath 5th July 1908, his text being John 8:36.¹⁶⁷ Mr Popham and the 'Messrs Wakeley' of Kent had sent apologies for absence to the funeral of Rev. Alexander Auld of Olig Free Church in November 1904.¹⁶⁸ A bond was formed with Rev. Donald Beaton of Wick and the Mackay family of Strathy, among others. Charlotte Mackay was known for her respect to Mr Popham and found spiritual benefit from his preaching.¹⁶⁹ A number of years later, Mr Beaton of Wick preached for Mr Popham in Galeed Chapel, Brighton. This took place on Wednesday 16th April 1930. The normal hymns were dropped, with psalms being sung instead on this occasion. In May of that year, Rev J. R. Mackay (by now in the Free Church of Scotland) also preached in Galeed Chapel, exclusive Psalmody again being the order of the day. This visit followed a meeting of the Sovereign Grace Union (SGU) in London.¹⁷⁰

165. *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 6 (March 1902), p. 423.

166. *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 41 (April 1937), p. 495.

167. M. J. Hyde (ed.), *According to Mine Heart: The Collected Correspondence of James Kidell Popham* (Gospel Standard Publications, 2010), p. 415.

168. *JOGJ*, 11th November 1904, p. 6.

169. *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 52 (January 1948), p. 177.

170. *The Christian's Pathway Supplement*, July 1930, pp. 135, 156. I am grateful to Dr Matthew J. Hyde for these references.

Mr Popham, Mr Beaton, and Mr Mackay were active in the work of the Union, which was set up in 1914 to promote the doctrines of grace; organising conferences and being probably the main publisher of reformed literature in Britain before World War Two. Mr Beaton preached the main sermon for the SGU at their 25th annual conference in April 1939. Rev. Neil Macintyre attended the 1948 International Conference in Edinburgh while the *Free Presbyterian Magazine* endorsed an appeal for financial help by the SGU in 1941.¹⁷¹ The biography of a Strict Baptist minister's wife, published by the SGU, was praised in the Church's *Magazine*.¹⁷² Preaching at the 1948 induction of Rev. Donald Maclean to the pastorate of Portree Free Presbyterian Church, Rev. John Colquhoun of Glendale mentioned that he valued a personal friendship with Mr Popham as one of 'the most precious privileges' he had enjoyed in his life. Mr Popham had written to Mr Colquhoun shortly after his ordination.¹⁷³

Following the turmoil of the first decade of the twentieth century, and the First World War, the long slow decline of anything approaching reformed spirituality continued in the county. However, one new Brethren Assembly was formed in Caithness when Angus Swanson, a Church of Scotland lay-reader in Wick resigned his Church membership after evangelising alongside Jock Troup. When the two men were about to enrol as students at the Bible Training Institute, Glasgow, Swanson returned to Wick where he met two Plymouth Brethren evangelists. In 1923, he and nine teenagers, who had also been influenced by the revival, began breaking bread.¹⁷⁴

The Reformed Presbyterian congregation in Wick closed in 1893. The Thurso congregation remained active for three more decades, finally closing in 1928.¹⁷⁵ In 1936 the Free Church minister of Stornoway, Rev. Kenneth Macrae, visited Caithness on a preaching tour. This was at the request of

171. M. J. Hyde, *Unity in Diversity: The Sovereign Grace Union, 1914-1939* (Huntingtonian Press, 2015), pp. 11, 31, 38.

172. *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 41 (April 1937), pp. 508-509. The biography recommended was *That Better Part: the early experience, diary, and letters of Mary Tanner* (Brighton, 1937).

173. *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 54 (May 1949), p. 5.

174. Bethany Hall (founded in 1923) is described in Angus Swanson, 'Our heritage', *Believer's Magazine*, 82 (1972), pp. 91-2. This is cited in context in Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland, 1838-2000*, pp. 189-190.

175. G. J. Keddie, 'The Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland and the Disruption of 1863', *SRSJHJ*, Vol. 6 (2016), pp. 133-172 (p. 172).



The Keiss Baptist Church was formed in 1750 by Sir William Sinclair. The building pictured was erected in the 1850s, replacing a turf and stone structure. It in turn was shut and sold in 2009, following the Church's merger with the Wick Baptists.

his Church's Public Questions Committee. The aim was to encourage the young to 'a greater interest in and zeal' for the Free Church's 'message and testimony'.¹⁷⁶ Despite bad weather, there were attendances of 46 in Wick, 57 in Castletown (Mr Auld's former congregation of Olig), 21 in Shebster (Reay), 55 in Thurso, 41 in Keiss, 43 in Lybster, and 57 in Watten.¹⁷⁷ Macrae commented in his diary: 'I enjoyed it very much and I found matters religious in a better way than I had anticipated from all the doleful accounts I had heard concerning Caithness. Of course I have never seen its former glory.'¹⁷⁸

One of the leading figures in maintaining the outlook of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* during the twentieth century in the county was Rev. William Grant who for 38 years pastored the Free Presbyterian congregation in Halkirk.¹⁷⁹ His home town was Dornoch where in his youth he had had the example of spiritual giants such as David Ross, Angus Murray, and Andrew Tallach. Mr Grant as a young man helped plant a church in London while employed in banking.¹⁸⁰ After war service, he trained with Rev. Donald Beaton, following which he was ordained as an

176. I. H. Murray (ed.), *Diary of Kenneth A. Macrae* (Edinburgh, 1980), p. 307.

177. *Ibid*, pp. 314-316.

178. *Ibid*, p. 317.

179. *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 83 (February 1978), pp. 49-54; [Margaret Campbell], *Rev. William Grant* (n.p., 1978).

180. *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 83 (February 1978), p. 50.

assistant to Rev. Neil Cameron in the large Glasgow congregation. In 1926, he was settled as minister of the joint charge of Halkirk and Helmsdale.¹⁸¹ He refused calls from other areas and was known to several generations of people in the north. He was 'much given to prayer' and noted for frequent visiting of the ill, whether of his own denomination or others. He was active in establishing a Church Home of Rest in Inverness. International in vision, he was very involved in the work of promoting sound versions of the Scriptures in Britain and abroad through the Trinitarian Bible Society.¹⁸² Mr Grant had been preceded in the Halkirk charge by Rev. Malcolm Gillies, who served there from 1921 to 1925.¹⁸³

Another leading conservative minister in the county was the Rev R. R. Sinclair (1898-1997) of Wick Free Presbyterian Church. A son of Rev. James S. Sinclair, he had been named after his great-grandfather, the Wick elder, Captain Robert Ross. Inducted to Wick in 1931, he later served as Clerk to the denomination's Synod (1935-1977) and editor of its *Magazine* (1949-1969). In the 1989 division in his denomination, he joined the Associated Presbyterian Churches (APC). He retired in 1992. A newspaper obituary said he would be remembered as a 'talented preacher'.¹⁸⁴

At Wick Free Presbyterian church in 1956, an attendance of 47 in the morning and 37 in the evening was noted by Alex MacLennan, a visiting home missionary, on one spring Sabbath.¹⁸⁵ Over a decade later he recorded that 27 attended an autumn Sabbath morning service (in 1967).¹⁸⁶ In Strathy, in October 1960, Mr MacLennan found that attendances at the prayer meeting could fluctuate from 9 to 15.¹⁸⁷ In a letter to his wife during that trip north, Mr MacLennan noted of the Sabbath in Strathy: 'In the morning service here there was over 20, and two praying people, so the cause is not dead yet.'¹⁸⁸ There was no communion service in the

181. Ibid, p. 51.

182. Ibid, p. 52.

183. Mr Gillies (1885-1945) was a missionary-minister in the Church's Canadian congregations before being inducted to Halkirk. After Caithness, he became minister of the Stornoway congregation.

184. J. M. Macleod, 'Rev. Robert Ross Sinclair', *Glasgow Herald*, 13th February 1997.

185. MS. Diary of Alex MacLennan, 1st April 1956 (in Inverness Free Presbyterian archive).

186. Ibid, Sabbath 10th September, 1967.

187. Ibid, Thursday 20th October, Tuesday 25th October, 1960.

188. MS. Letter to Eliza MacLennan, 24th October 1960, address 'c/o Mrs MacAskill, Strathy Point' (in Inverness Free Presbyterian archive).



Rev. William Grant (second from left), the pastor of Halkirk FP congregation, played a pivotal role in maintaining a Reformed witness in Caithness in the twentieth-century. The other ministers in the picture supplied in Caithness and assisted from time to time at communion seasons in the county. L-R: Murdo Macraill? (Skye), Rev. William Grant, Rev. John Colquhoun (Glendale), Rev. William Maclean (Ness, Gisborne), Rev. D. M. Macdonald, Rev. Donald Maclean (Portree), Rev. Donald A. Macfarlane (Dingwall). The picture may date to the late 1950s.

Pic. COURTESY OF JOHN AND MAIRI FRASER

Free Presbyterian church in Helmsdale in June 1978. This was decided 'with regret after considering the wishes of the people in Helmsdale'.¹⁸⁹ Helmsdale services were reduced to once a month and petered out in the 1980s. In the early 1980s, attendances at Halkirk Free Presbyterian Church were in single figures: a minister who was at that time a divinity student recalled that they ranged from five to eight.¹⁹⁰

In 1989, the Free Presbyterian Church split saw most of the Wick, Thurso, and Strathy congregations follow Rev. R. R. Sinclair into the APC. The Free Presbyterian cause consolidated around the Halkirk congregation which had retained its building. Worshippers who adhered to the Free Presbyterian cause travelled from as far away as Tongue and Wick. Free Presbyterian services eventually recommenced in Thurso. Strathy services began again in 2017. The APC had two ministries in Wick-Thurso-Strathy, with Rev. S. Fraser Tallach as pastor and later Rev. Ross MacAskill as an evangelist, before ceasing activity in the county in 2016.

189. *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 83 (February 1978), p. 59.

190. Rev. George MacAskill, who was a divinity student from 1982 to 1985, was often sent to supply Halkirk. I am grateful for this information to Mr MacAskill himself.

The Free Church of Scotland faced the long slow decline experienced by other denominations in the twentieth century and their Caithness congregations were no exception. Rural depopulation and a decline in spiritual interest among the general public saw charges linked. In more recent years, the Free Church of Scotland adopted a team ministry approach, but this was dropped.

When the Free Church of Scotland split in 2000, none of the Caithness congregations adhered to the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), though a number of individuals and families did. In 2007 an Act of the Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) consolidated the Caithness and East Sutherland congregations of Clyne, Dornoch, Lairg & Rosehall, Lybster, Bruan, Latheron & Berriedale; and Rogart into one congregation, to be known as Brora. Services are centred on Brora, but prayer meetings take place in homes around the areas from which the congregation is drawn, including Latheron, Dornoch, and Lairg.¹⁹¹

4. Conclusion

This article has attempted to critique William Mill's publication, acknowledging his sympathy for biblical doctrine and worship but pointing out his occasional unscriptural emphases in terms of recommended personal practice. It has sought to show that the spiritual declension from Reformation principles seen nationally also impacted deeply in Caithness but was met by an intelligent opposition. It has also argued that this counter-movement usually involved believers acting together rather than as isolated individuals, and it has shown how they became more organised as the nineteenth century waned.

191. I am grateful to Rev. John Macleod (Portmahomack), Principal Clerk to the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), for this information.