

# The Tyrant of Boisdale

The story of a laird's persecution of his tenants in the island of South Uist had an ironic 20th century sequel

by *Marjorie F. MacDonald*

**I**N the year 1772, two hundred and ten people—tacksmen and crofters and their families, from South Uist, Moidart, and Arisaig—sailed from Greenock for St John's Island in the Gulf of St Lawrence. Behind the departure of the South Uist quota—a hundred souls—lay a story unique in the history of Highland clearances. It was unique because the motives of the rack-renting laird were not dictated by either avarice or need; unique, also, because at one stage of events the laird was ordered out of church; and, finally, unique because the harrowing tale had a sequel in the present century which was as remarkable a piece of poetic justice as we are likely to see on this earth.

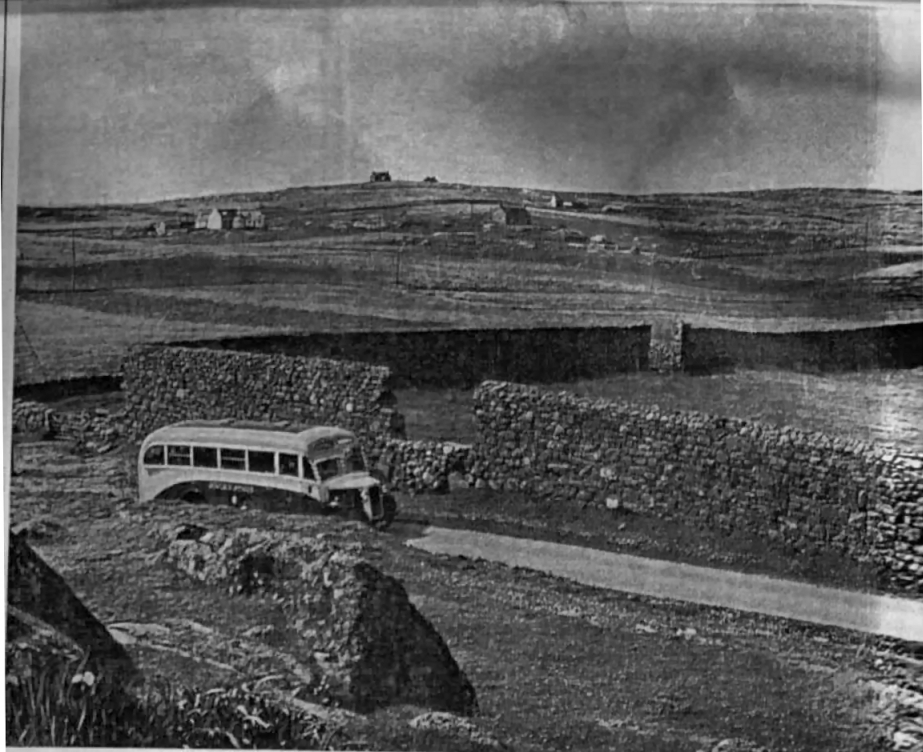
The story begins in 1766 with the arrival in South Uist of Father Forester's new assistant—a young Irish priest, Father Wynn. Before long, Bishop John MacDonald was reporting to Rome, "Mr Wynn is indeed a laborious and willing man, and behaves to everybody's satisfaction, for which he shall receive all the kindness we can show him. He is settled with Mr Forester in South Uist, where he has enough to do, his companion being now old and infirm, so that the chief weight must be upon him, which he bears very cheerfully."

For the benefit of readers who may wonder why the Bishop referred to his priests by the title of "Mr" instead of "Father" I must explain that this was a prudential measure, necessary because the penal laws

against Catholics were still on the statute book. Indeed, in the written communications of Catholics at that period the Bishops were mentioned, not by their own names, but by cyphers. Bishop John MacDonald's cypher name was "Tiberiop." He was a nephew of Bishop Hugh MacDonald, the Pope's Vicar-Apostolic in the Highlands.

For a year or two, Father Wynn continued to discharge his priestly office to everyone's satisfaction. His troubles began on a certain Michaelmas Day. St Michael was Patron Saint of the island, and consequently in South Uist his Feast was observed as a Holy Day of Obligation, on which the Catholics were required to attend Mass and refrain from unnecessary manual labour. So the people went to Mass in the morning, and the rest of the day was spent in secular festivities—horse racing on the machair in the afternoon, and dancing at night. However, Colin MacDonald, the new Laird of





Kenneth Robertson

The site of Boisdale House in Kilbride, South Uist. The walls formerly enclosed the laird's garden. The house itself, demolished at the beginning of the century, stood on the ground to the left.

Boisdale\*, had other ideas. He had been brought up in the Roman Catholic religion of his mother and had always practised it, yet on that Michaelmas Day he forced his tenants, against their consciences and the rule of their Church, to work in his fields.

At that period a certain form of discipline was commonly used, which is unheard of nowadays—the

\* In Volume 2 of *The Catholic Highlands of Scotland* (to which I am indebted for much contemporary material), the author—Dom Odo Blundell, O.S.B., F.S.A. (Scot.)—confuses Colin with his father, Alexander (Alasdair Mor), who died in 1768 before the persecution of the Catholic tenants began. Dom Odo wrote Volume 2 in 1916 when he was serving as a Catholic chaplain in the Royal Navy and was thus unable to check all his notes as exhaustively as usual.

Catholic equivalent of the Presbyterian stool of repentance. According to this practice, a person who had committed a grave offence would be ordered out of church next time he or she, appeared at Mass. On the following Sunday the offender would return to Mass, and nothing more would be said. Did Boisdale really believe that he, being the Laird and a cousin of Clanranald himself, would be exempt from the discipline which Holy Mother Church imposed on her less exalted sons? It would seem that he did. On the Sunday following that Michaelmas Day he appeared in church as bold as brass. But, of course, young Father Wynn had no choice—*Fiat justitia, ruat coelum*—he ordered the Laird out of church.

That Sunday morning the Laird

of Boisdale left both the church and the Church. He was consumed now by one burning ambition—to drive the last vestige of the Roman Catholic religion utterly from that Catholic island. He began by engaging a Protestant to teach his own children. Next he invited his tenants to send their children to his new school. The people were delighted. They sent their bairns to the school, but, after a week or so, withdrew them on discovering that the teacher was employing every possible means to turn his pupils against their Church—not only by precept, but even by forcing flesh meat into the mouths of children who refused to eat it in Lent.

Finding his school boycotted, the Laird bent his fury on the parents—and when his threats of eviction failed to cow them, he turned on the priests and promised them his dire vengeance if they remained on his lands. After that, Father Forester and Father Wynn kept out of his way, while continuing to minister to their flock.

At length, Boisdale summoned all his tenants. He translated to them, in Gaelic, a paper which he had written in English; and told them, if they refused to sign it, he would have them thrown out of their holdings. This document was a solemn renunciation of the Roman Catholic religion, and a promise (under oath) never to go near a priest again. Every single tenant refused to sign. They told the Laird they would sooner renounce their holdings and beg from door to door.

This reply took the wind out of Boisdale's sails. If he evicted his tenants, his land would lie waste unless, and until, he could induce people from the mainland to come and settle on that remote island. So Boisdale offered a compromise—he promised to allow his tenants

freedom to practise their own religion, provided they would allow their children to be brought up as Protestants. Again, everyone refused.

Then the Laird told his tenants he would leave them for one year on his estate, so that they might have time to reflect on his offer. But immediately thereafter, unappeased by the departure of Father Wynn from South Uist (much to the regret of Bishop John MacDonald), he increased the persecution tenfold. He raised the rents to three or four times their former figure—he even assaulted a number of his tenants, and no legal redress was available to them (there was no Justice of the Peace within a hundred miles).

Reporting their plight to Bishop Hay of Edinburgh, Tiberiop wrote, "The uncommon veneration and attachment to landlords and chieftains, for which they were remarkable, is by such barbarous treatment changed into an extreme of terror and with one accord they pray God to deliver them from him."

At last a message of hope reached Boisdale's victims. It came from one of Clanranald's Catholic kinsmen, John MacDonald of Glenaladale. He had bought land on St John's Island and was ready to let it, at very reasonable terms, to "oppress people" from South Uist and the Catholic regions of Moidart and Arisaig on the mainland.

The trouble was that Glenaladale's means would not extend to transporting all these unfortunates across the Atlantic—and between rack-renting and a continual harassment which forced them to neglect their crops, most of the "oppress people" were by now completely destitute. So Bishop Hay of Edinburgh (who had already contributed generously from his own small means) appealed to the Catholics of England. The

response was immediate. A fund was opened, which raised the sum of £1500—enough, at that period, to pay the passage of all the refugees (for such they were).

The emigrants sailed from Greenock in May, 1772. Glenaladale himself sailed with them to ensure their welfare, and Father James MacDonald went with them to be their priest. When one recalls the death-roll in the emigrant hell-ships of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is remarkable that this voyage was accomplished with the loss of only one child. At their destination the folk from South Uist and Arisaig and Moidart were warmly welcomed, by the French Canadians. Soon, glowing reports of their new life reached Scotland—already they were enjoying a higher standard of life than ever they had known before, and in a surprisingly short time they had repaid every penny of the money advanced to them by the London Catholics.

After the departure of the emigrants, Clanranald intervened, demanding that his cousin Boisdale allow full religious liberty to the remaining tenants. By that time the affair had reverberated right across Western Europe. The Pope made representations to the Duke of Gloucester, who was living in Rome at the time, and he also instructed his Nuncio in Paris to take the case up with the British Ambassador. Thereafter, Boisdale completely reversed his treatment of the Catholics.

Two years later, Father Alexander MacDonald (priest of the Isle of Barra) wrote to Bishop Hay, "Since our late terror and persecution, Boisdale is quite reformed, and is himself in all appearance the person who repents most for his former doings. He grants his people

a most unlimited toleration in religious matters, welcomes our clergy always to his family, uses them with the utmost civility, and with the deference they are entitled to. His condescension is so great that we are allowed at times to perform some of our functions within the precincts of his "palace," for to be serious he has built such a genteel house, at Kilbride, South Uist, as I never expected to see in the Long Island."

Despite these amends, Colin never made his own peace with the Church that had dared to discipline a Laird of Boisdale. When he lay on his deathbed, a priest was sent for but when he arrived, the Laird's son would not allow him to enter the house.

The years passed, and in course of time the Boisdale family disappeared from South Uist. Then, in 1909, came the postscript to the Boisdale story. The Crofters' Commission had divided the farm of Kilbride into small holdings, and many of the new tenants, who were moving in, were grandsons or great-grandsons of Glenaladale's emigrants. When the resettlement was complete, the next problem was to decide the fate of "Boisdale's palace."

That "genteel house" had well withstood the storms of nearly a century and a half, but Lady Cathcart (the proprietrix) would sell it only on condition that the buyer undertook to demolish it. On these terms it was bought by a Mr Mackenzie from Lochboisdale, who, when the house had been pulled down, sold its materials. And thus it came to pass that the descendants of Boisdale's victims built their byres with the stones of Boisdale's palace. I can think of no more fitting comment than Dom Odo Blundell's—

"*SIC TRANSIT GLORIA MUNDI.*"