The myth and the reality of the "Men": leadership and spirituality in the Northern Highlands, 1800-1850

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"The Men", or in Gaelic "Na Daoine" flourished in the Highlands from the covenanting period of the late seventeenth century to the period of the Highland crisis in the mid-nineteenth century. Their era of greatest influence was perhaps the first half of the nineteenth century, from the times of the early clearances to the 1843 Disruption in the Church of Scotland, in both of which events they are held by most commentators to have been of crucial importance. They helped bring about the "Evangelical capture" of the Highlands, which preceded the Disruption, and they provided leadership of the popular resentment of the lairds over clearances and the failure to provide sites for worship for the new Free Church. Or so the theory goes. In fact the role of "The Men" is less dramatic but more prolonged.

"The Men" played a significant part in the transformation of the Highlands. During the years of the Highland crisis – the process of eviction, communal breakdown, famine and religious conflict that comprised Highland history from 1800 to 1850 – "The Men" were a significant cultural influence. They used the familiar structures provided by the Established Church, to build a religious ideology, based on a very austere interpretation of Evangelical Presbyterianism that gave meaning to the chaotic world around them and provided the Gaelic communities from which they were drawn with a shared communal focus. "The Men" were in essence a conservative rather than an innovatory influence. The traditional nature of much of the religious practices and teachings of the Free Church bears tribute to their influence.

John Macinnes, the historian of Highland Evangelicalism, defines "The Men" thus:

> "The Men" were a definitely recognised, but ecclesiastically unofficial order of Evangelical laymen, who won public veneration by their eminence in godliness and supernatural

> endowments, and to whom alone was accorded the privilege of speaking at the public Fellowship Meetings which were held on the Friday during a Highland Communion Season.[1]

Their prestige and their role as mediums of religious instruction is emphasised. He traces their origin back to the era of the Covenanters; "The Men", though a distinctively Highland phenomenon, were within the mainstream of the church's teaching and heritage. Macinnes quotes the somewhat rosy view of their relations with the ministers offered by the Rev. John Kennedy, Free Church minister of Dingwall, 1844-1884.

> When a godly Highland minister discerned a promise of usefulness in a man who seemed to have been truly converted unto God, he brought him gradually into a more public position, by calling him first to pray, and then to "speak to the question", at the ordinary congregational meetings. According to the manner in which he approved himself, there was the prospect of his being enrolled among "the Friday speakers" on communion occasions. It was thus that the order of "The Men" was established, and thus the body of "The Men" was formed.[2]

What qualified someone as a "Man" was firstly his reputation for holiness, and secondly his selection by the minister. According to Kennedy, they were not "pushed forward into the position of public speakers by the current of popular feeling", nor were the ministers ever "compelled to share with them their own place in order to reserve any of it to themselves".[3] This is too restricted a view of those who were accepted as "Men". The paradigm Kennedy offers of minister working with "Men" may have held true with popular Evangelical ministers such as William Mackenzie, minister of Tongue from 1769 to 1835 or Alexander Stewart, minister of Dingwall, 1805-1820, but was certainly not uniform across the region. Only by denying the epithet "Men" to those who, like the Assynt separatist Norman

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1 J. Macinnes, "The Origin and Early Development of 'the Men'", *Records of the Scottish Church History* Society, viii (1944), 16.

2 J. Kennedy, *Days of the Fathers in Ross-shire* (Inverness, 1979), 80, Macinnes, "Origin and Development", 17.

3 Kennedy, *Days of the Fathers*, 80.

Macleod, or the leaders of the Creich or Kildonan separations, were in dispute with the minister, can Kennedy's statements that "The Men" were "never found to be enemies to due ecclesiastical order" or influenced by a "feeling of disrespect to the office of the ministry" be given much meaning. For many "Men", the office of the ministry was indeed tarnished by its association with patronage as well as its occupancy by unworthy ministers.

"The Men" were, in essence, a self-selecting body. They were those who wished to assert in public their own conversion. The discussion of proofs and experiences of conversion was a major function of the fellowship meetings. In a communion season, there would be many separate meetings; no minister could hope to chair them all, in the way that he chaired his own parochial meetings, if such were held. "The Men" were not a formally constituted order so there can be no accurate list of membership. They were defined by the prestige they asserted and the respect they were offered.

A different and suggestive interpretation of "The Men" has been offered by Professor Meek. He sees them as heirs of an ancient tradition:

> The emergence of this distinctive class of leaders, embracing elders, catechists, schoolmasters and missionaries may have been indebted to earlier secular models, perhaps deriving ultimately from the medieval learned orders who regulated the Gaelic communities.[4]

The best information that we have on an individual basis is drawn from the various popular religious histories of the region, whose archetype is John Kennedy's *Days of the Fathers in Ross-shire*. This is basically an assemblage of what might reasonably be termed the "Evangelical anecdote"; the body of personal accounts, brief memoirs, and characteristic sayings that relate to the individual's spiritual life. They have been used to illustrate religious practices and spirituality; hard information and precise dating is hard to come by. Nevertheless, if read for the evidence they provide of religio-political and sociological matters, they can be quite revealing. The anecdotes

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[4] D. Meek in *Dictionary of Scottish Church*, edd. N. de S. Cameron *et al.* (Edinburgh, 1993), 558.

themselves were preserved and handed down orally in the Gaelic community, and then collected and published by sympathetic clergy.[5] They are part of what the Gaelic community wished to preserve of itself. Notices of over 200 individuals in the Northern Highlands have come down to us. They are of two basic sorts; ministerial and lay. The ministerial anecdotes are likely to present an impeccably Evangelical minister, accepted by his people, perhaps after initial difficulties and leading them towards a more godly life.

A number of accounts offer a dramatic, "dark night of the soul". Often the role of friend and supporter is discharged by an experienced "Man". An example is presented in dramatic tones by Angus MacGillivray in his survey of revivals in the North:

> A young minister was settled in a district which contained a large number of enlightened Christians, and they received him warmly from the first as minister of Christ. After he had been a few years with them, his soul got into deep waters; Satan was suffered to assail the foundations of his faith and for some months he had not a ray of comforting light. He was a reserved man, and concealed his feelings, and continued to preach amid deep mental suffering. On a Sabbath afternoon, whilst concluding the service with prayer, intense misery extorted the following petition: "Lord, have pity on those of thy servants who endeavour to declare to others the comforts of the Gospel, whilst they cannot themselves taste a single drop". In the evening, an old venerable catechist, noted for his deep enlightened piety, called at the manse. He put the question, "what did you mean by that petition in your prayer?" And when the minister sought to avoid the question, he said with the deepest tenderness, "I know your state of mind; I have been in the same state; tell me all." Thus encouraged, the minister told him candidly the state of mind he had been in for

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[5] D. Munro, *Records of Grace in Sutherland* (Edinburgh, 1953); A. Auld, *Ministers and Men in the Far North* (Wick,1868); A. Mackay, *Sketches of Sutherland Characters* (Edinburgh, 1889); A.Gunn and J. Mackay, *Sutherland and the Reay Country* (Glasgow, 1897); J. Kennedy, *Days of the Fathers*; G. Macdonald, *Sketches of Some of the Men of Sutherland* (Inverness, 1937).

> months past. The old man listened till his minister was done, and then from a full heart, he spoke for half an hour of the glory of Christ – his unsearchable love, and the fulness and freeness of his salvation – and how he had himself got deliverance in similar trials; and ere he ceased the minister's bonds were loosed, and God restored to him the Joy of His salvation."[6]

These accounts are as much heuristic as biographical; the anecdote embodies a truth about faith or prayer or Christian conduct. There is an obvious message about the difficulty of faith and the omnipresence of sin and Satan. One also admires the deference, wisdom and appropriateness of "The Man's" response. Such images are common among the anecdotes referring to "the Men". The reader is implicitly encouraged to adopt such a standard of faith. "The Men" are presented, in retrospect, as iconic in function; a living embodiment of Christian faith and Divine election.

As characterisic of "The Men" one might examine Angus Baillie, 1760 –1834, a catechist in Clyne parish. The heart of the account relating to him is an extended conversion narrative, a very common theme since the quality of their faith and the evident truth of their conversion was exactly what "The Men" were admired for. The omnipresence of sin and the Devil, and the pain of conversion were also themes current in "The Men's" world. In the course of a communion service

> An arrow directed by the unerring hand of God's spirit entered the heart of the young man from Strath Brora, and there left a wound which only the Physician of souls could cure.... Often his face would be bathed with tears. For some time he continued in great distress, though he ever conducted himself with propriety, yet when the light from Heaven shone on him, what an alarming view he had of his past life; for the sins that formerly appeared to him as motes, now rose up before him as mountains.... He was brought to the very edge of despair. Indeed one morning he was tempted to put an end to his life by

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[6] A. Macgillivray, *Sketches of Religion and Revivals of Religion in the North Highlands During the Last Century* (Edinburgh, 1859), 20.

> casting himself into a deep pool in the river. He had actually reached the place and was pacing to and fro, when he was delivered from the grasp of the Tempter like a bird out of the fowler's snare.[7]

Like so many other "Men", Baillie was a catechist and glimpses of the official side of "The Men" are afforded in the Royal Bounty Committee Minutes. The following petition, relating to the provision of a catechist in the remote parish of Durness at the quarterly meeting in July 1819, requested: "That William Calder be continued as catechist in the parish of Tongue and Duirness with a salary of £9 on condition the parishioners give him as much".[8] William Calder became one of the more celebrated of "The Men":

> Mister Calder was one in whom the word of Christ dwelt richly; and teaching and admonishing in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in his heart to the Lord, was his constant practice.[9]

The reference to music is significant; Gaelic line-singing remained a characteristic of Evangelical worship and "The Men" were an integral part of the process by which religious verse became handed down and incorporated into Gaelic culture. In this account of Calder's life, another vital issue was raised; the question of secession in Assynt parish where Norman Macleod was holding services in defiance of the minister, Rev. John Kennedy, later minister of Redcastle. "William Calder was 'the firm and consistent supporter of order in the church of God' and when asked 'Who is right – the minister or Norman?' 'On that point I have no doubt; the minister is right'".[10]

The centrality of the conversion experience, and the ability to discuss its implication in relation to biblical teaching was a characteristic of "The Men". Other respected qualities were those of prophecy and skilful exegesis, often allegorical or mystical, of the

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7 D. Munro, *Records of Grace in Sutherland* (Edinburgh, 1953), 14.

8 Bounty Committee Scroll Minutes, July 1819, National Archives of Scotland, CH1/5/63, 391.

9 Auld, *Ministers and Men*, 205.

10 Auld, *Ministers and Men*, 206.

Bible. If an individual, by his prominence or confidence at religious meetings, was accepted as having special knowledge or faith, then he was, by the same token, able to make clear the true meaning of obscure biblical texts, and, more rarely, he might be able to articulate the divine purpose concealed from ordinary people. Prophecy was a valued and ancient part of Highland belief systems. Examples of vision into the future or into spiritual truths normally hidden are legion in the Evangelical anecdote.

These anecdotes were collected orally, translated and published, much in the fashion traditional some song has been preserved. Like traditional song, these anecdotes are short on hard verifiable information, but do tell us a great deal about the assumptions and world view of the "Men". The centrality of the conversion experience and the willingness to see the hand of God in even the smallest episode has already been noted. Allegorical interpretation and the need for complete resignation to the will of God are well attested in this letter of Alexander Gair, one of the best known of the "Men" of the north (and one of the most anti-clerical, too; many of the anecdotes relating to him have as their point a victory in doctrine or holiness over an established minister). He is writing to Joseph Mackay, another well-known "Man" about the death of his son, Robert Gair, at sea. In the context it is reasonable to assume that this style of language and thought was accepted and appropriate among the "Men":

> Well may I call this world a sea of glass, for the troubles and brittleness of it. All flowers are surrounded with thorns; indeed the world may be called, in a sense, a nothing. But Christ is all in all and He hath supported me, a poor, barren branch in His vineyard. Though he casts me down with one hand, He upholds me with the other. Ever blessed be His name, though my wounds are deep, yet His wounds are sweet. But O my withered, hard and unbelieving heart!"[11]

A vivid, indeed almost startling, account of the absorption into the hidden world that the "Men" aspired to can be found in the several

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[11] Auld, *Ministers and Men*, 395.

anecdotes of James Matheson of Dornoch parish, who was converted around 1830 and died in 1875.

> Upon a Communion Sabbath at Creich, Dr Kennedy preached in the open-air to many thousands of people who lined the hillside. James and a friend of his, one of the elders of Dornoch, sat together enjoying the rich Gospel feast spread before them by the renowned preacher. After a time his friend observed that James's countenance was radiant with delight, and this being so unusual, he could not help enquiring what it was that made him so bright and happy. James replied, "Oh, if you saw the camp surrounding Dr Kennedy". He was gazing in ecstasy upon the angelic host around the doctor until his face glowed with delight, while his worthy friend could see nothing.

It is clear we are meant to take this description literally, since the incident "can be well attested by those who were eye-witnesses and who heard his words on the occasions stated here."[12]

> Such visionary tendencies cohered with other aspects of the 'men's' belief systems. The same James Matheson was passing a house with a friend when he observed, "Oh, who stays in that house? It is all on fire!!" It was not ordinary fire he meant, but the events that occurred thereafter in the history of the family residing in that house proved conclusively that he saw correctly in the spiritual sense the fate of that household.[13]

Perhaps as many as half the recorded "Men" were catechists or elders within their parish. Clearly much of their authority derived from the fact that they were the representative of the church, since catechists were customarily appointed – by the Royal Bounty Committee on the advice of the Presbytery – to the remotest areas where it was almost impossible for the minister to preach on a regular basis. (It is worth noting how generous was the provision of catechists in the years after 1819. In the remote parishes of Wester Ross, for

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12 Macdonald, *Sketches of Some of the Men of Sutherland*, 99.

13 *Ibid.*, 100.

example; Loch Broom parish had two bounty catechists and another shared with Gairloch. Applecross had a catechist, as did the braes of Lochalsh, Kishorn and Torridon.).The Royal Bounty Committee Minutes have some interesting insights to offer. Consider this entry from 1819 (an inauspicious year in the Gaelic perspective since it was the year of the completion of the enormous clearances in Kildonan and Farr parishes):

> The Subcommittee which examined claims and evidence from the various Presbyteries took into consideration a Petition of the Kirk Session and parishioners of Creich stating that they had appointed William Murray, a member of the session of the neighbouring parish of Dornoch, to be Catechist in the parish of Creich vacant by the resignation of Hugh McKenzie.[14]

This dry entry conceals an illuminating story. Hugh Mackenzie was a very well-known "Man" who had been a tacksman in Creich for many years. He was not at all wealthy, and indeed was famously unworldly. Macgillivray presents him as an archetype, an icon of faith:

> Many a man speaks of my strong faith that does not know all it has to struggle with. But I shall tell you what my faith is. I am the emptiest, vilest, poorest sinner that I know on the face of the earth. I feel myself to be so. But I read in his own word that he heareth the cry of the poor; and I believe Him, and I cry to Him, and he always hears me, and that is all the faith or assurance that I have got.[15]

On the intruded appointment of Rev. Murdo Cameron to the parish of Creich in 1813, Mackenzie had separated from the new minister and conducted with Gustavus Munro and Hugh Mann, "Men" of similar prestige, meetings for worship by the rock of Migdale, a remote district in the heights of Creich parish. His successor, William Murray, was also a "Man" celebrated in the traditional histories. He did not separate from Cameron's ministry. George Macdonald says of Murray, he was "at times very profound and hard to be understood".[16]

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[14] Royal Bounty Committee Scroll Minutes, NAS, CH1/5/63, 369.

[15] MacGillivray, *Sketches of Religion*, 95.

[16] Macdonald, *Sketches of the Men*, 52.

The allegorical method of interpreting texts may have presented intellectual difficulties as well as powerful emotion.

It would be unwise to assume either a natural antipathy between minister and "Man" or a natural alliance. There are examples of "The Men" working successfully with the ministers and at odds with them. The crucial religious factor during the years 1800 to 1840, was not the number of disputed presentations or even the widespread revivals that coloured the end of the period, but the development of a new kind of popular Presbyterianism, in the formation of which, "The Men" took full part. There is no single answer to the question "what made a 'Man?". What we are left with is a list of those whose lives were still remembered fifty or a hundred years after their death. "The Men's historic achievement was the retention and extension of a uniquely Gaelic and Evangelical style of worship; this in itself shows an awareness of the power of tradition. The religious anecdotes and accounts of their lives place them securely in that tradition; that they are called "Men" is an assertion by the Gaelic community, to some extent in retrospect, that they were leading participants in the redefining of Gaelic religious sensibility.

The most successful ministries in the region were those in which the minister worked in concert with "The Men" and with the religious practices traditional to the locality. Such a ministry was not merely a matter of correct preaching and firm discipline; it depended on the minister's acceptance. An example of such a ministry is that of the Rev. William Mackenzie, minister of Tongue, 1769-1835.

At the outset of his ministry, William Mackenzie found the people unwilling to accept him, his teaching or his discipline. Surviving accounts – and he was a popular figure whose memory was long retained, if only because of the extraordinary length of his incumbency – emphasise the despair and sense of failure he felt in his first four years. The people were ungodly, profane and drunken, even using the customary interval between the Gaelic services, when a short service was held in English, to drink whisky, sell horses and make other transactions. The result was a defining moment for minister and people

> I came to this parish four years ago on your unanimous call, and I had then the impression that I had God's call too. But I

fear I have been mistaken; the Gospel is making no impression on you. What is worse, you are hardening under it; instead of receiving it, you flee from it, and leave God's house to buy and sell in the churchyard. "Woe is me that sojourn in Mesach, that I dwell in the tents of Kedar." And then he burst into tears, and sat down in the pulpit, and for the next five minutes wept and sobbed – his feelings too strong for utterance. Having at last mastered his feelings, he rose to preach, and with a power and a pathos which were peculiar to himself, he proclaimed to his people the unsearchable riches of Christ. It was the day of the Lord's visitation; the turning point in the history of that people. From that day forward there was a blessed outpouring of the Spirit of God.... For years afterwards he never preached on the Lord's Day but some of his people,at times as many as six or eight, came to him under conviction of sin, "asking the way to Jesus ".[17]

We have in the account given above an image of what one might reasonably term "Old Evangelicalism". The key relation is that of parochial minister and people. There can be no spiritual advance without a genuine acceptance of minister by people. The minister cannot be properly heard without a due discipline imposed and accepted. The occasion described is the genus of a revival; hence the reference to the work being sustained – the reputation of revivals was greatly undermined by accounts of people converted and subsequently lapsing. It is also an epiphany for the minister; the Lord vouchsafes to him the knowledge that his ministry will bear fruit. Both clergy and people look upon one another in a different relation. One may also note the extreme emotional preaching, characteristic of revivals and of Highland Evangelicalism.

There is a second area where the ministry of the Rev. William Mackenzie of has a particular interest. This is the dispute that took place in the Presbytery of Tongue over whether "Men's" meetings at both communion seasons and as a regular part of community life, should be authorised. The argument, which for twenty years prevailed

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[17] Macgillivray, *Sketches of Religion*, 17, 81.

in Presbytery discussions, against such meetings, was presented as follows:

> The Presbytery being weel apprised that there are in the several parishes some who take upon themselves to read the Scriptures and other books in the Irish language to the people and to solve doubts and cases of conscience at such meetings and that some of them are without the authority or allowance of the minister of the parish, and that such as so officiate are not well qualified for it and the Presbytery remembering a melancholy scene that happened several years ago at one of these unauthorized meetings at Halmadary; did and hereby do prohibit any meeting to convene the people to reading or conferences except the advice and consent of the parish minister be obtained, and if they think this a hardship, they are to apply to Presbytery, who will give proper directions to them.[18]

The implied challenge, by individual "Men" to the minister's role as interpreter of the Bible and the heterodox, and in some cases allegedly absurd, nature of some of the discussions remained powerful objections to the activities of "The Men". Halmadary was an occasion when an unofficial men's meeting discussed the need for human sacrifice.[19]

In this dispute popular opinion won out and the ban against the meetings was overturned. There ensued a period of harmony in those parishes where such meetings were supported by an Evangelical minister:

> At first indeed Mr. Mackenzie and some others were jealous of the tendency of their meetings, but for a period of at least two generations – i.e. for sixty years, from 1780 until Disruption times – the ministrations of these godly "men" assisted largely

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[18] Tongue Presbytery minutes, 2.3.1749, quoted in *Old Lore Miscellany*, 167.

[19] W.R. Mackay, "Early Evangelical religion in the far north: a kulturkampf", *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, xxvi, 104-33.

to maintain and extend the influence of the Gospel throughout the whole country.[20]

The author then describes in idyllic terms the "beautiful and salutary practice of question meetings on the way to and from church[21] in which "The Men" of each district led preparation for the service and discussion of the sermon afterwards on the long walk between distant township and kirk. Some of "The Men" such practices produced come slightly into personal focus; two of the men of Tongue, active during William Mackenzie's ministry are worth considering in more detail. Alexander Mackay, 1801-1883, was a catechist under William Mackenzie, the last to hold the office. His anecdotes starts with his attending a wedding celebration (always an image pregnant with meaning, since the wedding at Cana was the locale of Christ's first miracle, that of changing the water into wine). The meal and, in particular, the dancing clearly connote the sinful attractions of the world and Alexander Mackay's lethargy suggests the burden of sin weighing him down.

> After an ample repast and a liberal supply of whisky, the young people proceeded to a dance and young Sandy took a very prominent part. Indeed, so keen was he to be as free as possible on the floor that he removed his shoes. After continuing for some time, he thought he heard a voice saying to him, "Alasdair, stad" ("Alexander, cease"). But still he continued to take part in what he then enjoyed so much, until he felt as if an intolerable burden was weighing him down. At last, he became so oppressed that he could not move.... For fifteen months, he passed through great distress of soul, and during that time, he seldom could be prevailed upon to sleep except under his bed. When under conviction of sin, he was so oppressed by a sense of guilt and unworthiness that when he went to church, he generally lay under the pews. After being brought to Gospel liberty, he became a most capable worker

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[20] Gunn and Mackay, *Sutherland and the Reay Country*, 360.

[21] *Ibid.*, 360.

on both sea and land and developed into a most attractive Christian.[22]

The detail of the hiding in bed also occurs in other anecdotes; it is as if the bed, or beneath it, is the last pointless refuge of the soul, hiding literally and metaphorically from the truth. The repentant soul must come out and face God.

"The Men" were careful and deliberate in their choice as to the Minister they heard; they were aware of their influence; their appearance was a kind of endorsement. George Mackay attended regularly the Communion gatherings in Sutherland and Ross-shire. At Creich, Dornoch, Lairg, Rogart, Kincardine, Edderton, Tain and Dingwall, he and his companions would be seen as a group, and on Fridays heard speaking upon the question or passage of Scripture, which was given out as basis of self-examination. "His brethren in Christ" (there follows a list of names) "formed a company of disciples who brought with them from the far North the sunshine of the love of Christ when they came to communions."[23]

What we see in Tongue and elsewhere during this period is indigenous religious expression and traditions – led by a perceived and accepted lay grouping – understood and worked with by a popular and accepted Evangelical minister. There was no separation or significant dissent in Tongue parish, before the Disruption. The entire parish, with the exception of the factors and the sheep farmers, followed their ministers out of the Established Church.

Not all parishes had the same secure parochial organization or religious coherence and in these parishes a very different picture emerges, especially in the role of "The Men". The Fearn intrusion dispute of 1809 is particularly revealing. At the settlement in 1809 of the Rev. Hugh Ross there was a riot which prevented the Presbytery from entering the kirk and proceeding with the service, and also in some accounts, involved fire-raising. The members of Presbytery were trapped in the manse while the riot continued outside. The crowd was chanting "Privileges! Privileges!" (The impression one receives of the crowd's behaviour recalls very much a modern demonstration. It is

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22 Munro, *Records of Grace*, 221.

23 Mackay, *Men of Sutherland*, 124.

hard to believe that the whole business had not been carefully planned.) Protracted and involved negotiations between the Presbytery, cooped up in the manse, and the protestors now took place. What the protestors were asking for, "Was the liberty from the Presbytery to withdraw for the present from the ministry of the petitioner (i.e. Hugh Ross) and to receive their Christian privileges from such other Ministers as they might prefer to him".[24]

This had been the arrangement under the previous minister, who had secured some acceptance by this compromise. Several ministers, including Mr Ross, wished to conduct the service in the manse, as they were legally entitled to, but a motion to that effect was voted down. Other ministers, notably the Rev .William Forbes of Tarbat, a well known Evangelical, felt they could not allow a ministry to start in circumstances so hostile, the presentee so obviously not acceptable to the people. Mr Ross and others dissented from this decision and later appealed to Synod, complaining of the failure of the Presbytery of Tain to carry out his settlement. During the course of the evening of the riot, a petition was given to Mr Ross from his future parishioners saying that if he would agree to give them their 'privileges' they would allow the ceremony to take place. Mr Ross was advised to accept by some members of the Presbytery, but he remained obdurate; he could give no such undertaking until he was actually admitted Minister of Fearn.[25]

Hugh Ross's intrusion raises interesting questions about Moderatism in action and about tensions in the church in the northern Highlands. There can be no doubt but that the various parties in the controversy represented exactly the divisions in the church. In short we have in this dispute a paradigm of the tensions in the church as a whole. The Rev. Hugh Ross was clearly arguing from a Moderate "legalist" position; he had a call properly signed and moderated, which it was the duty of the Presbytery to enforce, whatever the beliefs and behaviour of his future congregation, who, judging by their riotous conduct, had clearly been misinformed and were in need of very strict pastoral guidance. Those who presented the people's petition represented popular Highland Presbyterianism; what they

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[24] Records of the Synod of Ross, 1809, NAS, CH2/345/A, 45.
[25] *Ibid.*,46.

wanted was the freedom to hear and receive the ordinances of the church, baptism and communion and so forth, from ministers of their choosing; otherwise they must secede.

A significant element in this controversy is the issue of the seceders and their leadership; there is a clear anxiety about untrained but influential local religious leaders, the "Men". The proper attitude of the church to "The Men" was something else that divided the Evangelical from the Moderate. As a review in the *Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, an Evangelical journal, of the four pamphlets on the dispute puts the matter :

> We find that the seceders have experienced very little indulgence; they have been denied the privileges they wished to assume; speeches have been delivered and motions have been made against them; and they have been reduced to the alternative of either adhering strictly to their own parish minister, or of leaving altogether the pale of the establishment. The latter they are anxious to avoid and in many cases cannot do without renouncing all religious communion whatever; the former is prohibited by a strong and imperious sense of duty.[26]

Viewed from this perspective, a different, more complex story emerges, one that perhaps is more sympathetic to individuals and less susceptible to propaganda. In Hugh Ross's account the crowd were "clamorous and showing strong indications to violence", although to the Rev. William Forbes of Tarbat:

> They were not a lawless mob for that many of the people of God were there. And in this language he was joined by Mr. Macintosh of Tain, who also maintained that many of them were regular and religious characters.[27]

Forbes would appear to have in mind some of "The Men" of his parish. Nor were such agreements between incoming ministers and their people unusual; the previous minister of Fearn, who had secured some acceptance by this compromise.

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[26] *Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, 1813, 106.

[27] Synod of Ross, 46.

> Nothing was now demanded of the presentee to the parish of Fearn but what had been granted at his instance to the parishioners by their late minister and what had been productive of the most agreeable consequences in the parish.[28]

In short a different model of the relation between minister and people is being developed; a model based on the authority of the church is being replaced by a model that is essentially contractual and personal. The people agree to hear, to accept, and receive ordinance of a minister so long as he is agreeable to them and accords them their privileges. Likewise, on his part, a minister, so long as he is faithful and agreeable to his people, is entitled to the due, and free, obedience of his people. Separatists, and many of "The Men", would have recognised in this contractual, voluntary, model their own approach to the clergy, and the influence of this view, inflated no doubt by popular criticism of Moderate or unacceptable ministers was gaining ground in the north. There is much evidence to suggest that these concerns were by no means confined to parishes such as Fearn where the relation between minister and was more or less dysfunctional.

Mr. Ross minister of Fearn alleged in the period since his admission:

> Several of the parishioners of Fearn have wholly withdrawn from their own Parish Church and attend Public Worship on Lord's Days for the most part in the neighbouring Parishes of Nigg, Tarbat and Tain.[29]

His opponents had also:

> been in the practice of meeting together in private houses on such days as Fellowship Meetings are generally held at the Parish Church, under the pretext of religious exercise to the prejudice of the memorialist's ministry.[30]

Clearly "The Men" were instrumental in the organization of fellowship meetings independent of the local minister. The practice of

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28 *Ibid.*, 46.

29 Records of Presbytery of Dingwall, NAS,CH2/345A, 78.

30 *Ibid.*,78.

withdrawing from one's parish church to that of a more congenial neighbour seems also to have been sufficiently common to be seen as a threat in the neighbouring Presbytery of Dingwall, which observed in its minutes:

> It is obvious to every well thinking man whether of the clergy or laity that gross and pernicious abuses frequently take place in our bounds from the irreverent and disorderly conduct of many of the people who withdraw themselves from the Gospel ordinances in their own parish wander to other parishes where the clergyman is more to their taste thus contemning and neglecting the ordinances of religion in their own parish and occasioning a spirit of division and separation among the people equally injurious to their own improvement and to the success of the Gospel among others.[31]

The disputes consequent on the Fearn intrusions demonstrate clearly that the region was completely divided on the issue of the proper relation between clergy and people. Moderate and Evangelical factions existed and appear to have voted en bloc, much as a political interest might have done in Parliament. The Evangelical case has perhaps drawn more attention, but the Moderates too were active and articulate in Presbytery. Indeed their best known minister in the first decade of the nineteenth century, the Rev. John Downie, minister of Urray, 1788-1811, made a long and reasoned defence of church authority in the matter of Fearn which was subsequently published as a pamphlet and occasioned the "lash" controversy. The dispute was not a matter of party or political conflict; it was a necessary result of the contradiction between the strict ecclesiological structure and regulations of the church and the ideology and the practices of popular Highland Presbyterianism. "The Men" were instrumental in developing a style of religion that was freer, less parochial-based, effectively de-parochialised in some areas, and more aware of itself as a community.

One of the ways in which the distinctive highland religious sensibility was formed and handed down to succeeding generations was through the body of religious verse, left by "The Men" in the late

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[31] *Ibid.*,77.

eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A relevant example is the verse of Donald Matheson of Kildonan, which, as H. Campbell observes, had an evangelistic purpose: "Several of his '*dain spioradail*' were really composed to enforce the lessons of the Shorter Catechism. The people of the parish, as it were, sang themselves into the knowledge of the great doctrines of the church."[32]

Put another way, the Gaelic religious verse records how the teachings of the church were internalised in a form that accorded with their own cultural and linguistic forms. There can be no doubt but that the verse of Donald Matheson was well known in the area; it was first published in Tain in 1816 and again in 1825, with endorsement from the Rev. John Macdonald of Ferintosh and the Rev. John Kennedy of Killearnan.[33] His verse was included in Rose's *Metrical Reliques of the Men*. One may reasonably assume that the content of the verse was, from an Evangelical point of view, standard doctrine.

Matheson was born in 1719 and spent most of his life in Kildonan, where he died in 1782. He was a catechist in that parish during the ministry of the Rev. Hugh Ross. Sage gives a short account of him and there is a notice of him in *Records of Grace in Sutherland*. In these accounts he appears as a taciturn but wise "Man", guiding or deprecating younger Christians with a few well chosen sentences.[34] The fullest account of his life is in the preface to his poems in Rose's *Metrical Relics*. His reply when asked what kind of minister he wished for his own parish gives the flavour of the man: "one scorched by the law, melted by the Gospel, and persecuted by the [ungodly] gentry".[35]

His poetry is instinct with the sense of submission to the Divine Will. He uses – in a way that recalls the metaphysical poetry of a century earlier – the imagery of desolation to suggest simultaneously the physical sufferings of his community and also the spiritual desolation of a people turned away from Christ. The end of a famine, for example, becomes both a release in itself and a powerful metaphor of the mercy of Christ. The implication is clear; hardship is the result

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32 *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, xxix, 139.
33 *Ibid.*, 136.
34 Sage, *Memorabilia Domestica*, 281; Munro, *Records of Grace*, 160.
35 J. Rose, *Metrical Reliques*, 246.

of our own backsliding, communally and individually. In times of distress, we must turn ever more humbly to Christ, who can alone save us.

This thesis is perhaps most movingly expressed in the poem *Fosglaidh Criosd A Thigh Stor Ann Ar Gainne / Christ Will Open his Storehouse in our Lack.*[36] Matheson is here regretting, during a season of hardship at the time of the American war, that many who lacked physical bread (*arain chorporra*) were also unaware of their need for spiritual bread (*aran Spioradail*) The storehouse, full of grain but locked to the people, represents the food that they cannot find but desperately need. At the same time, in a spiritual sense, the storehouse is God's mercy to which only humility and complete submission and repentance can gain admittance. The poem opens with a heartfelt and direct plea for God's intervention:

> 'S tu fhreagaireadh glaodh nam bochd,
> 'N uair bhitheadh iad nan eigin;
> 'S tu chaisgeadh cumhachd 'na goirt,
> 'N uair bu mhò a h-èigh
> (It is you who would answer the cry of the poor people when they would be in distress. It is you who would put an end to the power of the famine when the cry would be greatest.)[37]

But the people, including ineffective ministers, cannot open the treasury of Christ's storehouse. The smoke is not rising, the storehouse is locked. The rhetorical question, "Co dh' fhosgaileas na séulach?" (Who will open the seals?) is repeated throughout the poem. Only God can feed us with what we truly need; the image recalls the opening of the seals of Heaven in the Book of Revelation. The famine thus extends an already powerful metaphor into an emblem of the final judgment. Who will then be admitted to the storehouse of God's eternal grace and who excluded? The poem ends with an affirmation that it is God who opens the seals, "Dh'fhuasgail thus' na seulach".

Another metaphor much employed by Matheson of Kildonan that is relevant to popular religion and its reaction to the clearances is his

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36 Rose, *Metrical Reliques*, 280, translated by Professor Donald Meek.

37 Rose, *Metrical Reliques*, 278.

subtle use of the landscape. In the poem "Oran Ann An Timean Trioblaideach"/Song in Time of Trouble[38] the valleys and fields are likened to the Garden of Eden, from which our sin excluded us. That idea, which starts life as a kind of literary conceit, gains enormous power when, like a prophecy fulfilled, the people are indeed literally expelled from their Eden. Matheson expresses it in an image concise and powerful. He asks for a portion of the Holy Spirit which would both revitalise the ministry ("A ghlanadh mic Lebhi" / cleanse the sons of Levi, line 6) and "would kill the foxes that have followed me from the garden of Eden" ("A mharbhadh na sionnach, Lean mis' a lios Edein", lines 7, 8.) The image combines a theological point, for we are all indeed chased from Eden by the foxes of our sin, and a more painful awareness of exile, a cruel chasing away from our original and ideal home. The cure for such distress is simple; a turning again to the Lord. The poem is a song of hope for a renewed life, the source of which can only be divine. There is no call for endeavour in the temporal sphere.

> Nach an sheideadh na gaothan
> Air cnamhan tioram na fasaich,
> Ach an deanadh e 'n tionnda
> Mar chraobh ghlas ann a ghàradh
> (Oh that the winds would blow on the dry bones of the wilderness in order that he might turn them into a green tree in the garden.)[39]

Spiritual renewal and earthly fertility are thus neatly combined in an image both familiar and biblical.The landscape around us, like Eden, is the visible and felt arena of our judgment by God. Religious verse and nature verse are one.

It is impossible to evaluate how much his and other's poems reflected and how much they created the popular religious sensibility of the Highlands. The urgency of spiritual renewal, and the sense that all our actions and experiences are part of an unfolding divine purpose occur again and again in the verse. One may, perhaps, regard this motif as compensatory; the distress and pain we encounter, no less

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38 Rose, *Metrical Reliques*, 280.
39 *Ibid.*

than the sins we unavoidably commit, form part of a divine pattern, which may yet, with God's grace, redeem us and assure us of an eternal life, the benefits of which altogether dwarf our transient worldly defeats. There can be no protest – for such would be to dispute the Divine Will – but the immanence of God and the enfolding nature of his purpose may give a meaning to an otherwise cruel or inexplicable event. The corollary of this view is, of course, that just as the good will eventually be rewarded, so the wicked will be punished. This principle is often emphatically stated; it is a dark view of the human condition, heavily reliant on the harsh divine judgment articulated in the Old Testament.

There is in Gaelic verse an identification of the Highland people with the Israelites; both tribes were especially tested by God, but especially close to him. The *locus classicus* for this kind of approach is Dugald Buchanan's *La a' Bhreatheanais /The Day of Judgment*, an extended theological narrative, and greatly admired. Macinnis presents Buchanan as the greatest of the Gaelic spiritual poets and, tellingly, observes "that the main elements of that powerful description (of hell) were supplied, apart from the Bible, by the preaching of his day".[40] The theology implied in Buchanan's verse is standard Evangelicalism, with its emphasis on faith and submission to God.

> To Jesus flee without delay, thy Sins abhor, their ways abjure,
> with real faith His voice obey, as heard in huis commandments pure.[41]

There are a number of details that would have had particular appeal to succeeding generations of Highlanders. The savage condemnation of the covetous in verse 61 and 62, of whom it is said, "The hungry you have never fed, nor clothed the naked from the cold, although I filled your store with bread, and every year increased your fold"[42] would resonate as a condemnation of those who conducted the clearances.

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40 Macinnes, *Evangelical Movement*, 281.

41 D. Macbean, *Buchanan the Sacred Bard* (London, 1919), 62.

42 *Ibid.*, 51.

It is, however, the imagery of the section of the poem describing the end of the world that is particularly significant in suggesting that the locale of the world's end is, in visible fact, the landscape around us. The images of desolation and Divine power underline the theological message of our complete annihilation before the presence of God. Judgment is come, when we least expect it; God's purpose is revealed in the world and in our lives. The language is both apocalyptic and rooted in the familiar:

> Na cnuic 's na sléibhtean lasaidh suas,
> 'S bidh teas-ghoil air a' chuan gu leir.
> (The hills and moors are all aflame and all the oceans boil and seethe)[43]

There is reference to the difficulty of life in the Highland glens, which, when judgment comes, will be transformed in a manner more terrifying than gratifying. The metaphor of the hills as miser must, in an era when rising rents imposed an extra burden on the townships, is particularly apt. The hills and glens were miserly indeed with the living they afforded. The people – thorough God's grace – would at judgment be compensated with a different richer gold:

> Na beannta iargalt' nach d' thug seach
> An storas riamh do neach d'an deòin
> Ta iad gu fialaidh taosgadh mach
> An ionmhais leaght' mar abhuinn mhòir. "
>
> (The miser hills that now withhold their hidden hoards of shining ore, shall liberal streams of liquid gold and molten treasures round them pour.)[44]

The consuming flames are at once like "bark upon the burning hearth" and "as heather burns from mountains steep".[45] Like Donald Matheson, Buchanan is not here being prescient, in a human sense. He

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[43] Buchanan, "Day of Judgment", in R. Thomson, *Introduction to Gaelic Poetry*, 208.

[44] D. Maclean, *The Spiritual Songs of Dugald Buchanan* (Edinburgh, 1913).

[45] Macbean, *Buchanan* verses 36 and 38, 47.

is not predicting that a particular judgment will fall upon a particular locality or community, he is making a general theological point about the nature of our lives and the inevitability of Divine Judgment. The images of destruction are at once powerfully universal and, for a Gael, in retrospect, immediately recognisable in the abandoned landscapes, literal and metaphorical, of the clearances. The popularity of the poetry of Buchanan and, to a lesser extent of the other religious poets, rests in their embodying faith and experience. The process of social collapse, and in particular its epitome in forced evictions, was seen by the faithful as a judgment; the verse we have been considering, in its subtle and resonant use of familiar landscape and imagery, articulated that austere interpretation.

There was in the years following 1800, a significant extension of Evangelical influence in the North, an influence that had its fulfilment in the almost complete adherence of the region to the Free Church at the Disruption in 1843, a theme that is crucial in our understanding of "the Men". Macinnes identifies the origin of this New Evangelicalism as being the preaching tours undertaken by the Haldane brothers in 1797 and their subsequent formation of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel at Home in 1798. Their meetings – in principle non-denominational – had a strongly revivalistic fervour and "before the close of 1799, nearly 40 catechists were travelling throughout the length and breadth of the land, thirty or forty thousand tracts had been distributed and the whole of the North of Scotland was thrown in to a blaze".[46]

There were similar developments in other areas of the Highlands. Indeed, missions to the Highlands developed quickly in the years after 1800; a diversity of locality and religious denomination, evidenced by the 1827 pamphlet *An Account of the Present State of Religion throughout the Highlands of Scotland*, which records 17 societies active in the area.[47] It represents the Ross-shire people as far more organised Evangelically than other regions such as Argyll. Professor Meek records no less than 73 Evangelical missionaries active in the

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[46] Macinnes, *Evangelical Movement*, 17.

[47] *Present State*, 17.

Highlands in the early nineteenth century.[48] However, only 11 appear to have been active in the region of Sutherland and Ross. Of these, the most considerable figure was Dugald Sinclair, whose main labours were in Argyll. Sinclair offered the following explanation of the difficulties of missionary work in Easter Ross:

> Those parishes in Ross-shire, where they have reputed Gospel Ministers, are, in general, the places where the people turn out worst. In the parts the multitude look up to the example of the few reputed holy, and these give them no encouragement to hear us.[49]

The local religious leaders did not, it would seem, wish their authority challenged.

The missionaries were unable to found new congregations; throughout the period 1800-1843, the church at Nigg, a part of the General Associate Synod, remained the only congregation independent of the Established Church. Nigg did produce two missionaries who worked in Wester Ross and Sutherland, John Munro and Simon Somerville.[50] The penetration by these itinerant missionaries was by no means universal, particularly in the more exclusively Gaelic regions, nor was the society able to sustain its level of commitment. The activities of the society were condemned by the General Assembly of 1799:

> Those who, assuming the name of missionaries from what they call the Society for Propagating the Gospel at Home, as if they had some special commission from Heaven, are at present going through the land, not confining themselves to particular stations, but acting as universal itinerant teachers, and as superintendents of those who are established the teachers of religion by the Church; intruding themselves into parishes without any call; erecting in several places Sunday schools

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[48] D. Meek, "Evangelical Missionaries in the Early Nineteenth Century Highlands", *Scottish Gaelic Studies* (1987), 21-7.

[49] Donald Sinclair quoted in Meek, "Dugald Sinclair", *Scottish Studies,* 30 (1991), 74.

[50] Meek, "Dugald Sinclair", 26.

> without any countenance from the Presbytery of the grounds, the minister or heritors of the parish.[51]

Local objections to itinerant preachers from time to time appear in the records. Hugh Ross, the intruded minister of Fearn complained of one such, unfortunately not identified, whom he variously refers to as

> One of those persons called Missionary Ministers and who give themselves out as Independent teachers, "Separating Teacher", and a "Vagrant teacher".[52]

This man had often preached without permission in the parish and baptised certain children of Fearn – a step implying full separation from the church, that the Evangelical Ministers would appear to have been careful to avoid. He baptised the children because their parents "could give the Preacher Assurance of their being in a state of Grace".[53] The charges reflect exactly the tensions within the Established Church, already considered; the integrity of the church was challenged by an Evangelicalism not controlled by the clergy.

The high profile itineration by the Haldanes and others should not however conceal the basic fact that the style of Presbyterianism adopted by the Gaelic speaking community of the Northern Highlands was essentially endogamous or home grown. James Haldane preached in 1797 at Dornoch and Dingwall, on his return from his dramatic successes in Caithness and Orkney. He seems not to have preached in Dornoch since, "Gaelic was so generally spoken, that the people could not understand English".[54] He wrote in his diary an encomium of "The Men" and their value as religious leaders in Ross and Sutherland. It is an interesting response, although weakened by its second-hand nature. After praising the conduct of fellowship meetings, he concludes: "In many places, we understand they are the chief means of maintaining and carrying forward the work of Christ".[55]

The region – with the single exception of Nigg parish – did not support dissenting meetings. The activities of the missionaries

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51 *Acts of the General Assembly*, 1871.
52 *Minutes of the Synod of Ross*, 1809, 78.
53 *Ibid.*, 78.
54 *Lives of the Haldanes*, 188.
55 *Ibid.*, 187.

stimulated rather then initiated religious developments. As Macinnes concludes:

> The truth is that the tide of evangelism within the Church, running through the well-worn channels of the sacramental assemblies, fellowship meetings, and the Sabbath by Sabbath ministration of the Word, was, in a less spectacular way, keeping pace with, and was to absorb, the undenominational Evangelicalism of the itinerants. The inherent strength of Highland Presbyterianism was one cause, theological strife among the Haldanites another cause, of the eventual and almost complete dominance of the Presbyterian type of Evangelicalism.[56]

The driving force behind the religious developments in the north was not the "New Evangelicalism" of the Haldanes and the mission societies; rather it was the particular pattern and emotional strength of the communal (but not necessarily parochial) worship as it showed in sacrament and fellowship. All accounts of religion in the Highlands attest to the centrality of the communion season. MacInnes asserts:

> The sacrament was the centre of the spiritual life of the people. It might well be that, in those vast sacramental assemblies, only a proportion of the people actually communicated; but there is solid evidence to prove that multitudes who felt themselves unworthy to approach the Lord's Table received spiritual nourishment and growth in grace. There were occasions when these great communion assemblies became the starting point of revival movements which permanently affected large districts.[57]

The Rev. Kenneth Mackay in his account of religion on the Highlands, heavily based on his own years as a minister in Applecross, describes a traditional communion season and how the Friday "Men's Meeting" gradually increased in importance:

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[56] Macinnes, *Evangelical Movement*, 145.
[57] *Ibid.*, 12.

> Those parishes in which Presbyterian Ministers had been placed were centres of attraction to living souls from far and near. To have sound Gospel preaching for four days in a week was considered a treat by those who hungered for the bread of life. This was to be had on a communion occasion in any one of those parishes, and consequently men and women from every part of the country might be seen moving towards it in the Wednesday of the communion week. Thursday, the fast-day, was spent hearing the Gospel and praying in public and in private for a special blessing on the solemn exercises in which they were engaged. Friday was a blank day at first in the public service. There was no sermon that day. But as a number of professing Christians from all parts of the country, they were led to devote the day to the mutual edification of one another. They began by comparing notes on Christian experience. Men of different degrees of spiritual discernment and advancement in the divine life were there.... Each man gave an account of his own conversion, and when a man whose Christianity was undoubted described how the Lord had dealt with him, the weak brethren were strengthened by finding that they themselves had passed through a similar experience.[58]

We have, in these generalised accounts, much that is important. The size of many parishes in the northern Highlands, the fact that the more remote parishes had several preaching stations, some of which only received a sermon once a month, ensured that communion seasons were indeed the only occasion that the entire Christian community could meet together. Some ministers welcomed the intensity that large gatherings could generate. Other ministers did not and strove to keep their communions "closed", that is to say open only to members of the parish celebrating communion. Smaller gatherings meant that the minister had a much closer influence on what was discussed at meetings and over who actually received communion. In "open" communions, Christians from neighbouring parishes could

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[58] K. Mackay, *Social and Religious Life in the Highlands* (Edinburgh, 1902), 112.

participatc, and in these larger gatherings, it was not possible, for example, to refuse admission to the Lord's table, or to participation in meetings, to those in dispute with their own minister. Such matters became the province of the individual, rather than being a matter of proper church discipline.

The decision whether or not to open a communion was a key determinant in the relation between the "The Men" and the minister. Since communion seasons were occasions when the Godly, the spiritual elite, from all the parishes in the vicinity, foregathered, clearly it was needful from the "Men's" point of view that the occasion be "open". This would allow full and extended Fellowship meetings on the communion Friday. The minister would not, in view of the size of the gathering and its extra-parochial composition, be able to exercise a close control over the fellowship meetings. So important was this distinction that it caused a "separation" in the parish of Kildonan. The Rev. John Macleod, Principal of the Free Church College, Edinburgh, and author of the standard account of separatism in the northern Highlands, attributes to this event, which he places around 1797, the origin of separatism throughout the region.[59] The Rev. Donald Sage, who describes the episode in some detail, went further in his assessment and saw it and other separations as part of the cause of the Disruption in the Highlands being so complete. Sage represents the dispute as a trial of strength between his father, the parish minister the Rev. Alexander Sage, and his elders, "The Men" in fact.

> The last sacramental occasion at Kildonan but one, of which I have any recollection, was connected with a circumstance which, childish and thoughtless as I then was, yet deeply affected me. It was a schism which broke out between my father and his elders in regard to the administration of that ordinance. My father wished to celebrate it privately, or rather parochially, about the middle of spring. This his elders resisted. They wished him to defer it to the middle of summer, and have it publicly as usual. To this, however, my father would not agree, and matters ran so high that all the elders

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59 J. Macleod, *North Country Separatists,* (Inverness, 1930), 8.

refused to assist him on that occasion. My father asked Mr Mackenzie of Tongue to assist him, and his popularity, which was then very high, drew a far greater crowd than could be accommodated within the walls of the church. To the repeated and earnest demands for out-preaching my father would not listen, and on the Sabbath, during the fencing of the tables and the table-services, I remember seeing about two hundred persons assembled on the north side of Torr-an-riachaidh, whilst Donald Macleod, the schoolmaster, read a few chapters of the scriptures to them, accompanied by prayer and praise.[60]

The preaching at communion seasons was famously emotional; its intention was to generate a true sense of God's presence and our own need for him, in short, a revival. The Rev. John Macdonald, minister of Ferintosh, the "Apostle of the North", could reduce entire congregations to tears. It is difficult to assess the effect of such preaching since most accounts of revivals and revivalism are written from the perspective of the ministers taking part. However, there were clearly occasions, invariably at annual communions, when the Spirit of God was felt to be moving, changing the complexion of the meeting to one of genuine awakening. The following letter of Charles Calder Mackintosh, minister of Tain 1828-1843 presents such an event and also offers a definition of what a true revival is. He is talking of events in his own and neighbouring Easter Ross parishes in 1840:

> What I believe to be a genuine revival of religion – the work of the Spirit of God – has taken place during the past year, to a considerable extent, in this parish and district. By a revival of religion I mean that which, under Divine influence, is effected by the word of God, the main features of which are, a deep general anxiety to hear the Word, and to wait upon its dispensation – conviction of sin – earnest inquiry after the way of salvation – and apparent conversion, leading to holy life and

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[60] Sage, *Memorabilia Domestica*, 131, Macleod, *Separatists*, 10.

conversation – connected with the refreshing and growing sanctification of the people of God.[61]

Few "ordinary people" left any evidences that have survived. However William Findlater's life of his brother Robert Findlater concludes the account of the Breadalbane Revival with a valuable and unusual "narrative of the rise and progress of the spiritual concern and experience of the persons aftermentioned", taken down "in their own words as far as possible". This casts some light on how the celebrated sermons above considered were actually received, by "Men" and others. The concentration on individual Christian experience reflects the agenda of "The Men" The experiences do not have the element of dramatic intensity or blind convulsion that is to be found in accounts of revivals elsewhere, but they do have a certain pattern in common. The first element in that pattern is a kind of epiphany, a manifestation of the power of God in contrast to their own utter worthlessness, often presented as a sudden understanding in immediate response to the words of the sermon. Thus A. B.:

> often had some serious concern about my soul, and many times felt a glow of affection under the hearing of the gospel offers of salvation. Feeling flashes of joy, and at times able to weep for my condition, I began to entertain no unfavourable opinion of my state. The day of the sacrament I began, even on the way thither, to doubt the safety of my state. It was not long after Mr Macdonald began his sermon, when I was fully convinced that all was naught with me before. In describing the character of the Spouse, when the Lord first demanded her assent, I thought I saw my own picture plainly and legibly drawn before my eyes. O how did that sentence pierce my heart, "The Lord is a consuming fire!" I wonder He did not take vengeance of me that instant, as I richly deserved it.[62]

The second element in these accounts is the period, often extending into days and weeks of complete listlessness, doubt and

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[61] J. Gillies, *Historical Collections Relating to Remarkable Periods of the Success of the Gospel* (Edinburgh, 1845), 158.

[62] W. Findlater, *Memoir of the Rev. Robert Findlater of Inverness* (Glasgow, 1830), 235.

despair. It is as if the complete acceptance of the epiphanic insight of God's mercy cannot be made too easy; the transition from sinner to true Christian must involve a period of utter humility and abasement. After all, the saving process is in no sense an achievement of the individual human will. We wait upon God. All we can do is prepare ourselves by prayer and attendance on divine service. The power of this process and its internal logic is well exemplified in the witness of R.S. He:

> found relief and peace and joy unspeakable. For a considerable time I enjoyed the most satisfactory evidence of an interest in Christ. Not one doubt or scruple remained. Sin seemed to be wholly eradicated from my heart and mind, and I could incessantly praise and adore Jesus and His redeeming love to sinners and even to me.[63]

Even ministers passed through the same process. The Rev. Alexander Stewart's memoir, considering his modesty and sense of unworthiness for the divine task revealed in his diary, put the centrality of abasement thus:

> But self-abasement is not incompatible with a sense of safety, or a frame of habitual joy; for it is the privilege of all who fully enter into the grace of the gospel method of salvation, that with the deepest self-abhorrence, they have somewhat wherein to glory, and that is, Christ.[64]

This culture of abasement is reflected also in the practice of communion. Although many people attended very few actually received it. The communion table was rigidly "fenced". Only those who had a true and well-attested Christian character were received. Indeed, many whom the ministers would gladly have served communion forbade themselves the privilege on account of their awareness of their own unworthiness. Thus the experience of the vast majority of the communion congregations was to observe a symbolic enactment of Christ's redemption of humanity, from which they themselves were completely excluded. This was, in itself, a systematic

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63 Findlater, *Memoir*, 263.

64 Stewart, *Sermon*, 311.

humiliation – designed to facilitate that sense of unworthiness and despair that was crucial to salvation.

The Evangelical view of fencing the table is well exemplified by the Rev. John Macalister, minister of Nigg from 1837 until the Disruption. He was a native of Arran and converted during the celebrated revival on that island in 1810 and 1811. In terms that are a notable example of Evangelical emotionalism, Macalister explains the rationale of fencing: "Persons may come unworthily to the Lord's Table and when they do so they are guilty of a great sin, 'Guilty of the body and blood of the Lord'".[65] Strict examination of the conscience is required; many are excluded, "in a word, all swearers, liars, thieves, Sabbath-breakers, the unclean, and the covetous, those who live without secret prayer, and who do not acknowledge and honour God in their families, are excluded".[66]

The importance of the occasion is movingly dwelt upon: "Remember the painfulness of the death of Christ. A man of sorrows, broken and bruised by His Father in the day of His great wrath and great love, His body torn, His soul in a dreadful agony, His side pierced, His blood shed."[67] We must

> remember this death with mourning hearts for sin. A broken Christ must not be remembered without a broken heart. A bleeding Christ and a hardened spirit, a suffering, weeping Christ, and a senseless heart are unsuitable. Our passover should be eaten with bitter herbs, with sorrow for sin.[68]

Guilt, humility and emotionalism are the dominant motifs in this passage. His formula for those who are invited to receive communion is also revealing; "those who are poor in their own eyes, those who mourn for their sins, their ignorance, hardness, those to whom Christ as a Saviour is precious, *those to whom the cause and people of God are precious*".[69]

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[65] J. Macalister, *Gaelic and English Sermons* (Inverness, 1896),113.
[66] *Ibid.*, 114.
[67] *Ibid.*, 114.
[68] *Ibid.*, 115.
[69] *Ibid.*, 114, my italics.

The reference to the people of God is significant, since these communion assemblies did not represent the gathered Christians of a particular parish. They represented a more diffuse and self-selecting body of people. Those attending communion seasons in neighbouring parishes were not under any compulsion or threat of church discipline to attend. Their attendance was entirely personal and voluntary. Clearly such gatherings had a social function; hospitality offered at the host communion could be repaid at another season.

Nevertheless, the primary function of the seasons was religious and, importantly, communal. Together the people faced the withering analysis of their inadequacies that the ministers offered them. Together, and in public, they shouted their repentance and their desire to find a way to be saved. Their local leaders in worship, "The Men", likewise were part of a community. They met, conducted their soul examinations and renewed fellowship. Most accounts of the "Men" stress how much valued were their meetings and conference at regular intervals at different communions. The community that was brought into being at communion seasons was self-affirming and self-validating; it existed side by side with the structures and personnel of the parochial community. True Christians of course engaged religiously with their own parishes, although not a few remained separated, but their most significant spiritual engagement was with one another at communion seasons. Although communion seasons were under the aegis of the Established Church, the nature and size of the gathering and the peculiar intensity of the responses at some of the more effectively conducted occasions, were not planned.

Emotional, revivalistic communion seasons answered a need among the Highlanders and consequently, with the enthusiastic participation of some Evangelical clergy, became more frequent. Such gatherings, whether or not they resulted in true revivals were at the heart of popular Highland religion, the pillars of which were the Gaelic language, lay participation, individual self-abnegation or abasement, submission to God's Will and revivalism. At the centre of these communal spiritual activities were "The Men". Alexander Stewart, minister of Dingwall, concluded:

> Other experienced Christians among us have been extremely useful to their younger brethren and sisters. Their conversation

> and example have been principal means of turning the attention of the young to religion, and of edifying those who have already been awakened. Such persons I find most serviceable auxiliaries. If they be neither *prophets,* nor *apostles*, nor *teachers* yet their usefulness in the church entitles them to the appellation of *helpers*.[70]

The Disruption of 1843 can be viewed from several perspectives; Evangelical triumph, rearguard victory of the people over the lairds, religious and cultural transformation. Its immediate effects in the northern Highlands were instructive. There was violence in Easter Ross at a number of settlements of Established church ministers, particularly those replacing popular Evangelical ministers. These events were predictable in the highly charged religious context of Easter Ross.

The Rev. Norman Macleod of "the Barony", his parish for 21 years, perhaps the most influential and popular Highland minister of his day, in his diary written during the 1843 Disruption Assembly, listed what he saw as the deleterious effects of disruption: "the first rock I fear is fanaticism in Ross-shire and other parts of the country, such as has been witnessed only in America. I have already heard of scenes and expressions that would hardly be credited". By November 1843. Macleod is observing, "the riots in Ross-shire show that all this has been fulfilled".[71] There were indeed a number of riots in Easter Ross when new clergy were inducted into parishes formerly held by ministers who had joined the Free Church. *The Inverness Courier* records on 27 September 1843:

> The people of Rosskeen, Ross-shire, resisted the Presbytery of Tain when they went to induct the new parish minister, and the ceremony had to be conducted at lower Kincraig.[72]

The episodes, were probably no more violent or prolonged than the anti-intrusion riots with which the area was familiar and to which the descriptions bear a marked similarity.

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70 Stewart, *Sermons,*, 144.

71 D. Macleod, *Memoir of Norman Macleod* (London, 1876), 203.

72 *Inverness Courier*, Index File, 33.

The Rev. John Macdonald of Ferintosh, the "Apostle of the North":

> strongly inculcated the necessity of the people conducting themselves with decorum, and even went so far as to say that he would refuse all Church privileges to such as should take any part in creating a disturbance.[73]

This threat, the most severe the church could effect, implying as it did the possibility of children unbaptised and marriages unsolemnised, suggests very strongly the innate conservatism of Free Church's social posture during the Disruption period; protest at injustice had no place in its thinking. The Free Church leadership laboured to keep the perspective religious rather than political.

In the years preceding 1843, there were a number of reported revivals; further, the Disruption itself, in many accounts, was described in revivalistic terms. This is hardly surprising; if Christ's Headship was truly in contest, then a quickening in religious life, a positive expression of divine presence, might almost be expected. The district that participated most fully in the revivalism, as it did in the violence mentioned above, was Easter Ross. A revival was set off in the parish of Tarbat by the preaching of the Rev. John Macdonald of Ferintosh (Urquhart) in June 1841; it spread to the neighbouring parishes of Tain, Rosskeen, Alness and Macdonald's own parish of Ferintosh.[74]

The Revival appears to have been quite dramatic:

> The Church, which was crowded in every part, became the scene of outcries and prostrations. Many were ashamed and awakened to a sense of their lost condition. The movement went on spreading in all directions till almost all the parishes in the synod were embraced. In many congregations daily evening services were held, and attended by crowded audiences, and great and wonderful were the manifestations of power that took place. The excitement grew, and multitudes were crying "Men and brethren, what must we do to be

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[73] *Ibid.*, 35.

[74] J. Gillies, *Historical Collections*, 560.

saved?" Such at times was the extraordinary emotion, which found expression in loud weeping and lamentation, that the voice of the most powerful preacher was completely drowned in the sounds of agonising anguish that rose from the audience.[75]

Other evidences of a more vital spiritual life are to be found in the accounts of the difficulties congregations faced in the initial period after the Disruption when sites were refused and Free Church adherents were worshipping in the open air. The Rev. Mackenzie, minister of Farr, offers the following observations on the effect of the Disruption on spiritual life; in particular the communion season and the role of "The Men" in "speaking to the question":

> We have continued this Friday Exercise since the Disruption; and in regard to my experience in my own Congregation I can candidly declare I never had greater satisfaction in such exercises than during the three Communion Solemnities we had since we left the Establishment. There seemed to me, that worthy Christians had more than ordinary freedom in communicating the marks of God's dealing with their souls in converting, and building up in holiness and Comfort through faith unto Salvation. There was an Unction of Brotherly love and Unity which was truly gratifying.[76]

What is interesting about revivalism – and also the role of "The Men" – in the context of the Disruption, is the way in which it was used as religious validation for the events and choices of 1843. A quickening of religion, in which the Men were participant in these years was a symbol of God's approbation of the Evangelical agenda.

Little attention has been directed to the crowd psychology of Highland religion, or the role of the "Men" in generating or directing it. A useful starting point is the celebrated, rather hostile account, given of popular Presbyterianism in General Stewart's *Sketches of the Character, Manners and Present State of the Highlanders of Scotland.*

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[75] *Religious Life in Ross-shire* (n.d.), 217.

[76] D. Mackenzie, *Disruption Manuscript*, Edinburgh University Faculty of Divinity Library, p. 11.

Stewart clearly identified social reasons – clearances, the collapse of the old Highland community and economy – as the reason for the appeal of Evangelicalism and its associated revivals. Stewart's argument is simple; the fanaticism that he berates so famously was due to incoming missionaries and itinerants, presenting doctrine and practice in a way that opposed the authority of the parish minister and confused and polluted the natural religious feelings of the Highlanders:

> [The Highlanders] who, neglected and repulsed by their natural and protectors, while their feelings and attachment were still strong, have, in too many instances, sought consolation in the doctrines of ignorant and fanatical spiritual guides, capable of producing no solid or beneficial impression on the ardent minds of those to whom their exhortations and harangues are generally addressed. The natural enthusiasm of the Highland character has, in many cases been converted to a gloomy and morose fanaticism.[77]

Stewart regards the new kind of popular Evangelicalism as in essence compensatory and blames the itinerants and teachers for the change in religious feeling. He has a somewhat sentimental, not to say paternalistic, view of the Highlanders; their natural trust had been led astray by the rabid doctrines of teachers and itinerant preachers:

> Others again are rash, illiterate, ignorant of human nature, and vulgar; very incapable of filling the situation they have assumed, and peculiarly unqualified for the instruction of a people, sensitive and imaginative.[78]

The sociologist, Steve Bruce, in his survey of Easter Ross Revivals, attempts to formulate a process by which the change of ideology from traditional loyalties, focused on clan and township, to the belief in a strict form of Evangelical Presbyterianism may have happened. In his theory, the people must be "available for transformation", a condition abundantly fulfilled by the economic and

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[77] D. Stewart, *Sketches of the Character, Manners and Present State of the Highlanders of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1825), 133.

[78] *Ibid.*, 136.

social dislocation of the clearances. Bruce then offers two mechanisms of motivation and choice that give a causal link between clearance and religious revival.

> When social scientists do offer causal links between social change and collective behaviour, the connections tend to be of two types. One sort involves a psychological pathology of anxiety and frustration; the second sort suggests an underlying hidden rationality to the collective behaviour.[79]

Neither theory really satisfies, since both presuppose that the purported reason for their actions is different from their "real" reason, a dichotomy of which the agent is unaware. In the one case, his rejection of traditional beliefs and adoption of a new ideology is founded on a psychological disturbance caused by the clearances; in the other case, his rejection of the Established Church at the Disruption is "really" a protest against the lairds. In both cases the evidential value of the agent's actual words and actions are nullified, since his self-understanding is deemed to be inaccurate.

This irrational, emotional model of response to social change can, however, open up some interesting vistas. There can be no doubt that the most effective Evangelical preachers in the Highlands were powerfully and consistently emotional in their approach; their whole purpose was to induce in their audience a sense of worthlessness and dependence on God's mercy rather than on their own efforts. Passivity, complete submission to the Divine purpose and moral individualism were their watchwords. That such conversions and epiphanies should occur in the cohesive, community based setting of annual communion tells us a great deal. The individual act of conversion or of submission through prayer or through communion itself took place in a gathering wholly defined by the nature and collectivity of its language – there were separate services for English speakers – and, implicitly, by dislocation. They were assemblies of the evicted, or, at least, assemblies of survivors from the ruin of the old Highland community. The collectivity certainly magnified the emotions and, arguably, encouraged individual loss of self-control

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[79] S.J. Bruce, "Social Change and Collective Behaviours; the Revival in Eighteenth Century Ross-shire", *British Journal of Sociology* (1983), 56.

with the attendant dramatic expression of abandoned feeling of the kind already noted. Such revivalistic experience confirmed the transformation of belief. The most important element in this process was not the clearances, but the sacramental, endogamous and communal nature of the new emerging ideology of popular Presbyterianism.

The "hidden rationality" theory likewise presents difficulties. If the "real" purpose of the Disruption in the north was an attack on the lairds and the local power elite, then a wholesale reinterpretation of the role of revivals and of the importance of such figures as the Rev. John Macdonald of Ferintosh becomes necessary, since the last thing intended by him or looked for in revival meetings was the promotion of social discord. God's crown rights alone were in contention.

Bruce completes his argument, by giving a key role to the activities of "The Men". In a final interpretation, he makes them and their network of influence the reason behind the Evangelical capture of the Highlands, since they were anti-laird and anti-clerical. "The Men", in this version of events, become at once the leaders of both ideological transformation and of the ordinary Highlanders in their conflict with the lairds during the Disruption period.[80] I would argue that the mindset of popular Evangelical Presbyterianism in the region was more profoundly conditioned by the religious tradition of the region than it was by the clearances. The developments that comprised popular Highland religion largely predated the clearances and the crisis of the 1840s. The Disruption and its revivalism was indeed the climax of a long tradition – as its proponents loudly claimed. An alternative model of religious adherence and practice was already largely in existence, the ideological transformation was already accomplished. The Disruption of 1843 and the revivals that accompanied and preceded it were, in essence, an assertion and extension of what was already familiar and accepted.

Bruce's work is important because it introduces a level of explanation that reconciles social context, for which we have a great deal of evidence, with the kind of individual personal experiences that are presented in some of the religious sources. It enables the historian to build up a picture of how the transformation of belief actually

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[80] *Ibid.*, 61.

worked. Professor Eric Richards has schooled us to view the reaction to the clearances as not as passive as previously assumed. After surveying the surprising frequency and similarity of the acts of resistance, Richards tries to account for the lack of sustained leadership:

> The poverty of leadership may be related to the polarization of society and the demise of the tacksman – many had emigrated, many had thrown in their lot with the landlords.... Popular discontent was invested increasingly in the ministers.[81]

There is no suggestion "The Men" had any leadership role in episodes of resistance. A rather different role is envisaged for "The Men" by James Hunter in his important account of the crofting community:

> In view of "The Men's" obvious leaning towards anti-landlordism it was inevitable that the Established clergy's concern about these developments should be shared by landowners and their associates. Not only did "The Men" articulate crofters' growing dislike of landlords, the very existence of a profoundly popular movement equipped with its own leaders clearly constituted a threat to the latter's hitherto undisputed dominance in the Highlands.[82]

To what extent were "The Men" a real threat? Was there a radical and threatening political agenda put forward by "The Men" to their followers? In the areas comprehended by this study – Ross and Sutherland – "Men" led protest was a function of breakdown in the relation between minister and people, not a coherent, planned assault on laird, minister or other power elite figure. The ideology of "The Men" was highly individualist, with its emphasis on soul examination. Communal endeavour or anything resembling a theology of justice does not make an appearance until the 1850s and 1860s. The highlanders adhered to a version of Calvinism that effectively condemned any "social Gospel" or protest. There is an irony here; the

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[81] E. Richards, "Patterns of Highland Discontent" in *Popular Protest and Public Order*, edd. R. Quinault and J. Stevenson (London, 1974), 105.

[82] J. Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh, 1976), 102.

ideology that gave the shattered society of the Gael some coherence and meaning was also a mental construct that inhibited protest or public criticism. The classic statement of the duty of submission achieved during eviction is Donald Sage's description of the Christians of Achness mission in upper Strathnaver leaving their cottages from which they had been evicted:

> The truly pious acknowledged the mighty hand of God in the matter. In their prayers and religious conferences not a solitary expression could be heard indicative of anger or vindictiveness, but in the sight of God they humbled themselves, received the chastisement as at His hand.[83]

Sage's picture was an embodiment of the true Christian's response to hardship; acceptance and repentance. In principle this austere doctrine was what "The Men" and their followers believed. The more holy among them could expect God's grace. They were allowed a kind of victory, but not one of this world. Adam Sutherland, a Catechist and "Man" from Strathbrora, embodies at the crisis of his life complete disregard for things of this world and the passivity that accompanies such a viewpoint:

> During the winter preceding the removal of the crofting population from the south side of Strath Brora – for the north side had shortly before been cleared of its inhabitants - Adam was confined to bed, and his friends expressed their fears that, in his delicate state of health, he could not survive the fatigue of flitting in May, when a neighbouring sheep-farmer should come into possession of the crofts and adjoining grazings. "You can keep your minds easy", said the aged saint. "For before the term-day I expect to be in that place where flittings are unknown." His presentiment proved to be correct.[84]

It is not easy to find examples where known, named "Men" were pitted against the strength and resources of the landlord and the secular power. The neighbouring parish of Kildonan affords an interesting example of an acknowledged "Man" caught up in a

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[83] Sage, *Memorabilia Domestica*, 289.

[84] Munro, *Records of Grace*, 11.

potentially dangerous confrontation. The encomium of George Mackay, the catechist of Kildonan, hints at tensions within the parish:

> George was very scathing in his criticism of ministers unless they were deeply experiential, as well as sound in their preaching. He had a deep insight into the mysteries of God's Word, and a way of expressing his thoughts that was most original.[85]

We can observe closely some of his role in the clearance disturbances in Kildonan parish in January 1813. One entire side of the Strath of Kildonan was to be put under sheep and on 5 January 1813, the new tenants arrived to survey the farm. The community determined to resist, persuading themselves that if the incoming tenants were physically prevented from completing a survey, then the new tenancy would be stopped and the original tenants left in place.

The full story is given in K.J. Logue's *Popular Disturbances in Scotland 1780-1815*.[86] Although the incomers were not successful on this first attempt, after a threatened use of the militia and the initiating of a legal precognition enquiring into the disturbances, the clearances went ahead. The situation could well have developed into real tragedy; at various points some of the Kildonan people tried to involve men from Strathbrora and from Caithness in their protests. A meeting took place at night, at John Gordon's mill. The meeting was attended by George Mackay, catechist and several others. The meeting was told by one Alexander Bannerman that

> the shepherds were come and said that he was sounding the people to see if they would prevent the shepherds from traversing the grounds . That Alexander Fraser, George McDonald, and George Mackay were all of opinion that the shepherds should be prevented, but the declarant (John Gordon) was not of that mind. That George Mackay said he

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[85] *Ibid.*, 161.

[86] K.J. Logue, *Popular Disturbances in Scotland 1780 – 1815* (Edinburgh, 1977), 64-72.

would speak to Major Clunes on the business and the declarant adds that Mackay is the wisest person among them.[87]

He was certainly privy to the plans that were developing. Another disappointed tenant, George Macdonald declared to the Sheriff Depute of Sutherland, George Cranstoun,

> That he was desired to go to assist in preventing the shepherds from going over the grounds and being interragated by whom he was desired to go declares that he was desired by Alexander Fraser tenant in Lirribale and George Mackay, catechist, and they said to the declarant that the shepherds were to be kept off by force.[88]

We find the catechist speaking to Major Clunes, one of the new tenants, at the manse the next morning. George Mackay and Macleod seemed to be spokesmen for the rest. The situation would have been tense, since there was a crowd outside the manse of 20 or 30 men, most armed with sticks. Macleod appealed for calm – there had been some threats – by enjoining the crowd to "For the Lord's sake give it over."[89]

The two men who appear to have been leaders in this episode were George Macleod, the schoolmaster and a disappointed tenant, George Macdonald. What is clear is the absence of any kind of religious dimension; George Mackay appears as a secondary character whose advice is worth hearing, but is not the leading spirit in events. There is no sense in which his religious role as one of "The Men" compensated or moved into space vacated by the other elite social groupings.

In Ross and Sutherland, lay-led revivalism posed little extended threat to the existing parochial arrangements. Only when the relationship between minister and people became entirely dysfunctional was there the opportunity for "The Men" to impose any kind of discipline or leadership of their own. The pattern suggested by the disputes in Fearn, in Assynt, in Criech, and even in Kildonan, which has normally been regarded as an exception and ill-deserved,

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[87] NAS, AD14/13/9: Precognition into Kildonan, Declaration of John Gordon, 16.

[88] *Ibid.*, Declaration of George Macdonald, AD14/1319, 1.

[89] *Ibid.*, Declaration of J.Polson, AD14/13, 9.

all point to a major dysfunction in ministerial capacity or in the way in which the minister was appointed, not to a general failing among the clergy. Lay leadership was the product of breakdown; after the Disruption, the Free Church understood that lesson and was firm in reasserting traditional clerical authority and to ensure that ministers were appointed in way that strengthened their position. Even in the islands, the Free Church clergy reasserted clerical authority very quickly.

The "Men's" response to the clearances, indeed that of the whole Gaelic community, was hamstrung by their adherence to a very individualistic Calvinism. There was no place in such an ideological framework for social criticism or resistance. The relationship with God was what mattered, not the hardship suffered. Even the Rev. Lachlan Mackenzie, minister of Lochcarron, 1776-1819, famed as one who opposed the clearances from the pulpit, framed his argument very exactly. He did not criticise the offending sheep farmer for cruelty or injustice; he criticised him for the sin of greed, as his choice of text asserts, "Woe unto them that join house to house".[90] The victims were not given any kind of justification for protest or reparation; their response was to be truthful repentance and acceptance of providence. There was no looking for justice; that was the Lord's. Our sojourn on this earth necessarily had "a load of misery".[91] A truly Evangelical critique of the clearances did not emerge in the Highlands until the work of E.J. Findlater and Thomas Mclauchlan in the 1850s.[92]

The austere popular Presbyterianism adopted by the Highlanders and promulgated by "The Men" enabled their communities to retain some sense of meaning and identity. It is an abiding tragedy and paradox that the very ideology which sustained the communities should at the same time disable them in the face of injustice and cruelty.

There is a particular aspect of "The Men's" purported leadership that needs addressing. In some accounts "The Men" are presented as

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[90] Lachlan Mackenzie, *The Happy Man* (Edinburgh, 1979), 25.

[91] *Ibid.*, 75.

[92] E.J.Findlater, *Highland Clearances the Real Cause of Highland Famines*; T. McLauchlan, *Recent Highland Ejections Considered* (Edinburgh, 1850).

sole directors of the process of the Evangelical transformation of the Highland church. It has been argued throughout this study that the crucial elements in the formation of popular Highland Presbyterianism were revivals and communion seasons; in a sense the coming together for worship by the dislocated Gaelic community redefined their identity and explained and validated their suffering and insecurity. It needs emphasising that these sacramental occasions were clergy-led. All the accounts suggest the power of preaching as the defining element in breaking down the individual's last resistance. The ultimate purpose of such preaching was to bring the individual to repentance and, in due course, conversion. It appears to be assumed that the vehicle of conversion, the conduit of grace – for no preacher would have claimed other than that successful preaching is the Lord working through the minister not the minister himself – is the sermon, not, as it might well have been, the prayer or even the fellowship meeting. The lay person is ultimately denied the highest honour in gathering souls. He is not, after all, ordained. In religious terms, the circumstances were not propitious for a leadership or quasi-priestly role for "The Men". The surviving anecdotes about "The Men" very strongly picture them as spiritual figures, emblems of repentance and the power of prayer, not as leaders. Many mention a particular Evangelical minister who was Father in Christ to them or who had brought them to repentance. There is no evidence whatever for any anabaptist theory of the "priesthood of all believers". "The Men" respected greatly the office of priest; it was the individual minister who, in some parishes was deserted.

Even so, it is easy, however, to exaggerate their role and, in retrospect a generation after 1843, they were the subject of several lively controversies. The controversies focused on the nature of the Free Church and its ministry. The contention that "The Men" led their communities into the Disruption, their traditional leaders having abandoned them, is at the same time an identification of the Free Church as a radical body, organised in despite of the discredited clergy. This was the last way in which the Free Church of the 1850s and 1860s would have wished to present themselves. The Free Church establishment – the word is chosen advisedly – had by that time generated its own institutional respectability and social conservatism.

The best known of the various controversies regarding "The Men", is that between Hugh Miller, editor of the *Witness*, the Evangelical and Free Church journal, and an anonymous opponent writing from an Established Church point of view, Investigator. Miller wrote a series of articles in 1852, in the *Witness*, praising "The Men" for their sanctity, their importance to the Free Church and their role in preparing for the Disruption.[93] Investigator in a pamphlet *Fanaticism in the North* replied with specific charges against "The Men": before 1843 they tried to restrict access to communion; they disgraced the communion season by shameful accusations against the clergy; they persecuted ministers who would not do their bidding; they fomented bigotry, and they lived immoral lives.[94]

The texts reveal some important insights, irrespective of the truth of the actual allegations. Both parties assume that "The Men" had a crucial role in educating and preparing the ordinary people for the Disruption. Their motives for such an assumption differ, of course; they are really arguing about the nature of the Free Church. The role of "The Men" is the touchstone, the defining character of the Free Church. For Miller the Disruption is the climax of a tradition of godly Highland worship. His vision requires, as it were, native examplars (for all sides agree that "The Men" were unique to the Highlands – there were no Lowland equivalents). Investigator uses them to suggest the folly, corruption and irrationality of the whole Free Church project, an argument which gains force when the arbitrary nature of the "Men's" ministerial prejudices is made clear. Some Evangelical ministers were boycotted or exposed to criticism at meetings; Investigator gives as examples some unimpeachably Evangelical ministers such as Hugh Mackenzie of Tongue and David Carment of Rosskeen.[95] Further both Miller's and Investigator's approaches agree implicitly that the role of the minister was undermined by the activities of "The Men". This may be so; but it is not evidence of a leadership role undertaken by "The Men". Their opposition was critical rather than ambitious, religious rather than radical.

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93 Investigator Letter to the Editor of the *Witness* (Edinburgh, 1852), 10-17.
94 *Ibid.*, 20-9.
95 *Ibid.*, 20.

In summary, little evidence has been presented to suggest that "The Men" truly acted as a leadership class or coherent organisation, in either the revivals or the campaign preceding the Disruption. They are indeed part of a pattern of reduced clerical power and increased lay influence, a process earlier termed de-parochialisation. Their style of religion and behaviour did not in any case permit much joint action; if Calvinism is fundamentally individualistic in its emphasis on repentance and dependence on God, then the values and standards of "The Men" were more individualistic still. They competed to demonstrate their own holiness and seclusion from worldly matters. If they became influential in particular parishes, it was not because they had planned any kind of mission there, but rather because circumstances permitted them to step into a role otherwise firmly retained by the Church of Scotland ministry.

It is perhaps impossible to arrive at a fully settled view of "The Men". Their role was controversial at the time and ever since, their contribution and its divine authenticity, or lack of it, has been a symbolic touchstone of much larger themes: the success of Evangelicalism; the response of the church to the clearances and the nature of the Free Church.