

# The Baptist Church in Colonsay

by  
John McNeill

## PREFACE

Mrs. Eleanor McNeill of Machrins has most kindly made available her copy of The Baptist Church in Colonsay by John McNeill, first published at Edinburgh in 1914. It is nowadays very hard to find, and it is definitely not possessed by the National Library of Scotland. Part of the information was incorporated in the History of the Baptists in Scotland from pre-reformation times, edited by Rev. George Yuille and published at Glasgow by the Baptist Union Publications Committee in 1926. The latter work is extremely helpful for the general reader; chapter 3 of The New Dawn and Rise of "Scotch" Baptists covers the period from the Commonwealth until 1800 and is a useful introduction to John McNeill's own publication.

Interested persons should also read The Scottish Highlands – The churches and Gaelic culture by Donald E. Meek and The Baptists in Scotland – A History edited by D W Bebbington. John McNeill will have been a brother of the famous Dr. Roger McNeill, whose contribution to epidemiology and preventative medicine is without parallel in the Highlands. The text of this history has been transcribed verbatim by Kevin Byrne, with one or two additional notes being clearly indicated.

A portrait of the author is preserved in Colonsay Baptist Church archives:  
JOHN McNEILL, DEACON. DIED 10 OCTOBER 1921

## THE TEXT

In reading Mr. Waugh's pamphlet giving an account of the progress of the Baptist Home Mission in the Highlands and Western Islands of Scotland, it struck me that it would be interesting to the younger generation of Colonsay to have some account of the progress of the Church in the island.

I have, therefore, in the following short sketch, tried to give a few of the events in connection with the Church, from the time of the landing of the first missionary to the present day [c.1910 - ed.] Some of the facts happened within my own recollection, and others I have gleaned from older members of the community.

About the year 1812 the Rev. Dugald Sinclair made a tour through a part of the Highlands and Western Islands, and after coming as far north as Tire with Malcolm Maclaren (a member of the Independent Church), and the two came over to Colonsay in a small sailing boat. They were well received by the people, and a number of meetings were held in different parts of the island. These were productive of much good, many being brought to believe in the Saviour.

After a stay of some days they left again in a small sailing boat for Islay, but before reaching the point of Rhu Vaal the wind had risen so much that they were compelled to turn back. Again they tried, but again failed. Three times, indeed, did they try, but were always driven back. This circumstance so impressed Mr. Sinclair at the time that he believed the Lord had need for him in Colonsay.

The following year the two returned to the island, when their labours were greatly blessed, many conversions taking place. One sermon, preached by Mr. Sinclair, so impressed the people that it has been handed down from generation to generation; many times did the writer afterwards hear his uncle speak of it in admiration. The text of the discourse was Acts xxviii.22: "But we desire to hear of

thee what thou thinkest; for as concerning this sect, we know that everywhere it is spoken against." Preaching Baptism by immersion from it - which was something quite new to the people and which no one had thought of - he made a deep and lasting impression upon their hearts. They began to search the Scriptures daily upon this point, for the people of Colonsay were very much like the Athenians and strangers of old we are told of in Acts xvii.21, who spent their time in nothing else but to tell or hear something new.

John McMillan, son of Angus McMillan, butler to the laird, spoke to Mr. Sinclair, afterwards asking to be baptized, and one after another came forward until there were eight of them. These were all baptized on the following Sunday in Loch Fada. McMillan was a fine young fellow, and afterwards went through College. He was placed as a missionary in Inverary. But after only a few years' ministering to the people he died, on 10th April 1820 (sic), at the early age of twenty-seven. His illness was only of a few days' duration.

Another of the eight, Neil McEachern, was desirous of becoming a missionary, but feeling his education deficient he determined to go to Mull, where there was a better teacher, to improve himself for the work. Taking advantage of a small boat which was leaving for Mull at the time, he embarked with four others, but alas! they were destined never to reach the other side. While still a long way from land, the weather became so tempestuous that the boat became unmanageable. It eventually filled and sank and all on board were drowned.

The following year [c. 1814? - ed.], when Mr. Sinclair came round again, he brought with him a young man from the Ross of Mull, Duncan Fergusson, to be baptized. In those days the Church was very careful in selecting its members, and after a consultation it was decided that the young man would not be baptized that year. Mrs. McVane, a member of the Church, spoke, saying that they made her wonder, as he was a promising young man: Why not baptize him now, for how did they know he would be alive next year? They agreed to baptize him there and then. This was the first Baptist of the Ross, and he afterwards went to Edinburgh to fit himself for missionary work. He was sent home to spread the Gospel among the people of his own district, where he laboured hard for forty years.

After a good many years, during which he paid his annual visit to our island, Mr. Sinclair left this country altogether and went to America, where he continued preaching the Gospel.

Mr. Sinclair, who was a cultured man, was one who bore the heat and burden of the day. In his time travelling facilities in the Highlands were not what they are nowadays, so that the traveller very often had to undergo many hardships. Much opposition and prejudice had also to be met and overcome. The lairds of some of the places visited by our missionaries were not all in favour of these visits, as the following incident will show."

"When Mr Sinclair was addressing an open-air meeting in a certain place, the laird sent his factor with the following message, which was uttered at the pitch of the factor's voice: - "Any person who attends this man's meetings, or listens to his preaching, shall lose all his lands."

On hearing this, and knowing that the laird's word was law, Mr. Sinclair's congregation began to move off one by one. Mr. Sinclair made a short pause here, and then said: "I am sorry that the factor has caused such a disturbance, and also to see so many turning away from hearing the Word of Life, and choosing rather the profit of this world; but if I should resort to the law of the land I could place him (the factor) within four walls of stone and lime (meaning prison)." On hearing this the factor returned to the laird and said: "You and the minister can pull each other's noses if you choose, but I am not the man to disturb his meeting again."

Another incident is related, which reveals the tact with which this venerable missionary dealt with his opponents.

On visiting the island of Coll on one occasion Mr. Sinclair announced that he would preach on the Sabbath morning. Just before the service began the laird sent his factor to tell Mr. Sinclair that he was not to preach on his island on any account. To this Mr. Sinclair replied: "Well, sir, I have already intimated the meeting, and as I am not in the habit of telling lies I am bound to preach. But you had better return to your master and tell him that directly after the service I will call and have dinner with him, and no doubt we shall agree between ourselves about the meetings." The factor returned home and on meeting the laird delivered Mr. Sinclair's message as above recorded and he was prepared accordingly, and Mr. Sinclair, true to his promise, called upon the laird. So well did they get on together that after the dinner the laird turned to Mr. Sinclair and said: "You are at liberty to hold as many meetings on the island as you yourself see proper."

The two daughters of the laird of Colonsay were converted and became a great help to the cause in the island, bringing out the people to the meetings and in various other ways. At the time of their conversion the laird and his lady were on a visit to Edinburgh. On their return one of the islanders, an unconverted sinner, thinking no doubt to do injury to the truly Christian inhabitants, told the laird of his daughters' conversion, and how they were visiting the poor people at their cottages and persuading them to go to the meetings. He was allowed to finish his story without interruption, but listened to impatiently, I fear, judging from the reply he got. Raising his stick in a threatening attitude, the laird said: "The first who dares say anything against my daughters again will get this stick across the head." One of the ladies was baptized in Edinburgh, and the other in Loch Sgoltaire by Mr. Grant, minister for many years at Tobermory.

Although the laird objected to anyone speaking to him about the conversion of his daughters, he was, at the same time, greatly annoyed over the matter; so much so, indeed, that he caused a number of those that he thought instrumental in their conversion to leave the island. This he could easily do by refusing them any kind of employment. As showing the spirit in which the laird's action was accepted, one of those who had to leave the island - Donald Currie - left singing the Paraphrase: "I'm not ashamed to own my Lord."

Among those who had to go was the writer's uncle - Malcolm McNeill - one of the first in the island to be baptized. He went over to Islay, but at the end of two years he was recalled by the laird and made manager of Oronsay, a post which he retained till the laird's death, twenty years afterwards. The laird found him such a faithful and upright servant - one who practised what he preached - that his ideas regarding the Baptists and their creed became considerably modified; and not his only, but his wife's as well, who began to entertain a great regard for Malcolm, asking him to pray for herself and her husband.

Malcolm, better known as "Calum Ruadh" [i.e. red-haired], was one of the leaders of the Church, and was continually crossing over to the meetings at Kilchattan, a distance of some six miles. [Meetings at the time were held at the school, then owned by SSPCK]. One can easily understand the many difficulties he had to encounter in getting across the strand owing to the tide. Sometimes he had to leave before daylight, and as often getting back in the dark, frequently having to wade, carrying his boots over his shoulders. He was often accompanied on these journeys by his wife, and for fear the tide might cut them off they often dispensed with breakfast, taking with them a piece of bread and butter to be eaten at their leisure on the other side.

Captain McNeill, son of the laird, was staying at Oronsay at this time. He was married to an English

lady who appears to have been very much impressed with Malcolm's piety. One Sunday when he could not get over the strand, she invited him to hold a meeting in her house. Calling all her servants together she sat with them and listened throughout the service, although not understanding a single word of what was said.

At this time [1830's?] the Baptist Church in Colonsay was prospering and greatly increasing in membership. This was due in a large measure to the labours of one gifted man, Malcolm Blue, a native of the island and a true follower of Christ, but still an unbeliever in the matter of immersion. He had preached against it in Mull, but afterwards becoming convinced that he had been altogether wrong in his views, he made a point of going to Mull (the very place where he had spoken against it) to be baptized.

Blue was regarded by those who had the privilege of listening to his discourses as a splendid preacher; he therefore generally undertook the expounding of the Gospel, while Malcolm McNeill prayed and read and also conducted the singing. Malcolm, however, had only three tunes at his command, "Martyrdom", "Coleshill" and "Stroudwater", and these had to do duty on every occasion. Now, however correctly Malcolm might sing as regards time, Blue was sure to be a note ahead. This did not worry Malcolm much, but he was rather surprised one day when they were walking home from the meeting together to hear his friend say: "You were singing too quick to-day." This evidently annoyed Malcolm, for he replied: "If I was twice as qu                      would be sure to be before me"

"Wonderful are the ways of the Lord in bringing people to repentance, as is shown by the conversion of one young man, Duncan McDougall by name, a native of Mull, then engaged at the kelp-making in Oronsay. When passing the cross one day he remarked to his companion, looking at the figure carved on it, which represents the Crucifixion: "I suppose that will be Donald Balloch", meaning thereby a man of ill-repute in local tradition. ["Poxed Donald", the Campbell factor who was executed c. 1646 by Angus MacCholla - Editor]. His conscience at once rebuked him, as he knew quite well who was represented in the carving, and repenting of his past life he became a changed man and was baptized into the Church. He afterwards went to be trained for missionary work, and settling in Tiree he visited this island frequently, where he did much good, baptizing many. He found time as well to compose a great number of beautiful hymns, which are still sung all over the Highlands. [Duncan MacDougald, a native of Ross of Mull, settled in Tiree in 1824 as a Gaelic school teacher and became the first Baptist Pastor in that island, serving for 31 years. He died in 1881. His hymns were published by J. Niven, Glasgow, in 1841, as "Gaelic Hymns" - Editor].

Angus McNaughton, missionary in Islay, came over occasionally to help in the good work. After his retirement his place was taken by James Miller, who was for over twenty years in Islay, visiting Colonsay twice a year at least, and on one occasion bringing Mr. Livingstone of Lismore with him. Livingstone preached a very powerful sermon from Rev. xxi. 25, which was long afterwards remembered. [McNaughton farmed in the north of Islay, travelled barefoot between meetings, for speed, and was the first Baptist Pastor in Islay. Mr. Miller was based in Bowmore, but his work embraced Port Charlotte and Port Ellen - Editor.]

In the year 1843 Mr Tulloch (late of Edinburgh), accompanied by Mr. McQuarrie, paid us his first visit, holding several meetings throughout the island. One powerful discourse given by Mr. Tulloch, from Romans viii. 13, is still remembered by some of those who heard it. Shortly after him came Mr MacIntyre of Mull. [Rev. William Tulloch was Superintendent of the Home Mission, a charismatic and highly respected evangelist; his father was William Tulloch (1776-1861), author of Sketch of Itinerant Exertions in the Highlands, 1819, reprinted 1901. Duncan MacIntyre served at Bunessan (1835-63) - Editor]

The family of Lachlan McNeill, Kilchattan, are deserving of some mention. Lachlan had three sons, and one of them, not finding scope for his energies at home, went off to Canada. The accounts of the country which he sent home were so encouraging that the whole family followed him in a couple of years, taking one or two more of the islanders with them. This was in the year 1852, and was a great blow to the Church, as nine members left the island together. John was the father of the Rev. John McNeill, the present Baptist minister at Toronto, who was present at the Congress in London in 1905, when he preached in Spurgeon's Tabernacle. Before returning to Canada he visited Colonsay.

Donald, another of Lachlan's sons, was a splendid young man, and before leaving the island had worked hard for the Church, preaching and holding meetings on his own account. After being some years in Canada he determined to devote the remainder of his life to missionary work, going to college to better fit himself for that purpose. He was known among his friends as the "Minister mor", owing to his great height, standing 6 feet 5 inches. Alexander, the third son, was also a good Christian and an able preacher, although not devoting the whole of his time to the preaching of the Gospel. [The 1851 Census, 30th March, shows Lachlan McNeill aged 65, a widower, farming 12 acres of arable in Kilchattan, by far the largest croft (most being 2 or 4 acres in extent). His unmarried children were with him, Donald (27yrs), Sarah (22yrs) and Isabella (19yrs). The only other resident was Malcolm Blue, 66yrs, an unmarried visitor described as "Baptist local preacher". In 1841, Lachlan was described as a Shoe Maker, and his sons Alexander (then 20 yrs) and John (evidently Donald's twin) were still at home, whilst "Sarah" was still known as "Marron" - Editor].

Malcolm Blue was now getting on in years and still able to preach, but beginning to fail very much. One Sabbath in May 1858, he gave a very impressive discourse from 1 John iii. 1,2 in the Schoolhouse, Kilchattan, which greatly affected the people. This proved to be the last sermon they were to hear from him, for he took ill that night and died a few days afterwards. A good man, highly respected by everyone, and one who had done much to further the cause of Christ, his death came as a great blow to the island. [His gravestone reads: "In memory of Malcolm Blue who died 29th May 1858 aged 73 years. He acted as Baptist missionary in Colonsay for many years. His sister, Flora Blue, who died 30th May 1879, aged 80 years. "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God; therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew Him not." In loving memory of Christina McNeill nee Blue, who died 19th December 1934, in her 91st year. "I know that my Redeemer liveth" - Editor]

For a time after Blue's death the Church rather languished, and although his lifelong friend McNeill continued to hold the meetings, the latter was not so able as hitherto for the work, his years telling against him. The meetings were held alternately at the inn and at the schoolhouse, Kilchattan, on the other side of the island, but they began to be less well attended, as a minister had recently been appointed to the Parish Church and people went to worship there instead.

About this time we had a visit from Duncan Campbell, who many years afterwards was settled in Islay. He was instrumental in bringing a number of people forward to be baptized. Mr McFadyen also arrived from Tiree, and being a splendid preacher he did much good in arousing the people to a sense of their duty. He afterwards went over to Islay to help Mr Miller, who was beginning to fail, and remained there for two years, visiting this island frequently, but finally leaving our shores for America.

On the occasion of the first visit to Islay of Mr McFarlane, Baptist minister of Tiree, shortly before coming to Colonsay, the writer happened to be at Port Askaig at the time of his arrival, but did not know him any more than the Islay natives did. Many remarks were passed as to who the new arrival could be, one saying that he looked like a Government official, while another said he was not a gentleman anyway when he did not offer to treat them at the hotel. Whatever the Islay folk may

have thought of him, he became much liked by the Colonsay people, and his preaching drew crowds to the meetings. The writer heard one man remark that these two preachers, McFadyen and McFarlane, were spoiling the people of Colonsay, as they did not value another that did not come up to their standard.

Malcolm McNeill, about the last of the original band of workers left, was now getting very frail and not able any longer to go to the different meeting-places. The people, therefore, arranged to meet at his house every alternate Sunday, where, sitting in his chair, he read and expounded the Gospel. This was continued until the time of his death in 1873 in his eighty-fifth year. [In the 1871 census, he was living (as a widower, retired herd) in the modern farmhouse at Balerominmore (7 windows), and sharing his home with Malcolm McNeill, 37 yrs, ploughman, John McNeill, 28 yrs, herd, Christina McNeill, 19 yrs, housekeeper and Peter Campbell, 16 yrs, farm servant. His son's gravestone reads: "In loving memory of Malcolm MacNeill, farmer, Baleraominmore, who died 10th November 1906. "Carraig, mo neirt, mo thearmunn is e Dia". - Editor]

"After [Malcom McNeill] his death [1873] interest in the meetings began to decline until they were finally dropped, except when a missionary happened to come round. Fortunately this state of affairs did not last long, for when Mr McFarlane came again there was a great revival, the interest being kept up by Mr Tulloch and Mr Allan McDougall coming over at different times.

The Church had now greatly increased in membership and it was determined to build a suitable meeting-house. A site being acquired from the laird the work was at once proceeded with. Those who could not give money gave their time and labour. A handsome and commodious building erected to seat over 100 persons and costing £300 was opened in 1879 free of debt.

Not having a resident minister, Mr. James Campbell, Kilchattan, who had entered heart and soul into the work of the Church, undertook to conduct the services when there was no missionary on the island.

[A portrait in Colonsay Baptist Church archive is entitled:  
JAMES CAMPBELL, DEACON. DIED 9th JUNE 1913 – Editor.]

Ever since the church was built, however, we have had a number of missionaries paying us occasional visits. Among the first was Mr. McLean, the present pastor of the Baptist Church at Dalkeith, who was followed by the Rev. Donald McMillan, a native of the island. He stayed with us a few months [c. 1882?] and afterwards went out to the Congo, where he died shortly after his arrival. [Donald MacMillan seems to have been the son of Alexander MacMillan, a rabbit catcher, who lived with his wife and six children in the cottage beside Cnoc Eabriginn, and he was born c. 1859; unfortunately his service in the Congo is not recorded in the published history of the Baptist Church in Scotland. It has now been researched and is to be published on this website - Editor.]

Then in the following year came the late Mr Henderson, afterwards Baptist minister at Irvine, followed by Mr. Bell of Tobermory. In 1886 we had the Rev. James Black, who remained with us for about three months. Although not a Gaelic speaker his personal influence was very great. He worked hard during his stay, visiting the people in their homes. He held a Bible Class during the week, and on Sundays the people flocked to hear him.

In 1891 Mr. McDougall was sent to us, but he had to devote half his time to Islay, a month in one island and a month in the other, or fortnightly, as suited him best. Mr. Campbell, in his absence, took the service. Mr. McDougall's first visit to Colonsay was in 1869, when he went to Islay in the place of

Mr. Miller, who had retired through old age.

We have had visits at various times since from Mr. Brown of Bunessan, who is now in Taynuilt, Mr. McArthur of Tiree, Mr. McDonald, at present in Bunessan, and Mr. Milne of Cambuslang.

Mr. McDougall's services not being required in Islay latterly, he was able to devote the whole of his energies to the work here. He was a native of Mull and one of Spurgeon's students. A good preacher and an interesting man, he worked hard for the good of the island. He taught a singing class and left some beautiful singers behind him. In the Gaelic Bible Class he earnestly taught the younger people. Five were converted, two being baptized by Mr. McDougall, and the others by Mr. Brown of Taynuilt. Shortly before this time, Mr. Brackenridge, a very fine preacher, visited the island. His labours were greatly blessed and he was the means of these five girls making open confession.

Mr. McDougall resigned his charge and left Colonsay in 1907. The people subscribed for a presentation, and before his departure a crowded meeting was held in the Baptist Church on 18th December, a large proportion of the people of the island being present. Mr. Carmichael, the parish minister, presided, and spoke very highly of Mr. McDougall, expressing his regret at his departure from the island. Many others spoke to the same effect.

In January 1908, shortly after Mr. McDougall left us, a severe gale swept over the island, which caused considerable damage to our little church. Lord Strathcona very kindly came to our aid and gave us £10; Lady Strathcona also contributed £5 and the Hon. Mrs. Howard other £5. With a little further effort on the part of the members, the church was again soon set in repair.

Since Mr. McDougall's retiral, the church has been without a settled pastor, but an arrangement was made by the Baptist Home Mission, under which Mr. McDonald, the pastor of Bunessan church, visits Colonsay once a month except during the summer months. Mr. McDonald is a powerful preacher, and invariably has large attendances at his meetings on each of his visits. Mr. William Taylor, one of the students from Dunoon, has been coming here for the last two summers for a period of three months. He is an earnest preacher, a promising young man and working hard in the island. He left Colonsay for Tiree in September last year and returned to Colonsay on 3rd December and stayed until the end of January, when he held meetings every night during his stay, which was greatly blessed, seven professing conversion during that time.

Two years ago we had a visit from Mr. Grant Robinson and Mr. Cornish, who together held very interesting meetings. During the past summer Mr. and Mrs. Maisie from Central Africa gave us an account of the good work going on there, which the people enjoyed very much.

At the present time our membership is twenty-seven. Some of our members are now scattered over the country - in London, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Greenock, Oban, Islay, Mull and some in Canada. Our youngest member is nineteen years of age, and our oldest member - Mrs. Martin - completed her hundredth year last October. [The Martin family of Gortain moved eventually to Homefield, which had been a Campbell home; an archive of various family papers survives (wills, tenancy agreements etc.) - Editor]

When the Church was first formed, a silver-mounted cup costing thirty shillings was bought for use at the Communion table and is still in use.

Although the Church work is carried on at a disadvantage, through not having a permanently settled pastor, we can truly say that the Lord has not failed to bless the work, or to raise up witnesses to the Gospel.

Since writing the foregoing, we regret to record the death of our oldest member, Mrs. Martin, who passed away [21 April 1910] at the advanced age of one hundred years.

In October 1910 we had a brief visit from Mr. Brown of Taynuilt, when he baptized a young man and a girl, who were also received into fellowship.