
Rev. Wallace Bruce Nicholson (1903–1984) Autobiographical Reflections

NORMAN CAMPBELL

The following pages are taken from a typed manuscript entitled ‘Notes of My Life’ by the late Rev. W. B. Nicholson, Free Church minister of Plockton and published theological author. They are reproduced by kind permission of Mr Nicholson’s daughter, Margaret. As described in the article ‘Arthur W. Pink’s Lewis Friends’ in this volume of *SRSJ*, Mr Nicholson was an early correspondent of Pink. The manuscript makes no direct mention of Pink but it is a useful sidelight on one of Pink’s correspondents; and it has an independent interest in its insights into the pastoral ministry of a twentieth-century Free Church of Scotland minister, written in his retirement. It sheds light on Highland congregations and outreach to the twentieth-century emigrant Scottish diaspora in North America, and it provides an unusual eye-witness account of the tutor-led divinity training system of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland in the 1930s. The original manuscript consisted of a series of occasional writings dating from March 9th 1973 to November 13th 1975. These have here been reworked into a continuous account in chronological order. Overlapping material and personal and family business has been removed, and some minor grammatical and punctuation changes made. Additional editorial remarks for context have been provided in italics. Other editorial additions are in square brackets.

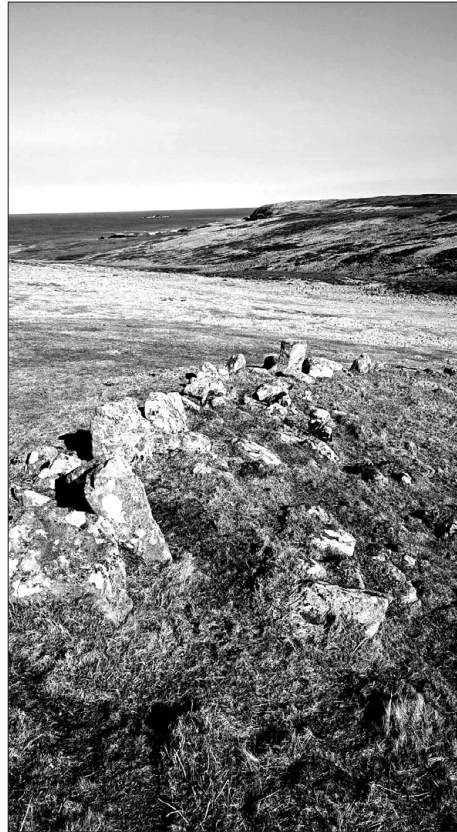


I was born in Skigersta, Ness, Isle of Lewis March 9th 1903. My father, Alexander Morrison Nicholson¹ was the son of Alexander Nicholson, Lionel, Ness,

¹ Known locally as Billy an Fhiosaich, Alasdair was born in October 1870. As well as being an accomplished builder, he was noted for his poetic skills. Two of his songs – ‘O nach Àghmhor’ and ‘An Tèid Thu Leam a Ribhinn Mhaiseach’ are still well-known and sung. Four were published in Iain N. Macleoid (ed.), *Bàrdachd Leodhais* (Glasgow, 1916), pp.

who was a shepherd.² His father was from Galson or what was better known as Asmigarry. He had to leave Asmigarry at the time of the Clearances and he was paying rent as late as 1862. My grandmother, Margaret Morrison,³ on my father's side was married to Donald Morrison, Fivepenny. He was drowned in the big drowning of December 1862, the Bàthadh Mòr,⁴ shortly after his marriage. He would not have been much older than twenty-four at the time.

His widow, who was the same age, had a son, born about six months after his father's death. Donald Morrison, this son, became a remarkable man of business in Winnipeg. He was a millionaire at one time but he lost it all in the Wall Street Crash of 1929. Some years after, my grandmother married Alexander Nicholson and had six sons and one daughter, my father being the second oldest. I knew my grandfather and grandmother well. She was a follower of Big Macrae⁵ and Rev. Duncan MacBeath.⁶



Asmigarry lies between Galson and South Dell in the Ness area of Lewis and was the birthplace of Wallace Bruce Nicholson's paternal grandfather Alexander Nicholson. Large areas of grass in the upper reaches, and flatter ground of thin soil near the shore allowing 'lazybed' cultivation, enabled a community to exist before it was cleared.

176-184. 'O Nach Àghmhor' also appeared in the collection *Eilean Fraoich, Lewis Gaelic Songs and Melodies* (Acair, Stornoway, 1982, second edition), p. 172.

² Alexander Nicholson, the shepherd, was born at Asmigarry in 1838 and died in 1905.

³ Margaret was born in 1838 and died in 1910.

⁴ On 18th December 1862, thirty-one Ness fishermen died after a sudden storm. Twenty-four women were left as widows and 71 children fatherless. A memorial at Port of Ness commemorates these and similar drownings.

⁵ Rev. John MacRae – Gaelic byname Macrath Mòr, i.e. 'Big Macrae' – was a powerful preacher and leader of the Disruption in the Highlands. He had been pastor of Cross (Ness) from 1830 until 1839, with ministries also in Knockbain (1839–1849), Greenock (1849–1857), Lochs (1857–1866), and Carloway (1866–1871). R. Macleod, 'MacRae, John (1794–1876)', *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology*, ed. N.M de S. Cameron (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), p. 537.

⁶ Duncan MacBeath (1821–1891) from Applecross served as town missionary in Inverness from 1850 to 1871 and experienced the 1859–1860 revival there. In 1878 he was ordained and inducted to Cross Free Church, which he served until his death in 1891. He preached with



Mr Nicholson at a wedding
in Inverness in the 1960s.

COURTESY: MARGARET NICHOLSON

I was told that at the Barvas communions she and Mairead Donn, Skigersta,⁷ used to walk every day and come back at night. My grandfather looked after the infant. The distance from Lionel, my grandfather's home, to Barvas, is about fifteen miles.

I was told a very long time ago by an elder in the Church that he and the minister were in the house the day I was born. My mother [Marion née Mackay] was very ill and my father was very worried. My maternal grandmother from Achmore was there too.⁸ The minister went up to the bedroom where my mother was. 'She'll be all right', said the minister. 'And may I ask your warrant for this happy news?'. 'Well', said the minister, 'when I was praying this verse occurred to me and I believe it will prove itself: "I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the LORD"' (Ps. 118:17). This word has been a blessing to many.

My grandmother was born in Glasgow; her father was on the police force there. She was married to Neil Mackay at an early age, probably seventeen, and had eighteen of a family. There are still three living. There is a story told about this good woman that in the days of Rev. Duncan MacBeath of Ness during a communion Sabbath in the open air at Dell, two elders who were serving the Tables saw a halo around her head.⁹ One

warm tenderness, using verbal illustrations and occasionally showing severity of expression. He was credited with deep spiritual insight. Rev. Murdo Macaulay, *Free Church Ministers in Lewis (Presbytery), 1843–1993* (Stornoway, n.d.), p. 16. Much previously unpublished material on MacBeath features in Murdina D. MacDonald, *Blackhouse God's House, A Lewisman Recalls the World He Left Behind* (Christian Faith Publishing Inc., Meadville, PA, 2019), pp. 152-163. A warm appreciation is to be found in Murdoch Campbell, *Gleanings of Highland Harvest* (Christian Focus Publications, Tain, 1989), pp. 63-72. *Gleanings* was republished by Covenanters Press in 2016. For his cautious but enthusiastic work in the 1859–1860 revival, see Norman Campbell, *One of Heaven's Jewels: Rev. Archibald Cook of Daviot and the (Free) North Church, Inverness* (Stornoway, 2009), pp. 162-190.

⁷ Margaret Thomson, (local byname Mairead Donn, brown-haired Margaret) was remembered as one of three women in Skigersta 'of exceptional piety who stood out as spiritual beacons of light'. MacDonald, *Blackhouse God's House*, p. 236.

⁸ Mr Nicholson's mother Marion was born in 1878. His maternal grandmother, Mary Mackay née MacDonald, was born in 1855. Bill Lawson, *Croft History Isle of Lewis, Volume 18, Acha Mor, Loch a' Ghainmhich, Scapraid* (Comunn Eachdraidh Ceann a Tuath nan Loch, 2009), p. 61.

⁹ This presumably means a shining face rather than an object along the lines of the artistic cliché of a large ring suspended above or behind the head. The latter would have been against the theology of the elders and Mr Nicholson. Mr Nicholson

elder remarked on this to the other and he said it was odd because there were others of the Lord's people present besides her. The other elders said that she was above many in her kindness to God's people and many others.

It was also reported that her husband Neil, who was the senior elder at Achmore, was being persuaded by Mr MacDougall,¹⁰ the minister at Crossbost, to enter the union of the Free and United Free Church in 1900. Mr Mackay was not willing to forsake his inheritance, and my grandmother being very ill at the time, the minister said his wife would die as a judgment on his refusal to join. Mr Mackay was much distressed at the pronouncement but when his wife discovered the source of his trouble she said: 'Don't be concerned; he was speaking from nature; I am not going to die.' And so it was. The Achmore family have a history for themselves which I will not enter into, meantime.

Grandpa got the house at 13 Lionel which was thatched at that time to use in his occupation as shepherd. He was a real shepherd according to the reports I heard about his care and observance of sheep.

Grandpa's brother Angus also went to Canada. He edited the *Canada Scotsman* of 1870–1872. Angus was an eminent Gaelic scholar as can be seen by his writing. He edited *An Gaidheal* for a number of years and sold his interest to MacLachlans, Glasgow, when he was appointed a Canadian Commissioner by the British government.

Some are self-conscious at a very early age. [I] was, at five years old. I remember well a fight on my first day at school which seemed to end in a draw. The infant school was less than 500 yards from home. Once we were 10 years old or so we went to the school at Lionel, two miles away. My recollections are of the school master, Mr [George] Milne; perhaps he was bored stiff with his pupils and circumstances. His wife was a gracious lady and she taught us to read the Bible in Gaelic. The first day in Sabbath School one of the elders, a real saint, asked me if I could read the Gaelic Bible. 'A little', I said. He then said: 'A little will yet come to much'. I had a great regard for this man, John Macdonald, 23 Habost. He used to visit our house often. One hot summer day I was sleeping and woke with Satan after me. I saw old John and jumped into his lap and Satan made off for a season.

nowhere prescribes such experiences as necessary in the normal Christian life, or to be looked for.

¹⁰ Born in North Uist, 1851, Rev. John MacDougall studied at the University and Free Church College, Glasgow. He was ordained at Lochs, Lewis, 1885. W. Ewing (ed.), *Annals of the Free Church of Scotland, 1843–1900* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1914), Vol. 1, p. 225. In late 1901, he became minister of Snizort United Free Church.

His nickname was *Iain Uasal*, ‘gentleman John’. I was told the reason why. He was in a shop in Stornoway with his horse and cart collecting flour; and during the time he was in, another man was begging the merchant to give him meal as his family was destitute. The merchant said, ‘You are in my debt already and I cannot afford to give you any more’. John came over. ‘Where is your cart?’ he said to the man, and forthwith he put a bag of meal on the other man’s cart and told him to go home with it to his family. One of his daughters used to tell me that herself and my mother used to sneak into the Free Presbyterian Church in Lionel when Rev. Neil MacIntyre of Stornoway used to be preaching there.¹¹

The Free Church was about five miles away in Cross and when we got to be nine or ten we used to walk across by the outskirts of Adabrock. This was very pleasant in the summer, which seem to us to be much hotter and sunnier than nowadays. Mr MacDougall¹² was minister in Cross for a time, and after he left Mr Macleod, Point,¹³ used to come; also lay preachers and missionaries. I cannot explain why, but I do know that we understood nothing of what was preached although it conveyed a deep sense of solemnity.

My Uncle John Nicholson used to receive many visitors and preached every Sabbath at Edgemoor when he was at home.¹⁴ He was an attractive preacher, and he knew how to put a sound to his voice. He was also a simple preacher. I remember yet his sermon on the Ethiopian Eunuch. He had a large Sabbath School and attracted pupils from every church; but as a rule when they grew up they ceased going to hear him and went to their own churches. My uncle was very kind to the Sabbath School pupils and to the poor generally. All I know of the history of his life is that he went abroad and he came into contact with a well-to-do family in Rhode Island [USA]. He married Nora B. Cushing, of Rhode Island, and she came home with him to Ness. He was not in good health but he was able to spend money; and I

¹¹ Neil Macintyre (1867–1953), a native of Lochyside, Lochaber, was minister successively of Glendale from 1899 to 1908; Stornoway from 1908 to 1923; and Edinburgh from 31st May 1923 until January 1950. D Campbell, ‘The Late Rev. Neil Macintyre’, *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 59:1 (May 1954), pp. 1-9.

¹² Duncan MacDougall (1880–1954) was an Islayman who served as Cross Free Church pastor from 1909–1918. He had subsequent pastorates in Fort Augustus, Vancouver, and Dunoon. Macaulay, *Free Church Ministers in Lewis (Presbytery), 1843–1993*, p. 17.

¹³ Roderick Macleod BD (1857–1937) served the Knock (Point) Free Church charge from 1910 until 1923. Macaulay, *Free Church Ministers in Lewis (Presbytery), 1843–1993*, p. 28.

¹⁴ For a biography and two tracts by John Nicholson, see *John 'An Fiosaich Nicholson* (Comunn Eachdraidh Nis, Ness, 2021), 27pp. See also *Adabroc* (Comunn Eachdraidh Nis, Ness, 2021), pp. 15-16.

understand that the Mission with which he was connected, sent him clothes and things which he faithfully distributed to the poor. I am not suggesting that poverty was common but in those days there were no pensions for widows, the destitute, or those of frail health, but Uncle John would find the needy ones. My Auntie Nora did not learn the Gaelic but seemed very happy. She was a good Christian and gracious and ladylike in all her ways.

In 1910, when I was about seven years old, my father emigrated to Vancouver. He was a competent joiner and had learned his trade at Vermont in the U.S.A. where he had spent ten years. Returning to Ness he had built a house himself on the American style and he had a shop in Skigersta. The Sabbath before he left Ness to go to Canada in 1910, he heard a sermon by Rev. William MacKinnon¹⁵ who was at the Communion at Ness, about Abraham going by faith where he did not know. My father took this as a token that the Lord would look after himself and his family, so with a family of four – three girls and one boy, myself, he left Glasgow on the S.S. *Cassandra*¹⁶ bound for Montreal or Quebec. My mother took me out in Glasgow the day before we left and I followed someone else and got lost. Happily I was found again that day. I don't know much about the journey to Vancouver except that I lost several caps through shaking my head out of the train windows. I remember we stopped a few days at Winnipeg with my uncle by marriage.

There were quite a number of Gaelic people in Vancouver at this time and some from Ness. Some of the Lewis folk had boarding houses and perhaps some of these could accommodate one half to a dozen men.

My father went to work at his trade building but he began to get ill, his feet swelled and he suffered from bronchitis. The doctor said the climate did not agree with him and if he wanted to live he must leave Vancouver; so my father and the family came back home [to Lewis]. But there was no house to go to and Lewis Maciver, who had bought the house, lived in it at the time. So the family went over to my grandfather's at 6 Achmore. Here Alick John, the youngest of the family but one, was born about 1910. My father then came to Skigersta and got busy building another house.

¹⁵ Rev. William Mackinnon (1843–1925) was minister of Gairloch Free Church. See John W. Keddie, *Preserving a Reformed Heritage, Aspects of the History of the Free Church of Scotland in the 20th Century* (Scottish Reformed Heritage Publications, Kiltarlity, 2017), p. 336.

¹⁶ SS *Cassandra* was a steel screw cruiser built in 1906 at Scotts' Shipbuilding & Engineering Co. Ltd, Greenock. She had 1200 passenger berths and served on the Glasgow-Canada and Glasgow-Portland routes for many years until scrapped in 1934.

My father went to Glasgow sometime in 1914 and he bought a new Ford. After half an hour's instruction he drove the Ford to Skigersta. The First World War began about August 1914 and when the *Lusitania* was sunk by a German submarine¹⁷ my father spoke about joining up although he was not physically fit. When he tried to join the Territorial Army the doctor in Stornoway told him he had a distended heart and that he might drop dead at any time.

My father was kept busy with the car, going to Stornoway for groceries and taking soldiers and sailors home. I don't remember his ever having any trouble with the car until his last tragic accident [in 1915.] Another car driver tried to pass my father at Loch Mhorabhat and hit my father's car a glancing blow on the near side. My father's car, which had no hope, turned upside down and my father was thrown underneath it. He was taken to the doctor, who had him transferred to the Stornoway hospital. The accident took place about 8pm and my father died at 4pm the following day, the Sabbath.¹⁸

Shortly before my father's death he told me that Mr Milne, the schoolmaster, had recommended me for a county bursary. Eventually I received £15 annually but I did little to deserve it. While I was in the Nicolson Institute, I did very little homework. My heart was not in it. I went into Stornoway when I was about thirteen or fourteen and left it at sixteen or so. The first year I was ill part of the time and my record in subjects was only fair. Mr Gibson the rector¹⁹ was very kind and he gave me a good reference when I left. Roderick Smith²⁰ the chemist took an interest in me and I worked for a time in his shop. He was most kind to me and I met him often through the years. When I was in Scalpay as minister, I got an invitation to be presented to the Queen and when I was in Stornoway shortly afterwards I went to ask his advice as to how I should comport myself. Roddy Smith, with several flourishes, showed me how I should make my bow. I thought from his age, his dignity and his experience that he had been presented to Royalty several times. He had not! But he knew how to bow and I tried to follow his instructions.

¹⁷ The RMS *Lusitania* was sunk on 7th May 1915 off the south coast of Ireland with the loss of 1,198 people.

¹⁸ Lord's Day 1st August 1915.

¹⁹ William John Gibson was head teacher from 1894 until 1925 and was awarded the CBE. He was given the title 'rector' from 1906 onwards.

²⁰ Mr Smith's chemist's shop was on Point Street in Stornoway. He served twice as provost of Stornoway Town Council, a body on which he sat for fifty years from 1911. He served on the Ross and Cromarty District Council, the Stornoway Trust, and the town's Pier and Harbour Commission.

We had a shop in Skigersta but it was not a success. My mother sold the house and moved over to Stornoway and afterwards to Aberdeen where she was persuaded to open a shop. It was during the war that my mother met Murdo Maciver, her second husband, who survived until 1968.²¹ My mother and the children went to Canada and she married Murdo in 1924. At this time some of the children were in Scotland but followed afterwards. I went to Canada in 1924 and sailed on the *SS Marloch*²² as a deck boy. I think I was earning 30 shillings a month.

Mr Nicholson sailed from Lewis to Canada on the SS Marloch in 1924. After some time in Macleod's Crossing, Quebec, Mr Nicholson became an ordinary seaman with Detroit and Cleveland Navigation Company steamers plying between Detroit and Buffalo in the USA. He later found work as a clerk with the American Wire and Steel Company in Buffalo.

During the time we lived in Windsor, my sister worked in an office in Detroit. I continued sailing in the summer and working in Detroit during the winter. I swam the Detroit river twice. The first time I was carried down about a mile by the current and I did the journey in about an hour and a half or so. The second time I had my friend with me. He was in a rowing boat and I just followed him. I think it took me two hours.

During my time with the D&C, I began to study for a pilot's licence. By that time I had some little experience in steering ships through the lakes and rivers. It was during this time that I met Mr Hughes in Buffalo at one of the dock offices. Mr Hughes, with whom I spent two or three years of Christian fellowship which was very precious to me, was a potent influence in my Christian life. He told me to quit studying for a pilot's licence as I would have no home life and no opportunity of teaching my family if I had them. What he meant was that if I wanted to live a normal Christian life it was not necessary for me to be a sailor as there were plenty other jobs. This advice decided me and in due course I applied for a job advertised as a clerk with the American Steel and Wire Company.

It was in Buffalo that I got acquainted with some of the Close Brethren, including the Reiners. Mrs Reiner did not wear a marriage ring in accordance with 1 Peter 3:3. I visited these people and discovered that they were very strict in some things.

²¹ Mr Maciver was originally from 30 North Tolsta. Lawson, *Croft History Isle of Lewis, Volume 18, Acha Mor, Loch a' Ghainmhich, Scapraid*, p. 61.

²² Launched under the name *Victorian* in Belfast in 1904, she had been renamed *Marloch* in 1922. The ship and the *SS Metagama* became synonymous with 1920s mass emigration from Lewis.

Mr Hughes was the principal man in the Brethren Assembly. Looking back on my acquaintance with him I should take him rather for a Presbyterian than a Brethren. Mr Hughes had an immense influence on my life – for a layman he was an excellent expositor and a good Calvinist.²³

During the first several months I spent with the Brethren I spent agonizing hours before services in the prospect of having to engage in prayer. Since then I got over my fears to some extent but I cannot say that I ever felt liberty in public prayer except on rare occasions. When, however, I was serving in my own congregation things were different, but I have always dreaded being called to pray in a strange congregation. I have also almost invariably felt uncomfortable during the first ten minutes of speaking in a strange congregation; and I have often envied those who are so free and easy in their preaching or in their prayers.

My mother was kindly treated by the Brethren and they used to get us to go to the services. The children and my mother went regularly but Mary, my sister, and myself dodged the meetings as often as we could. It was during this time that for no reason or through any agency I began to get concerned about my soul. This was so gradual that I did not realise it until I became deeply involved and attended all the church meetings I could. I was truly hungry and thirsting after somewhat and for a while I could not tell what it was. This continued for several months, nor did I speak of it to anyone and I got no relief through the preachers I heard. I always knew I was a sinner and I proved it on many occasions but now it was a fact of experience with which I became so preoccupied that I could hardly think of anything else. If I may express it so, I always had a warm side for the Gospel and God's people and I always carried a Bible with me on my travels and had it under my pillow and would read a few verses before dropping off to sleep. Likely I promised my mother I would do this and tried to keep my promise.

I had often found the Gospel preached by my Uncle John enjoyable and arresting and it was simple so I could follow it. The Lord's Day was a solemn day and sometimes I was impressed and thought myself better than I was. I believed at that time and accepted the truths of the Gospel but it made no real change to my life. I was good on Sunday, as they say, but bad during the week. This veneer of religion followed me and there were some sins I would not commit on the Lord's Day, such as dancing, theatre, or games of any kind. But I had no compunction about committing sins on

²³ For a full analysis of this thread in the Plymouth Brethren tradition, see Mark R. Stevenson, *The Doctrines of Grace in an Unexpected Place: Calvinistic Soteriology in Nineteenth-Century Brethren Thought* (Pickwick, Oregon, 2017).

a weekend. But this experience was different. Something new had entered into my life and it was not produced by myself or anyone else. It made me to flee from every sin and it led me to seek Christ and I longed that I might find Him, and at times I longed so much that I even wished that God would do something in the way of judgement to bring me to Christ. By this [time] I had given up everything that I thought was an obstacle to the power of the Gospel, and I used every means that I knew of to bring about my conversion. I had this further experience also although I was striving with all my might and using all the means at my disposal to have Christ as my Saviour. I was not depending upon these means but looking to Christ Himself and realising that salvation was the gift of God and not to be won by human effort. It is the Blood of Christ that cleanseth from all sin and this is what I sought.

Then suddenly I was on my knees by the bed in my room in my mother's house reading the New Testament and the following verse sounded in my ears and appeared before my eyes with such power that I concluded that I was now in Christ: 'If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the death, thou shalt be saved' (Romans 10:9). It seemed to me that that experience made the greatest change in my life. I have heard several opinions as to what the Old Man means (Romans 6:4) and I'd be inclined to say that in my case the old man was my old past sinful life, and the new man my new Christian life. I should, however, mention what I did not know at that time, that a person may be saved and not know that he is. He is convinced of sin, the misery of his sin, and he looks to Christ for salvation. How then are we to know that we are saved? Not because of our feelings and hopes and fears, but because we have received Christ into our hearts and lives; and that whereas before we were going after sin, now we are running away from sin. Converted people are truly converted and the state or condition of conversion lasts because it is real, because it has been produced by the Holy Ghost who is the author of spiritual life as He is the author of natural life. I shall never forget the place and the time and the open Bible and my silent reading of this text while I live; and even if I can get no comfort today from the verse yet I know it is there and in that day I took it to be mine. And it was not as if Christ had found me but as if I had found Christ after a deep and prolonged search. 'And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with your whole heart.'²⁴

²⁴ Jeremiah 29:13.

For how do we expect to meet with Christ unless we search for Him with our whole hearts? There are lesser things which we must seek earnestly and continuously if we are to possess them. And how much more when we are seeking the Pearl of Great Price.

There are two great joys in a Christian's life: the joy he experiences when he knows that he loves Christ and the joy he experiences when he knows that Christ loves him. 'And your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.'²⁵

The eminent John Calvin says very little about his conversion as he does not wish to draw attention to himself, but he does refer to his condition as hardened in sin and then suddenly experiencing the crisis of conversion. There is, however, nothing wrong with mentioning our experiences if this will be of interest or use to others. It has been noted that biographies and autobiographies are usually favourable to the persons concerned, and the dark spots in their lives are not referred to; whereas the word of God has no hesitation in referring to some of the sins of God's people.

After my conversion I was filled with joy and energy. I kept my thoughts to myself, although I have no doubt other people noticed that something had happened in my life. I could see that my good mother, though she said nothing, rejoiced, for I am sure she had often prayed for this. My teaching and experience since has taught me that after conversion some believers depend a great deal on their feelings, think they are much better than they really are, and are too ready to criticise other believers. This arises from self-righteousness. This just means in common language that we think we are better than others. We are reminded therefore that newly converted Christians are infants in the faith.

When living in Buffalo, Mr Nicholson applied to become an American citizen, and stated that his birthplace was Scotland. This clashed with an inaccurate statement on his Canadian passport which had been recorded by the US authorities a few years earlier when he paid head tax for entry to work in America. The immigration authorities decided that he was to be deported to the UK within six months. However, he negotiated a voluntary departure and then a post as a seaman on the SS Selma City,²⁶ reaching Liverpool via Vancouver and London three and a half months later.

²⁵ John 16:22.

²⁶ This vessel was eventually sunk in the Bay of Bengal in 1942 by Japanese bomber planes. It should not be confused with the concrete vessel SS *Selma*, whose wreck is a tourist attraction off Galveston, Texas.

During the time I was in London I attended services at the FP Church in London. At that time there was no Free Church in London but the FPs and the Free Church worshipped together. In those days there were many Lewis young men and women in London. Mr Alex Macaskill,²⁷ who was a student at that time, was in charge of the services which were three, English 11 am, Gaelic 3 pm and English 6.30 pm. I later served as a student there on several occasions. Rev. John Peter MacQueen became minister of the church then and remained throughout the war.²⁸ He remained there all his life and died suddenly of a heart attack. Mr MacQueen was a very kindly man. I still have a New Testament which he gave me some time after we had a verbal fight. John was an ecclesiastical polemic and when in his company it was as well for one to keep away from polemics.

My grandfather was sympathetic to the Free Presbyterians and he attended services in that Church. He used to say good-humouredly 'They are good people and I am one of them'. In my case I belonged to the churchless people for many years as I was abroad in Canada and the States.

I proceeded from Liverpool to Lewis and stayed for some weeks with my uncle John R. Mackay in Achmore and partly with my friends, the Mackenzies at Skigersta. When I was in Skigersta, part of the time I attended the church nearest me which was the FP Church.

At that time they had a missionary,²⁹ Mr Andrew Finlayson,³⁰ and for my case³¹ he was the best preacher I ever heard. I was impressed with his preaching and although he spoke for about two hours in the cold church (we had no heating), I enjoyed every minute of it.

I then went to Glasgow. At this time I was twenty-nine years old and my objective in coming to Glasgow was to take a university education and afterwards to take up the study of theology. But one had to live at the

²⁷ This was probably during Mr MacAskill's time in pre-divinity studies in the University of London. Born in North Uist, Mr MacAskill (1895–1982) was to become pastor of the Assynt congregation from 1937 until his death in 1982. His preaching was described in his obituary as refreshing, theologically balanced, and informed by his own spiritual experiences. AEW, 'The late Alexander MacAskill, Lochinver', *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol 89 (May 1984), pp. 150-154.

²⁸ Mr MacQueen (1894–1961) was minister of London FP congregation from 1936 until 1961. Southern Presbytery, 'The Late Reverend John Peter MacQueen, London', *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 67 (June 1962), pp. 37-42.

²⁹ Home missionaries are salaried lay preachers, usually focussing on a specific location.

³⁰ Mr Finlayson (1883–1935) was a 'greatly loved and respected' lay-preacher. Malcolm Gillies, 'The late Mr Andrew Finlayson, Missionary, Ness, Lewis', *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol 40:11, (March 1936), pp. 466-468.

³¹ 'Case' in the sense of a person's current spiritual exercise.

same time and so I took a job as a salesman. At the same time I attended Skerry's College in Glasgow.³²

When I went to Glasgow I stayed for some time with my cousin Mary who was married to Donald Macdonald. At that time they lived on High Street, Glasgow. I used to hear Rev. Neil Cameron of the Free Presbyterians³³ and Rev. Peter Chisholm of the Free Church, who at that time was minister of Partick Highland Free Church.³⁴ Mr Chisholm in my judgement preached some of the best and some of the worst sermons I ever heard. Mr Cameron was stern, simple, Calvinistic and very strict. I don't remember ever to have met him personally and he died a few months after I came to Glasgow. I attended the Free Church services part of the time and the Free Presbyterian Church most of the time. I at length decided that it behoved me to become a communicant member in the church. However, I had some reservation and holding to these I came to the conclusion that I would not be accepted. However, unfit as I felt, I was I decided to apply for membership.

Rev. Neil MacIntyre, minister of the Free Presbyterian Church in Edinburgh, was then Interim-moderator of the Glasgow Kirk Session. I expressed my difficulties at the Session and Mr MacIntyre was very sympathetic and suggested that in due time the difficulties would resolve themselves. I place on record here my long-standing friendship with Mr MacIntyre. I was his assistant in Edinburgh for a year or two while I studied in the University there and I often stayed in the Manse while he was away. Mrs MacIntyre was very frank and withal a gracious woman.

After spending about a year and a half as a communicant member in the Free Presbyterian Church I qualified to get into the university and then I applied to become a student in the Free Presbyterian Church. I

³² This was part of a UK-wide network of colleges, dating to one established in Edinburgh in 1878. Aimed initially at civil service candidates, it widened its scope, utilised educational innovations, and by the 1930s had made the building on Bath Street in Glasgow its main base. The organisation went into liquidation in 1970.

³³ Rev. Neil Cameron (1854–1932) was born in Kilninver near Oban. He was educated in Kilchoan Public School, Ardnamurchan, and then in Onich in Lochaber. He helped the elders who gathered the St Jude's Free Presbyterian congregation in Glasgow after the denomination was formed in 1893. Following divinity training, he was pastor of St Jude's from 1896 until his death on 9th March 1932. Rev. Donald Beaton, *Memoir and Remains of Rev. Neil Cameron* (Glasgow, 1932).

³⁴ Mr Chisholm (1884–1957) was from Gravir in Lewis and served as Free Church minister of Coll from 1921 to 1925, moving then to the new Partick Highland charge in Glasgow which he served until being translated to Lochalsh. He later lived in Ceos, Lewis and latterly in Broadford on Skye. See Norman Campbell, 'The Chisholmites of Achmore', *SRSJH*, Vol. 2 (2012), pp. 275-291.

was thoroughly grilled by session members and afterwards by Presbytery members; and I am reasonably certain that the training I received before and after I became a minister was of great benefit to me. In any case I was taught my limitations and discovered that earnestness and diligence were almost as important as intellect.

Shortly after I became a student [in October 1932]³⁵ I was sent down to London for the summer months, during which time I studied intensely. I used to get up at 5 am and not go to bed until 1 am. My nose began to bleed and from then on I did not get up until 7 am. I took up Hebrew classes while in London. The little I learned of Hebrew later was from a Mr Cameron, when I was a student in the Edinburgh University. I enjoyed London very much. At that time there was no Free Church [there] and the Church of Scotland, Free Presbyterians and Free Church people worshipped in the FP church. Probably at that time there were two or three times more people attending the church than there are in both churches today.³⁶ [1973].

In those days London was very different from what it is today. At that time I could find my way in London without any difficulty and I visited all the places of interest and especially the book shops and barrows where I picked up some valuable books. I remember on one occasion getting a Greek New Testament for one penny.

What made London more interesting and more unforgettable is that I met my future wife [Ann Macleod] there at the church services. When later we got married in Edinburgh, Rev. Neil MacIntyre, with the assistance of the Rev. John Shaw of Leith Free Church, performed the ceremony.³⁷

Upon the completion of my university I took up the study of Theology. In the days of the Disruption Church, that is before and after 1843, the theological course was four years; in my day it was a three-year course when students took up such subjects as Greek and Hebrew, Church Law, Church History, Theology and Apologetics. Some of the subjects

³⁵ Mr Nicholson was accepted as a divinity student on 25th October 1932 by the Southern Presbytery. 'Church Notes', *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 37:8 (December 1932), p. 358.

³⁶ This was written in 1973–1975. By the 'two churches' he probably meant the Free Church of Scotland and the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland.

³⁷ Mr Nicholson married Ann Macleod in Edinburgh on 17th December 1937. Ann belonged to Aird Dell in Ness, Isle of Lewis. When they met in London, she had been working as a domestic servant and he was studying in Dingwall with Rev. Donald A. Macfarlane. National Records of Scotland, Statutory Registers, Marriages 685/7 288, 1937, Marriages in the District of Morningside in the City of Edinburgh, p. 144.

such as homiletics, that is the building of sermons, elocution, that is speechmaking, were not considered of much importance.

When I got my degree I thought I was on top of the world. I was physically and mentally fit although somewhat worn down with studying, but I had much to learn. If I had known what I was in for, I would not have thought of the ministry. Later I studied in the Union College in Vancouver and took the B.D. and spent a year in the Westminster Theological Seminary [in Philadelphia] and graduated Master of Theology. It was a wonder I managed, for I was ill practically all winter.

Mr Nicholson's first academic year of theological training as a divinity student, 1936–1937, was spent with the Church tutor Rev. Donald Beaton in Oban.³⁸ The 1937–1938 session was under the tuition of Rev. Donald A. Macfarlane, Dingwall.³⁹ The students returned to Oban for the 1938–1939 session.⁴⁰

I spent three years in Theology. The Rev. Donald A. Macfarlane, Dingwall, who is still living, a good man and full of the Holy Ghost, taught me in Hebrew and Greek, including Old Testament, Introduction and N.T. Exegesis. Mr Beaton, Oban, taught Church History and Church Law, Theology and Apologetics. Mr Beaton was an ideal teacher in some ways. He was not keen on giving his own opinions but he always tried to solve our theological problems, and he would tell us where to get the answers. I don't

³⁸ Mr Beaton (1872–1953) grew up in Kilsyth, his father being from Mull and his mother from Iona. After the ratification of the Declaratory Act in the Free Church General Assembly in 1893, he and several other divinity students joined the Free Presbyterian Church. He was taught by Professor Robert Watts (who had taught in Princeton) in the Presbyterian Church of Ireland's Assembly's College, Belfast. Here Mr Beaton won prizes for theology, sacred rhetoric, catechetics, and Hebrew. He was licensed to preach by the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland's Southern Presbytery in 1896, and appointed a Church tutor in 1899. He was pastor of Wick Free Presbyterian Church from 1901 to 1930, and Oban from 1930 until 1948. In addition to editing Church magazines, he authored a number of books. Rev. R.R. Sinclair (editor), 'The late Rev. Donald Beaton', *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 58:11 (March 1954), pp. 319-327.

³⁹ Mr Macfarlane was minister of Dingwall from 1930 until 1973. He himself had been tutored by Rev. Donald Beaton and Rev. John R. Mackay (1865–1939) who was later a professor in the Free Church College. Mr Macfarlane's previous pastorates had been in the joint charge of Lairg, Bonar, Dornoch, and Rogart (1914–1921) and in Oban (1921–1930). He was a clear communicator in the pulpit, a tutor of divinity students in Greek and Hebrew, of deep intellect, and known for his kindness. His first wife was Catherine Cameron from Oban; she died in 1955. He married his second wife, Ella Finlayson, in 1957. She passed away in 2015. See John Tallach, *I Shall Arise: The life and ministry of Donald A. Macfarlane* (Aberdeen: Faro Publishing, 1984).

⁴⁰ 'Report of Training of the Ministry Committee', *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol 42:3 (July 1937), pp. 102-103.

remember his getting heated except on one or two occasions and one was in dealing with Creationism.⁴¹ I said: 'but Shedd says.' He replied: 'I don't care what Shedd says.'⁴² Most of our students thought that Traducianism⁴³ was the answer but later some of us changed our minds. Mr Beaton was a good man and a faithful counsellor. He was gentle in his preaching. What was called law⁴⁴ he hardly ever preached but he did preach gospel.⁴⁵ I remember one examination we sat and he gave me 100 and one of the other students almost 100. The student in question thought it was not fair. It was easy to sit examinations under Mr Beaton because he was a plain speaker and did not delve into mysteries.

I got a good theological training with Mr Beaton, Oban, and Mr Macfarlane, Dingwall. But that is not the whole of the story. Our perfection in training is not due to the teachers alone; the student who is intelligent and diligent will get on whoever his teachers are. Mr Beaton and Mr Macfarlane recommended to us the best books and they knew what these were. Of course we did not study much of what the other side had to say, but there was no time. I studied homiletics and public speaking and I suppose I read everything that was ever written on these subjects. And I am sure that those who have little knowledge of these subjects, unless they are specially gifted, will never succeed in their public speaking. It requires a tremendous amount of patience to listen to boring and long sermons, most of which is repetition; and whatever people say it is questionable if people do listen. They just wait patiently until the sermon is finished. It is not expected, being what we are, that we can hear good sermons from our minister all the time, but we do expect good sermons part of the time. And the reason we don't get these good sermons is that men do not know how to build these sermons and how to deliver them.

Of course it will be said that what we need is the Spirit of God and real earnestness, as if other things did not count; but they do. The man who is under the influence of the Spirit and in real earnest will be neat and orderly and he will not waste time repeating himself. We are

⁴¹ In this context, Mr Nicholson is not referring to the origin of the universe but to that of the soul.

⁴² William G.T. Shedd (1820–1894) was an American theologian who had also served as a professor of English Literature and of Church History. He held Traducian views with regard to the origin of the soul.

⁴³ The view that the child's soul is generated from the souls of its parents.

⁴⁴ A term covering the claims of the law of God and the demands and penalties of divine justice.

⁴⁵ In this context, the message of salvation from the guilt of sin.



Mr Nicholson with Free Church colleagues, thought to be attending the induction of Rev. Donald Gillies to Crossbost, (Lochs), Lewis, in 1960. Back row (L-R): Duncan Morrison (Retired, Dunvegan), John Macleod (Shawbost), Angus Finlayson (North Tolsta), Wallace Bruce Nicholson (Scalpay). Front row (L-R): John Morrison (Cross), Kenneth J. Nicholson (Barvas), Malcolm Maciver (Crossbost, 1924–1959), Donald Gillies (Crossbost), Kenneth A. Macrae (Stornoway), Murdoch Macrae (Kinloch).

COURTESY: PEGGY FLORA MATHESON.

hearing well-meaning people (and people who are not so well-meaning) complaining about how boring our sermons are. Let us not really blame these people, but let us improve our pulpit performance. It was said of Sir Joshua Reynolds⁴⁶ that he was continually improving upon his own work even towards the end of his life. Perhaps we are much mistaken here, but even if we are not, it is up to us to make them listen and understand. And besides, we are preaching to please God even if, like Himself on one occasion, we have only one of a congregation (John 4).⁴⁷

The little I learned of homiletics and public speaking, I learned through reading everything I could lay my hands on; and so far as theology was concerned I benefitted greatly from the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Shorter Catechism.

*Mr Nicholson was licensed as a preacher of the gospel by the Free Presbyterian Church's Southern Presbytery on 3rd October 1939.*⁴⁸ He was

⁴⁶ Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792) was a portrait artist in London.

⁴⁷ Christ preaching to the woman of Samaria at Jacob's well.

⁴⁸ 'Church Notes', *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol 44:7 (November 1939), p. 278.

*ordained and inducted to the North Uist congregation on 22nd November 1939. A heavy storm the previous day had cast doubts on whether the planned induction would go ahead but calmer conditions on the morning of the induction allowed friends to take Presbytery members by motor boat across the Sound of Harris, and return later. The call was signed by 233 members and adherents of the North Uist congregation.*⁴⁹

My first congregation was North Uist, one of the Western Isles of Scotland, where I spent about seven years. The people were very kind. A presentation was made to me and I bought a second-hand Ford car for £45 which lasted me all the time I was in North Uist but I had much trouble with it. Anything I learned about the car I got it out of books. It was a 1936 Popular and was about five years old when I got it. However, for some reason there was crack on the off-side [driver's] window. I was in Glasgow and saw a windscreen on a car. The man said it would cost me 28 shillings. I said: 'You might as well give me the car'. I said I would give him £7 if he put it on MacBrayne's pier. I towed it from Lochmaddy to Bayhead; I soon got it I started and found no fault with it except the clamps holding the engine to the body were loose. I took the windows out and put them in my own car. I found the little Ford Popular very useful but I had a struggle to keep it in repair. On one occasion I took seven passengers from Lochmaddy to Bayhead, about fifteen miles or so; soon after, the rear axle broke. It took me a long time to repair that break. I used to do the rounds of the congregation regularly and I hardly ever came home without milk, meat, cheese or something else. One man gave me a bottle of seal oil – the oil from this was supposed to be the best – and he told me it was so powerful that it would go through my vest and that if I put it in a plate at night it would seep through!

North Uist was very isolated, especially in the winter. For some time we got mail only about three days a week and in those days there was no electric light or telephone. I think, however, that the Manse and the schoolhouse had running water. In the winter some days the weather was so wild and rainy that people could not get out of their houses. On one or two occasions there were only 2 or 3 in the church. The people of course walked to church and the few who had cars would not venture to open their garage doors. There was a plane calling at North Uist and going to Stornoway and I took it twice in a case of emergency.

⁴⁹ Malcolm Gillies, Clerk, 'Church Notes', *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol 44:9 (January 1940), pp. 359-360.

During the war we had double summer time⁵⁰ for the Post Office etc., but the local people used the ordinary time for looking after the cows and hens and getting up in the morning. My sojourn in North Uist gave me a taste for fly-fishing. I had many opportunities of speaking to the Uist people of all denominations and found them very kindly but I would not say that they were good at attending church. Some of them had long distances to walk, there were few vehicles in those days, and the weather could be very rough in summer and winter. At that time, one was young and got used to it. The population of North Uist at that time would be near 2000 and the main village was Lochmaddy where passenger and freight steamers called.

Mr Nicholson's North Uist ministry ended when he left the Free Presbyterian Church on 30th November 1945. He and his family moved to his wife's family home in Aird Dell. He was accepted as a Free Church minister at the General Assembly of 1946. Following a tour as a deputy to congregations in North America, he was inducted to the Vancouver Free Church congregation in 1948.

I was not long in Vancouver until I came into conflict with the hard facts of life. I discovered that I was in charge of the pulpit and that the office-bearers were in charge of the Kirk Session and the Deacons' Court. No doubt I was to blame in my emphasis on the power of the minister, but my cabinet was determined to have the last word in everything but the pulpit. After all, they had built the church and were supporting it and they were paying the minister's salary which at that time was fairly good.

Ministers need not only knowledge but wisdom to be effective in their congregations, and even with the best will for doing good, the truth hurts and one makes enemies. I also discovered that if I were to hold onto the small congregation I had, or to increase it, I must visit regularly, which I did.

It becomes a minister to give justice to every person in his congregation. If there are those who don't like us, let us try to win them over. After all, sinners have a conscience; they are the subjects of common grace; and when they are fairly dealt with, they will respond.

There were many Highlanders in Vancouver and thousands of people who could speak Gaelic or their parents did, but no amount of visiting made any difference to the most, who were very hospitable to any who called but who would not come to church.

⁵⁰ British Double Summer Time ran from February 1940 until October 1945. It aimed to increase productivity and save fuel. It added one hour to GMT in the winter and two in the summer.

We left Vancouver about September 1954, stopping at the Westminster Theological Seminary [in Philadelphia] where I spent a year, studying for a Master of Theology. It was a wonder I managed for I was ill practically all winter. The children were very restive, two boys and two girls, and I was thankful to get them safely over to Lewis [in 1955].

We spent a few days with the Leggates and part of that time we were ill with diarrhoea, but the doctor fixed us up. We tried a few cars and decided on a Morris 10, [manufactured in] 1945 or so, which brought us safely to Ness with all our luggage and which I used in Scalpay and Plockton.

We had no sooner landed in Ness that Mr MacRae, the Minister of Kinloch⁵¹ whom I had known years before, asked me to go to Scalpay for the weekend. I did, and after I preached my first sermon I felt I would go there if I had the opportunity. I believe that the congregation felt the same. The opportunity came and I took it and had no regrets. The Scalpay people, young and old, were the kindest people I ever met. The meetings were well attended, Sabbath and weekday. One wondered who the Christians were and who were not. I preached my best sermons in Scalpay – (perhaps I should add ‘except the Free Church Seminary’ where I preached for more than a year.) I spent about seven years in this congregation and during my stay there I never saw nor heard a nasty thing.

When I went into Scalpay manse, it was pretty well insulated. There was no electric light, no running water for the people and practically no roads. The island was about 3 miles long and 1 mile broad. Its population at that time would be about 600 people. The school had about 70 pupils. The journey to the mainland, that is Tarbert Harris, by a small ferry boat would in the winter [not] be very comfortable. As our children attended the High School in Tarbert it was a worry to get them back and fore, that is Monday morning and Friday evening. I did get a launch but it was more trouble than it was worth.

The period I should now cover is from my departure from Scalpay until my departure from Plockton. I had no intention of ever leaving

⁵¹ Mr Macrae (1900–1961) would have acted in his capacity as interim-moderator for Scalpay. Originally from Swordale in Point, he was minister of Kinloch Free Church from 1927 until his death. Macaulay, *Free Church Ministers in Lewis (Presbytery), 1843–1993*, p. 25. Mr Macrae was revered for his preaching. He was the subject of several Gaelic elegies which emphasised his tender approach, theological prowess, and spiritual discernment of the times. He also served a public role on the Harris Tweed Association and is credited with helping stave off threats to the textile’s niche in the North American market as part of an Association delegation to the USA in 1958.

Scalpay. I think I left Scalpay because I came to the conclusion that I was needed in Plockton and Kyle congregation. Why I left I cannot tell. Perhaps I was too happy there, and perhaps the congregation of Plockton needed me more. The Plockton elder, Mr Budge, was very insistent and he kept presenting a good case for Plockton for some considerable time, and finally I agreed to go. I must confess I left with a somewhat sad heart. I should mention here that I spent much time and money on second-hand cars, and did not really know the pleasure of trouble-free driving until I got a Volkswagen over five years ago. When in Plockton I got my son to buy me a Morris Oxford. It was a strong car and served me well. It began to use oil and I had special rings put in. This lasted for about 1000 miles and it began to use oil again, so I sold it to Mitchell, Stornoway,⁵² for £60 in exchange for a new Volkswagen 1300, which at that time cost about £700 in December 1967. It is now almost six years old and is most dependable. I had two clutch plates put in since I got it, two exhausts, about two dozen plugs and about a dozen sets of points. I get it diagnosed in Inverness by the Volkswagen people about once a year and it goes like a machine.

The Plockton years were active for the Nicholsons with stated Lord's Day and weekday services in Gaelic and English. Services were also held in homes and meeting-halls in the smaller surrounding villages. There were communion seasons there and in neighbouring congregations, and a steady stream of visiting friends including Rev. Murdoch Campbell.⁵³ Professor John Murray and his wife Valerie were also regular callers.⁵⁴ Mr Nicholson had several serious illnesses from 1967 onwards and 'reluctantly decided to retire from the active ministry' in 1970. He and Ann retired to Aird Dell, Ness in the Isle of Lewis. During his retirement, his health declined. A pressing concern for him as a preacher was a recurrent throat problem. From Ness he was to be active in supplying congregations, particularly

⁵² Set on a busy junction of Bayhead and Matheson Road, Mitchell's garage and associated bus company were Lewis landmarks. See Colin Tucker, *Mitchell's: The Story of a Stornoway Family's Garage and Bus Business* (Stornoway: Acair, 2018).

⁵³ Murdoch Campbell (1900–1974) was a much-loved preacher who served in Partick Highland Free Church in Glasgow, then in the Fort Augustus and Glenurquhart congregation and finally in Resolis. His autobiography, *Memories of a Wayfaring Man* (1974), was republished by Covenanters Press in 2016. He wrote a number of devotional books. Previously unpublished biographical material in bilingual format appeared in a collection of his Gaelic religious poetry, published as *Tobraichean Sòlais* in 2013.

⁵⁴ Prof. John Murray spent time at the family home in Badbea near Bonar Bridge in Scotland in 1965 and retired there from Philadelphia in December 1966. See Iain H. Murray, *The Life of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2007), pp. 182-186.

the English services held in the Free Church seminary on Francis Street, Stornoway.

July 12th 1970, Cross and Dell, throat weary. September 27th 1970: last Sabbath in Plockton. Left Plockton Friday October 1st at 8 am. Arrived Tarbert 1 pm. Ness 3.30 pm. Rev. Murdo MacRitchie phoned me some weeks after I got to Ness.⁵⁵ I told him I thought I'd be fit by the beginning of 1971. I began to preach in the Seminary, going easy for three months, at the end of which my voice was about normal. In about a year's time, February 3rd 1973, I got a cold while I was away from home and my throat started acting up again. I had promised to go to London for about a month and had to cancel at the last minute.

October 10th, 1973. I was to see the surgeon last week. He said there was nothing seriously wrong with voice or cords. He said I was to visit less and preach snappy sermons. I said: 'how snappy?' He said: 'five minutes!' My voice at this date has cleared up and within a few weeks should be back to normal. I wondered for some weeks whether the hoarseness would ever leave it. The weather here is often damp and cold and rainy. Chest and throat weakness tends to trouble one.

Thursday March 14th 1974, Vancouver. We arrived here Friday March 8th, about noon. The communions were held this week, but with tiredness and colds we were not out on Saturday. Mr McLeod took the Sabbath services. There would be about 40 present at each service and about the same Monday night, as about 12 FPs were present.

Baptism, funerals and other issues

I had some difficulties with Baptism services. In some cases people wanted their children baptised while they themselves never attended church. I thought this was a mockery of the sacred Sacrament of Baptism. I made a public announcement that I would not baptise children unless their parents faithfully attended church and unless they made conscience of Baptismal Vows, such as faith in Christ and in obedience to His word. The result in some cases was that they went to other churches. One minister told that he just baptised and married any who wished these privileges. Conviction of sin on the part of parents would change this situation. They

⁵⁵ Mr Macritchie was born in Back in 1919 and died in 1983. Like Mr Nicholson he had served in North America, pastoring Detroit Free Church from 1952 until he became minister of Stornoway in 1966. Macaulay, *Free Church Ministers in Lewis (Presbytery), 1843-1993*, p. 50. For blessing in his latter ministry see Rev. Norman Macleod, *Lewis Revivals of the 20th Century* (Hebridean Press Service, c. 1988), p. 16. Mr Macritchie's wife Valerie died in January 2022.

would realise the meaning of the Sacrament and would sincerely attempt to perform their vows.

The great problem confronting ministers and sessions with regard to this rite is the Christian character of the applicant. If it is discovered that the applicant is not practising his religion there is no difficulty in refusing Baptism until the applicant produces some evidence of a change of mind or heart. In cases where the applicant makes a sincere profession of his faith and obedience to the Laws of Christ there is no reason why Baptism should not be given. To adjudge the state of the applicant's heart is not the province of the minister or session because they are dealing here with subjects of the visible church. In the case of doubt it is better to grant the rite. Some applicants are very ignorant and defective in their profession, but for all we know they may be infants in Christ and have the beginning of the root of the matter in them.

At funerals ministers are faced with one of the most solemn duties of their office and consequently they find it most difficult to comfort those who mourn. It is a matter of astonishment to some of us how ministers are so keen to attend funerals and to take part in them. To some the thought of having to attend a funeral is a heavy burden and there is somehow a weight of despondency after it so that one has no heart for duties on that day.

At funerals a minister wonders how he is to read appropriate Scriptures and in what way he is to comfort the mourners, especially if the deceased did not practise his religious profession. Some have found the safest plan is to make no reference to the dead while making every effort to instruct and console the living relatives. One wonders if it is becoming to read long passages of Scripture and to engage in long prayers; and yet one is often reminded that some who attend funerals do not attend church and therefore they have need of having the Gospel proclaimed to them on this solemn occasion.

It is customary in this part of the world for the minister in charge to engage in prayer or to ask some other minister or preacher to do so, expressing their hope of immortality after death through Christ Jesus who died and rose again, the need of faith to unite us to Christ, and the need of practising our profession if we are to be saved from the punishment and power of sin. After the first prayer, a Psalm is sung, the Scriptures are read and the service is concluded by another prayer.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Mr Nicholson wrote in 1973–1975. This pattern remains, except that a short biographical account of the deceased person is now usually read out by the minister before the service

Some ministers have another service at the grave, either a prayer or an exhortation or both, and sometimes the reading and expounding of Scripture. Some do not want any service at the grave, others would have some kind of service because it seems more dignified. On an occasion on a very cold day, a minister gave a long harangue at the grave. Doubtless he enjoyed it himself, but one man who was present could be seen shivering with the cold and longing for this service to come to an end. A short exhortation is in order and it will satisfy everybody, but ministers should remember that those present as a rule know the Gospel already; and besides, there is always a service at the house before coming to the place of burial.⁵⁷

In some places the minister asks those in charge what Scripture or Psalms they desire. This is done by the minister out of sheer courtesy. Some take advantage of this, so a minister should, as a rule, carry out the service without consultation. I have often been asked to sing certain hymns but I always preferred the Psalms of David.

Voice

There is no doubt in my mind now that preachers and speakers should have training in voice production. Strain and stresses in speaking and carelessness in using the voice may affect its qualities. One does not require to be a doctor to realise that after speaking, especially loud speaking, there will be some inflammation in the throat and in the vocal cords and this requires warmth and perhaps treatment. Besides, when one develops a cold and one continues speaking engagements with a defective or hoarse voice, one is looking for trouble.

I took good care of my voice but colds and carelessness began to affect my throat through the years. Most clergymen get bouts of laryngitis. In some it gets chronic as mine did. I have for several years bouts of sore throat.

His soul and preaching

As to my mental condition, I cannot describe it. I believe the things I ought to believe. I know that if God is to speak to me it is through His Word and I cannot see any reason for disbelieving the things that I always

in island Free Churches, or occasionally a longer eulogy read out or a short Bible address given during its course.

⁵⁷ A present-day minister could not assume knowledge of the gospel in those attending an island funeral. Before the Covid pandemic affected the UK in 2020, funerals from family homes had become extremely rare, people opting instead for their local church building as the venue.

have believed since I was converted which is about 50 years ago, but I do know and feel poor and needy. Unbelief and harshness of heart are a great concern to me but not as much as it ought.

I believe and fear and read today and yet find myself full of the world. I cannot therefore see myself as being in a proper spiritual condition in this world until I experience the power of the Gospel along with the words I read and hear.

I do not know whether the world as such is better or worse than it was 100 or 50 years ago, but I do think that the gospel has much to say for men and women. They believe and accept the bulk of the gospel, and that is so much but it hardly affects their lives. Some people are satisfied with what they hear and one wonders if they do listen.

But if they do not hear good gospel, experienced sermons, they cannot be expected to listen. A good strong voice (which is needful), quotations from Scripture, and a labouring of the obvious seems to please most people. Exposition is praised by most ministers but the expositions we usually hear have neither word or order. This is due partly to lack of theology but mostly for lack of study, meditation, and prayer.

To be a preacher is not only to show men that they are sinners and need to be saved, but it requires the investigation of human hopes and fears, their sins and sufferings and their fake and true methods of escaping from their temptations. The thoughts of these things are a help to man discovering himself and suggesting to him the source of his help. 'God', says the Psalmist, 'is my refuge and my strength.' Some people are extroverts and ready to discuss some of their problems. Others are introverts and keep their troubles to themselves. And so we must not adjudge men by what they say or do. If there is not a skeleton in the cupboard there is a person in there whom you have never seen. The cupboard is outside, the real person is inside and not available. If we were what we say saints ought to be, what a wonder we would be to ourselves. Still we want to be what we ought, and have a set purpose to be so.