

AN OLD STORY OF A
HIGHLAND PARISH

BY

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WITH PREFACE BY
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CHAPTER VII

FORTES IN FIDE

As we have seen in the preceding chapter, the old faith was apparently destroyed-but only apparently, for the gates of hell could not prevail, even although, within twenty years, the Catholic clergy were reduced from two thousand eight hundred to six, and the seeds of rebellion had been sown throughout the land.

Despite the unceasing efforts of the Reformers, a large number of the nobles and the common people still held fast to the old religion.

With the characteristic dourness of the Scot, they not only stubbornly refused to submit to the recent innovations, and claimed for themselves liberty of conscience, but they strove to vindicate that right by every means in their power. They fought for freedom with a dogged perseverance and indomitable endurance that can only be termed heroic.

A paper drawn up by Lord Burghley in 1590 states that all the northern parts of the kingdom, as well as Wigtown and Nithsdale,

were either wholly or for the greater part in the Catholic interest,* and three years later it is recorded that Popery was still on the increase.*

"From the histories of these times", says Bishop Nicolson, † "it appears that where there were zealous priests, there remained a considerable seed of the old religion", and Mortlach, along with the Enzie and Glenlivet, shares the distinction of being one of the places most remarkable for its fidelity. How do we explain the constancy of the Mortlach Catholics and their prolonged fight for their faith, when in other districts there was so much apathy ?

INFLUENCE OF THE HOUSE OF GORDON

The influence of the house of Gordon contributed much to the preservation of the ancient religion in the north, and for a long time the district which comprised the Enzie, Glenlivet, Strathbogie, and Deeside was served by priests who lived under the protection of this powerful clan. George Gordon, first Marquis of Huntly, was a devoted champion of the Church, and the revolutionaries, in opposing him, had to deal with a power upheld by numerous retainers from Fochabers to Fort William.

* *Book of Universal Kirk*, Part III., p 78.

† Blair's College, MSS.

BATTLE OF GLENLIVET

So formidable was his influence, that the Kirk was declared to be in danger in 1594 on account of "the erection of the Mass in divers quarters of the land, and among others in the Earl of Huntly's houses at Strathbogie and Aberdeen".* When the decree of 12th November 1593 came out, by which Catholics were ordered to give up their faith or leave the country, Huntly refused obedience. His continued resistance culminated in the battle of Glenlivet, when, accompanied by the Earl of Errol and one thousand five hundred horsemen, he engaged Argyll's army of six thousand men at Alnachoylachan. Like the soldiers of Bruce at Bannockburn, Huntly's retainers prepared for battle by confession and communion. Mass was said at Auchindoun for them by Father Gordon, S.J., before they set out on their march through Glenrinnnes ; their weapons were sprinkled with holy water, and a cross placed on their armour symbolised that they fought in defence of the Cross of Christ.†

Then Huntly gave his orders : "It is God's cause for religion is our quarrel, and therefore be ready to charge as soon as the word is given, which (word) is Virgin Mary". In

* *Book of Universal Kirk*, Part III., p. 820.

† A tradition repeated recently by an old woman of ninety has it that Patrick Gordon, the only one of the family who had gone into battle without this preparation, was the only one killed.

such a spirit the small force advanced and conquered.

Until Huntly's death in 1636, the majority of the inhabitants of Mortlach were Catholics, and if we may judge by some records in the minutes of Strathbogie Kirk, the continued existence of the old faith was a thorn in the flesh of the Protestant ministers, who wrote that "There were some Papists in this parish (Mortlach), but no fanatics or Quakers". Ten years later, Mr Thiers, minister of Mortlach, reports that "several of his parishioners had been married by priests previous to his entry". The large numbers who returned to the old religion provoked a protest from the minister of Strathbogie : "If the Church of the Lady Marchioness increased as much in the next three months as it had done in the past, he would give up preaching altogether". The same plaintive note is sounded again in 1675. "Papists and seducers of that sort are too much already abounding, which they (the ministers) could not help, to their sad regret".

The Rev. George Gordon, who lived for many years in the Parish of Mortlach, and knew so well all its records and traditions, tells us that at no time did the Catholics number less than one hundred to one hundred and fifty souls. When we realise that these people were without a resident pastor from 1560 to 1728, and that during all these years they were

subjected to relentless, unceasing persecution, if many lapsed, we can only marvel that any remained faithful.

To the teaching and example of their Highland priests may be attributed, in no small measure, the staunchness of the Catholics. These priests, continually hunted and harassed, had no fixed place of abode, but wandered about in disguise, not daring to stay for any length of time in one place, ministering to the faithful remnant where, and when, opportunities offered. Many a time was Mass said under the open canopy of heaven, perhaps in some remote glen, or in some dense wood ; perhaps by some lonely mountain tarn, while sentinels,* posted on the hills, kept watch against surprise, for the ministers were ever on the alert, and a price was placed on the head of the priest. Even in their correspondence the priests had to use the greatest caution lest any clue be given to their whereabouts. They referred to bishops as physicians, Rome as Hamburg or Hilltown, priests as labourers, Jesuits as "birlies".

Here is a sample of a letter written in these days : "T. Gordon lives with his father, and is highly applauded for the commodities he has in his shop which is the richest and usefulest that I know. He is almost smothered by the throng on market day". The writer refers to the good attendance and

* Of these sentinels an ancestor of the writer was one.

frequentation of the Sacraments at the Chapel of the Craig in the Enzie.*

From the time of Archbishop Beaton's death in 1603 till the appointment of William Bishop as Vicar Apostolic in 1623, the priests had no bishop but the Pope, consequently there was no organisation, and it sometimes happened that two or three priests met at the same house, unaware of one another's movements.

MORTLACH CATHOLICS TAKE REFUGE IN THE CABRACH

These unsatisfactory conditions lasted till 1694, when some degree of order was restored by the election of the Right Rev. Thomas Nicolson as Vicar Apostolic for Scotland. He had under his jurisdiction only twenty-three secular priests, ten Jesuits, and four Benedictines, a small enough number to cope with such widely scattered flocks. In the meantime-so tradition tells us-many Catholics from Mortlach had taken refuge in the fastnesses of the Cabrach, and this tradition is borne out by numerous ruins of houses there, which show that the district was once thickly populated. In such remote glens, the faithful remnant found comparative safety from the prying eye of the informer, and formed a nucleus of what afterwards became a thriving congregation.

* Letter from James Wilson, Edinburgh, to L. Leslie at Rome.

BISHOP JAMES GORDON

The sheep had indeed wandered, but the shepherds remained and, despite the unceasing blows aimed at them, counted no risks and hardships too great if they could but help and comfort their flocks. One of the most notable of these courageous and devoted priests was Gordon of Glastirum, a great missionary bishop, whose life of strenuous labour, poverty and self-sacrifice, was said by his contemporaries to have rivalled the lives of St Francis Xavier and St Vincent de Paul. He was on one occasion referred to be Pope Clement VI. As "one of the best bishops in all the Christian world".

Proclaimed an outlaw, and a price set on his head, Bishop Gordon, regardless of danger, made his regular round of visitations, literally travelling all over Scotland, enduring such perils by land and perils by sea, such privations, such fatigues, such hunger, thirst and cold as pass our powers of imagination and seem almost incredible in the present days of easy journeys. Speaking of the missionary priests, whose labours were undertaken in circumstances similar to his own, Bishop Gordon said of them : "Not one but does more than three could do with any degree of convenience ; their zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of souls make such fatigues each to them".

Among the Cabrach hills the snow often

lay deep during the long winter months. One great storm is described as beginning on All Souls' Day and lasting till the following March. In some places the snow drifted level with the house tops, and as large holes in the roof did duty for chimneys, the unwary traveller ran the risk of finding himself an unexpected and uninvited guest by a strangers fireside.

Needless to say the rigours of such a climate greatly increased the sufferings so heroically endured by Bishop Gordon and his fellow priests, and their extreme poverty made any amelioration difficult.

Nevertheless, these devoted men persevered in their work. Even General Winter could not defeat them, for their cause-unlike that of Napoleon-was the cause of God, and they not only succeeded in holding their own but brought back many strayed sheep to the fold.

To Bishop Gordon many conversions are credited-for conversions were numerous, even when to become a Catholic meant slow martyrdom ; and though Bishop Gordon is less well known than Bishop Hay, we must remember that it was the former who prepared the ground and sowed the seed which was tended and brought to maturity by his successor.

A CHAPEL BUILT AT CABRACH IN 1728

It was Bishop Gordon who, in the year 1728, resolved to establish a fixed residence for a priest in the Cabrach, and who chose,

for this purpose, the Shenval, high above the Blackwater river, partly on account of its secluded position and partly because a number of Catholics had settled in that wild and remote region, so difficult of access as to be comparatively safe from the oppressor.

It was indeed a hazardous venture, for new and more cruel statutes had been recently added to the penal laws, but the undaunted bishop took the bold step of building a small presbytery, in which he installed Father Burnett, O.S.B., the first resident Catholic priest since the Reformation. In 1731 a still greater effort was made, and a small chapel was built adjoining the presbytery. The Rev. Thomas Brockie was placed in charge, and there, with the exception of one year spent at Tomnagylach* in Glenrinnes, did that good priest remain till 1759, braving the severity of the climate in this "Siberia of Scotland".

In one respect he was rather more fortunate than his brother priests, for he received a yearly allowance from the monastery of St

* The ruins of a chapel are still to be seen at Tomnagylach. The incumbents of this small mission were:-

Father James Hamilton, 1731.

Rev. Geo. Gordon, 1742-1744, who served Glenbucket, Strathavon and Glenrinnes.

Rev. Chas. Cruickshank, 1739-1744, who lived in Glenrinnes and served Glenlivet.

Rev. Thos. Brockie, 1748-1749, who served Aberlour and Glenrinnes.

Rev. Wm. Guthrie, 1759-1773, who served Glenbucket, Morange, Glenrinnes and Shenval.

James at Ratisbon in addition to the munificent income of £10 to £15 annually, which was, as a rule, all that the priests could depend on.

SEVEN HUNDRED CATHOLICS AT SHENVAL

Five years after the building of the chapel at Shenval we find the ministers of Strathbogie once more alarmed at the growth of Catholicism in the district of Mortlach. It is recorded in their minutes that "there were sixty or seventy Papists (in the vicinity), and they were one of the great obstacles of the Gospel, keeping their meetings for idolatrous and superstitious practices at Keithmore and Glenrinnies".* These fears were not groundless, for already the mission at Shenval, which included Glass, the Cabrach, Mortlach and Aberlour, could boast of a congregation of seven hundred souls. It seems almost incredible that, in spite of such protracted and cruel persecution, so many loyal to the old faith could be found within a radius of twenty miles.

For some years previous to the 'forty-five, Catholics enjoyed comparative peace, but after Culloden, the little chapel among the hills of Shenval was burned by Cumberland's soldiers. Fortunately their efforts to find the priest,

Father Brockie,* were unavailing, as he was absent at the time.

For two years after the destruction of the chapel, the Cabrach was left without a pastor, so that many Catholics fell away from the practice of their religion. Apart, however, from the absence of a priest, there were other disintegrating factors.

Prince Charlie's ill-fated effort to regain his crown accounted for the loss of, at least, a thousand Catholics, and their numbers were still further diminished by transportation to the American colonies, while, during the war with France, six thousand more were drafted out of the country for foreign service. Truly, it seemed as if the Reformers must at last be successful, and that the faith, planted so long ago in these valleys by St Moluag, would be extinguished ; but dark though the outlook appeared, some faint rays of light began to pierce the obscuring clouds.

* After the death of Father Brockie in 1759 the Mission of Shenval was served by Rev. John Geddes, 1759-1762; Rev. Chas. Gordon, 1762-1764; Rev. Alex. Menzies, O.S.B., 1762-1764 at Keithmore-vacant from 1764-1767 owing to scarcity of clergy; Rev. Chas. Cruickshank, 1767-1771; Rev. Alertus Hope, O.P., 1771-1773; Rev. John Gordon, 1775-1779; Rev. Paul Macpherson, 1779-1780; Rev. Wm. Reid, 1780-1782 or 1784; Rev. Andrew Dawson, 1785-1787; Rev. Alex. Farquharson, 1787-1793.

CHAPTER VIII

IN LATER YEARS

We must begin this chapter by a short summary of what we have already tried, if inadequately, to tell of the part played by Shenval in the history of Highland Catholics. For Shenval, is so little known, that few even of those whose lives are spent among these hills realise that, in spite of the rigours of the climate and the terrors of the penal laws, the light of the faith was never extinguished in the district of Mortlach and the Cabrach ; nor do they appreciate the cost at which the light was kept alive by the devoted labours of the missionary priests who had taken up their abode in the Shenval.

When the ancient church at Mortlach had been desecrated and turned to alien purposes by the followers of Knox, when it was no longer possible for Catholics to worship there after the manners of their forefathers, then did the tiny chapel at Shenval become the precarious refuge of the Holy Mystery ; and there the priests, in fear and seclusion, like the Apostles of old, dwelt with It under the

same roof, and there they continued to preach the doctrine and to practice the rites of the unchanging faith. Thence they issued forth to tend the remnant of their scattered flock, and to minister to their spiritual needs.

SHENVAL, 1728-1793

Shenval continued to be the centre of Catholic life and activity in these parts, from 1728 to 1793-the last priest to live there being the Rev. Mr Farquharson.

The little chapel, when bereft of a resident pastor, fell rapidly into decay, and the stones were utilised for the construction of a farm house and steading, which was built on an adjacent site.

The interested visitor to the Shenval may trace the boundary wall which formerly enclosed the priest's small domain. He will see the rough heaps of debris overgrown with grass and moss, which alone remain to mark the site of the church and dwelling-house, and he will notice that here and there a stray stone or a crumbling bit of wall protrude their ragged edges from the ground. No other visible link remains to connect this bleak and deserted hillock with the past, except a solitary rowan tree, grown old and battered by the winds, which stands in the plot of ground where was once the garden. One cannot visit this lonely spot and be unmoved by its hallowed memories, and by the knowledge

that here the Catholic faith was preserved during the terrible years which preceded the Act of Emancipation.

By this act, passed 3rd June 1793, Catholics were allowed "to hold and enjoy property of all kinds without molestation. The bill was proposed in the House of Commons by the Lord Advocate in an able speech, which reflected much honour on the Catholics of Scotland ; not a member in the House but applauded it. Lord Kellie, in the House of Lords, acknowledged that he was happy in having the honour of assisting to emancipate from shameful laws such valuable subjects".*

Now that Catholics were at last free to enjoy property of all kinds, there was no further need to seek the seclusion of a Shenval, and as the Cabrach was being rapidly depopulated it was decided to open a new mission in a less isolated position. Before describing these later developments, it seems fitting to give here some short account of the minor stations in the vicinity, which were visited and served by the priests from the Shenval.

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* *Memoirs of Scottish Catholics*, Vol. II., p. 391.