



Background to the Whangarei Heads Church

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This is the first of a series of 5 articles written by our church Trustee tracing the migration from Scotland to Whangarei Heads.

Scotland

Historically it was Gaelic that was spoken in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. It's a warm and beautiful language, rich in imagery, with roots in the distant past. The clansmen who spoke it usually led simple lives with few material possessions. Essentially, they were subsistence farmers and fishermen. Their culture valued self-sufficiency, hospitality and generosity, loyalty and a pride of ones clan. These values, though intangible, helped them survive in a mountainous land with shallow soils and a cold, damp climate. They also helped them succeed in Nova Scotia and New Zealand when they left their ancestral home.

The Gaelic word 'clan' means children and refers to a kinship group among the Scottish people. The different family clans were led by chiefs, who may not necessarily have been related. Clansmen often took the chief's surname as their own when anglicised surnames came into common usage during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Doing so demonstrated solidarity which in return afforded basic protection and sustenance in times of need. Clansmen, or followers of the chief, were given land to lease which was sublet to tenant farmers. The land holdings however were impermanent and could change to meet needs of the chief or other members of the clan. In return the lessee owed loyalty and service to the chief and took up arms for him if required.

The later 18th century was a time of change in Scotland. Following the battle of Culloden and defeat of Bonnie Prince Charlie in 1746 the British government imposed restrictive laws that compromised the clan chiefs and the Gaelic culture that underpinned the clan system. It banned the carrying of arms, the wearing of tartan, the playing of bagpipes and allowed the confiscation of land belonging to any chief that did not adhere to the rule of the Crown. The government policies also cleared the way for outsiders to acquire much of the land in the Highlands.

At the same time improved agriculture systems in the south were beginning to penetrate the highlands. The industrial revolution taking place in England increased demand for food, pushed up wool prices and opened the door to both large scale sheep farming and the infamous Highland clearances.

Background to the Whangarei Heads Church

The glens where people lived tended to be both the more sheltered and fertile areas of the landscape. Unfortunately, these were also the areas that grew the best grass and afforded the best shelter for sheep, so in order for landowners to cash in on the opportunities at hand, people needed to be removed from the land. As a way to clear the land chiefs ratcheted up rent and at times leases were simply not renewed. Consequently, the clan system broke down and large numbers of tenants were evicted, often brutally, from their ancestral lands.



The inhabitants of the croft in this photo left Scotland during the clearances and settled at Whangarei Heads. Although they paid their own fares many other highland people had their fares paid for by landowners who were keen to be rid of their tenants. The clearances continued until 1886 when the eviction of tenants was made illegal with the passage of the Crofters Holding Act.

The options were limited for most people once evicted off the land. Some moved south to look for work while young men often joined the armed forces. Many relocated to the newly established villages along the west coast where they could make a living fishing in the herring fleets for the British Fishing Company, building and repairing boats or collecting seaweed, which was gathered and burned to make kelp. Kelp is an ashy substance, rich in potash and soda, and was eagerly sought after by glass and soap industries of the time, but from 1811 demand and prices for it began falling.

This was also a time of unrest within the Church of Scotland. Christianity was introduced to Scotland around 500 AD by missionaries from Ireland but it was not until the late Middle Ages that the crown established influence over it. In 1707 church government within Scotland was ensured by the Acts of Union, when the kingdom of Great Britain was created. Scotland underwent a Protestant Reformation about this time also that created a predominately Calvinist national church, with a strongly Presbyterian outlook.

Presbyterian churches derive their name from the Presbyterian form of church government, in which churches are governed by a representative assembly of elders. A number of Reformed churches are organized in this way, but the word Presbyterian is usually applied to churches that trace their roots back to the Church of Scotland. Their theology typically emphasizes the sovereignty of God, the authority of the Scriptures, and the necessity of grace through faith in Christ.

Background to the Whangarei Heads Church

The Church of Scotland struggled to effectively penetrate the more remote parts of the country. In the Highlands religion played but a small part in the lives of most people prior to the 18th century. Although they were ostensibly Christian there was still belief in witches, fairies and ghosts, with traditional ceilidhs playing a more central part in daily life than the church. Beltane was widely celebrated on 1 May with rituals performed to protect the cattle, crops and people, and to encourage growth over the coming year. Christianity provided but another protection against ill fate.

The Church began a gradual process of conversion and consolidation in the Highlands, partly to counter the Catholic influences from Ireland and partly as a means of bringing the people



The Free Church of Scotland in Gairloch

more under control of the government. By the late 18th century it was achieving greater success, owing partly at least to efforts of the Society in Scotland for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SSPCK), which established numerous schools where religion could be taught. Despite this it wasn't until the 19th century that the evangelical Free Churches gained traction and grew rapidly, mainly because they were more accepting of the Gaelic language and culture than the established church.

The Church of Scotland has a fractious history with several succession movements breaking away. Different factions had splintered from the established Church in 1733 and 1761. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries there was another philosophical battle going on, this time between evangelicals on one side and the "Moderates" and gentry on the other side. The evangelical element demanded the purification of the Church and was unhappy with the patronage system, that allowed wealthy landowners to select the local ministers. Eventually this led to a further succession from the church in 1843 when 450 of the 1,200 ministers broke away from the established church to form the Free Church of Scotland. This event became known as the Great Disruption.

It was into this world of upheaval and discontent that Norman McLeod and the pioneering families who participated in the Nova Scotia/Waipu migration were born. It is here that the history of the Whangarei Heads Church begins.

Norman McLeod was born about 1779 at Stoer Point, Assynt in Sutherlandshire, Scotland. His father was a fisherman and in due course Norman also became one. During his early 20s however, he underwent a religious conversion and subsequently enrolled at Aberdeen University in 1807. Following his graduation in 1812 he spent two years at Edinburgh studying

Background to the Whangarei Heads Church

for the ministry, which at that time was dominated by the moderate faction within the church. He did not complete his studies, instead withdrawing in protest over what he saw as the hypocrisy and worldliness of his teachers.

Precluded from the ministry he became a teacher at the SSPCK School in Ullapool, a position which required reading, and commenting on the scriptures to the villagers on Sundays. This school was under the jurisdiction of the local parish minister who was a member of the moderate party of the church. Norman, though successful as a teacher, antagonised the local ministers and landlords by criticising their conduct and theology. He was one of a number of evangelical lay preachers of the time, called the 'Assynt Separatists' or 'The Men,' forerunners of the roiling discontent that culminated in the Great



Loch Broom and the wharf at Ullapool

Disruption. They repudiated the liberalism of the established church and encouraged a return to the rigorous principles of Knox and Calvin. They also despised the Church Ministers who often came from wealthy families and condoned and supported the Clearances. Normans' zealous preaching drew crowds away from the churches and as a result he fell afoul of the conservative parish minister, eventually having to resign his teaching position in 1815. With the schools controlled by the church this inevitably ended his teaching career also.

He spent the following two seasons fishing from Wick in Caithness, then left for Pictou in Canada aboard the *Francis Ann* in July 1817. Norman was but one of many Highlanders leaving Scotland around this time in an exodus that began in 1773 when the *Hector* sailed from Loch Broom for Nova Scotia. He was joined on the voyage by two of the original Whangarei Heads settlers, the Squire's son John D. Arichat McLeod, and John Munro. Most of the emigrants left in family groups and never set foot in the country of their birth again. Fortunately, it was also a time when vast areas of fertile agricultural land were becoming available through an expanding British Empire.

In the next instalment of this history we follow the exodus to Canada.