

# Grateful for enduring devotion of the Glasgow Highlander

**JOHN MacLEOD** pays tribute to the Reverend Donald MacLean, who is preparing to celebrate his golden jubilee

ON December 22, 1948, the Reverend Donald MacLean was ordained to the ministry of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, at Portree, Skye. Tomorrow - since 1960, minister of St Jude's Church, Woodlands Road, and now a Glasgow institution - MacLean celebrates his jubilee. At 83, he is tall, active, and as dangerous as ever, seeming nearer 60. There is no word of retirement.

He is famous as a scourge of Lord Chancellors. It was largely under MacLean's leadership that Lord MacKay of Clashfern, then holder of that ancient office, and Free Presbyterian elder in Edinburgh, was suspended from church privileges because he had gone to Requiem Mass for a colleague.

There was hysterical publicity. The Free Presbyterian Church split - with revisionist ministers and followers breaking away to form the less than successful Associated Presbyterian Churches - and MacLean attracted much personal abuse.

Whatever the merits of the Church's stand, it was a harsh way to treat this fascinating Glasgow clergyman. Some 300 still sit under him; since 1960, MacLean in September calculated, he has held 194 funerals and baptised 193 babies.

MacLean is a Glasgow Highlander. Born in the Gorbals in June 1915, his father was from Coigach, north of Ullapool. His mother, though, was from Raasay. He is of dark Raasay cast and spent many holidays there. He knew Sorley MacLean and family well. Recently, the Glasgow minister met Dr Alasdair MacLean at Raasay Pier and uttered the imitable line, "Well! We haven't met since 1926!"

In 1985, MacLean awoke after major surgery and, asked how he was, said wistfully: "I'd really like a drink from the Allt a'Rolair." A Raasay spring, in the township of Oskaig.

But, in truth, MacLean is Glaswegian. The family were ardent Free Presbyterians, and Church rules preclude use of commercial transport on the Sabbath - even to hear sermon. So twice each Sabbath, there and back, the family MacLean walked to St Jude's then on Pitt Street - a round distance, weekly, of 16 miles.

MacLean was clever and fond of order. He took up accountancy, and studied under the firm headed by Thomas Galbraith, later Lord Strathclyde. Galbraith - an active Unionist - took interest in the lad, urging him to consider a career in politics. MacLean wrote a paper on income tax, in 1938, so well researched that the Inland Revenue themselves used it for reference.

There intervened, though, a spiritual interest - MacLean first professed saving faith at the Glasgow Communion in 1934, still only 19 - and, before he had even sat his Chartered Accountancy, there broke forth the Second World War.

He spurred Galbraith's proffered connections: the future peer offered hope of a commission. MacLean entered the Royal Navy as a rating. His war was largely based at Cape Town, specialising in anti-submarine tactics, in which MacLean became such an expert he lectured in the field. He rose to become a 2nd Lieutenant. His habit, home on leave, of going to church in full uniform attracted affectionate comment.

He had one solemn escape. Lt MacLean was removed from his regular ship to escort German prisoners to Britain. In his absence, his vessel was sunk with all hands.

The war ended and MacLean - though still pressed by Galbraith - knew now he was called to higher service. He applied that year to his Church for recognition as a student for the ministry.

MacLean served Portree for 12 years. (When he arrived, the midweek prayer meeting attendance was in single figures; when he left, it was in three). In time, he married Grace MacQueen, of Daviot, gracious by name and nature. They have four children.

Fifty years on, the Royal Navy influence is evident in MacLean. His bearing is military; his manner - in the pulpit; at table; in company - always authoritative. Certainly, there is naval gung-ho in his astonishing, expressive voice. Most striking are his hands. They chop and wave in the pulpit with keen clarity. He preaches like a master on the bridge at the height of battle.

He became a competent Gaelic preacher. In 1945 MacLean knew scarce a word. For months, as a student, he closeted himself in the manse of a Skye minister. They rose each day at six and studied until midnight, with brief breaks for meals. "It's the only way to learn any language," says MacLean pleasantly.

Removed to Glasgow in 1960 - the biggest congregation in the Church - MacLean came into his own. He also rose to height in denominational affairs. He has been thrice Moderator of Synod. He chaired the Free Presbyterian centenary celebrations in 1993.

Most significantly, for a quarter century and more, he served as divinity tutor in systematic theology, raising a generation of ministers.

Too much could be made of the MacKay business. MacLean is not a bitter or grudge-bearing man. The MacKay struggle highlighted a yawning division in the Church, between those who cherished, unashamed, a distinctive Free Presbyterian witness, and those who preferred the applause of softer evangelical acceptance. MacLean, then and now, positively exults in Free Presbyterian difference - unabashed Protestantism; purity of worship; full-blown Calvinism; above all, proclamation, without compromise, of Christ as King of all things.

After the split - well, he was 74 - MacLean quit church office and has since devoted himself almost exclusively to preaching. He holds no Synod position. He sits on no standing committee. He does some Communion seasons a year; takes two or three Sabbaths off, completely, and - barring rare illness - tends his flock of St Jude's.

He holds three services a week and visits assiduously. More than once I have seen him intently greet Highland students of a Sabbath evening outside St Jude's - mere adherents, teenagers in bad suits from the West Highlands, keeping up attendance for the sake of the folks. MacLean always remembers their names - and what they study. Wherever they have been the night before, they matter to him.

Some say he has mellowed. MacLean has largely forsaken the habit of personalised attacks from the pulpit. He has not forsworn the diverting one of jolly, cutting phrase: "Bishops! Who'd want to be a bishop? Bunch of blockheads the lot of them!"

He has stood, always, for what - as he would say - is to him "clear as the noonday sun"; the imperative of the glory of God, and of His cause; and the lesser issue of the integrity of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland.

MacLean remains a great preacher, an assiduous pastor, and enthralling company. He is a grand raconteur and rather a good mimic. He dresses immaculately. He is the utter professional; the last gasp of an age when the cleverest men in Scotland considered, automatically, the Christian ministry.

He has three indulgences: chocolate (strictly rationed); one tiny brandy, after preaching; and the reading of political biography. Lately, I speculated with a mutual friend as to what he might have become, had he been called to politics.

"Oh, Mr MacLean'd have been Prime Minister," said he cheerfully. "He'd have settled for nothing less."

Those who want to attain vigorous old age could take some tips from our Donnie. He has sensibly cut wider commitments and worries in his ninth decade. He has watched his weight (still more sternly watched by Grace). Unless it is icy, Mr MacLean takes a brisk walk every day around his Kelvindale stumping-ground. He remains fascinated by life and people.

If he retires, it will be at the right moment and he will never, like R R Sinclair or Willie Still, continue toiling to the point where he is past it and past knowing he is past it.

He reminds company, gleefully if with all regard for Providence, that an aunt lived to be more than 100. We, his brethren, delight in his jubilee and find ourselves as one with the wee girl, a few months ago in the gallery of St Jude's, who resented the fussing hands of her mother. "Do you mind!" said the tot in a stage-whisper heard by all present. "I'm listening to Mr MacLean." - *Dec 21*.