

“THE MASTER'S MOTHER” MARY MACPHERSON, MRS WILLIAM MACPHAIL

by Alan G. Macpherson

Sir Andrew Macphail's classic in Canadian literature, *The Master's Wife* - written in 1927 and later, and published in 1939 - focussed on his father, William Macphail (1830-1905), and his mother, Catherine Elizabeth Smith (1834-1920). His grandfather, also William Macphail (1802-1852), was the “Assembly's schoolmaster at Glenbanchor” above Newtonmore in the parish of Kingussie when he married Mary Macpherson (1804-1888) at the Manse of Laggan at Gaskbeg on the 29th June 1829. Their first child was born at Corpach near Fort William in Lochaber on the 11th April 1830 (Family Record), where he was baptised “William” on the 12th May 1831 (Parish of Kilmallie Register), their second Janet born 12th September 1831 (Family Record) just prior to their emigration to Upper Canada in 1833. Their intended destination was Napanee near Kingston, via Montreal, but they were shipwrecked near the mouth of the River John on the Gulf coast of Nova Scotia. William proceeded to Napanee on foot and alone, leaving Mary, young William and Janet in Nova Scotia, but returned to teach in various communities in Nova Scotia, Cape Breton Island, and Prince Edward Island. The stops in this wandering phase of her life were marked for Mary by the births of her later children:

James Alexander, born 26 August 1834 in Nova Scotia

John Macpherson, born 9 April 1836 at West River, Pictou Co., N.S.

[Note: John Macpherson Macphail died 13 March 1837 at River Philip, Cumberland Co., Nova Scotia]

Isabella Maria, born 23 September 1837, River John, Pictou Co.

John Macpherson, born 1 November 1839 at Port Hood, Cape Breton Island

Mary Jane, born 10 November 1841

Lydia Margaret, born 19 July 1844

The augmented family finally settled at Orwell in the eastern part of Prince Edward Island in 1844 (pp. 23, 24). The “Explanatory Notes” prefacing the New Carleton Library edition (1977), written by Ian Ross Robertson, Scarborough College, University of Toronto, indicate that Mary Macpherson was born in 1804; her grandson, however, reports (p.164) that she was a girl of fifteen when Waterloo was fought', suggesting that she was born in 1799 or 1800. Another source suggests 1802, while her alleged age at death, 82 years, would indicate 1806. There is no record of a baptism anywhere in Scotland in those years, and in the absence of information from Sir Andrew on her parents or siblings, her family of origin would seem to be undetermined. She had two uncles, Andrew and John, who served as army surgeons at Waterloo, but their surnames are not mentioned.

Sir Andrew Macphail, in his ironic yet affectionate style, casts his grandmother in contrast with his mother, between whom there was evidently some rivalry and a degree of tension. He introduces her as of “the tribe of Cluny” (p.20). He also quotes a surviving letter from his paternal great-grandmother, Isabel Clark, Mrs James Macphail of Nairn, dated 21st December 1829 and directed to the young schoolmaster at Fort William shortly after his marriage. In it she refers to “the mean hovel in Glenbanchor” - a remark to which Mary evidently took exception whenever it was mentioned (pp. 21, 22). When her husband died in 1852 her son William became “The Master”; he lived with his mother at Upper Newton and taught at Lower Newton while his siblings gradually moved away (pp. 24, 25), and when he married in August 1858 he brought his bride, the Master's wife, into the household. Later, Mary lived with her second son James who taught at the Whim Road, some ten miles away (p.52).

Sir Andrew, who “saw her face for the first time ... in the house of her younger son, James.... at the Whim Road”, devoted a chapter to his grandmother, entitled “His Mother” (pp. 52-61), from which the following extracts are drawn:

The grandmother was pleased to see her son and his child. Her ruddy face glowed with pleasure, and she laughed aloud. Mary Macpherson never excelled in housework. She expected to have things done for her, and if they were not done, her quiet content remained undisturbed. In her father's house there had been servants. She sometimes spoke of a cook, who was dismissed from her place because she “would not cool the porridge with the meal”; and of dairy maids who would take her as a child for a week into the hills where they tended the cattle, of which “there were seventy-six to be milked”, and from the milk, cheese and butter made.

The Master's wife was sceptical of such “stories”. She had never heard of “*shielings*”, or the upland pastures to which Highland cattle were driven for the summer grass. Still less did she believe that there ever was such a person as “Lady Cluny”, who would invite young girls to “a party, where there would be dancing for three days at a time”. But when a serious and truthful man arrived from Scotland, and attested from his own knowledge that all these things were so, she was compelled - and secretly proud - to believe.

It was the custom of the country for a woman, as soon as she became a mother-in-law, “to take to the chair”, to sit in silence, contenting herself with the wheel, the care of a child, and a bit of knitting, leaving the administration of the house to “the young woman”. This grandmother never took to the chair, and in that resolve her three daughters on their spasmodic return from their schools openly abetted her. To this subversion of custom the Master's wife exerted a most passive resistance. She never raised her voice, but she never yielded, not even to the combined force of those four women. So passive was her resistance, the Master remained an innocent neutral, unaware of the conflict in his own house.

On public occasions the grandmother wore silk, with a white frill under a satin hood. secured by long streamers of the same. There is a portrait of her in that costume, drawn by Dyonnet - but from a photograph only. She was a “bold woman”. She would speak to any man, and the proper persons she would address by their first names. The whole fabric of my social edifice came down when I once heard her call the merchant “Denis”, although that was his baptismal name, and threaten “to throw his goods about his feet”. Her authority in the settlement was greater than in the house. She was said to be an accomplice of all who did not take life as the sombre preparation for a life to come which was reputed to be only a little less sombre than this. The Irish were her especial friends.

One day she was returning from the town in the little steamer, properly arrayed, and sitting alone in the “ladies” cabin. Two men came in with a bottle from which they proposed to drink. They had already been drinking, and were unperturbed by the spectacle of the silken woman. “What did you say to them?” “I said, 'I will take a drop of that myself'.” That formula is used in the family to this day. Mary Macpherson's one superior authority was witches.... Ghosts were too common to excite much interest; and the fairies all seemed so malignant that the grandmother found it difficult to explain the distinction between a fairy and a witch. It was in stories of forays, robberies and murders that this Highland woman excelled; but she had many songs and ballads in which the more important events were recorded; and they were mainly derogatory of all clans but her own. Some of these “murder stories” I found printed in a book one wet afternoon in Inverness, exactly as she told them.... These diversions of hers were not encouraged: they were a waste of time and a seduction from important tasks. These stories must have been authentic. They are to be found in the old books.... Of these the most specific was the account of the Witch-woman of the Cairngorm Hills. . . .

What followed was an abbreviated account of the old Badenoch tale of the Witch of Laggan as recounted in Stewart's *Lectures from the Mountains*, 2nd Series (1860): 192-201, and reproduced in Alexander Macpherson's *Glimpses of Church and Social Life in the Highlands in Olden Times* (1893): 23-26, a legend which must have been very familiar to the Master's mother in the oral tradition.

Sir Andrew, the Master's son, adds a further insight into the personality of his Highland grandmother:

The grandmother was the one authority upon all matters that lay beyond our little island world. She was of the “old country”; she had crossed the sea, and all knowledge was imputed to her. What did a mountain look like? Did it rise up from the level ground? Or, was it approached by lesser mountains? How high were the waves of the sea? And how could they wreck a ship? The answer to these questions occupied many a winter evening, and created a profound unrest in young minds.

She had some gift in the simpler forms of music, and could sing in a shrill and true voice. The song she sang best was the poignant “I'm wearin' awa, John”. The confident assertion, “And angels beckon me to the land o' the leal”, the

Master heard without entire approval. He was not convinced of the “grounds of her assurance”, in view of the meagreness of “the profession” the dying woman had made.

Her grandson also witnessed her response to thunder and lightning - in marked contrast to his mother's, the “Master's wife” (pp.68, 69):

Thunder and lightning left her prostrate. While the storm lasted, her terror was extreme. Doors were shut, blinds drawn but the dark stillness only increased the sense of fear. A child soon learned that thunder was the voice of the very angry God, and the sky riven to afford a glimpse into a still more angry hell. The grandmother stood in the door entranced by the spectacle, her face glowing with delight.

Perhaps Mary's delight came from a girlhood lived among the mountains of Badenoch. Again, in contrast to her daughter-in-law (p.81):

The grandmother was an inveterate reader of newspapers, magazines, and other romances - everything but the Bible; and all in the community who had books brought them to her. We watched for them as a jackdaw watches for a shining thing. On the other hand, she too exercised a prescriptive censorship over our books; but it was observed that she would read the book from the beginning to end before passing judgement, which, however, was always favourable.

Yet, the Bible was fundamental to the predilections (p. 86):

The grandmother learned English by following in the English Bible the words as they were read in the Gaelic at family worship, and that process of education was fairly continuous. Her husband spoke an educated English, and she learned from him. The Master [her son] used the Gaelic as his first language, . . . But at an early age forgot much by disuse, although to the end he could exercise the gift of prayer in that tongue. He retained the merest flavour of the Highland accent, and spoke English with respect and unconscious care, with ease and fluency as if he had known no other. By contrast, the speech of his mother seemed somewhat archaic to us in our new perfection, and we came to be known [to her] as “the English-speaking”.

Rather than Sabbath-breaking, untruthfulness or cruelty (p. 103):

To the grandmother the chief commandment was, Honour thy father and thy mother, but that honour in the highest degree was due to herself by reason of her anterior parentage. Her exegesis might be correct, and the penalty was clear. The eye that despiseth to obey his grandmother the ravens of the valley shall pluck it out. The valley was there; the crows might be the ravens. A boy stricken with conscience would peer at the avenging birds from between his protecting fingers.

In conclusion, it is obvious that there is great affection in Sir Andrew MacPhail's portrayal of his grandmother. As a bearer of Highland Gaelic culture in Prince Edward Island, she was clearly a significant influence in his childhood and youth - she died when he was twenty-four years old. From his pages we know what kind of woman she was. Her personality, as he describes it, was that of a typical Highland woman of her time, full of life, love, forthrightness and vivacity - an independent spirit. His failure to record her family of origin is sad: he visited Inverairnie and Nairn on convalescent leave from France in 1917 (p. 170), but showed no interest in seeking kinsmen in Badenoch. His memoir of his grandmother strongly indicates that she belonged to the tacksman class in the parish of Laggan and lived in some proximity to Cluny. But who was she?

The mystery of her family origins is resolved by a source which records that she was born in August 1804 to John Macpherson and Janet Macpherson in Crubenbeg in Glentruim, within the Parish of Laggan. Their typically clan-endogamous marriage was formed in July or August 1799, John from Crubenbeg, Janet from Biallidbeg in the Parish of Kingussie, eldest daughter of Andrew McPherson and Mary Clark in Biallidbeg (b. 21 Oct. 1778). The births and baptisms of their children, as recorded in the Laggan Register, all occurred at Crubenbeg:

| | |
|-----------|---|
| James | born 2nd Sept. 1800 [died 23 May 1818, aged 18] |
| Andrew | born 13th Jan. 1802 |
| Donald | born 27th Oct. 1808 – bapt. 6th Nov. 1808 |
| Nelly | born 27th Aug. 1810 – bapt. 27th Aug. 1808 |
| Isabel | – bapt. 8 Mar. 1812 |
| Alexander | born 9th Feb. 1817 |
| Lachlan | born 4th Apr. 1819 |
| Janet | – bapt. 5th May 1821 |
| George | born 21st Dec. 1823 – bapt. 6th Jan. 1824 |

Mary Macpherson, the Master's Mother, would have been born between Andrew and Donald, the first daughter. She was undoubtedly named after her maternal grandmother, Mary Clark. And she was set on having a son named John Macpherson Macphail after her father. Her father, John Macpherson, tacksman of Crubenbeg, was a brother of Capt. Lachlan Macpherson of Biallid ("Old Biallid") of the 52nd Regiment, some of whose manuscripts were published by Alexander Macpherson in his compendium on Badenoch history, *Glimpses of Church and Social life in the Highlands in Olden Times* (1893): 399-426, and who died at Biallid on the 20th May 1858 at the age of eighty-nine (b. 1769). He was also a brother of Duncan Macpherson whose headstone inscription is recorded in *Glimpses*, p. 136: "who died at Crubenbeg 25th April 1817, aged 38." Another brother was Andrew Macpherson who had also held a commission in the army and was factor to the Duke of Richmond at Huntly for many years. Their parents were James McPherson, tacksman of Crubenbeg, and Jean Macpherson, a daughter of Andrew McPherson in Inchlia, who were married on the 25th August 1761. The Kingussie Parish Register records three of their children: James (bapt. 1776 at Bridge of Etrage), Kathrine (bapt. 1777 at Crubenbeg), and Duncan (bapt. 9th Apr. 1780 at Crubenbeg), just mentioned. James, the father, died 28th April 1804, aged 76 (b. 1727/8); Jean, the mother, was born on the 7th April 1737 at Nuide, the daughter of Andrew McPherson and Isobel McPherson who married 26th December 1732. This, then, was the "anterior parentage" to which her grandson referred. It must have been well-known to the Macphails.