

THE CHURCH AND PRIORY OF ST. MARY, MONYMUSK

The picturesque village of Monymusk is situated on the right bank of the River Don about twenty miles south-west of the city of Aberdeen. Monymusk is a Celtic name, probably meaning 'moor and river' and the scenery in the parish exhibits variety and charm owing to the sharp contrast between the rich agricultural haugh around the river as it spreads itself into graceful loops on its way to Kemnay and Inverurie and the rugged heather and tree-clad hills rising into the craggy 'Mither Tap' of Bennachie which dominates the whole landscape. The village itself has its peculiar beauty with its simple village green surrounded by the square of granite houses with their diamond-paned windows, all sheltering under the ancient tower of its historic church.

This parish is one of high antiquarian and historic interest as is evidenced by the stone circles in the district and the weapons of the Stone and Bronze ages which have been found. Graves (circa 1000 B.C.) have also been exposed and it seems that Monymusk had been a populated place in pre-Christian times.

The Kirk of the Culdees

A strong tradition exists that the Christian faith in Monymusk had a Columban origin and this tradition is supported by some remarkable evidence.

There is the existence of the 'Monymusk Stone' still preserved in the House of Monymusk and belonging to a class whose style may be assigned to the ninth century. The stone originally stood on the farm of Nether Mains about a mile from the present church and is an unhewn granite boulder, seven feet high, with sculptures partly incised and partly in relief. The sculptures consist of an equal-armed Celtic cross with staff and base all ornamented with knot work; there is also the 'step' symbol and the 'disc and double ring' symbol. That this stone was in the parish in the ninth century there seems to be little doubt.

The other important Celtic relic associated with Monymusk is the famous 'Brecbannock' or reliquary of St. Columba (now in the keeping of the Museum of Scottish Antiquities, Edinburgh). Though no direct connection can be found between the Reliquary and Monymusk before 1315, yet the fact that a Charter dated 18 January in that year conveys the lands of Forglen, which pertains to the



PLATE A. MONYMUSK PRIORY - EXTERIOR

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PLATE B. MONYMUSK PRIORY - CHANCEL

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Brecbannock, to Malcolm of Monymusk – these lands having earlier belonged to the Priory – suggests an earlier connection between this Celtic relic and the Priory.

A stone in the present kirkyard is dated by the late Dr. Douglas Simpson as belonging to the ninth century and two others with the same crude Celtic cross dug up in the floor of the Church belong to the same period.

The first mention of the 'Culdees of Munimusc' occurs in a grant of produce by the Earl of Buchan (ante 1130) and many charters follow in the next two centuries usually conveying grants of land. These deeds frequently mention 'the Church of St. Mary, in which Culdees formerly were'. Some of the documents of this period offer the alternative title in the address 'Keledei sive Canonici'.

Such evidence cannot lightly be set aside and it seems logical to believe that a Culdean community existed in Monymusk before being superseded by the Augustinians.

The Priory

The actual date of the transfer from the Culdean to the Roman practice in Monymusk is uncertain. The change seems to have been a slow one and was only made after local opposition had been overcome. One tradition sets the initial transfer as early as Malcolm Canmore and it is said that the length of the base of the church tower is the length of that king's spear. It is a fact that the Priory was placed under the care of the Augustinian Convent of St. Andrews, Fife. Other Priories were under the same mother house but they were all quite near St. Andrews; only Monymusk was at a distance.

Following the Culdean custom, there were never more than the Apostolic number of monks—twelve Canons with a Prior at their head. The present church was the chapel of the convent and a flat recumbent stone between two pillars about forty yards north-east of the church just within the gate leading to Monymusk manse is said to be the threshold of the Priory. A sunken lawn in front of the house is reputed to be the fish-pond and the burn running by gives some credence to this legend. There was a school attached to the Priory, the memory of which is still preserved in the name Scollatis or Scolois land attached to a croft; there was also a garden and pasture for six horses and fifteen wethers.

It can be assumed that for many years the Priory was a centre of Christian light in the north-east of Scotland with its canonical services, its educational and hospital facilities but little of this is recorded.

From the very beginning of its existence the Priory became a

subject of dispute between the Bishops of Aberdeen and St. Andrews. Each claimed jurisdiction; commissions were appointed to arbitrate but little headway was made in resolving the difficulty until in 1211 Pope Innocent III took the Priory under his special protection for an annual payment of two hundred shillings sterling. The Priory was endowed with large tracts of land in the Garioch and beyond.

There were also disputes between the canons and the secular clergy in the parish especially over the use of the burying-ground. Some confusion exists as to the exact relationship between the Prior and the Rector or Vicar. In some cases they seem to be one and the same person; in other cases the Rector became the Prior as though he had been one of the twelve canons. While the Prior had two oratories each about two miles from the Priory buildings yet there is no mention of any other place of worship than the Priory chapel and no mention of any special burying-ground either for the canons or the laity in the parish. Out of the confusion there seems to emerge a dual-purpose building, both Priory chapel and parish church with the canons occupying the chancel and the laity worshipping in the nave.

Pope Innocent IV issued a Bull from Lyons, on 10 May 1245 addressed to 'our beloved sons, the Prior and Canons of Munimusc of the Order of St. Augustine' and this date can be taken to mark the completed transference of the Culdees into canons regular of the Roman obedience.

Towards the end of the fifteenth century and the first half of the sixteenth the Priory was rent by internal dissensions; financial difficulties became acute and the Priory lands had to be mortgaged or sold, while the morals and discipline inside the convent reflected the general decadence of faith and practice so apparent in Western Christendom. The last religious Prior, David Farlie, 1522-1542, was charged with murder and other crimes and was succeeded by lay commendators John Elphinstone, 1542, and Robert Forbes, 1556. When the Reformation achieved success and official recognition in Scotland, there was no need to use suppression in Monymusk because the Priory had ceased to be a centre of piety, religious influence or Christian activity.

The Parish Church

In 1567 James Murray was appointed Reader and three years later James Johnstone began a long ministry which only ended with his death in 1613. He was the first of the twenty-two incumbents until the present day. It is interesting to note that the successive ministries of the Rev. John Burnett, 1678-1728, and the Rev. Alexander Simpson, 1729-1781, amounted to 103 years. The most eminent

minister of the parish was the Rev. Wm. Forbes, whose incumbency was the shortest, 1615–1616. A cadet of the Forbes family of Monymusk, he entered Marischal College at the age of twelve and graduated when sixteen. He was soon appointed Professor of Logic at his alma mater but resigned after four years. After travelling in Poland, Germany and Holland and studying for five years at German universities he was offered the Professorships of Hebrew and Divinity at Oxford. He refused and at twenty-five was ordained to the parish of Alford. He was translated to Monymusk in 1615, then went to parishes in Aberdeen and Edinburgh. He preached before Charles I when the king came to his Scottish capital for his coronation and the King was so pleased that he said he had 'found out a preacher who deserved to have a see created for him'. The King was as good as his word; Edinburgh was created a Bishopric, Forbes was installed but only enjoyed his appointment for one hundred days till his death. He is buried in St. Giles' Cathedral.

The Kirk Session records, which have been preserved from 1660 with a short gap in the eighteenth century, give a very detailed account of the Church in the parish since the Reformation. There are the usual cases of discipline, texts used in Sunday sermons, times of crisis in the controversy over the Caroline Episcopacy, the building of the school and the appointment of headmasters as well as the Church's care of the poor, the children and the sick. The minutes can be repeated in almost any other quoad omnia parish in the country and Monymusk can be proud of the generations who have gone before and have done their best to accept the burden of preaching the Gospel in word and action.

In one respect, however, Monymusk did make a unique contribution to Scottish Church worship. The Laird of Monymusk, Sir Archibald Grant, 1696–1778, was one of the most dynamic personalities of his generation. He was Member of Parliament for Aberdeenshire from 1722 to 1732 but his greatest work was in the realms of agriculture and forestry. In the former area he revolutionized almost every department of land cultivation and because of his knowledge of the latter he was responsible for the planting of over forty-eight million trees including the introduction of many species never grown in Scotland before. A man of many talents, he was intensely interested in music – it is said that he always sat with the choir in church. In his day there still existed the old custom of repeating the line of the psalm. This displeased Sir Archibald, who brought Ensign Channon from the barracks at Aberdeen, gave him employment on the estate and appointed him precentor in the church with the sole aim of eliminating the repeated line. This was done and the change progressed slowly through the whole of Scotland but not without opposition from those who opposed the intro-

duction of 'this heathenish singing into the House of God.' The change would have come sometime and somewhere but the revival of church music in Scotland began in Monymusk because of the musical ability and personality of its laird. Monymusk has other musical associations for not only did Daniel Dow, the composer, publish a reel named after the parish, but there is also a psalm tune called 'Monymusk' though it never seems to have become popular and is never sung nowadays.

In the latter half of the seventeenth century alterations were made to the church buildings. Externally a new addition was made outside the whole length of the north wall of the nave. The ground floor was the Session Room and the first floor became the 'Laird's loft' entered by an outside stair. A large opening was made in the north wall of the nave to include the loft in the church. At the east end of the nave the beautiful Norman arch leading to the chancel was covered in with lathe and plaster and a gallery was erected. The same change was repeated at the tower end of the nave though a door-way was made under the arch that people might enter the church from the west doorway. The double-decker pulpit was placed in the centre of the south wall opposite the Laird's loft and subsequently a door was broken into the wall behind the pulpit to allow the minister to enter without being troubled by the dogs which the shepherds brought with them to church. In 1748 a bell was erected in the tower and in 1792 a clock by Wm. Lunan, Aberdeen. Both are still in use. Around the bell is a broad band of ornament with the inscription: 'IOAN · MOWAT · ME · FECIT · VET · ABD · 1748 · IN · USUM · ECCLESIAE · DE · MONIEMUSK · SABBATA · PANGO · FUNERA · PLANGO.' The P in the last word is reversed through a mistake in the mould.

The next big change in the structure until the restoration in 1932 was the removal of the Norman spire from above the tower in 1891. This was necessitated by a storm which so damaged the spire that it was rendered unsafe. A granite parapet was substituted which gives the tower a squat appearance.

The most distinguished visitor to the church was John Wesley, the Founder of Methodism, who preached on two separate visits in 1761 and 1764. In his diary he writes, 'Monymusk lies in a pleasant and fruitful valley, much of which is owing to Sir Archibald's improvements, who has ploughed much waste land and planted many millions of trees. . . . About six o'clock in the morning we went to church. It was pretty well filled with such persons as we do not look for so near the Highlands. Thirty or forty sang an anthem with such voices as well as judgment, that I doubt whether they could have been excelled in any Cathedral in England.' With that pleasant testimonial let us now look at the church as it is today.

The Church today

A very successful renovation and restoration of the church buildings was completed in 1932 so that in many ways the church looks more what it originally looked like than at any time since the Reformation. Here is a description of the buildings which may help to make people understand how fortunate we are to have preserved this architectural gem of our national and ecclesiastical heritage.

The church consists of a western tower, measuring twenty-two feet by nineteen feet at the base with a vaulted porch. The tower is at present fifty feet eleven inches high to its modern parapet. The tower is little changed in its lower half but is patchy and shows signs of alterations higher up. Doors and windows have been blocked up. The Norman masonry on the exterior of the tower is in red granite, formed of coursed ashlar, the blocks varying from cubical to oblong in shapes and the joints being very open, often as much as $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide. As customary in Norman work, there is a notable tendency to build without breaking bond, continuous vertical joints running through two or three courses. These features are noticeable, though not so common, in other parts of the building. The red granite used for all the Norman work in the building has weathered through centuries of exposure and now shows a rich and warm colour. The material used in the building of the Priory was a local granite. Tradition says that the granite came from the farm of Tombeg a little over a mile from the site of the church and that a human chain of both men and women conveyed the stone from the quarry to the builders. The corners of the tower and church as well as the jambs and full centred arch of the west door (a very beautiful piece of work) are wrought in Kildrummy sandstone.

A nave, stretching from the tower to the chancel, measures fifty-two feet by twenty. The chancel is also fifty-two feet long, about half of which is roofed and incorporated in the church. An east wall with a very colourful window depicting the Culdees preaching to the Picts, divides the present used chancel from the roofless part used as a burial ground. The north wall has been blocked up and the Laird's loft converted into a neat little Guild Room still entered by the outside stair. The east gallery has been removed and the Norman arch leading into the chancel has been revealed. At the west end of the nave the Norman arch leading from the tower has also been exposed, though a small gallery remains which also gives access to the first floor of the tower. The pulpit was replaced by a smaller one and placed in the south side of the nave where it meets the chancel arch. A natural finished pitch-pine roof and pews give a chaste colouring and are in harmony with the simplicity of the Norman architecture. Round the walls of the nave are tablets, all

except three to the memory of members of the Grant family, who for about three centuries have played such a beneficial part in the history of the church and parish. The verse on the tablet erected to the memory of Sir Francis Cullen Grant, 1914-1966, by his widow is a source of comfort to many visitors. It is taken from the Book of Wisdom:

And life is eternal and love is immortal
 And death is only an horizon;
 And an horizon is nothing
 Save the limit of our sight.

Of the remaining three tablets one is in memory of members of the Forbes family who owned the estate before the Grants and is dated 1583. It is written in Scots. The second is to a son of the schoolhouse in Monymusk, the Rev. James Nicoll Ogilvie, M.A., D.D., H.C.F., who was Moderator of the General Assembly in 1918, and the third is in memory of the Rev. William Macpherson, D.D., minister 1867-1911, whose history of the church and Priory must remain a classic.

During the last ten years further improvements have been made.

In 1960 a lancet window in the front wall of the tower was dedicated; it was the gift of Westminster Presbyterian Church, Oklahoma, U.S.A., and depicts Mary and the Child in a semi-traditional style.

In 1967, a Celtic cross and set of candlesticks were placed in the window ledge of the chancel and a lectern was placed on the other side of the chancel arch from the pulpit. These were all wrought in ironwork and are the gift of Mr. Archibald Cobban, blacksmith, an Elder in the parish, who designed and made them. They are an exquisite example of village craftsmanship.

Among the minor properties of the church possessing an antiquarian interest, there may be noted four links of the 'jougs'; a Bible with the arms and initials of Charles II, which was purchased by the session in 1679 at a cost of £15 6s. 8d. Scots; and six silver communion cups, four of which are William and Mary silver dated 1691 and the other two 1712. It should be noted that only these four 'common' cups are still used for the congregation at the half-yearly sacrament. There is also a silver baptismal bowl which was presented by Lady Grant in 1772.

One can understand that a church with its history and architecture lends itself to liturgical worship and, being interested in the approach that men and women make to God, I found Monymusk an excellent workshop for experiment. In some ways a country parish, especially in Aberdeenshire, might be considered barren ground for attempting

to make change. However, this was far from the case and the understanding and help received was beyond my expectation.

I began with a Good Friday Devotional Service with no sermon in my first Easter in 1957 and followed this with a Christmas Midnight service the same year. Both services were liturgical with responses, the Creed etc. The success of these services was amazing not only in attendance but more important in a deeply religious sense among the congregation and a joy that they were taking part.

The following summer I used a printed service I had used in my Bible Class at St. Andrew's Parish, Inverurie, and so much was it appreciated that monthly through the year we used the same order. Not that it was followed slavishly for the service allowed flexibility in addition and in omission. A service of Holy Communion was held in the chancel on Christmas Sunday morning at 9 a.m. The response in numbers was small, as I suggested in my intimation that only those who felt they really desired to come from their hearts should do so. In this little service one was conscious of the grace of God.

From the nave the chancel looked dark and dreary. The congregation looked into nothing as it were and so candles were introduced at the rear of the chancel to light up the Celtic cross. This was done for a merely utilitarian reason but once in use its aesthetic value was felt as well. These changes may seem very slight in comparison with changes which are taking place today in liturgy but I feel sure they led to the dignity of the worship and made everyone feel that they were taking their rightful place as priests to God.

The Church is open daily from Easter to October for prayer and meditation. Many visitors are attracted from many lands. However it is no museum-piece but a centre of Christian worship and deep community fellowship where a congregation, proud of its past, is sustained by the Word and Sacrament to meet, with Christian courage, the challenges of the modern world.

INGLIS M. BLACK, Minister of Monymusk 1957-1971

SOURCES

1. Kirk Session Minutes.
2. *Church and Priory of Monymusk* (1895) by the Rev. Dr. Wm. Macpherson.
3. Dr. Douglas Simpson: articles, lectures and conversations.