

Rev Donald MacLean

Minister whole played a key role in the discipline of Lord Mackay of Clashfern

■ **The Rev Donald MacLean, Free Presbyterian minister. Born: June 1915 in Glasgow. Died: Friday, 13 August, 2010 in Inverness, aged 95.**

THE Reverend Donald MacLean, for many years Free Presbyterian minister of Glasgow, died in Inverness on Friday evening after a brief illness. He was 95 and the Church's most senior minister, best remembered for his prominence in the discipline of Lord Mackay of Clashfern in November 1988, after the Lord Chancellor had attended Requiem Mass.

Of vast presence and personality, MacLean was such a venerable Free Presbyterian fixture – a communicant member since November 1937, a minister for so long he began his trade beside colleagues ordained in the 19th century – that his passing is epochal.

Donald MacLean was born in the Gorbals in June 1915; his father was a son of Coigach, and his mother from Osgaig, Raasay, where there were regular holidays. (The little "Donnie" counted Sorley MacLean as a boyhood playmate.)

Raasay is, too, the birthplace of the Free Presbyterian Church – founded in 1893, in protest against theological declension – and, by 1915, this was a substantial though overwhelmingly Highland denomination.

The St Jude's congregation in Glasgow was then enormous, with over 1,000 worshippers, and each Sabbath the MacLeans walked from their tenement to sermon, morning and night – in all, a 16-mile tramp.

As a young man, he trained for accountancy in the employ of Thomas Galbraith, of standing in both commerce and statecraft: the first Lord Strathclyde and the patriarch of a Tory dynasty. He took a keen interest in this clever young man and had hopes of mentoring him in Unionist politics. MacLean certainly acquired

much West End polish from Galbraith; but any parliamentary ambitions were derailed by the Second World War – MacLean was a first-lieutenant in the Royal Navy – and profound spiritual experience.

He was still only 19 when, under the preaching of his Lewis-born pastor Rev Roderick MacKenzie, coming to personal faith in Christ. And in 1945 MacLean was accepted as a student for the ministry. His training was intense, capped with a summer in a Skye manse where he endured a ruthless immersion-course in Gaelic – and to remarkable pulpit fluency.

Donald MacLean was ordained to the charge of Portree on 30 December, 1948. Of tireless energy and joyous preaching skills, he built up a neglected parish so effectively that he had latterly over 100 attending his midweek prayer meeting. (He was also wickedly christened "Frankie" by the local schoolboys; dashing and brilliant, MacLean did rather resemble a popular crooner of the day.)

Shortly after his ordination, MacLean married the gentle Grace MacQueen, from Daviot; she bore him four children and, through nearly 60 years of blissful union, was his strength and stay.

On 14 June, 1960, MacLean was inducted to his boyhood charge of St Jude's Glasgow, launching a notable 40-year pastorate. It proved one of the great teaching ministries anywhere in post-war Scotland. MacLean commanded the pulpit like the bridge of a battleship, with sweeping gesture and that extraordinary, surging voice; he spoke in perfect prose, from minimal notes.

Even by 1960, though, Donald MacLean led in other respects. He was for some years editor of the *Young People's Magazine* and, from 1958 to 1986, was the Church's theology tutor. This was sacrificial work; he trained dozens of ministers and out-



lived a distressing number. (Of the four students in his very first class, only one survives him.)

MacLean not only served three times as Moderator of Synod but – most unusually – from 1992, in two consecutive years, presiding at the Church's centenary event at Edinburgh in May 1993. He was also instrumental in the foundation of the Blythswood Tract Society in 1966, by a group of Glasgow students, though he never won proper credit for it and deplored its later subversion.

This reflected what, from the early 1970s, became a building ideological rift within the Free Presbyterian Church, between those determined to uphold what was already a distinctive, demanding witness (earnest, robustly Protestant, but profoundly Christ-centred) and those

shared a train home from Scottish Office consultancy in Edinburgh, and with great and jolly craic.) In the event – amid frightful publicity – Lord Mackay's suspension as a Free Presbyterian elder was confirmed by a whisper in 1989, and the Church split from top to bottom, with many adherents seceding to form the Associated Presbyterian Churches. It was a tough time.

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And these were desperate years. By the late 1980s, the Free Presbyterian Church was fighting for her soul, and this far more underpinned the Lord Mackay affair than the notional issue of the Mass. (There was not a bigoted bone in MacLean's body: for some years, he and the then-Archbishop Winning often

shared a train home from Scottish Office consultancy in Edinburgh, and with great and jolly craic.) In the event – amid frightful publicity – Lord Mackay's suspension as a Free Presbyterian elder was confirmed by a whisper in 1989, and the Church split from top to bottom, with many adherents seceding to form the Associated Presbyterian Churches. It was a tough time.

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MacLean nevertheless put in a stint as interim moderator of Fort William, preached frequently until surviving an unpleasant illness in 2006, and more occasionally thereafter and till almost the end.

MacLean oozed something uncommon in Highland Evangelicalism: a boundless optimism; that the best was yet to come. Yet each step back, in the face of inexorable old age, was taken at just the right time and with cheerful wisdom.

On the last retreat – in 2007, with Grace, to the Church's care-home in Inverness, he embraced it as a ministry itself, establishing himself as more president than resident and where tough old holiness and an emerging, playful streak endeared him to all. He bore Grace's death, in 2008, with extraordinary, spiritual serenity.

Mr MacLean had all his faculties to the end, dressed immaculately, and till recent weeks enjoyed the minimal morning walk – still as erect as the day he sailed out to fight the U-boats, and almost as handsome.

He never looked his age, never lost a majestic unflappability. In a telephone conversation only seven weeks ago, sharing memories of the Clydebank Blitz, he was as sharp and engaged as ever; the last illness was but a few gentle days.

In 1989, some of us thought that Rev Donald MacLean had only steered his Church on to the rocks. Over two decades later, with the APC sliding from obscurity into oblivion and with several of its ministers wilting into the Church of Scotland and ever more ridiculous positions (Lord Mackay's former Edinburgh minister, for instance, led a shameful manoeuvre in 2008 to shut down the General Assembly debate on homosexuality) the scale of what was at stake is now apparent.

The Free Presbyterians have survived; battered, but unbowed. The witness endures, unabashed. MacLean in the late Eighties held to that stand, and at high personal cost; but he was brave, and he was right.

JOHN MACLEOD

glider with an especially important – and heavy – load. He was transporting over the Channel a four-man anti-gun detachment with Jeep and trailer.

Unfortunately, as he approached the French coastline the towing aircraft had to release the tow yarn because it had hit turbulent weather conditions.

Dow therefore made a forced landing far from the pre-arranged drop area. Worse he was behind enemy lines. He was immediately surrounded by German troops and taken prisoner.

Dow was put in a temporary POW camp and underwent intensive interrogation near Chartres before being transported in a crammed bus to Paris. From there, he was shoved into a rail

wagon which had the delightful sign outside: "40 men or 8 horses". It was then that Dow showed his initiative and bravery.

Dow and some other POWs had found a metal bar under a seat of the bus and smuggled it on to the train. He then forced open a ventilator and, with his colleagues, scrambled out on to the buffers.

The jump – while the train was moving at speed – was neither easy nor simple. But Dow and his friends made the leap to safety and met up in Rheims.

From there – with no knowledge of the area or even the simplest of maps – they headed south and were clandestinely put in touch with the French underground, who sheltered and fed

them. Despite some hazardous moments with German troops in the area, all was well.

There was one particular tense moment. In a remote village Dow and the others had jumped into a truck full of barrels of beer after there was an alarm of a German patrol passing by. The truck was driven off at speed and a German policeman was gracious enough to halt the traffic so that it could get through a road block at a roundabout.

Dow was liberated by the advancing American army at Rheims in August 1944 and returned to England where he was sent to an officer training college. Thereafter, he briefly re-joined the Glider Pilot Regiment in Egypt before finishing the war

with the 6th Airborne Division in Palestine. On being demobilised in 1946, Dow returned to Aberdeen with the intention of reading land management and forestry. Aberdeen University informed him that all the places on the course were taken and suggested he studied medicine.

That he did and qualified in 1950 and after two years in the University Hospital of Jamaica, where he met his wife, Dow joined a general practice at North Hylton in Sunderland.

He also worked at various A&E departments and in 1973 was appointed a senior consultant at Sunderland Royal Hospital.

A senior colleague, Ram Banerjee, said of Dow: "Sandy was a remarkable man, modest and

immensely capable. For example, he never spoke to me about his heroic war record.

"He was devoted to his work, his colleagues and his patients. Away from work, Sandy was delightful company – a lover of music and a wine connoisseur. He supported the Washington Arts Centre. When he retired in 1988, I made the speech at his farewell dinner and when I retired in 2000 he spoke at my farewell dinner. Sandy was a great friend and colleague."

It was typical of Dr Dow that the announcement of his death in the newspapers included the following: "On his own declaration, his was the happiest of lives. If urged to do anything, his wish was to have you simply plant

a tree, somewhere, anywhere, – and smile." Such was the man.

Dr Dow's wife, Anne, predeceased him and he is survived by two sons and two daughters. ALASDAIR STEVEN

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circumstances it would be a folly to remove one lot of people who know the island and replace them with a

down away by it. I don't find it eerie but you get moments, particularly if you're by yourself in the village, when you begin to

is dominated by its last gasp."

LESLEY RIDDOCH, PAGE 25

with his parents
Pictures: Alan Milligan;
Toby Williams; NTS; BBC

