

THE REV. RANALD RANKIN

By Rev. Eric G. Clancy
Archivist, Uniting Church in Australia, Sydney

The Rev. Ranald Rankin was a Highland Scot who exercised most of his ministry in the western Highlands, but who came to Victoria in response to a request by Gaelic speaking Roman Catholics.

He was the son of Donald Rankin and Elizabeth (nee MacDonald or McDonnell), and had four sisters who also came to Victoria. Jane (who married John Kelly), Janet (who married Duncan Rankin, and who was my great-grandmother), Christina (who married a Rankin) and another whose name I do not know, but I suspect her name was Flora and she was married to a MacDonald.

Elizabeth MacDonald belonged to the McDonnells of Keppoch. When Ranald Rankin died the obituary published in the *Geelong Advertiser* said his mother was "a sister of the beloved fair Flora." Obviously "sister" is wrong, if the reference is to the Flora MacDonald. But Rev. W. Ebsworth and others also indicate that there was a relationship, and this belief has also been passed down to succeeding generations in our family. However, as Flora belonged to a different branch of the MacDonald clan than the McDonnells of Keppoch I do not know how the link is established. Ranald Rankin was also a descendant of one of the martyrs of Glencoe.

Ranald Rankin was born at Fort William in 1799. When Janet was born in 1802 their father was a factor for the Chisholms on Strathglass estate, which near Glenelg on Loch Hourm in Inversess-shire.

The obituary referred to states that Ranald was left an orphan at an early age, and that on him devolved the duties of looking after his sisters. In compliance with the dying wishes of his mother he became a Catholic and the four sisters soon followed in his steps. This is repeated by Rev. W. Ebsworth and others. According to shipping records his sister, Christina, was born in 1775, when Ranald was 26 years of age.

Prior to this time Ranald had been at Lismore Seminary, then had proceeded to the Scotch College at Valladolid in Spain to pursue theological studies. The warm climate of Spain had adversely affected his health and after four years there he returned to Scotland in 1822. He then entered Lismore College which had been acquired by Bishop John Chisholm, and

was then under the charge of Bishop Aeneas Chisholm. He was succeeded by Bishop Ranald MacDonald, a kinsman of Ranald Rankin, who ordained him in 1828.

Fr. Ranald Rankin was appointed to Badenoch in Argyllshire as his first mission, where he remained for nine years. Then followed Moidart where he remained for about 18 years.

An interesting contemporary account of the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland, and of Rev. Ranald Rankin appeared in the *Catholic Penny Magazine* No 20, Saturday June 28 1834, a Dublin weekly publication:

"Perhaps in no part where it once prevailed, is the Catholic religion more advancing than in the Western district, including the Highlands of Scotland."

Then follows a listing of the places and the names of the priests (a number of whom bear the name MacDonald), and the number of Catholics, e.g. Fort William, Rev. Charles MacKenzie 300; Moydart, Rev. R.M. MacDonald, Rev. A. MacDonald, Rev. Coll McColl 600; Knoydart, Rev. Charles MacDonald 500; Badenoch, Rev. Ranald Rankin 300.

After this listing the *Magazine* continues:

"The Rev. Ranald Rankin, a Catholic clergyman of great learning, piety and zeal, is now preaching over the principal parts of Ireland, in order to remedy this evil, and to be enabled to erect a chapel at Badenoch, in Invershire (sic). The place in which the Catholics of this Mission have to meet in order to assist at the adorable Sacrifice, and to offer up their daily prayers to the Almighty, is a wretched hovel in ruins, incapable of defending them from the inclemency of the weather. The pastor has no other residence but what the families of his flock benevolently afford him.

"If there be one thing more than another, which calls for the active co-operation of Irishmen in a particular manner, in favour of the Rev. Mr Rankin, it is that he has, with considerable pains and talents compiled a prayer book (the first of its kind) in the Gaelic language, entitled 'The Christian's Guide', published this year in Aberdeen, and not only circulated in the Highlands of

Scotland, but also amongst Scottish and Irish Catholics in America. It is a curious fact, that from the affinity which the Gaelic has with the Irish language, many in the Highlands of Scotland can understand the latter; and there is no reason to think, if sufficient pains were taken to point out the relative differences and agreements in both languages, that most of the aboriginal Irish and primitive Scotch could not only feel alike, but speak together on the wonderful works of God.

"To follow the example of Mr Rankin by publishing a prayer book suited to the wants of the many thousands who know nothing but Irish, would be conferring an indescribable benefit on religion in Ireland."

Then follows a copy of a letter from the Rt. Rev. Dr Scott (he was at Glasgow and the Vicar Apostolic of the Western District of Scotland):

"The bearer, the Rev. Ranald Rankin, a most zealous Roman Catholic missionary in the Western District of Scotland, has my full permission to go to Ireland to make an appeal to the generosity and charity of the very liberal Catholics of that country, on behalf of his very poor flock, and also on behalf of some of the very poor Missions near him.

"The Roman Catholics in the Highland parts of Inverness-shire, where Mr Rankin resides, have hitherto from various causes been deprived of chapels; for the huts in which the poor people assemble cannot be called by the name of chapels. The Catholic inhabitants of that part of the country, though numerous, are wretchedly poor, and totally unable to provide places of worship for themselves. I beg leave, therefore, most earnestly to recommend to the charity and piety of the faithful, the laudable object of Mr Rankin's mission to Ireland."

Andrew Scott,

Apostolic of the Western District.

Glasgow, May 5, 1834.

The poverty referred to was largely due to the 'Highland Clearances' which had been occurring for quite some time. This forced many people to migrate to Canada, America and Australia. It was reported that when Dr Boyter, who travelled in Scotland on behalf of emigration to Australia, visited Fort William on 18th April, 1838, "the news of his arrival, like the fiery cross of old, soon spread through every glen of the district, and at an early hour on Monday morning, thousands of enterprising Gaels might be seen ranked around the

Caledonian Hotel, anxious to quit the land of their forefathers and go and possess the unbounded pastures of Australia".

Fr Rankin encouraged many to emigrate, and he noted in his records those who did so. Many of these people he was to meet again years later in Victoria.

His parish of Moidart was very extensive, being fifty miles in diameter. He soon gained a reputation as a scholar, and translated several devotional works from the French into the Gaelic. He also rendered the first, third and fourth books of Virgil into Gaelic. While he was at Badenoch, an uncle of his moved into Argyllshire. A daughter of this uncle, a Miss Margaret Rankin, died some forty years after Ranald's death. The Aberdeen newspaper, reporting her death, made mention of Fr. Rankin, and added: "Fr Rankin is still remembered on the West Coast for his gifts as a poet and preacher. His beautiful hymns, songs and witty sayings, were familiar to her while her own recollections of Highland lore became more vivid as time advanced."

Ranald Rankin joined in the Glenfinian Demonstration in 1845 held on the Centenary of the Rising of the Highlanders in support of Prince Charles. A large Assembly of Highlanders attended who joined in a procession, followed by a banquet. Many descendants of adherents to the cause of Prince Charles were present. But this was no subversive group. At the banquet they declared their loyalty to the Queen and the Royal Family.

In 1849 the Rev. P.B. Geoghegan, well-known pioneer priest of Melbourne, travelled overseas, and on 7th November he wrote to Bishop Goold indicating that he was recruiting priests to come to Melbourne. He mentioned that he had 'an offer of great importance . . . the gentleman is a Scotch clergyman, of whom I have frequently heard in terms of praise for his abilities and missionary spirit - the Rev. Mr Rankin of Dr Murdoch's Diocese - Mr McKillop knows him well'. He then says that some Catholics are likely to come to Port Phillip according to Mrs Chisholm's 'excellent plan', and 'Fr Rankin, the Apostle of the Highlands, encourages them to the purpose and I believe has nearly succeeded in procuring the consent of his Bishop to devote himself to the adopted country of so many members of his flock. I am informed by Captain and Mrs Chisholm that I may expect to hear from him in the course of the coming week.' (The Chisholms were then in London).

Among those who decided to emigrate, doubtless encouraged by Ranald, were his sisters - Jane Kelly (widowed) with her family

migrated in 1851 and settled at Kyneton, Janet Rankin (also widowed) with her seven children arrived in January 1854 and went to Bendigo.

Apparently the consent he expected from his Bishop was not forthcoming, so Ranald remained in Scotland longer than was expected. In 1852 Highland Scots in Victoria sent a petition to Bishop Murdoch to have Rev. Ranald Rankin come to Victoria to minister to them. There was some delay in granting that petition, so a further petition was sent to Rome for his release from his duties so that he could come to Victoria. That petition granted, he left Scotland in 1855, travelling on the *James Baines* with his widowed sister, Christina, and her six year old son, Ranald. Caroline Chisholm then in Melbourne was one of those who joined in sending the petition.

The Rev. Thomas Heptonstall, of the Convent, Stanbrook, Worcester, provided Fr Rankin with the sum of £115.10.0 to meet the cost of the journey. The *James Baines*, one of the famous clippers, which greatly reduced the time sailing ships took to travel from England to Australia, left Liverpool on 4th August 1855 and arrived at Port Phillip on 23rd October 1855.

When he arrived, the Bishop being absent, Fr Rankin called on Rev. P.B. Geoghegan. He also made contact with Caroline Chisholm. He wrote to the Vicar-General on 26th October, in which he said: "I have the opportunity of going gratis to Kyneton, along with Mrs Captain Chisholm and son. My youngest sister and little nephew came along with me. I have a sister and family in Kyneton and another sister and family at Bendigo. Some of my former hearers reside at Kyneton and also my friend and Captain Chisholm. The trip will enable me to find out some of the scattered Highland tribe."

So he had the joy of meeting up again with his sister, of meeting with Captain Chisholm who he had known before — probably they were boys together at Sutherland, for Archie Chisholm was born there — and of renewing acquaintances with many Highlanders.

For a short time Fr Rankin acted as assistant at Geelong, then left for Portland on 13th May 1856. By June he was in Hamilton, whence he wrote to Very Rev. Dean Fitzpatrick V.G., St. Francis' Church, Melbourne, in which he said he had performed a few baptisms and a marriage during his brief stay in Geelong. In Hamilton he had board in a good Catholic home near the chapel, but he was dismayed with the few Catholics in the district and the poor Catholicity of some of them. He added, "The Lord of mercy crowns my humble

exertions with great success. I have had two converts and expect more by and by . . . I enjoy better health than in town. I am getting young and strong again."

His first Mass was celebrated in a tent on a block of ground nearly opposite the present Town Hall.

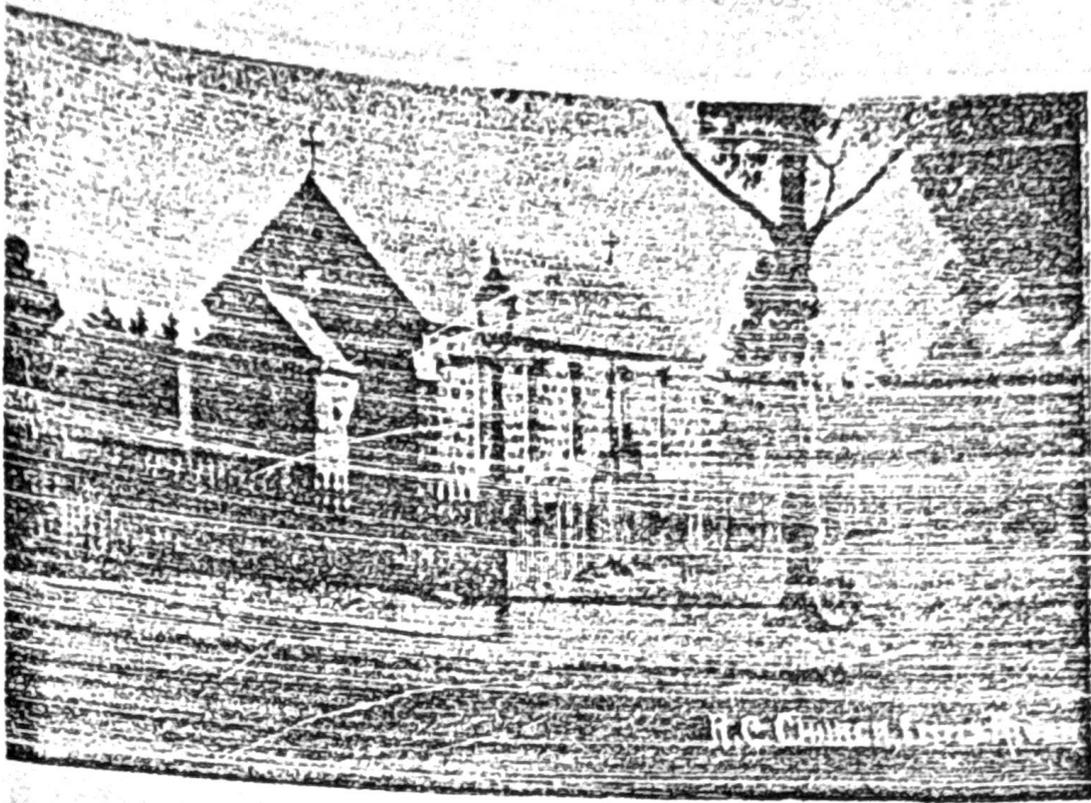
He wrote again on 4th August: "I find great difficulty in procuring a proper place of residence in this muddy township. Till now I was obliged to put up with very indifferent accommodation. I avoided renting a house because the rents are so high." He then went on to mention that a quantity of quarried stone was available at a very reasonable price, and asked permission for it to be purchased for the erection of a house. He would collect money for the purpose. The Bishop gave permission, "providing it did not involve the mission in debt."

Ranald Rankin moved to Ballarat in November 1856, where again he met former parishioners, and there he stayed until February 1857. Shortly afterwards he was appointed to Keilor, and later for a short time was on the staff of St. Francis, Melbourne.

In 1857 he was appointed first (and only) priest at Little River. His mission extended to and beyond Werribee and to Steiglitz in the other direction. He opened a school at Little River on 5th April 1858, and also a school at Steiglitz. He was responsible for building a church at Little River in 1857, a fine stone building. This was replaced by the present brick church in 1922, but the original foundation stone is set in the gable end above the porch. Mrs Betty Shaw of Little River has located the site where his home stood, and reports that it still has pear and quince trees which he planted.

His health began to fail, and he became seriously ill on 10th February 1863, and on Saturday, 14th February he died in the arms of his sister. This was probably Christina, who was keeping house for him. On Sunday inhabitants of Little River thronged to take a last look at one who served them so faithfully.

Parishioners took his body to Geelong on Monday morning, where a service was held in St. Mary's Church. On his coffin were his biretta and stole. At 11 a.m. a Solemn Requiem Mass was celebrated by Dean Hayes, assisted by the Rev. Mr O'Dwyer. At 2.00p.m. the cortege moved from the Church to East Geelong Cemetery, eight priests preceding the hearse which was followed by the mourning coaches in which were the four sisters of Fr Rankin, his nephews and other relatives. About 400 mourners followed on foot, and



Fr. Rankin's Church, Little River

60 vehicles, in which were many leading townsmen, brought up the rear.

At the Cemetery the coffin was carried by Little River parishioners to the Mortuary Chapel, which had been erected in memory of Rev. Fr O'Brien of Geelong, and the body was lowered in the grave near where Fr O'Brien had been buried.

There are quite a few descendants of Rev. Ranald Rankin's sisters in Victoria, and elsewhere in Australia.

FURTHER COMMISSION ACQUISITIONS

From *Mr. & Mrs. R. McGowan*, Blackburn: Two copies of *Our Mary Book*, promoted by the Marian Literature Gold Medal Competitions.

Catholic Library Archæology Series Volume II and Volume III.

From *Mrs A. O'Kearney*:

French Prayer Book, formerly the property of Rev. Walter Ebsworth (dec.).

From *The Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart*, Mary's Mount, Balwyn:

Pontifical Candlestick, Jug and Bowl, formerly the property of Bishop Gerard Vesters M.S.C.

From *Mr. Denis J. Cleary*, Queensland:

History of St. Thomas' Parish, Camp Hill, Queensland. Golden Jubilee 1927-1977.

From *The Vincentian Fathers*, Malvern:

Bound volumes of the American Ecclesiastical Record, 1895-1941, with a few gaps.

March 1979 Vol.3 No.7

(Note: The story of Rev. Ranald Rankin's sisters and their descendants, together with the story of Rev. Ranald Rankin, is told much more fully in a forthcoming book which Rev Eric G. Clancy is writing on his Clancy forebears).

From *Miss K.P. Rankin*, Armadale:

Unbound typescript of the Life of Archbishop Thomas Joseph Carr D.D., Melbourne 1886-1917, by Mr. Donald Hamilton Rankin, M.A., M.Ed., her father.

Unbound typescript of *The Philosophy & History of Catholic Education in Victoria 1840-1890*, incomplete, by the late D.H. Rankin, M.A., M.Ed.

From *Miss Christine Daffy*, Melbourne:

Article, Material & Programme of Music for Jubilee Celebrations of St. Francis' Church, Melbourne, November 2nd - 25th 1979, at St. Francis' Church.

From *Archbishop T.F. Little D.D.*, Melbourne:

Letter (original) from Cardinal Moran, Sydney, N.S.W., to Archbishop Carr, Melbourne, 17th July 1857, forwarding a copy of a document from Rome, 8th August 1876, altering slightly and setting out in detail the boundaries of the Archdiocese of Melbourne.