

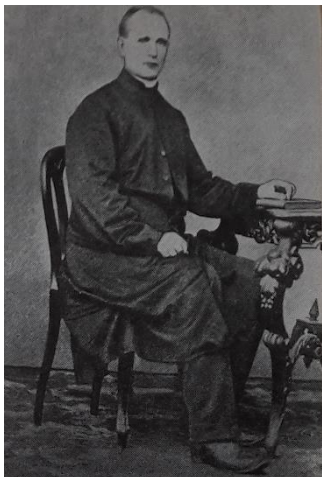
Leckroy – Father Coll MacDonald

An extract from THE NEW ZEALAND TABLET of 20th June 1890 regarding Father Coll -

THE LATE REV. COLL MACDONALD, FORT-AUGUSTUS.

(From a Highland paper.)

ON Thursday December 5th, 1889, the grave closed over the remains of a prominent Brae-Lochaber man—Rev. Father Coll of Fort-Augustus. Father Coll was interred in the ancient Roman Catholic burying ground at Killechurril. He was a pupil of Blarour School, under the celebrated Gaelic scholar and teacher, Mr. James Munro. Father Coll may appropriately be called an eminent Scotsman. He was very widely known, and universally liked both by high and low. Naturally a keen sportsman, he was wont to enjoy a day on the moor or in the forest with gun or rifle, or on the river with his rod, whenever the duties of his sacred office would admit. The memory of the “big priest” (an sagart mor) as he was generally known in his native district, will be long cherished by Lochaber people.—*R.I.P.*



This memorial, one of many, neatly sums-up a remarkable Highland Priest who made an impression in the Western Highlands during difficult social upheavals in the 19th century.

This is the only known photo of Father Coll, born at Leckroy in 1812 and died at Fort Augustus in 1889. The image is from an article by Solicitor Alexander Campbell, a great nephew of Father Colls. It was published in The Scots Magazine of June 1959

The House Site at Leckroy where Fr Coll and family lived is still pointed out today, although their remains only a smattering of overgrown stones next to the river Roy.

The house site in Leckroy where Fr Coll was born – On the left about 1990, the right 2022



Leckroy - LEACHD ROY...1831 map of the Duke of Gordons Lordship of Lochaber

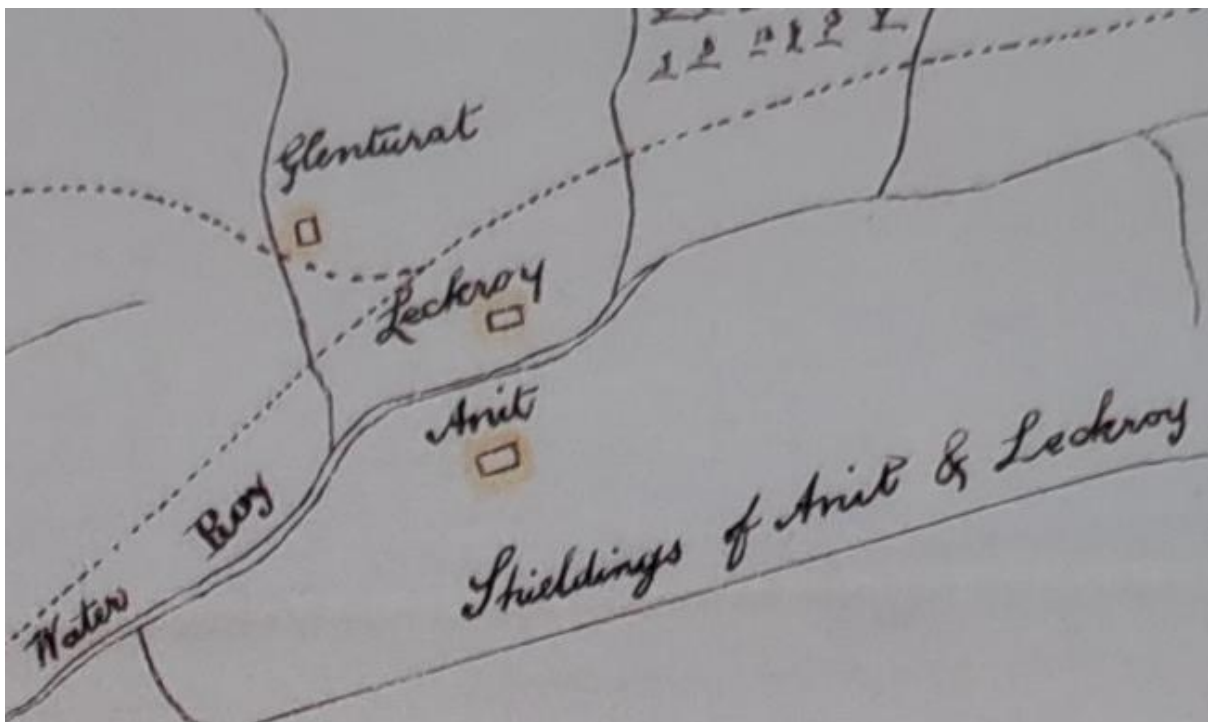


This map was prepared in 1831 for the sale of the Dukes Lochaber Estate - Leckroy is situated at the end of Glen Roy as you take the track towards the confluence of the Rivers Roy and Spey and ultimately to Garvamore and Badenoch

It is bordered to the North by Lovat's Abertarf property, to the West by the farm of Glenturret (GLEN TURRAD) and the south by the River Roy and across it the farm of Annat (Anad).

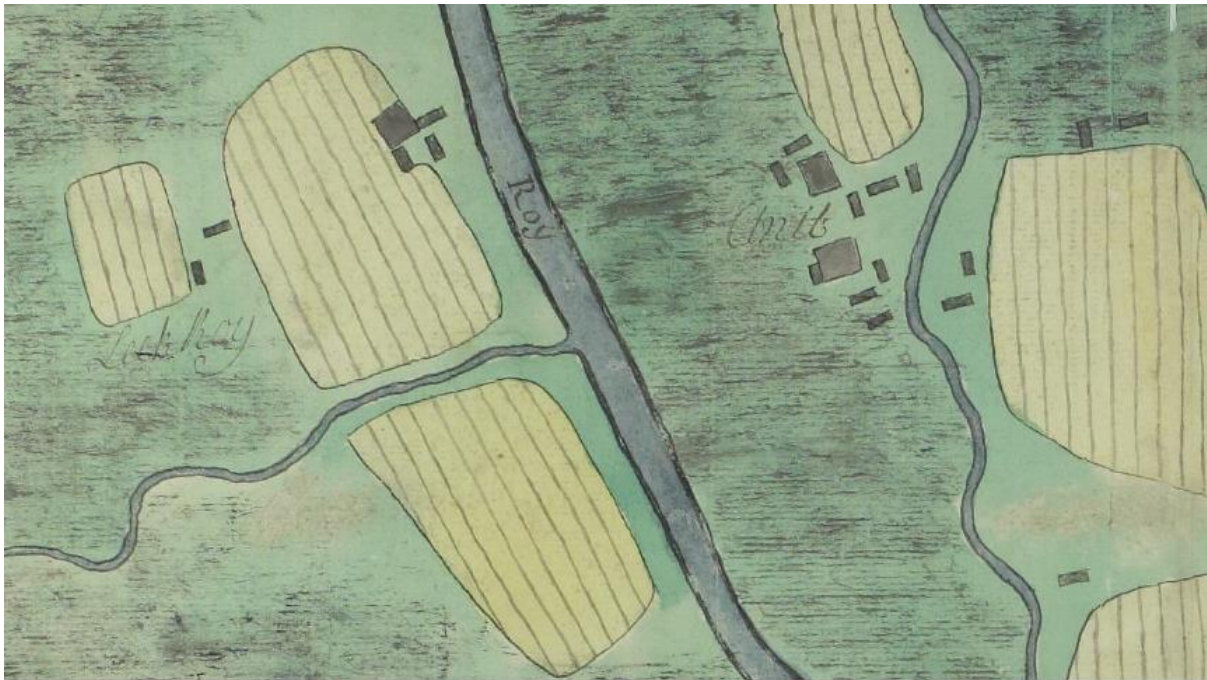
The dwellings of Laechd ruaigh and Anad are shown ringed in red.

Leckroy - Sketch of Lochaber in 1803 showing the Dukes farms by Mr Klinksdale.



A clear indication of the location of Leckroy relative to Glenturat and Anit at the head of Glen Roy. The dotted lines indicate **all good & pafsable roads** on the map, to the right the road to Garvamore, from the bottom left through Glen Roy and upwards past Glenturat into Glen Gloy

Plan of Leek Roy and Anit 1767.



Sketches were made in 1767 of the Dukes Lordship of Lochaber townships, with brief notes on its location and the extent of arable land as well as hill pasture and Shielings.

An interesting note on the map states – ***The Corn Lands nearest to Roy Water on Both Tacks is good the upper fields are shallow and gravelly.***

Leckroy Inhabitants -

1778 - List of the men residing on the Duke of Gordons Property in the Lordship of Lochaber comprehending all the Able Bodied Men between the Ages of Sixteen and Sixty Years. ~

Leckroy consisting of One Merk Land and a half ~

Donald Cameron
Martin Cameron
Duncan Cameron } Joint Tacksmen
John Cameron Servant to Duncan Cameron

Camerons were the dominant occupiers of Leckroy and neighbouring Annat for the next 30 plus years with Duncan Cameron recorded as Tacksman in 1782 & 1783. The infamous Donald Og Cameron was Tacksman of half the lands of Leckroy in 1785. William Cameron in Leckroy was sequestrated in 1809, he had been recorded there in 1801.

At the Western edges of the Lordship of Lochaber in 1809, Donald MacDonald was principal Tacksman of the Farm & Public House Highbridge, his subtenant Angus MacDonald was a younger brother of Donald, living at Highbridge with his aged mother. They were Cranachan MacDonalds, a sept of the MacDonalds/MacDonells of Keppoch, who were later described as Donald and Angus **Drochaid** (bridge), probably so described because of their time at Highbridge. Donald Drochaid had built an Inn at Gordonsburgh in 1805 and was living there

in 1809. He is remembered as the grandfather of the first Australian born Saint, Mary MacKillop. Later papers in 1809 record that both Donald and Angus were to be removed from Highbridge.

Angus probably moved to Leckroy around this time and it was in Leckroy that his son Coll MacDonald was born in 1814. His mother was Mary MacDonald, known as **Mairi Bheag an Doctair**, the daughter of Dr Donald MacDonald, 5th of Cranachan. Angus and Mary had 5 children - Coll, Donald, Catherine, Mary and the youngest Clementina. The family moved across the hills to the Inn at Garvamore when Angus took over as Innkeeper.

Coll's life, both before and after he was ordained, is shown in more detail with the excerpts from –

1 – His obituary in the 1890 edition of the Catholic Directory

2 – An article referred to earlier in the Scots Magazine of 1959

3 – The braes of Lochaber – Community Newspaper Vol, 13 Issues 3&4 2017 – By “An Bodach”

It is noted that Father Coll decided to become a Priest after the untimely death of a favourite/youngest sister Clementina. She married Allan MacDonald merchant Unachan on 16th Feb 1838 as recorded in the Kilmonivaig Parish Register –

Mar 11 Allan Macdonald merchant Unachan of this Parish to Clementina Macdonald Parish of Laggan Badenoch married 16 th inst
" 25 James Rutherford Shepherd Letterfearna to Ann Cowan both within this Parish married 29 th inst.

JAMES MUNRO SES. CLK.

Their son Angus was born on the 16th September 1839 as recorded in the Bunroy Catholic Register –

1839 Sept 16th Angus the lawful son of Allan Macdonald and Clementina Macdonald Bridge of Aonachan was born on the 16th and baptised on the 17th of September. Angus Macdonald sponsor.
Allan-Merchant Unachan Donald Forbes. Ms. Ap.

Unachan/Bridge of Aonachan – now Spean Bridge. It seems that Clementina died after the birth of her son Angus, by 1841 Allan was on his own in Unachan sharing with Peter MacFarlane and his family. It was thought by Lochaber historians that Clementina may have died with her child during the birth, but more recent findings has shown the son was with his grandparents in Clianaig in 1841 and there are many descendants in the UK and elsewhere.

Coll entered Blairs to commence his studies on the 7th September 1841, Rome and the College of Propaganda on 29th July 1845 and finally ordained in Rome on the 30th March 1850.

Referring once more to “THE NEW ZEALAND TABLET of 20th June 1890 regarding Father Coll” –

Mr. Macdonald had good natural gifts, which were well cultivated in his youth. He was fond of telling of the time he spent as a student in Rome, and among other memories, he used to speak with pleasure of his companionship in those days with that distinguished man whom we know as Cardinal Newman. The early friendship was not forgotten in the later years, and, widely separated as the two ecclesiastics were in the scenes and associations of life, an occasional correspondence by letter was always kept up between them. Those who remember Mr. Macdonald half a century ago, say that he was a strikingly handsome man, and he retained to old age a massive splendour of appearance, like an old Scotch pine tree. His studies in theology were so successful as to make him a first-rate polemic as a champion of his Church and her doctrines.

John Henry Newman (1801 – 1890) was a Roman Catholic theologian, philosopher and cardinal who converted to Roman Catholicism from Anglicanism in Oct 1845. In early life, he was a major figure in the Oxford Movement to bring the Church of England back to its roots. Eventually his studies in history persuaded him to become a Roman Catholic priest, and he has now become a Saint, having been canonised on 13 October 2019. In 1991.

In 1854 Fr Coll was transferred to Fort William and while there he built St Mary's as shown below from a historical account of St Mary's Fort William 15th August 1923. – ***“Then from July, 1854, to 1871 we have Fr. Coll MacDonal, by whom the present church was built. In 1871 there was an exchange of parishes between Fr, Coll and Fr. John MacDonal, Fort Augustus”***



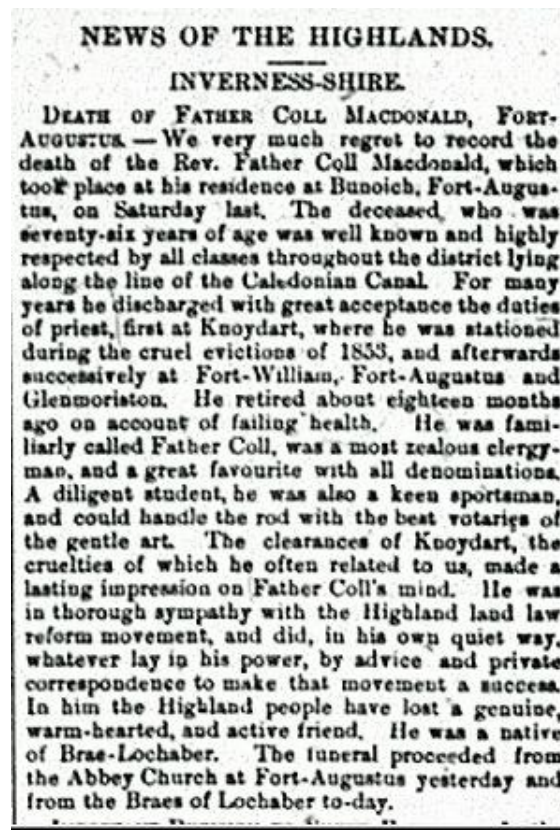
A fine memorial.

During Father Coll's time in Fort Augustus he saw the establishment of the Benedictine Monastery at the old site of the 18th century Fort. His own church and house was later a Convent and now a private home. His elderly Mother stayed with him in Fort Augustus, she died at the Chapel House there on the 19th January 1875, aged 91. She is buried in Cille Choirill, the location can be seen at the end of the Catholic Directory obituary for Fr Coll below.

The edition of the "Scottish Highlander" on the 5th July 1888 carries a report on the retirement of Fr Coll –

Fort Augustus – Presentation to THE Rev Father Coll MacDonald. – On Thursday, the 21st ult, the Rev Coll MacDonald, C.C. was, on the occasion of his retirement from the active superintendence of his charge, presented with a purse of over 40 sovereigns, subscribed by all classes in the district, as an expression of their esteem and good-will. The presentation took place in the Monastery, and the large company present was presided over by the Prior.

Only 17 months later the Scottish Highlander of the 5th December 1889 was reporting the death of Father Coll –



The Inverness Courier of May 13th 1898 reported progress on "The Father Coll Memorial", a committee having been appointed by the RC communities of Lochaber and Fort Augustus, for the purpose of erecting a monument to the memory of the late Father Coll.

"As Father Coll was highly esteemed by all denominations throughout the Western Highlands"

Is this the monument that sits over his lasting resting place in Cille Choirill?

Rev. Coll MacDonald who died at Fort Augustus, on the 30th day of November, 1889, in the 78th year of his age, and the 40th of his priesthood.

Coll MacDonald, known for many years throughout the Highlands by the familiar title of "Father Coll", was born at Lickroy, in Lochaber on 6th February 1812. He received his early education at the school of Blarour, at that time taught by Mr Munro, whose reputation as a Gaelic scholar extended far beyond his native glen, and to whom the future missionary was, doubtless, indebted for that complete mastery over the Celtic tongue which afterwards distinguished him. The young student's first ambition appears to have been to qualify himself for the position of an officer of excise; and it was the impression made upon his mind by the death of a favourite sister, when he was growing up to manhood, that first turned his thoughts to an ecclesiastical career. He was thus considerably older than the majority of students for the priesthood when, on 7th September 1841, he entered Blairs College to begin the preliminary studies requisite for his state. On 29th July 1845, he was admitted to the College of Propoganda at Rome, where he remained for nearly five years. These, of course, included the stormy months of revolution which drove Pius IX from his throne, and threatened the very existence of every religious establishment in the Eternal City; and it is still on record that the cheerful and unfailing courage of the stalwart young Highland student did much, during those days of suspense and anxiety, to keep up the sometimes flagging spirits of his companions. Early in 1850, he was ordained to the priesthood and, returning to Scotland in June of the same year, he was stationed for a time at Canna. During the months that he remained here, although his health, which had been, to some extent, undermined by the treacherous Roman climate, was at this time far from good, he gave ample proofs of the missionary zeal which animated him. To quote only one instance, may be mentioned the fact of his crossing over on a Sunday morning from his island mission to the mainland (a distance of nearly forty miles), in an open boat, fasting, of course, and in weather more than threatening, in order to give the poor people of Knoydart an opportunity of attending Mass.

In June 1851, Father Coll was transferred from Canna to the wide and scattered mission of Knoydart, where he spent the succeeding four years of his ministry. They were years of trial and sorrow to both pastor and people; for it was shortly after his arrival at his new sphere of labour that the then proprietress of the immense Glengarry estates (of which Knoydart formed a part), commenced the series of wholesale evictions which caused such widescale suffering and distress throughout the country. Nearly a thousand members of Father Coll's poor and scattered flock were forcibly ejected from their poor holdings, their dwelling houses being torn down and burned, and the barns and byres in which they took refuge being pulled down about their ears. During these scenes of violence Father Coll never ceased to exert himself by every means in his power on behalf of his unfortunate people; and, when protest proved unavailing, he took active steps to organise a relief fund in their aid. Many of the emigrants he provided with food and clothing at his own expense; and for those who remained, now destitute and homeless, he procured tents as a temporary shelter, some seven or eight families being thus lodged for some time in his own small garden. In 1854, when the work of eviction was over, the number of Catholics in the district was reduced to little more than seventy. A resident priest was thus thought to be no longer necessary, and Father Coll was accordingly, in the following year, transferred to Fort William. His name, however, was not forgotten among those whom he had befriended; and, for many years, the newly arrived settlers in Canada were accustomed to baptise their sons by the familiar name of Coll, in memory of the kind pastor whom they had left behind them, in the Scottish Highlands.

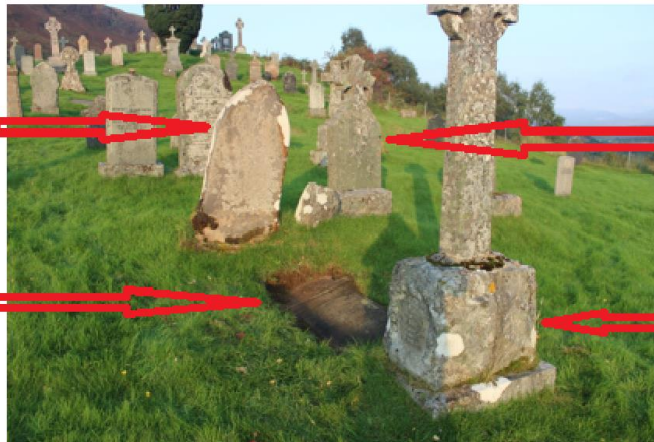
For upwards of fifteen years, Father Coll remained at Fort William, discharging, with unwearied assiduity, the duties of his sacred office. One substantial memorial of his ministry he left behind him at his departure, in the shape of the handsome church and commodious presbytery, the entire cost of which was defrayed by his efforts; but he also bequeathed to his flock the memory of a faithful pastor, a warm friend, and a wise counsellor. By his shrewd good sense, and ever active benevolence, Father Coll succeeded in winning the respect and esteem of more than his own co-religionists; and when at one time Bishop Murdoch contemplated removing him to the important mission of Paisley, it was proposed by some of the leading Protestants of the district to memorialise the bishop against the suggested change. The confidence felt in his sagacity and prudence was evinced a short time afterwards, when he was selected to proceed to Rome in connection with the difficult question of the nomination of a coadjutor bishop to the Western District.

In 1870 Father Coll was transferred from the mission of Fort William to that of Fort Augustus; and here he spent the last years of his life, ministering faithfully, as long as health and strength permitted, to the widely scattered Catholics of Fort Augustus, Glengarry and Glenmoriston, and held in respect and goodwill by his neighbours of every creed. He was for many years a member of the School and Parochial Boards both of Boleskine and Glengarry; and his colleagues were not slow to recognise the clear headiness, business capacity, and practical good sense that always distinguished him. In 1888 he resigned his charge into the hands of the Benedictine Fathers, who had a few years previously been established at Fort Augustus; and his friends hoped that he might still live to enjoy for some time the repose which he had so well earned. The end, however, was to come sooner than was anticipated. On the last Sunday of Pentecost, 1889, Father Coll preached in the Abbey Church, in Gaelic, with all his accustomed fluency and force, the subject of his discourse being the last judgement. On the Saturday evening following the feast of St. Andrew, he quietly breathed his last, retaining consciousness almost to the end, and consoled in his closing hours by the unremitting care of the Fathers of the Abbey, and the constant prayers of his former flock, who came in turns to watch round his dying bed. On the following Tuesday evening, the remains of the lamented priest were brought to the Abbey Church, the community meeting the procession as it reached the west door, and chanting the Subvenite as it entered the sacred edifice. A solemn Requiem Mass was chanted next morning, after which the coffin was conveyed by road to the Catholic Chapel in the Braes of Lochaber. Next day Requiem Mass was celebrated at 11 o'clock by the Rev. Father McDougall. The very Rev. Canon Mackintosh, Kinning Park, Glasgow, preached an eloquent discourse in the presence of a large and sympathetic congregation who had come from far and near, and of all denominations, to mark their esteem and love of the departed priest. After the absolutions, the remains were carried to the quiet graveyard of Killchaorieil, and placed in the grave pointed out by himself only a few weeks previously.

Fr Coll's Gravesite in Cille Choirill

**Fr Coll's Brother
Donald MacDonald
d. 19/1/1874**

**Fr Coll's Mother Mary
MacDonald
d. 19/1/1874**



**Fr Coll's 2nd cousin
John MacDonald
"Long John"
d. 26/10/1856**

**Fr Coll MacDonald
d. 1/12/1889**

Father Coll

By ALEX. M. CAMPBELL

In this brief sketch, the writer tries to outline the extraordinary influence of Father Coll MacDonald during a lifetime of service to his people in the Highlands. He was held in deep and abiding affection by Catholic and Protestant alike

HE was born on February 6, 1812, at Leacroy—a hamlet of some three houses, long since vanished, between Roy Bridge and Glen Turret, in Inverness-shire. His early education was received at a school near Spean Bridge, which at that time was conducted by an eminent Gaelic scholar, Robert Munro (a kinsman of my own). Like many another boy of that period, his schooling began late, and consequently finished late. He was in his eighteenth year when his old dominie deemed it wise to "turn him out into the world," as he put it. His intention, once schooldays were over, was to enter the Excise service, but in the meantime his parents moved from Leacroy to Laggan, in Badenoch, where they had taken over the inn.

Coll now changed his mind, deciding to stay at home and help his father with the business. Ten years passed. He was by now a somewhat wild and reckless young man and, possessed of enormous physical strength, he had no peer at Highland sports or on the shinty field. Then came a shattering blow. His favourite sister fell ill and died suddenly. He was heartbroken. Overnight, it was said, he became a changed man. In the morning he told his people that he had decided to enter the Church, and dedicate his life to the service of others.

Thus, despite the fact that he was now in his 29th year, he entered Blairs College in Aberdeen, and began his long and tedious studies, for he had much leeway to make up. As he remarked years later to my own people, "It was for me the midnight oil, but I stuck in." That was on September 7, 1841.

Four years later he went to Rome, and on March 30, 1850, he was ordained. Whilst in Rome he found himself in the thick of stirring events; the revolution of 1848; the siege of the city itself, and the flight of the Pope. During the attack on St Peter's he found himself lined up with others in front of the main entrance, the howling mob ready to advance. Tearing an iron bar from the hands of one of the leaders, he threatened to such purpose in Gaelic that the mob, overawed by this fearless and "wild-spoken" giant, gradually fell back, and eventually dispersed. "Man," he said to my father years afterwards, "I was clean carried away, and couldn't help myself."

Three months after his ordination he returned to Scotland. His first charge was on the Island of Canna, where he spent a year. Then he was transferred to Knoydart. There, his experiences in Rome, by an odd trick of fate, were repeated, although in a somewhat different form. At that time the "clearances" were in full

Father Coll MacDonald
(1812-1889).



swing, but in this case, at least, those responsible for them failed to reckon with a strong man's grim determination. He sought an audience with the estate factor, and when told that eight families would have to go, Father Coll said: "We'll see about that; if they do, sir, it will be over my dead body." Strong talk!

He summoned the families concerned to his church. In it he gave them sanctuary. Then off he went to Glasgow, returning a few days later with eight large tents. In them he housed the unfortunate people as best he could, and there they remained until the worst of the trouble was over and other accommodation was found. But the less fortunate ones had to go, and eventually, like hundreds more, found new homes—those of them who survived, that is—on various parts of Canada's eastern seaboard. Is it surprising, in view of all this, that to this very day there are "Colls" still being christened in Canada in honour of their forebears' champion in Knoydart?

In 1845, Father Coll was given charge of Fort William, with the oversight of Glenfinnan and Glencoe. But this man, of whom it was often

said that he never once confused principle with expediency, took everything in his stride, his gentle hands and gentler heart ministering to all in need, Protestants as well as those of his own flock. Whilst there he built the church and presbytery—these are now replaced by larger structures—and paid for them all entirely by his own efforts. Happily settled in Lochaber, things were running smoothly. But presently a dark cloud appeared. The Bishop of the Diocese, hearing wonderful reports of this energetic, yet withal, humble priest, decided he might well accomplish better work in a larger sphere, in Paisley.

When news of the Bishop's plan leaked out there was an uproar. The Protestants asked to be associated "body, soul and spirit," as one of their leaders said, with the form of protest that was to be immediately drawn up, imploring the Bishop to

leave Father Coll—their “beloved Father Coll”—with them. What could the Bishop do in face of that? So Father Coll remained.

But the parting finally came. It was on the first of June 1870. On that day Father Coll came to Fort Augustus. It was to be his last parish. Included in the charge were those of Glenmoriston and Glengarry as well. For the next eighteen years he worked unceasingly here, loved and honoured by all. Among his greatest friends and companions were ministers in the Protestant churches, and a special favourite was the Rev. Dr Thomas Sinton, minister of Glengarry. A dear old lady—86-year-old Mrs MacAskill, of Mandally, Invergarry—described to me “her happiest memory of Father Coll.” The occasion was the Jubilee of Queen Victoria. Like all other villages up and down the country, Invergarry had its own special Highland gathering in honour of the day. “I can still see it all,” Mrs MacAskill told me, “Father Coll and Mrs Sinton, the minister’s wife, led the procession to the sports field, arm-in-arm, like everybody else and laughing and joking all the time.”

Like many another Highland cleric, Father Coll was a keen angler, and was frequently invited to fish on the rivers Oich, Garry and

Moriston. One day on the Garry he was accompanied—as usual—by Mr Ellice’s most experienced gillie, who was, in fact, Mrs MacAskill’s father. The day was bitterly cold, and the salmon hard to lure. It looked like being an “all-blank.”

At last Father Coll reeled up, laid his rod aside, and opened his prayer-book. The gillie lit his pipe, knowing full well he would have plenty of time for a smoke. Presently the priest, his devotions over, started to fish again. Hardly had his fly touched the water than he was into a salmon. It was duly landed. In traditional manner, too, the event was properly celebrated. Casting over the same spot again, he hooked and landed another. Then a third, all within the hour. Meanwhile, not a word had passed between priest and gillie. With three good fish in the bag, they called it a day. Turning to go, Father Coll, with a twinkle in his eye, remarked: “Man, who says there is no power in prayer.”

Another story is told of his reply to one of his greatest friends, the Rev. Francis MacBain, Fort Augustus. They met at the Canal Bridge one hot summer day. “Man,” said the minister, jokingly, “how long would it take you to get me out of purgatory?” Back came the retort: “Man, I would have to get you into it first.” Of course, all this was



Father Coll's chapel and chapel house at Fort Augustus.

spoken in Gaelic, and unfortunately much of the subtlety is largely lost in the translation.

Only on one occasion was Father Coll ever at a loss for an answer. It happened at Lochunagan Inn, near Fort Augustus. (This inn ceased to function as such about 75 years ago.) At that time the innkeeper, Angus Chisholm, a Strathglass man, was troubled by a drunkard who was the bane of every innkeeper's life for miles around. On this particular day, Angus found the man lying drunk in a stall in his byre. Wondering what to do he went out to the nearby road to think things over.

Just then he saw Father Coll approach in his pony and trap. He hailed him, and explained what was wrong. Together they entered the byre, and the (now) old priest, stooping over the drunk man, said: "In the name of God, man, what are you doing there? Are you not afraid you will catch your death lying on the cobbles like a beast of the field?"

At first there was no response, but in a little while the inebriated one raised himself on an elbow and, peering owlshly at the priest, delivered himself of what Father Coll afterwards described as "this broadside," "Well, it's like this, I would count it an honour indeed to meet my death in the same kind of place in which my Saviour was born." Turning away, Father Coll remarked to his companion, "What could I say to that?"

My last story is about that purely Highland gift, second-sight, a subject that has had much ink spilt over it, one way or another, for many, many years. Here, then, is a factual case, in which Father Coll was involved. One day he was driving, this time alone, to visit certain sick in the parish, on the old road that skirts Fort Augustus Cemetery. Nearing

this historic burial place, he gave a lift to a local man, a Protestant, going the same way.

Hardly had they settled themselves in the trap than the priest's companion seized his arm, and, pointing towards the cemetery with shaking hand, he said: "God bless me, it's Seonaid Dhubh" (Black Janet). Now the curious thing about this manifestation was that Father Coll, never doubting his own eyes, saw Seonaid too, and remarked: "Well, well, this is indeed strange. What can she be doing here, for as you know she is over ninety years of age, and not able to walk all that distance from home—a good two miles." Suddenly Seonaid vanished.

Father Coll, who had never doubted his companion's reputation of being in possession of "the gift," immediately turned back, and made with all speed for Janet's home. On the way he was met by a messenger who bore the news that Janet's son, Gillespie, who had for many years led a wastrel's life in the south, had that day returned home in a dying condition. When Father Coll reached the small, black house, Janet herself met him at the door.

"Thank God you're here, Father," she said, "you're in time."

Father Coll stepped inside. A glance showed how things were, and as the last rites were being administered, the wayward one died.

Father Coll died on November 30, 1880. He was buried in the ancient ground of Killiechurrel, near Roy Bridge, where a memorial cross in stone marks the grave. There are three inscriptions on it, in Latin, English and Gaelic.

Father Coll's worldly possessions were few. But what he considered his greatest possession in the worldly sense, his chair, is to this day carefully preserved in a house in Fort Augustus.

From The Braes of Lochaber - 2017

John Prebble wrote of Fr. Coll's time in in Knoydart "By 1853 there were only seventy families (left) in his parish but all the people Protestant or Roman loved him. Half a century later the children of Glengarry in Australia and Canada were still calling their sons Coll in his memory."

Fr Coll MacDonald was parish priest in Knoydart for three short years 1851 to 1854 but they were the years of the terrible clearances. As the estate's men turned the people from their homes, breaking the rooftrees and burning the thatch and the contents of their modest homes, it was Fr Coll who almost alone cared for the old and the infirm giving them such shelter as he could in the church grounds at his little church and house at Sandaig. It was also Fr Coll who together with the advocate and journalist Donald Ross stirred the conscience of the nation and brought help – food, blankets and tents to the few of his parishioners who had survived the potato famine and now sought to survive the servants of Glengarry's widow.

Fr Coll was unusual amongst highland priests at this time - or at any time. A son of the Braes, he was born at Leckroy in 1812. His father Angus was one of the Drochaid MacDonalds, so named because they had managed the little Inn at High Bridge. One of the family, Donald, emigrated to Australia where his son, another Donald, was to keep the Royal Oak hotel in Penola and to be friend and supporter of their niece St. Mary Mackillop. Angus also went into the hotel trade when in about 1830 he took over the Drover's Inn at Garvamore on the upper Spey. Coll, aged 18, went with him. He was already a big strong man good at the shinty and at the outdoor sports he was to enjoy throughout his life. Years later when he was priest in Fort William, he was described by the Rev. MacIntyre as "having an unmortified fondness for venison of his own killing" and later, when taking part in a shoot in Glen Roy, as having been "a great hunter from his earliest days." His prowess as a fisherman was also remarked on by all who knew him.

After nine years at Garvamore, Coll decided that he wanted to become a priest. It is believed that this apparently surprising decision was brought about by the early death of his favourite sister. His ambition at the unusually late age of 28 was

supported by a letter to the Bishop from his friend and priest in Laggan Fr Ranald Rankin, later to go to Australia to minister to Moidart exiles there. "His age is the great and only objection. He is keen to learn and possessed of great abilities....Physical powers are not to be disregarded in a laborious Highland mission and you evidently want a few Grenadiers."

Fr Coll - Part 2

Coll studied at the Catholic Seminary at Blairs and then was sent to Rome, not to the Scots College there, but to the prestigious College for the Propagation of the Faith where he was consecrated priest in March 1850. Already, however, he had made his mark in the church. The forces of the Risorgimento were besieging the papal enclave at the Vatican and a contemporary describes Coll facing the mob "tearing an iron bar from one of their leaders and threatening them to such purpose in Gaelic that they dispersed."

After a year in Canna where he will have learned some seamanship, Fr Coll was appointed to Knoydart in June 1851. Those three years must have been a terrible ordeal for the newly ordained priest and his next appointment to Fort William must have offered a welcome change from the shattered parish in Knoydart. He was to stay there for 17 years and will have felt at home there with his kinsmen from the Braes both as visitors and in his congregation. He built a new church (now the HIE offices in Gordon Square) and Presbytery and will have been happy and busy with the growing community, his new church and the school next door. Once again, however, he was to come in to the limelight beyond Lochaber.

Tensions in Glasgow where the Irish community were lobbying for one of their own, the co-adjutor bishop James Lynch, to succeed Bishop Gray meant that Rome had to get an independent judgment from Scotland. Fr Coll, parish priest from Fort William was called to the Vatican. He had studied there and was clearly seen as the impartial voice that was needed. Bishop Lynch was given an appointment in Ireland; an apostolic administrator was sent to Glasgow and Fr Coll returned to his parish in Fort William.

Fort Augustus was Fr Coll's next and last appointment and it may have been seen as one that offered a lighter workload. He went there in 1871 but his peace was to be disturbed a few years later by the arrival of a group of Benedictine monks to establish a monastery in the buildings of the old fort. John Wilson, the schools inspector, was a fishing friend of Fr Coll and went with him to a ceremony at the monastery. Fr Coll was unimpressed and "belittled the whole affair... he had no love for the monks whom he regarded as interlopers poaching, as he said, in his special sphere of labour". His Presbyterian friends would say that Fr Coll was a highland priest, unlike these incomers from the south. Or again, "Fr Coll MacDonald had the lax and easy ways of the old Highland Romanists." He died in Fort Augustus in 1889 and is buried in Cille Choirill.

BYGONE
BRAES