

Children's Camps at Lochailort 1948 -1966

This is a summary of some of the articles to be found in collection D271/F/3 at the Highland Council Archives in Fort William. Some were photocopied by GC Barr in 2016 and can be viewed at the display house of Comann Eachdraidh Mùideart in Glenuig, Moidart.

The collection has a picture of 7 girls, 3 boys and an adult. Most of the children have their hands in praying position. The girls have religious white clothing and all are smiling. The picture is not dated. (DSCF0556).

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The earliest document in the collection is dated 1949 and entitled "Report of the Catholic Women's League Camp held at Inverailort Castle 1949". It begins :-

" It is not generally realised in England that most Catholic children in the Highlands of Scotland, an un-breached stronghold of the Faith until the coming of the railway, are obliged to attend non-Catholic schools on reaching the age of twelve. In order to satisfy the requirements of modern educational legislation and at the same time to profit from the increased opportunities of secondary education, a boy or girl living in an isolated croft or a small community must travel daily to the nearest secondary school, which in most cases has no Catholic teacher on its staff. In cases of extreme remoteness, the child is unable to live at home, and is boarded out with foster parents in the town in which the school is situated. For the Catholic boy or girl, therefore, the secular benefits of improved State education are obtained only at the expense of the spiritual training normally given in a Catholic school and in some cases the support of the Catholic home background has to be sacrificed as well.

In order to offset this danger to the Faith, the Catholic Women's League of Scotland has begun an experiment of organising a yearly holiday camp which is free to Catholic Highland children. The first camp was held last year and was a mixed camp for boys and girls. The venture was so successful that a second camp was held this year during the month of August at Inverailort Castle, Inverness-shire; an ideal situation, set amidst scenes of the wildest loveliness in the heart of the western Highlands. The success of both camps has been due largely to the self-sacrificing and personal organisation ability of the hostess, Mrs. Cameron-Head.

This year, two camps were organised in consecutive weeks for girls and boys separately. The purpose of the camps was to give the children a happy holiday which they could remember with pleasure, and, at the same time to weave into it a thread of spiritual training which they would be able to work into their own lives apart from the camp; the final memory to be remembered in an atmosphere of happiness, comradeship and unity in serving One Master, essentially Catholic.

The instruction given was influenced in method by the holiday atmosphere and the children were not required to listen passively for long periods. There was a daily Mass at 8.30 a.m. and various experiments were tried with the object of assisting the children to understand the essential nature of the Sacrifice and to follow its structure and development in the prayers and actions of the priest.

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The understanding of the Mass was also the theme of the main period of daily instruction which lasted for three quarters of an hour each morning. A model altar was set up, complete with all the requirements for saying Mass. Each day, the priest went through a section of the Mass..... The enthusiasm shown by the boys in following the detail of the Mass and their real desire to serve on the altar were startling indication of the natural power of the Mass to capture the imagination of the young. The girls were particularly interested in the vestments and in learning how to fold them and put them on.....

There were, however, several examples of children who lacked an understanding of even the most fundamental ideas of the Faith; this was depressingly true of children boarded out in unsatisfactory homes. The main danger was seen to be the unquestioning acceptance by some of the children of Protestant prayers and Protestant ideas as a part of the natural experience gained through the influence of a non-Catholic environment. A number of children had to be taught to un-say the Lord's Prayer and to say the Our Father. One boy, aged seven, danced with delight when he saw the priest paddling in the sea, and expressed his appreciation of this revolt against the Calvinist propriety by exclaiming "Look, Look! the minister's in the water".

This half hour with the catechists concluded the formal instruction for the day and three quarters of an hour remained in the morning for games such as football and rounders. The afternoon was given over to outdoor activities; stalking, route finding and treasure hunting in the hills for the boys and similar but less hardy adventures for the girls. Basket-ball proved a great indoor favourite on wet afternoons.

In the evening, all except the very youngest children, were given special activities, questions on the day's instructions, quiz competitions, indoor games, story reading. The final activity of the day was a short talk in the chapel by the priest, usually indicating the means of stories and thought pictures the application of a particular virtue to daily life, and this was followed by a very happy Benediction, with boys all over the altar. Then an individual visit to the shrine in the sleeping hut before retiring so as to form the habit of a final 'Hail Mary'. During the girls' camp the evening routine contained more active games and Benediction was held before the evening meal, so that night prayers were said communally at the shrine with the priest.

The routine was varied on occasions by a Sunday picnic to the sea-shore and by final night celebrations. Particularly noteworthy were the playlets on saints' lives written and acted by the girls.

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The numbers attending were small, twenty girls and sixteen boys; and of these only a few were children with really unsatisfactory Catholic backgrounds. In future years, it is hoped that every effort will be made by organisers and parish priests to ensure that those children who really need encouragement and support, attend the camp wherever possible."

There is also an article "Catechism in Camp" written by M.M. Bate in the collection. "A pioneer experiment in bringing instruction in the Faith to Catholic children in the remote parts of Scotland is being made by the Scottish Association of Our Lady's Catechists. This was founded in 1949 by the Scottish Catholic Women's League, who on account of the conditions obtaining in Scotland, made a great deal of use of the Children's Postal Course and now for the past three years, have run a Holiday Camp at Inverailort, Inverness-shire in connection with it.

The Inverailort camp last year lasted full nine days with an extra day at each end for travelling. To it came twenty-eight children, who represented with five exceptions, those who had already been to one or more camps before; while this year we intend to make a special effort to increase the numbers, and hope that a proportion will be new arrivals, the building up of the familiar - and enthusiastic - nucleus, has great advantages.

Another important point concerns the building up of a tradition of coming to summer camp in certain parishes; at the present moment, the great majority come from around Kingussie or from the Beaully and Kirkhill district.

Each year the ages ranged from seven to fifteen, with the inevitable complication both in organising the teaching and the amusements. For the former, the camp was split up into three groups; those aged ten and downwards were taught by Miss McKenna, who is headmistress of a Catholic school in England, and has many years experience of teaching small children. She

brought with her a series of film slides, both religious and secular, and her teaching largely revolved around them. She is a born story-teller. The middle group of children were taught by Miss Vera Bowie, while Father O'Neill took the older ones, who also joined in a new venture involving discussions at bed-time.

Obviously, we want the children to enjoy themselves, and the last thing we wish to produce is an impression of a return to school several weeks too early; great tact is therefore needed in filling the children with enough but not too much instruction. The experience of living in the camp itself is valuable, most particularly is this seen in contrasting the behaviour in chapel at the beginning and the end. Without any particular instruction on this point, the amount of reverence shown increases as the children become accustomed, for instance, to attending Benediction.

As before, the organisers were most anxious that both boys and girls should take as much part as possible themselves; Miss Molyneux Seel continued her Sacristy instruction for the older girls, while the boys took in hand the teaching of each other to serve, three or four who serve regularly at home being the instructors. At one class, while two experts were through the actions with one group, there being the inevitable rivalry as to who should act the Priest, another closeted himself in turn with four of the nine and ten year olds, hearing them say the Latin words.

The amusement side of the camp went on as before, although as in everything else, the organisers are themselves learning each year, and the games were much less organised than in the first year or so.

Father O'Neill, the Chaplain, both taught and played with the children. He was assisted by six lay helpers. There is no need to emphasise the amount of work done for the camps by our hostess, Mrs. Cameron-Head. Mrs. Stirling was not only often at the camp while it was running, but had done a considerable part of the preparatory correspondence and organisation for it.

The only paid helper, especially brought in from outside, was the cook; her normal job is to provide the dinners at Arisaig school, so she was well-used to coping with large numbers. Then there was Mr. Cameron-Head's "George", whose function it is impossible to describe, as he was preparer of camp, night watchman for the boys, driver of cars to fetch supplies and general organiser of meals, to mention only a few of his metamorphoses.

This picture may not be very clear. It is an attempt to show some of the things which were aimed at by the 1951 camp, as well as some of the problems the organisers are attempting to solve. There is obviously a great deal of improvement still to be made, but the idea is alive. It must be a slow growing one, and there has already been some achievement."

The collection has a document which describes the types of children encouraged to attend the Summer Schools :-

- "1) Good Catholic separated geographically from the parish by the husband's work.
- 2) Children "in care", either in state-run non-catholic houses or fostered in non-catholic homes.
- 3) Homes where both parents are Catholic but have some quarrel or marital problems with the Church and therefore do very little or nothing for their own children's faith.
- 4) The home of a mixed marriage where the Catholic parent's faith has become, or perhaps always was, very vague and is now indifferent."

The records contain an account of applying for a child to go to the camp :-

"The 1961 Catholic Camp at Inverailort for boys and girls.

The annual camp will take place at Inverailort, near Fort William. The dates are Tuesday, August 1st to Thursday 10th August.

The camp is meant to combine a short course of religious instruction with a really happy holiday. It hopes to care for those children who live in areas where the Catholic population is small and scattered; who do not, therefore, have the advantage of going to a Catholic school. A Chaplain will be at the camp, and lessons will be given by three qualified teachers, the Misses Bowie and Miss Cameron-Head.

Although the purpose of the camp is essentially most serious and it is hoped that a week in a Catholic atmosphere does something to influence those who come, the children manage to enjoy themselves, very much indeed; they go at least one expedition to the sea; there are picnics and all manner of games, as well as dancing and acting. Their health is supervised by a qualified nurse.

The fees are :-

One child	35/-
Two children from the same family	45/-
Three children from the same family	50/-

The fees do not include the fares to and from the camp, which the parents are expected to pay."

The collection shows a number of timetables for children attending :-

7.30am	Morning Bell
8.15am	Leave Camp for Chapel
8.30am	Mass
9.15am	Breakfast
10.15 - 10.30am	Instruction
10.30 - 11am	Class
11 - 11.45am	Choir
11.45am - 12.30pm	Class
12.30 - 1pm	Mass serving Sacristy work, etc.
1.15pm	Lunch
1.45 - 2.30pm	Rest
2.30 - 5.30pm	Recreation
5.30pm	Supper
6.30pm	Leave Camp for Chapel
6.45pm	Benediction
7.15 - 8pm	Wait Instruction
8pm	Cocoa and Night Prayers
8.15pm	Bed
8.45pm	Lights out."

Meals served between Thursday August 4th and Wednesday August 10th are described.

Breakfast for six of the days at 9.15am was 'Porridge, Bread, Marmalade, Paste, Tea'. On the Sunday Bacon took the place of Porridge and on the Wednesday "Cooked Breakfast" took the place of Porridge.

Lunches were taken at 1pm. Three Lunches had stew + Potatoes + carrots or "boiled onions" or "lettuce". One day there was Fish Pie and on another Mince. There was also a sweet e.g. Apple Charlotte, stewed plums & Custard, Chocolate Pudding.

Tea at 6.30pm had on two of the days Sausages and fried bread, Kippers on one day, Baked Beans on another, Macaroni cheese on another, and Black Pudding on another. These were accompanied by bread, jam and tea.

At 8.30pm Cocoa was served every day.

In 1962 British Railways were offering children attending the camps special return train fares :-

- Connel Ferry to Ballachulish - 4/11^d (under 16), 9/9^d (16-18), 13/0^d (adults).
- Fort William to Lochailort - 5/1^d (under 16), 10/2^d (16-18), 13/6^d (adults).
- Rannoch to Lochailort - 11/6^d (under 16), 22/11^d (16-18), 30/6^d (adults).

By 1965 fares had changed :-

- Connel Ferry to Ballachulish - 6/3^d (children under 14), 12/6^d (adults).
- Fort William to Lochailort - 6/6^d (children under 16), 13/0^d (adults).
- Rannoch to Lochailort - 16/9^d (children under 14), 33/6^d (adults).

Outward on 1st August 1961 and returning on 10th August there were :-

11 children and one adult from Connel Ferry to Ballachulish.

29 children and 1 adult form Fort William to Lochailort.

8 children and 1 adult from Arrochar to Lochailort.

12 children from Rannoch to Lochailort.

The collection has a number of letters from parents. This is a letter written on 2//7/52 by Isobel Fraser, Schoolhouse, Glenfinnan to Miss Bowman, Camusdarach, Morar :-

"Dear Miss Bowman,

The children are delighted to hear that they may attend the Camp.

Names and addresses are :- Mrs MacDonald, Burnside Cottage; Mrs Monaghan, Station House; Mrs Gillies, Viaduct Cottage; Mrs McDonald, Shielview (guardian of John Kenney).

Dr O Regan has been unsuccessful with the McIntosh boy. We thought that knowing the Glenfinnan boys would be with him he might be coaxed. Another Catholic family has just come to Kinlocheil - a boy of ten and an older sister. Mr Fraser, Kinlocheil would be sufficient if you wish to write."

The collection in The Archives, Fort William, show a number of lists of children who attended the camping holidays. The list here for 1950 shows the names of 25 children who attended the camp. They are all ticked to indicate that they brought their food ration book.

Helen Glass	Kirkhill	10	↓
Alex Matheson	Kirkhill	12	£1/5/-
Donald Ross	Kingussie	11	↓
Shona Ross	Kingussie	10	£1/5/-
Mary Taylor	Ardross, Alucee	10	£1
John Taylor	Ardross, Alucee	9	5/-
Alistair Watson	Kyle	11	£1
Veronica Finnegin	Kingussie	13	↓
James Finnegin	Kingussie	15	25/-
Derrick Young	Kingussie	11	£1
Christine Macleod	Kinlocheil	11	£1
I? Gilmour	Kingussie	14	£1
Katherine Ross	Sanatorium Kingussie	10	↓
Angus Prolt	Sanatorium Kingussie	12	25/-
Burty McFarlane	Kirkhill	14	£1
Patricia Ward	Aviemore	11	↓

Veronica Ward	"	14	↓
Lily May Ward	"	15	30/-
Gerald Grant	Beauly	14	↓
Hugh Grant	Beauly	12	25/-
Christina McLachlan	Kingussie	14	£1
Flora Paghari	Fortrose	13	£1
George Ross	Kingussie	9	5/-
Jock Ross	Kingussie	7½	10/-

The camp of 1962 contained the following children :-

FORT AUGUSTUS	Pat Martin	
	Jim Martin	
	Patricia Martin	
OBAN	Patricia Crawford	10
	Janet Crawford	7
	Nauly MacAllister	9
	Margaret MacAllister	11
	Elizabeth Anne King	14
DUNOON	Barry Kelly	11
LOCHGILPHEAD	William M Griffin	14
	Robert Sinclair Griffin	7
TAYNUILT	Edward Riffin	14
	Joseph Riffin	12
	Flora Riffin	11
	David Riffin	10
KINGUSSIE	James MacMillan	11
GLENCOE	Sarah Anne Steele	
	Neil Steele	11
	Ruta Sturas	9
	Anna Sturas	11
	Ursula Sturas	
	Alexander Taylor	11
	Diana Campbell	8
	Donald Steele	
	Anne Macpherson	10
	Brian Mackinnon	
	Michael Mackinnon	10
	Ronald Mackinnon	
	Mary Mackinnon	
	Donald Michael MacDonald	13
	James Donald Dunlop	
	Alexander John Dunlop	
STRATHTAY	Francis Thereta Kennedy	
	Ronald Kevin Kennedy	
	George Robert Kennedy	
	Elizabeth MacGrath	

	Morag MacGrath	
	Mary Bierska	
	Derek Smith	
	Theresa Clifford	
	Ian Shauto	11
	Veronica Christine Scott	
	James Albert Scott	12
ARDNAMURCHAN	Harrison	
MINGARRY?	Harrison	
STRATHTAY	Rosemary Scott	
	Veronica Christine Scott	
	Victor James Kennedy.	
	Mary Bilrska,	
MULL	Janet Crawford	8

The Archive collection has a number of letters praising the project. The following is part of a letter from Stephen McGill to Mrs Stirling on 14th August 1960 :-

"Oh thank you - thank you most sincerely for the wonderful work of real supernatural charity you and the Lady Catechists are doing for those poor little children - so cut off from Catholic influences and life.

I was delighted and most impressed & edified by what I saw at the camp. May God bless Mrs Cameron-Head & the good Chaplain & the Lady Catechists for their devoted efforts - efforts so obviously successful. The children were a real credit to them. How so much was achieved in such a short time astonishes me & fills me with grateful admiration.

You may be sure that the work of the Lady Catechists will always be a matter of keen interest to me, and I shall keep you & the children daily in my prayers.

Thank you - and God bless you."

Other groups seem to have requested the use of Lochailort Estate for camping. The collection has a letter dated 22nd October 1946 to The Secretary, An Comunn Gaidhealach, 131 West Regent Street, Glasgow from Inverailort.

"Both my wife and myself would be delighted and honoured to have the 1947 Comunn na H-Oigridh camp on Inverailort Estate. The chief difficulty is of course that the camp buildings that I showed to Mr. Macphail are still under naval registration; and it is of course by no means certain whether this Government will allow them to return into private hands or may use them for some purpose of their own."