

Alexander Chisholm

Following her investigations of the rent books of Robert Brown, factor for the Clanranald estates, Catriona White (née McEwan - formerly of Muck, now Frackersaig, Lismore) has found that Alexander Chisholm was living at Keppoch, Arisaig, in the opening years of the 19th century. The rent for Keppoch was £300 in 1810. Chisholm was a wealthy man, almost certainly from kelp, and lent £1,000 to the estate: interest of £50 is recorded by Brown for the year 1807.

Chisholm moved about 1811 to the former Catholic seminary of Samalaman (pronounced and sometimes spelt Samlaman, emphasis on first syllable) at Glenuig in Moidart. Bishop John Chisholm was still paying rent for Samalaman in 1807, although he transferred his base and seminary to Kilcheran, Lismore, in 1804. Perhaps it was the wealth of a kinsman which made this possible. When Bishop John died in 1814 his brother Aeneas Chisholm succeeded as Bishop of the Highland District. The priest responsible for a scattered mission which included Badenoch, Lochaber and even (from 1816) was William Chisholm who died, probably from overwork, at the age of fifty. All these Chisholms were from Strathglass, the episcopal brothers from Inchully near Aigas, and several more Chisholm priests came to the West Highlands in the next generation. It would be surprising, in other words, if Alexander Chisholm had no connection with Inchully, Strathglass.

Catriona White has taken particular notice of the fact that Chisholm passed rent to Brown on behalf of the joint tenants and tacksmen in Muck between 1799 and 1813 – a fourteen-year period when that island belonged to the Clanranald estate. Catriona writes: ‘One gets entries in the rent book “By cash paid by Mr Alex. Chisholm on his account to Boisdale for Robert Brown”, or “By cash paid by Mr Alex. Chisholm for Rob. Brown”. In 1811 the rent from Muck was going through John McIntyre New Inn [Arisaig]. . . The Muck joint

tenants were making their own kelp and the kelp for one of the tacksmen. I am not sure how the kelp trade was organised for small producers. Keppoch was the one place in the inner isles where the small tenants were paid directly to make kelp for the Clanranald estate.'

There is a useful summary by the editor John Watts in the 1997 edition of the Rev. Charles MacDonald's 1889 classic *Moidart; Or Among the Clanranalds*: 'It has been calculated that landowners' profits on kelp increased nine-fold between the 1720s and the 1780s, while prices paid to the tenants who gathered it only doubled. By far the most abundant sources were in the Hebrides, and the greatest of all on the Clanranald estate of Uist, but some was also harvested on the West coast of the mainland. Kinlochmoidart Estate papers for 1784-5 mention eight tenants who made kelp, five from Kyles Ian Og and three from Kyles Mor. The process involved gathering [sea] weed, drying and burning it, after which it was shipped to the Clyde for use in bleaching and the manufacture of glass and soap. Prices peaked during the Napoleonic Wars, but the peace, and a series of Acts favouring alternative methods of manufacture, brought a massive decline in the industry in the 1820s.'

From Father Charles' text we learn that 'owing to the extraordinary rise in kelp, a very large profit found its way into the pockets of the proprietor. Those are said to have been the golden days of landed property in the west. It is calculated that Clanranald's income for several years averaged from £20,000 to £25,000 per annum, a large sum when the quality of most of the land is taken into consideration.' At some point before the Etonian Reginald George MacDonald of Clanranald came into his inheritance (1811?) and began to dissipate it on the gaming tables, Alexander Chisholm was in a position (while still at Keppoch) to lend the estate £1,000.

He also features in *Moidart* in a full discussion of Samalaman: 'In 1804 the college and the bishop's residence were transferred to the island of Lismore, principally with the view of getting into easier communications with the south;

but from all accounts it would have been much wiser to have clung to the arrangement made by Bishop MacDonald, and to have remained at Samalaman. After their departure the house and grounds were let by Clanranald to a Mr Chisholm, father of the late Mrs MacDonald, Tormore, in Skye [two miles SW of Armadale]. This gentleman, during a long life marked by prudence and wise economy, succeeded in amassing a considerable fortune, part of which was sunk in the purchase of Glenmoidart, or Lochans, for the benefit of his son Lachlan. Chisholm was succeeded, as tenant, by a Mr M'Guarry, native of Mull. . .'

Another version of the name is MacQuarry. At this point Father Charles' account wanders off to a trial concerning land on Mull, and ease of corrupting Highland witnesses, before returning: 'M'Guarry, who had hitherto done well in Australia, was ruined by this litigation. After living some years at Samalaman he removed to Campbelltown, or to some other part of Argyllshire.' Thus it follows that the trial mentioned in a letter to Alexander Chisholm while tenant of Samlaman (so-spelt) must have been about some other matter to do with the estate which features, once again, in *Moidart*:

'One of the properties in the district which oftener than any other has passed from one owner to another, since it was sold by Clanranald, is that of Lochans, or Glenmoidart. It has been in the hands of Banker MacDonald, Lachlan Chisholm, Captain Grimstone, General Ross, and has finally been acquired by Mr Stuart of Kinloch. Although small in size it has many attractions, the house, for instance, being picturesquely situated in front of the river Moidart and the small lake through which the latter flows on its way to the lower end of the glen. This house was enlarged by General Ross, to whom also are due the fine plantations in its vicinity, and which help so much in diversifying the scenery of the place. It is now being pulled down in order to make way for a larger building. This estate seems to have been rather neglected in Banker MacDonald's time. . .'

Banker MacDonald features in MacKay's 'Clanranald's tacksmen' article in *TGSI*: 'Alexander, the elder brother of Aonghas Cinn a' Chreagain [Inverailort], succeeded to the tenancy of Dalilea {Loch Shiel} about 1790. He was, in fact, an absentee tenant as he was a banker at Callendar. It is said he was a very energetic and good businessman. He built the present Dalilea house incorporating into it at least part of the old house. He also was partly responsible for the building of the road round the west end of Lochshiel to Dalilea and Kinlochmoidart. . . The Banker must have died about 1830 and he is buried on Eilean Fhianain.' According to *Moidart* the Banker was resident at Lochans 'a short time before his death.'

The letter mentioned above belongs to the collection of Iain Thornber of Morvern. The envelope shows that it was addressed to Alexander Chisholm Esq, Samlaman, Strontian, and the sender was William Robertson, writing from Edinburgh on 26 April 1822. Presumably this was the same man, born about 1802, who followed his father as proprietor of the Kinlochmoidart estate – or could it have been his father Lieut. Col. Robertson (the youngest son of Edinburgh University's Principal William Robertson) who married the last MacDonald of Kinlochmoidart? The 1851 census has William Robertson (49) in residence at Kinlochmoidart House with a sixteen-year-old son of the same name 'studying at home'. William Robertson's writing is difficult to decipher:

'My Dear Sir – Your letters of the 4th and 9th I have left unanswered because till Saturday last I thought the business was going on favourably and was much surprised on that day by [illeg.] communicating Mr Henderson's letter for a few days before I met WH in the street who told me everything was he thought going on well. If you have not made up your mind to leave for Edinburgh I think you had better set off and endeavour to get the matter arranged; as you gave me no powers beyond £100 I of course could not take any step. You are I think by the letter to Mr Campbell precluded from going to trial.

[Unintelligible - That come up in on the spot?] matters can alone be settled & the time now runs very short.

'I did not go to Mr Ca[mpbell?] because the way in which such matters are viewed here the excuse you allege in not coming would not be believed. I am sorry I can do nothing about Lochans but having made up my mind no alteration of circumstances has occurred to induce me to change. You cannot be more anxious that I should leave the place than I am but still prudence prevents me rushing too much particularly in these unsettled times and having a profession that binds me to a town life at such a distance. I see objections to most plans by which you could endeavour to get quit of Lochans. At the present moment I trust you will set out without delay to this.'

He signs himself W^m Robertson, then adds, 'I don't know whether this letter is worth postage the chief object being to get you to come to Edinburgh. Mr Henderson has never been with money.' The last sentence has been more or less guessed at. The letter is hard to understand as well as to read. The William Robertson of the 1851 census could hardly have been old enough to be engaged in legal matters in 1822. The post office stamp looks more like 26 April 1832, but the date at the head of the letter seems to leave no room for doubt. Clearly Alexander Chisholm wanted to 'get quit of Lochans', or his son Lachlan did, and yet William Robertson was 'anxious that I should leave the place'. Whether the 'trial' was linked with Lochans is not obvious, nor why it was so urgent that Chisholm should travel to Edinburgh.

I have elsewhere assembled a good deal of information on Samalaman in the days of Alexander Stewart, when there was a dramatic lightning strike as described in *Moidart*, and his daughter who married John MacLean the grazier of Glenforslan and Kildonnan, Eigg. That seems no more relevant to Alexander Chisholm than the fact that Lord McLaren followed on as proprietor, but it may be of interest to point out that Odo Blundell's 1916 *Catholic Highlands of Scotland* Vol. 2 contains a drawing of Samalaman Lodge with its different

blocks numbered and explained in a neat hand: '1. Old Kitchen wing of Bishop [Alexander Macdonald]'s house. 2. House built by Bishop; he died just when it was finished, & only his body was brought there. 3. Wing added by Mr Maclean. 4. Parts added by Lord Maclaren. Before the Bishop built his House, a Seminary was in the Square.'

Returning to Keppoch in Arisaig (there is another in Lochaber), Denis Rixson in *Arisaig and Morar: A History* (2002) includes in a 1699-1798 table of Rentals in Arisaig the fact that the six pennyland of Keppoch & Ardgasery increased almost eight-fold in value between 1748 and 1798, from 347 merks annual rent to 2663 merks. The fact that the two pennyland of Kinloid, well away from the shore, only rose from 141 merks to 454 merks in the same period shows the importance of seaweed for kelp. John Macdonald of Glenaladale was operating a kelp factory at Keppoch, as Clanranald's tenant, shortly before his 1772 expedition left for what became Prince Edward's Island.

He wrote, as quoted in MacKay's 'Glenaladale's Settlement', 1964 *Scottish Studies*, 'You know the precarious footing on which I was persuaded to accept the farm of Keppoch. Misrepresentations that were made of me by designing people to Lady Clanranald had like to overturn this security I promised myself I might probably have of the possession of it, & upon the whole alienated my mind from the factory or any dependance on that family, so far that I was determined to take the first opportunity of throwing off the same, notwithstanding that she was at last perfectly reconciled to me.' Later he wrote: 'John has the factory, & is so satisfied that he'll stick to it whatever he may say in times of fatigue.' This John was Iain Fraingeach, son of Angus MacDonald of Borrodale, who later prospered through cattle as laird of Rhu Arisaig. The letters were written to Glenaladale's cousin Alasdair an Òir MacDonald ('Golden Sandy' made a fortune in Jamaica and bought Glenaladale's lands) who built the old house of Keppoch with its view past Arisaig village towards Rhu.