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## The St Mary's Heritage Project

The Rev. Andrew Macdonald, 1757-90.  
Incumbent at Glasgow, 1777-87.

SOURCE:

Alexander Campbell: *An Introduction to the History of Poetry in Scotland* (1798), Edinburgh, pp. 317-30, 349.

*Transcribed from a volume in the Mitchell Library, Glasgow, with spelling modernised, capitalisation reduced, punctuation simplified and minor editorial changes.*

[RGE, 2009]

The Rev. Andrew Macdonald, 1757-90.  
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In 1791 were printed at London for John Murray, No. 32, Fleet Street, *The Miscellaneous Works of A. M'Donald; including the tragedy of Vimonda, and other productions, which have appeared under the signature of Matthew Bramble, Esq. with various other compositions by the same author.* This volume contains all that I have seen of the poetical labours of a departed friend. Little did I expect that one day it should fall to my lot to give some account of the life and writings of Andrew M'Donald, but such is the uncertainty of human existence.

Of the life and writings of Mr M'Donald little hitherto has been communicated to the world; and what I have been able to procure respecting him more properly belongs to the earlier part of his life, than that in which he was known to the public - as a literary character, and which certainly more immediately relates to the subject to which these pages are devoted. However, as the mournful task has devolved on me of recording some passages in the life of this ingenious and accomplished poet, I shall, in so doing, trace back some of the former part of my own remembrance with a melancholy pleasure.

Andrew Donald - for the Mac was added afterwards to his name - was the son of George Donald, by profession a gardener and living near Leith, in much credit and reputation in that useful though humble station, when our poet was born; the precise time I have not been able with certainty to learn, but it is supposed, some time in 1755<sup>1</sup>.

At an early age he discovered a quickness of apprehension that indicated his future celebrity as a man of genius. From his very infancy he discovered an uncommon liking to music. His mother, whom he survived but a few months only, was wont to mention an instance of the delight - while a boy of eight years only - he took in running over the keys of an old spinet (the first he had ever seen one) at random, and, in a very short time, he taught himself to play by ear a great many tunes with remarkable ease and fluency. His passion for music only expired with his life. In this scientific art he was no mean proficient both as a theorist as well as a very tolerable practitioner. It is not unlikely his own inclination might have led him to adopt music as a profession, had not his turn to literary pursuits pointed out to his friends the prospect of his one day appearing as a bright ornament in the republic of letters.

He was instructed in the elements of the Latin tongue in the Grammar School of Leith, his native place. After the usual course at that respectable seminary he was entered a student in the university of Edinburgh, where he remained till he was put in deacon's orders by the late worthy Bishop Forbes<sup>2</sup> (our poet's chief patron) in 1775; and on this occasion the Mac was added to his name by the pious prelate, and our poet ever after retained the distinction, and spelled his name *Macdonald*.

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<sup>1</sup> [Ed. DNB gives Macdonald's date of birth as 27 February 1757.]

<sup>2</sup> This gentleman was a Scotch Episcopal bishop, and officiated as such in the diocese of Edinburgh.

As yet there was no vacant living for young Macdonald, but under the patronage of Bishop Forbes a temporary establishment was procured for him, as preceptor in the family of the late Mr Oliphant of Gask. In this capacity he remained but twelve months, when, on the sudden departure of Mr [Andrew] Wood, pastor of the Episcopal congregation at Glasgow, for St. Peter's<sup>3</sup>, Mr Macdonald was appointed to that charge, and went thither in 1777. About this time his worthy patron died, and he was put in priest's orders by the late Bishop Falconer, a man of great piety and simplicity of manners.

Macdonald being now in a situation congenial to his wishes, and though the emoluments of his living were small, yet, with economy, they were such as afforded sufficient independence to a contented and cheerful disposition, such as he possessed in an eminent degree. Besides - what he prized above all - he was placed in a great and commercial city where everyone seems attentive to the great concerns of life, and every moment is filled up with business or conviviality. Moreover, his passion for literary pursuits were amply gratified in the society of men of letters and philosophers, such as the University of Glasgow had the felicity to boast. Music, his favourite study, was assiduously cultivated. A music club, of which he was one of the directors, was established in Glasgow, and to this pursuit he devoted much of his time, and to very good purpose.

But, although he became an enthusiast in music, her sister art was not altogether neglected. Poesy formed always part of his devotion, at the shrine of the Muses, even from his earlier years: and, when his imagination became illumined by the reflection of more refined criticism, it was not to be expected that he would lose any opportunity in cultivating with passion an art in which he so much delighted. In very early youth - as he himself informs us - he had projected a poetical work, of which, in 1782, he presented to the world a part, entitled *Velina, a poetical fragment*<sup>4</sup>, which established his reputation as a poet.

His next essay was as a novelist. But, here he entered the lists against formidable odds. Glasgow, though rich in commerce, was but poor in point of incident and character, our novelist having comparatively speaking but a scanty supply of materials in these respects, and not having had an opportunity of surveying the great theatre of the world; it was not to be much wondered at that he fell short in his pictures of living manners of sufficient variety and interest. It cannot be denied that his novels are by no means the best of his writings.

As a dramatist he was more fortunate. His *Vimonda, a Tragedy* was brought out for the benefit of Mr Woods in the Edinburgh theatre and afterwards at the Little Theatre, Haymarket, where it met with success and merited applause.

The scanty income of a clergyman of the almost annihilated Episcopal Church of Scotland entirely depends on the seat rents and occasional liberality of the remaining adherents to the good old cause, viz. Church and King. Glasgow, a place noticed for its attachment to civil and religious liberty on the broadest basis, was not the most likely

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<sup>3</sup> [Ed. St Petersburg, or even America, according to other accounts.]

<sup>4</sup> Edinburgh, printed for C. Elliot, Parliament Square, and T. Longman, Paternoster Row, London.

place for a young man, even of superior talents as Macdonald's unquestionably were, to keep alive a predilection in favour of Jacobite-Episcopacy. His congregation decreased daily, while the young smiled in their sleeve at the vain obstinacy of the aged and staunch members, who now were dropping one by one into the grave; they neglected their pastor, who, at last, was obliged to bid *adieu* to his thinned and scattered flock, and soon after he relinquished his ecclesiastical functions for ever.

On this event he came to reside in Edinburgh. But he now felt himself insulted and neglected. What led to this change in his intercourse with his former friends, is, in a great measure, to be attributed to an event which had taken place previous to his final departure from Glasgow.

A young woman who lived in the same house in which he lodged, in a menial capacity, of the name of Macgregor, had found means to render herself essential to his happiness. He had too high notions of moral rectitude to live with her on any questionable terms; of consequence, he honourably placed her by his side as his lawful wife.

No sooner had he publicly acknowledged this step than many turned their backs on him. Had he kept her as his mistress the world would have perhaps winked at it; but to marry a fascinating young girl was a misdemeanour of such magnitude as to merit degradation and marked contempt. Such are the sentiments of our present state of civilization!

To an ingenuous disposition, such cruel conduct seems the most unaccountable in nature. Is the state of society yet so low as to condemn an act of justice, in obedience to the laws of established order, at the same time it holds in derision the individual for having justified his honourable intentions by an open and manly avowal to support, and preserve inviolable, so ancient and sacred a rite as marriage? Yet so it happened. Macdonald, instead of being caressed for so magnanimous and disinterested an act of what is rational, moral, and even decorous, the tongue of scandal was let loose upon him, and he pined in secret, while his big, swelling heart rose indignant at the vain conceits of silly pride, and the puerile sarcasms of petulance and folly. On his coming to Edinburgh he laid aside his clerical habit, and became completely secularized in his dress. This, among the sanctified, gives additional cause of offence. At last, tired of waging war with opinion and inveterate prejudice, he gave up his literary connections in Edinburgh, and resolved at once to appear in the capital. Having left his mother - to whom he had at all times paid the most affectionate and dutiful attention - in possession of his house and furniture, he set off for London, where, on his arrival, he met many friends, who received him with open arms. Here, for a time, he forgot the narrow prejudices and low scandal of Edinburgh.

Letters were now his sole possession, and to form respectable and eligible connections was his first and great object. On the first blush of his success his expectations were raised to a very high pitch. An unpleasant occurrence had taken place soon after his departure from Edinburgh that hurt him excessively. This was the distress his aged mother was plunged into on account of the embarrassed state of her son's affairs. The law in Scotland is very strict in favour of the landlord. Mr Macdonald, who had been but a few months in the house he had furnished for his residence in Edinburgh in 1787, before he changed his plan and went to London, was not aware of this.

*I never dreamed (says he in a letter that lies before me to a friend<sup>5</sup>) that arrestments could be made for rent, before the rent was due. And, as I have given up all thoughts of returning to Scotland, I thought it as well to have some things, which, by my absence, became useless, disposed of, and others, which might be useful to me, sent here. You are acquainted with lawyers - will enquire whether half-year's rents can be lawfully demanded. I know they are sometimes paid by custom; but if payment cannot be enforced by law, 'Squire Horn shall not have one penny till Whitsunday. He has chosen to be rigorous, and therefore cannot expect favour.*

We see here an instance of the simplicity and ignorance of literary men in the common concerns of life; it is little wonder then that at every turn they meet with crosses and vexations, which others know how to escape. He proceeds -

*You will do me infinite pleasure, by frequently visiting my mother, and frequently writing to me. I shall soon be acquainted with the great musicians here, Shield<sup>6</sup> has already undertaken to set an opera for me, of which you may perhaps hear, before the winter campaign be finished.*  
London, October 18, 1787.

While Mr Macdonald was engaged in his dramatic speculations, his mother died. The following is a copy of a letter on this event to the same friend.

Dear Sir, London, January 11, 1788.

*I was greatly surprised and shocked by a letter from Dr Webster informing me of my mother's death. From the declining state of her health, indeed, I thought she would not outlive this winter; but I did not expect the mournful event so soon. I owe you infinite obligations for the attention you have paid to her, and the very friendly manner in which you took charge of the funeral.*

*Your kind concerns there, my friends, are now at an end. I wish the large chest could be sent me by the first ship. It contains all my linens, and all my music, two articles of which I want much. If you find any loose papers about the house, of whatever kind, burn them. What few clothes my mother left (and they could be but few), Mrs Henderson, the old woman who waited on her, must have. I wish much to know if she is to remain in the house to the term<sup>7</sup>, and if she is able to do anything for herself. Do not refuse her a few shillings on my account. I am so confused, I know not what I write. Write to me particularly, I beg. My mind will soon, I hope, be more composed, and I shall be able to mention everything in order.*

*Yours, most sincerely, A. M'Donald.*

*Direct for me in future, at Mr Murray's, Bookseller, No. 32, Fleet Street.*

The following copy of his next letter to the same friend, will shew into his history better than any comment whatever.

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<sup>5</sup> Mr. M. Stewart, music seller, Edinburgh.

<sup>6</sup> [Ed. English composer, William Shield, 1748-1829.]

<sup>7</sup> Whitsunday, 1788.

Dear Sir,

I was extremely mortified at failing to send you money for the purposes I had intended. But occasions of unavoidable necessity demanded all the cash I was able to compass. Thank Heaven, my greatest difficulties are now over! and the approaching opening of the summer theatre will soon render me independent and perfectly at ease. In three weeks, as you will see by the public prints, I shall be flourishing at the Haymarket, in splendour superior to last season.

With great reluctance I trouble you once more. I beg of you, as the last favour you can do me, to see my furniture disposed of and matters settled with Horn; or, if your engagements and attentions to business render this inconvenient, that you will employ some person on whom you can depend, whose trouble I will cheerfully pay for. I know the kind disposition of your heart; I have no friend so well qualified for the transaction.

I will not deceive you - the dining-room furniture was got from Messers. Young and Trotter, and is not yet paid for. Will you have the goodness to call on these gentlemen, and assure them they may depend upon payment at the expiration of the year's credit, which they generously allowed me (which will happen, I believe, in July), and they may, if they please, for security take the things into their possession. They were very little used, and many of the chairs never sat upon; and the great table never once employed.

The great chest, which I exceedingly want for my linens and music, must be sent by the first vessel, of which you will be kind enough to advise me, that I may receive it at the proper wharf.

A statement of our money matters will naturally accompany that advice, and shall be settled without delay.

Tell me if you know anything about the old woman who attended my mother - as soon as I am fully in train, I mean to give her a small allowance.

For all this trouble, dear school-fellow, I am not without hopes of being one day able to make you a return in kind. In consequence of my operatical affairs at the theatre, I shall soon be deeply connected with the musical world, and have it in my power to give you early and perfect accounts of every novelty. Do me the justice to believe that no opportunity of that, or any other kind, shall ever be neglected by me, to do you service.

Do you visit Mrs Longman this season? If she afford you a city lodging, make your country seat with me. I am fixed for the summer in a sweet retirement, at Brompton, where, having a large bed, and lying alone, I can accommodate you tolerably, and give you a share of a poet's suppers, salads, and delicious fruits, (even Corri<sup>8</sup> eats no better) from my own garden.

If you see Dr Webster, give him my best compliments, and tell I mean to write to him soon.                      God bless you.                      A. M'Donald                      London, May 12, 1788.

But little did Macdonald foresee how near all his schemes to insure independence, and comfort in this world, were to a close; *having no powerful friends* (says the author of an advertisement prefixed to our author's sermons<sup>9</sup>) *to patronize his abilities, and suffering*

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<sup>8</sup> Alluding to that gentleman's practice, while in Edinburgh, of frequenting the fruit shops. [Ed. Domenico Corri (1746-1825), manager of the Theatre Royal in Edinburgh, where in 1787 Macdonald's play, *Vimonda*, was first performed.].

<sup>9</sup> Printed by John Murray, No. 32, Fleet Street, 1790.

*under the infirmities of a weak constitution, he fell a victim, at the age of three and thirty, to sickness, disappointment, and misfortune.* This event took place in 1790<sup>10</sup>. He left behind him an infant son, who, I much fear, has now a chance, from his mother having formed another connection, of feeling the loss he has sustained. But rather let me hope, duty, above all humanity, and a tender regard for the offspring of one who sacrificed much to the comforts and good name of the mother, will weigh full in the balance, and so find in this new connection a fond father, a steady and disinterested friend.

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My acquaintance with Macdonald commenced in the year 1780. I was his junior by nine years; a lad of sixteen was hardly a companion for a man of five-and-twenty; and, having but interviews of short duration, we were of consequence but slightly acquainted.

In 1785 we became more intimate. About this period I had prepared for publication an original work in music, which I was anxious he should look over; which he did, with much attention. And it is but justice to acknowledge that his remarks were so judicious as to let me understand he was no mean proficient in the theory, as well as the practice, of music<sup>11</sup>.

In 1786 while on a visit to Edinburgh he was invited to dinner at Dr Webster's, where he was to be introduced to the late celebrated John Brown, painter. I was also of the party. The interview was interesting. At this distance of time, it comes to my remembrance in tender emotions of regret; for, alas! the friends of my youth have dropped forever from my sight! an early grave has already been allotted to each, and few remain that are more dear to my heart.

I came soon, in order to witness the introduction. Brown, who had arrived but a few minutes before, was all expectation. The door opens - Brown starts up - it is not Macdonald, it was Webster. He rallied Brown on his seeming embarrassment; we all laughed, and talked of something indifferent. Webster left us. Brown took out his pencil and made a hasty sketch of my face. The door bell is heard. The pencil drops from Brown's fingers. The parlour door opens, and Webster announces Macdonald. Brown turns round, and looks steadfastly in our poet's face, who seemed arrested in his advance; they rivet their eyes on each other with respect and admiration. After the usual compliment had passed, each attempted to speak to the other, but they only interrupted one another with commonplace remarks; and it was not till after we had dined and a few glasses had circulated, that Brown and Macdonald opened a conversation, the most cordial, sprightly, and entertaining I had ever witnessed. From this day they became intimate friends.

Macdonald, like almost every man of genius, was peculiar in many respects, as to certain eccentricities of character. His aversion to hypocrisy, and clerical grimace, exhibited to some a degree of seeming levity unusual among men of his profession. He

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<sup>10</sup> [Ed. A space for the date has been left in the printed version.]

<sup>11</sup> I am told he has left behind a good deal of his musical compositions, but I have never seen any.

was by no means studious to command respect by a sanctimonious regard to decorum: on the contrary, he seized every opportunity to expose the empiricism of false religion, and hold up to ridicule the pragmatism of godly vanity. For these things he became an object of persecution.

His conduct, at times, was by no means the most correct; and it is no wonder, when a man steps unheedingly into by-paths in his journey through life, that he finds himself entangled among briars and thorns, that impede and gall him in his progress. Notwithstanding, Macdonald was a good man. His heart was warm and sincere, full of candour and openness. His mental qualities are best displayed in his works. A few, and but a few remarks on some of his writings will suffice.

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*No subject* (says a late ingenious author) *requires to be treated more delicately than praise*; it is impossible to pay too much regard to the truth of this remark, as indiscriminate praise is oblique censure. That portion of praise due to the poetical labours of Macdonald ought not to be conveyed in a vague indeterminate manner. And I much fear my limited plan will admit of none other.

Few imitations of Spenser's style and measure, have met with a more favourable reception, than Macdonald's *Velina, a fragment*. There is much fancy, rich imagery, pathos, and delicacy of sentiment, together with a fine flow of smooth and harmonious versification that stamps it as a first rate production. The following stanzas may serve as a specimen -

XVIII.

*If e'er thy heart has felt Love's subtle flame,  
Thou mayest imagine, for I cannot tell,  
How o'er my soul the mingled rapture came  
Of sweet sensation, which I could not quell;  
How through my trembling veins a pow'ful swell  
Of life rush'd forth, and bore me quite away.  
Down on my knees before the nymph I fell;  
Ask'd in what star of heav'n her mansion lay,  
That in fit terms I might my adoration pay.*

XIX.

*Rise, simple youth, the blushing virgin said,  
No goddess I of planet or of star;  
A weak, poor, friendless, persecuted maid,  
Whose hateful prison lies not distant far:  
Where chiefs, whose sole delight is barb'rous war,  
With dissonance have tortur'd oft mine ear,  
Bray'd from the clashing shield and rattling car:  
But sounds before I never heard so clear,  
So soft, as those which drew me wand'ring heedless here.*



XXII.

Oft have I gaz'd upon the rising sun,  
Survey'd the noon-tide vault of aether blue;  
And when the glorious orb his course had run  
Down to the west, where scenery ever new  
Floats on, I have perus'd with careful view  
The clouds, and fancied beauties in the air:  
Oft have I wander'd through the nightly dew,  
While slow the moon rode in her cloudy chair,  
And all the eyes of heav'n look'd out with sparkling glare.

XXIII.

Oft, too, the pow'r that sounds harmonic have,  
My raptur'd soul has felt in pure delight, &c.

Those productions which appeared under the signature of Matthew Bramble, Esq., are not inferior to the ephemeral effusions of Peter Pindar's muse, of whom he speaks in the following lines -

- *Giardini, dry and sapless as a cindar,  
Ne'er to the heart of feeling gave such pleasure  
As playful and pathetic Peter Pindar.*

Macdonald's *Probationary Odes for the Laureateship*, possess a strain of excellent humour, and poignant satire. *Number VII, by the Right Hon. Henry Dundas* is in the Scottish dialect, to which is subjoined a translation, by John Pinkerton, Esq (*Miscellaneous Works*, pp. 91-2). It begins thus -

*The pawky loon Tam Warton's gane  
And on his wymb they've laid a stane,  
Ance mair, &c.*

The favourable impression the first dramatic production of our author made on the public, insured success to his subsequent attempts. But it must be confessed that his tragedy of *Vimonda* is by far the best of his dramatic works. It abounds in pathos and sentiment; breathes the fervour of true genius, tempered with taste, elegance, and purity of diction.

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As a preacher he was distinguished for neat, classical, and elegant composition. [Jean-Baptiste] Massillon and Bourdeleau were his models. He delivered his discourses with a manly, and becoming modesty, that failed not to interest and command attention.

In his person he was above the middle size, but rather slender. His countenance was prepossessing, and full of expression. He had an air of independence bordering on haughtiness; yet, withal, he was affable and polite, free from supercilious pedantry or unmeaning pride.

## List of Dramatic Writers, Natives of Scotland

Andrew Macdonald.

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|------|---|
| 1785 | <i>Vimonda, a tragedy.</i>              |
| 1787 | <i>The Fair Apostate, a tragedy.</i>    |
| 1787 | <i>The Prince of Tarento, a comedy.</i> |
| 1788 | <i>Love and Loyalty, an opera.</i>      |