First of August

An Hebridean Step Dance from the collection of the late Tom Flett

C Metherell

Addenda.

Full-break Bla was collected by Tom Flett from John MacLeod. This version is to be found in his notes of the steps he collected in 1953. In 1975 his published version gives two breaks - Full-break Bl and full-break B5. It is not clear at what date he collected B1, but this was the break he taught as coming from MacLeod, although no mention of it is to be found in his notes on the dance. It must be assumed that B1 represents a later perhaps more accurate version collected on a visit subsequent to 1953.

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I would wish to express my gratitude to Mrs J.F.Flett for her kindness in allowing access to the manuscript material from which this volume has been prepared. It cannot be stressed too strongly that my work has been one of collating and editing the material Tom Flett collected. I hope he would have approved of my interpretation of his original material.

9 1982 C Metherell

The First of August is one of a series of solo step dances which are known to have been taught on the Hebridean islands. These dances can be traced back to one particular dancing teacher, Ewan MacLachlan (c.1799 -1879). The names of some of the other dances are Tullochgorm, Highland Laddie, Over the Water to Charlie, Blue Bonnets, Over The Water and Over the Seas, Aberdonian Lassie and Flowers of Edinburgh. The origin of these dances is obscure, as are the origins of MacLachlan himself. The only certain date we have for MacLachlan that he died in 1879 aged 80, on the Island of S.Uist. He was known on the island as "Ewan Beag" (beag is Gaelic for "little one"), "MacIseabail Reitalain" or occasionally as "Ewan-of-the-short-arms". This last was because his arms were deformed. Although the exact nature of this deformity is uncertain, it has become an integral part of the folklore which has built up around his character since his death. MacIseabail Reitalain translates as "son of Isabel of Retland", thus suggesting that he originally came from Retland in Morar. Church and local records in that area do not begin until 1832, however at this date there was a family of MacLachlans living at Inversilort nearby, which strengthens the argument that Ewan came from there. Ewan's sister, also Isabella, came to Uist from Greenock where she was working, after meeting and marrying a Uist man, Donald MacDonald. After their mariage they moved to Loch Eynort, and it is possible that Ewan came with her to the island at this time.

Ewan worked on the island as a catechist and dancing teacher. There is a generally accepted story concerning him and his dances which warrants close examination (see MacLennan 1950 and Emmerson 1972). Ewan was said to have studied for the priesthood at the Scots College Douai, in France, and whilst there to have picked up French dances which he used as a basis for the solos he later taught. This story seems to be based on the following "evidence":

- 1) Ewan was an educated man, he was probably able to read and write.
- 2) Because of his deformed arms he was unable to finish his training and be ordained and became a catechist instead.
- 3) In 1925 D.G.MacLennan, an Edinburgh dancing master, came to the islands and collected a number of the dances (although not it seems the first of August), he later returned, convinced that he had seen boys in France do the same dances and seems to have convinced the islanders of this also.
- 3) At Ewan's death, his books and papers were taken by some of his relations with whom he was staying at the time and these contained amongst them some which were written in "hierioglyphics". MacLennan (MacLennan 1950)

p31) states that he interviewed Ewan's nephew, a sailor, "who told me about two particular books found in his cottage, one resembling printed shorthand or Chinese writing. It was shown to this sailor who had sailed the China Seas, but he could not interpret it, — only the title was Choregraphie." MacLennan suggested that these were Feuillet's books of dance notations, strengthening the "French Connection". (These books were later burned during an outbreak of fever).

The facts however seem to contradict the folklore:

- 1) The Scots College at Douai closed at the beginning of the French Revolution in 1793 and did not re-open. This was six years before Ewan's birth. The same applies to the other Scots seminary in Paris.
- 2) Because of his deformity he would not have been accepted for the priesthood in the first place, as a priest has to be a "whole man".
- There is no record of him having attended the two Catholic colleges in Scotland at Aquhortes or Lismore.
- 4) Much of the blame for the continuance of this story must be laid at the door of D.G.MacLennan, who unfortunately was a much better dancer than he was a scholar and based his evidence for the French origin of the dances on a postcard showing some French boys dancing what he thought was the Flowers of Edinburgh.

A second possibility has been suggested, that Ewan was a "mass companion". That is an assistant to a priest, looking after his vestments and assisting him at the mass. This seems more likely, and would perhaps account for his education, as it was not unknown for priests to educate their assistants themselves. It should be remembered that at the time when Ewan was a boy the Catholic church was not divided into parishes as it is today and that a priest would travel over a wide area.

Whilst on S.Uist Ewan lived at Cumhag, although towards the end of his life he seems to have travelled round staying with relatives. He died in 1879 aged 80 and was buried at Howmore.

Whatever the origins of Ewan MacLachlan and his dances it is certain that he taught many people on S.Uist to dance these solos, or a selection of them. The First of August seems by no means to have been the most common nor perhaps the most popular of his dances, and not all his pupils learnt it. Among those who did were John MacMillan, Ronald Morrison (also known as Ronald-the-Dancer) and Archie Macpherson. All the extant versions of the dance stem from the latter two men.

Of John MacMillan little is known. He taught dancing at Eochar, but none of his surviving pupils knew the First of August.

Ronald Morrison (born c.1836) married twice, his first wife coming from Barra, and he lived on that Island for some time and taught dancing in Castlebay, although there is no record that he taught any solos there. He is credited with teaching the dance to Donald MacDonald known as "Rotchain". He died during the 1914-18 war aged about 80.

Angus Macpherson (born c.1849) is the teacher through whom most of our knowledge of the dance comes. in the dances was revived when a dancing competiton was organised on S. Uist by the Glasgow School of Celtic Studies in 1925. In fact there were only two entrants, Archie Macpherson and Rotchain. Archie came by the dances in a rather strange way. Ewan MacLachlan. although he taught the dances to both men and women. would not teach children (anyone under 15/16). was only 11 at the time Ewan was holding his classes but he attended (there is a story that he hid in the loft of the room in which Ewan was teaching), watched the dances and went away and practised them. Ewan got to hear of this however and at his "finishing ball" made Archie do one or two of the solos. The competition was judged, among others by D.G. Maclennan, and Archie won. Afterwards he taught some of the dances (though not the First of August) to MacLennan who eventually published those that he had acquired (MacLennan 1950). Archie also taught his children Callum, Roderick and a Mrs Smith, but once again not the First of August. He did however teach the dance to John Macleod of Eochar. Archie died in 1933 aged 84.

The dance itself is known in various versions dependant upon the source. These are outlined below. It should be stressed that each version represents what is essentially a different dance, and steps and breaks from different versions should not be mixed.

This dance has a standard structure which is found in each of the ten steps. This pattern is as follows -

Bars 1/2 Characteristic step movement (A)

3/4 Half break. (H)

5/6 Characteristic step movement (A)

7/8 Full break. (B)

This is all repeated off the opposite foot. Thus each step is performed first off the left foot and then off the right. The foot off which each section of the step is performed is given at the foot of each notation thus —

A H A Br

- 1) John MacLeod (Tom Flett)
 This is the main version given in the notations below.
 It was collected from MacLeod by Tom Flett in 1953. 10 steps. These are numbered 1-10 in the notations given below. His half-break was H1 (but see note to H1a) and his full-break B1. The notations are derived both from Tom Flett's MS notes and a version which he published in 1975 (J.F.& T.M.Flett 1975).
- 2) John Macleod (Jack MacConachie) (MacC)
 Jack MacConachie also collected from the same John
 Macleod in 1949. His version is not as complete as Tom's
 and has some differences in interpretation. This version
 was known to Tom Flett when he was collecting from Macleod
 in 1953. MacConachie had 8 steps, of which the eighth
 is identical to the first. His order was as follows Step 1,2,3,4,6,7,8,1. Half-break H2, full-break B2.
- 3) Mary MacNab (MacN) Obtained a version from (Hector?) Macpherson in Glasgow 1952. Macpherson learnt the dance from a John Macdonald who in turn had the dance from Archie Macpherson. She was offered the dance by Mrs Fassiefern Bain, one of her sources in Canada, in c.1914, but did not learn it. Mrs MacNab was not really a collector in the true sense of the word although she acquired many dances for her dancing classes and performances. I have been unable to obtain a full notation of this version but what fragments have come to hand have been inserted. Mrs MacNab always insisted that her dances should tell a story and her First of August is no exception. She explained that August 1st is the feast of St Peter in Chains, that each of the chains had 16 links and that the steps represent the links in the chain. Her last step (which I do not have) represents a cross. At any event it seems that her version of the dance is rather different from that collected by others. Only one step (step Λ), together with her half-break (=H1) and her full-break (B5) are currently known.
- 4) Roderick Maclean (MacL)
 Collected by Frank Rhodes on 28/4/54 in Eochar. Generally very similar to the John MacLeod version. (4 steps). His order was as follows Step 1,2,7,4. Half-break H3, full-break B3. "His catch in was a hardly visible flicker and his treble was performed very close to the foot." (Frank Rhodes) It is suggested that the catch in begins in A/E and the shuffles performed in B.C.
- 5) Donald Walker (Walk)
 Collected by Frank Rhodes on 29/4/54. Learnt the dance from Rotchain who was a very bad teacher and was described by MacLeod as a "comedian" (according to MacLennan Rotchain had admitted that his versions of the dances were not authentic). It should be noted that his versions of other dances differ markedly from those

collected from MacLeod. Rotchain merely showed his pupils the steps and left them to get on with it as best they could. 5 steps - there were 6 but Walker was unable to remember the sixth. His order was - Step 2,9,10,B,C. Half-breaks H3 and H4, full-break B4. "His treble is a wide swinging step with the knee well bent." (Frank Rhodes)

The tune seems always to have been the White Cockade. John Macleod suggested a speed of 20 secs for a complete step. It is interesting to note that the other dances are all named after their tune whereas the First of August is not. The name is something of a mystery and name and tune are best considered together.

A tune entitled the First of August was published by D. Wright (D.Wright nd.) in a collection of country dances, together with an accompanying description of a country dance to go with the tune. The dance which he gives has no connection with the solo dance under consideration, but the tune is of some interest.



The volume is undated but probably dates from 1734/5. It will be seen that the dance fits this tune very well, although this may be pure coincidence. The tune itself first appears in the 2nd volume of the Dancing Master, 3rd edn. 1718 (at p337), where it is given the title "Frisky Jenny, Or: the tenth of June". The latter seems to have been because it was James the Pretender's birthday. It appears under the same title in Walsh 1719, but in the 3rd volume of the Dancing Master dated c1728 it had acquired the title of the "Constant Lover". The same tune, under the title of the First of August appears in Coffey's "The Beggar's Wedding"(1729), Chuck(1729) and the Sharper(1740). Later in the eighteenth century it was fairly commonly used as a ballad tune.

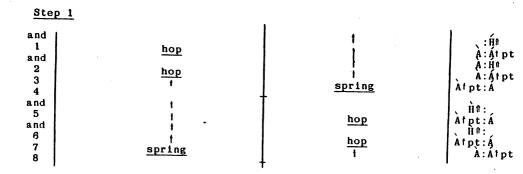
As regards the name there are several possibilities. Firstly it has been suggested that it commemorates the accession of George 1 to the throne in 1714. This was an occasion for great rejoicing amongst the protestant Scots as it finally dashed the hopes of the Jacobites. Several songs of the same name occur of which no fewer than four were printed by Hogg in 1819 (J.Hogg 1819-21) Of these, two are set to tunes of different names and the other two have no tunes attached. I quote the first verse of one of these which sets the tenor of the rest -

Let those that detest all Popish priests Remember the First of August And those that abhor to be yok'd like beasts Give thanks for the First of August For George proclaim'd, dissolved the spell Contriv'd by the Pope, the French and hell And ever since their projects fail Now give thanks for the First of August.

Secondly it has been suggested that August 1st was the date on which Prince Charles landed to begin the '45.

Unfortunately neither of these options seem very favourable. Most of the islanders were catholics and it is most unlikely that they should wish to celebrate the accession of George 1. It is quite possible, indeed extremely likely that the dance came from outside the islands and was perhaps composed by a protestant whig dancing master. Against the second idea is the assertion by Robertson (J.L.Robertson 1904) that Charles landed on 23rd July 1745, but this is close enough for the dance to have been composed later to celebrate an event the exact date of which had been forgotten. It is of course equally possible that the dance was composed to celebrate some completely prosaic event such as a patron's birthday. MacLennan states that the dance was also known by the alternative name of Fisher's Hornpipe, this being a well known tune in hornpipe rhythm. It is not known where he came by this information.

For the dance the men wore their ordinary boots or stocking soles and the girls their ordinary shoes, some with quite a high heel. According to Macleod, hands were held by the sides or the dance was performed with arms akimbo. Walker danced with both hands held up in highland dancing fashion except for his 4th step when he raised opposite hands to feet. As in all Scottish dancing the knees should be kept well turned out.



Step is A H1 A B1

Variations.

1. McC.

Gives aerial leg positions on beats 1,2,5 and 6 as R $\acute{B}l$ pt. Also aerial leg positions on beats 3 and 7 as R $\acute{X}l$ pt.

2. McL.

Gives foot positions on beats 3 and 7 as Al:A.

Ste	p 2		
8 and	hop	catch in	À:Éf :Éf,É/É,Á† :A È,C/È:
1. and 2	shuffle	<u>step</u>	È,Ĉ/È:
and 3	step	ston	xċ:
and 4) shuffle	<u>step</u>	C/E,È:
and 5	step	gton	RXC:
and 6) shuffle	<u>step</u>	È,Ĉ/È:
and	step		xc:,

step

: A

Step is A H1 A B1
| | | | |
L R R L

Variations.

1. McC Gives different foot positions for the steps -

and 3	step	<u>step</u>	B/XB:
and 5	step	<u>step</u>	RB/RXB;
and 7	step	step	B/XB:

McC calls this step "break step" although it seems unlikely that his informant used this terminology.

2. McL. Step has an unusual structure, otherwise as above.

А А НЗ А

Structure is quite clear in the notes but the pattern of the feet given does not work - this being RLRR and no repeat off the other foot. This is very difficult to do after McL step 1 and there seems to be an error in the notation.

3. Walk. Step is a series of half-breaks an breaks.

Move forward on first H4 and back wards on H5.

Step 3 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 (hop) tip touch heel touch tip touch spring tip touch heel touch hop hop spring

tip touch

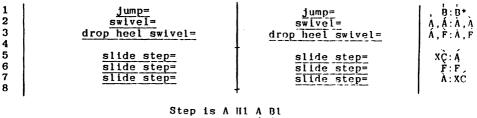
Variations.

1. McC.

Gives this step quite differently -

1 2 3 4	hop hop jump=	toe touch heel touch jump=
5 6 7	toe touch heel touch jump=	h <u>op</u> h <u>op</u> jump=
	Step is A 	H2 A B2

Step 4



Step is A H1 A B1

Variations.

1. McC

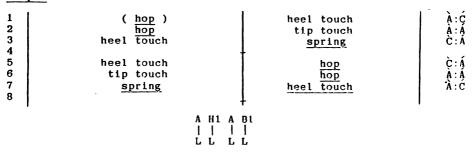
Gives beats 5,6,7 and 8 as follows -



2. McL.

Rhodes recorded parts of an identical step, using the same repeat pattern.

Step 5



This step is a simple variation on step 3

Step 6 flat jump= flat jump= 2 swivel= heel swivel= 3 heel swivel= swivel= 4 5 swivel= heel swivel= 6 heel swivel= swivel= 7 swivel= heel swivel= 8 Step is A H1 A B1.

LL

Note.

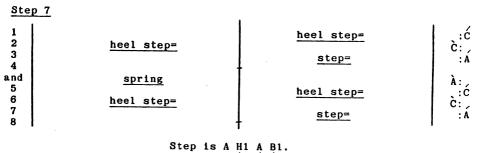
This step is performed moving in a clockwise circle, using the A parts for the movement, and moving 1/4 of the circle on each A part, or as an alternative a complete circle clockwise for the first eight bars and a complete circle counter clockwise for the second eight bars.

Variations.

1. McC.

This version is very similar but with a different rhythm. It is also rather awkward performing the break with the feet turned in, perhaps suggesting that the notation is at fault.

1 2	flat jump=	flat jump=	ć:ċ*
3	swivel=	heel swivel=	xà:ŕ∗
5	heel swivel= swivel=	swivel=	XÁ: È* XÀ: É*
7 8	heel swivel=	heel swivel= swivel=	XA:F*



Step is A H1 A B1. | | | | | | R R L L

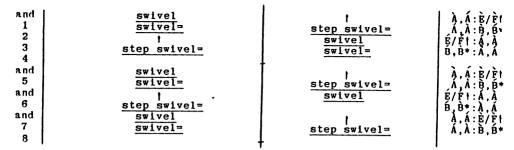
Variations.

1) McC.

and 1	hop		heel step	À: :ć
2 3 4 and 5 6 and 7	heel step= heel swivel= spring heel step= heel swivel=		heel swivel= step heel step step	Č: Ć, Č Ć, Č: Ć, Č A: Ć Ç: Ć, Č Č, Ć: Ć, Č
	A L	H2 A B2		ı

2) McL.

Step 8



Step is A H1 A B1.

This is as in Tom Flett's original notes. His published version gives the repeat pattern as LLLL. He obviously experienced some difficulty with the pattern of this step as his notes have been changed several times.

Variations.

1. McC

Gives a very similar step which he calls "flicker". The description is too vague to permit a proper comparison to be made. He gives the repeat pattern as -

A H2 A B2 | | | | | L R R L

Step 9			
1	jump=	jump=	λ:xć
3 4	jump=	<u>jump=</u>	xc: Á
5	jump= jump=	jump=	À: XĆ È/Ğ: Ē/Ğ

Step is A H1 A B1.

I | | |

L R R L

Variations.

1. Walk.

Gives this step rather differently -

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	jump= jump= jump= jump= jump= jump= jump=	jump= jump= jump= jump= jump= jump=	À/P:Á/F À:XĆ À/F:Á/F XC:Á À/P:Á/F À:XĆ À/F:Á/F
--------------------------------------	---	--	--

Step is A H4 A B4 | | | | | L L L L

Ste	p 10		
1 2	hop	1	À:Xố!pt :Á/f4 RXČ:
3	step=	step	RXČ*:
a. 5	•	spring	XBfpt:
а 6	spring .	<u> </u>	:RXĆ* :XBfpt RXÖr:
a 7	1	spring	RXÒ± XBfpt: :RXĆ⊁
8	ı .		

Step is A H1 A B1.

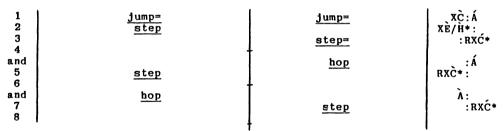
Note.

Make one complete turn on beats 5 to 8, turn clockwise first time and counter clockwise on the repeat.

Variations.

1. Walk.

Has this step rather differently -



The precise timing of the backsteps is not clear in the MS.

A A H4 B5 | | | | | L R L L

Extra step from MacNab.

Step 8 & a 1 and 2 and 3	<u>hop</u> <u>drop heel=</u> <u>step=</u> <u>heel step=</u>	catch in heel step= step heel step	À:F† :F†,À,Ŋ; :B A: :F* A: :F*
and 4 and 5 6 7 8	step= heel step= flat step (ff) Step is A H		:F* A: :F* A: :A

This step was collected from Mary MacNab. In his written up notes (J.F & T.M.L Flett 1975) Tom Flett gives the repeat pattern as L L L but the above is from his original notes. Move to the right on 1st A part, to the left on the 2nd.

Other steps from D. Walker.

glide touch	À:É/Ĥ
slide touch	:XĆbt :É/Ĥ
slide touch	A: :XĆbt
	:E/H A:
slide touch	:RXĆbţ :É/H À:
slide touch slide touch	: RXĆbt : É/ÍÍ
	slide touch slide touch slide touch slide touch slide touch

This is repeated off the other foot to make up the A movement.

Step is A H5 A B4 IIIII

Step C			
1 and 2 3 and 4 5 and 6 7 and 8	spring (hop) tap step hop tap step step step step	tap step hop tap step hop	À:Áf :BA À::Á À::Á :A::Áf :A::A À::A
	Step is A L	1 1 1	1

This is my interpretation of the following description in the MS -

Hop on L foot.

Beat R foot forward just in front of first position.

Beat R foot back to first position.

Hop on R foot.

Beat L foot forwards just in front of first position. Beat L foot back to first position.

Half-Breaks

Half-break H1

		1	
8 and 1	hop	t catch in .	À:É! :É!,É/É,Á!
and 2) shuffle	<u>step</u>	È,È/Ċ:
and 3	step	_	xċ:,
4		<u>step</u> hop	E':Á
and 5	catch in step		ÈI,È/B,ÀI:
and	<u>acep</u>) shuffle	A: :É,É/C
6	,)	
and 7		<u>step</u>	: XĆ À:
8	<u>step</u>		A:

This is from MacLeod

Note.

Flett also records the foot positions on beats "1" and "5" as $X\acute{C}^*$ but seems to have changed his mind in a later set of notes.

Half-break H2

From McConachie. He gives this as H1 above but on beats "1" and "2and" the steps are noted as springs. Also on beats "and 3" and "and 7" the fo foot positions are " \hat{B} :" and ": \hat{A} " in lieu of " $X\hat{C}$:" and ": \hat{A} " etc.

Half-break H3/H4

From MacLean(H3) and Walker(H4). Foot positions undefined. (see note on their general styles supra)

Half-break H5

Also from Walker. Foot positions conjectural.

a 1	hop		À: ,
a		step	:RXC*
2	step	<u>hop</u>	: A RXČ*:
a 3	hop		À:
a		<u>step</u> hop	:RXC*
4	step	<u>nop</u>	:A RXC*:
a 5	<u>step</u> <u>hop</u>		À:
a		step	:RXC*
6	step	hop	: A RXC*:
a 7	step hop		À:
7 a		<u>step</u> hop	:ŖXĆ*
8	step	<u>hop</u>	: A RXC*:

Full-Breaks

Full-break B1

8 and 1		<u>hop</u>	catch in step	À:É! :É!,É/B,Á!
and 2)	shuffle	<u> </u>	∶A È,È/Ċ:
and 3	•	step	step	XĊ: ·á
and 4)	shuffle	<u> </u>	c/È,È:
and 5	,	step	<u>hop</u>	:Á RČ*:
6 7		spring	<u>step</u>	: RĆ À: RXĆ
8			L	A. 11.AC

The foot position on beat 1 may be XC^* (see note to H1). Tom Flett also noted the following (see step summary supra)

Full-break Bla

and 1 and	hop) shuffle	catch in <u>step</u>	À:É! :É!,É/B,Á! :Ä È,È/C:
2 and 3 4 5 6 7 8	step step step step spring	step hop t step	XČ: : Á XČ!pt:Á RČ*:XČ!pt XČ!pt:RČ* B:RXĆ pt

Full-break B2

From MacConachie. As B1 but gives spring in lieu of step on beat 1, and steps on beats "and 3" are in \hat{B} : and : \hat{A} respectivly.

Full-break B3

From MacLean.

8		hop	
and			catch in
1 and		-1 001	step
2	1	shuffle	
and 3	,	step	
and)	shuffle	step
4)		
and 5		step	
and 6)	shuffle	step
and		step	
7 8			step

Note.

No foot positions are given as the MS is unclear as to the positions used. (see note on his general style supra)

Full-break B4

From Walker. The break is rather unclear, and is described as "shuffle LLRR" or the same movement but with different feet. These would have been standard scottish shuffles as noted below, but these are normally done four to a bar which suggests that either the shuffles were performed at half speed or that they were doubled up (versions a) and b) below).

Version a) (half-time)

1	spring	1	À:É/HI
and		slide touch	:Bbt
2	'	slide touch	:Ė/Ĥ

Break is four times through off L L R L.

Version b) (doubled up)

1 & a 2 &	<u>spring</u> (<u>hop</u>) <u>hop</u>	slide touch slide touch slide touch	À:É/HÍ :Bbt :É/H À: :Bbt
а	·	slide touch	:É/Ĥ

Break is four times through on the L and four times on the R.

Full-break B5

From MacNab.

Beats 8 and 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 as B1 above then -

and 5	step	hop	RXC:
and 6 7 8		tap touch <u>drop heel</u>	: E : E

References.

1) From the MS collection of Tom Flett.

Interviewer abbreviations are TMF = T.M.Flett. FR = F.Rhodes.

Rev William James Anderson. Letters to TMF 27/7/56 & 2/8/56

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Fr. Campbell, Glen Uig. FR/TMF 9/4/56

Mrs Campbell, Daliburgh, S. Uist. FR. 29/4/55

Donald Kennedy, Garrymonie, S. Uist. TMF ?/10/56

Mrs Margaret MacAskill, S.Boisdale, S.Uist. FR. 8/7/56

Miss Cissie MacDonald, Arisaig. TMF 5/4/53

Mrs Donald MacDonald, Daliburgh, S.Uist. FR 26/4/55 TMF ?10/9/54

Ronald MacDonald, Ardmonie, S. Uist. TMF 13/4/53

Angus John MacIntyre, Loch Eynort, S. Uist. FR 8/7/56

Peter MacKay, Kilaulay, S. Uist. TMF 12/4/53

Mgr. MacKellaig, Daliburgh, S. Uist. FR 26/4/55

Dr. Maclean, Daliburgh, S. Uist. FR 25-29/4/55

Roderick MacLean, Kilauley, Eochar, S.Uist. FR 28/4/55

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