

MacGillivrays of Ballinglen, Ballycastle, Co. Mayo

From: Christopher Langmuir <celangmuir@ono.com>
Date: 23 August 2011
Subject: MacGillivrays from Ballinglen, Ballycastle
To: Ballycastle Family History

First of all, congratulations and many thanks for the photographs of the Ballinglen gravestones. I was delighted to find there Alexander MacGillivry, the 13 year-old son of the Ballinglen schoolmaster, Duncan, my great great grandfather.

Here is a bit of a letter I wrote to some other family members yesterday, putting the Ballinglen episode of Duncan's life in context. Not all of it will be of interest to you but the first letter does shed light on the tension experienced by protestants in the immediate area in 1867. I know nothing about what triggered the unrest and I would be very grateful if you could point me in the right direction to find out more. Please feel free to post the letter on the website or pass it on any others interested.

Thanks again to whoever took the photographs. Alexander now takes his proper place in the family's history.
Best wishes,
Christopher Langmuir

The Inverness Library Family History section contains in its archives a collection of about a dozen letters, spanning the period from 1853 to 1867, written by one Invernessshire MacGillivray to another. They probably had one or more ancestors in common in the 18th century and had grown up together on the Dunmaglass estate, the one, Finlay, in Lagg, and the other, Duncan (the author of the letters), about half a mile north in Milton. These two settlements have long since disappeared but traces of foundations are still visible if you know where to look. Both men had left the community, Finlay to thrive as a road surveyor in Nairn and Duncan to struggle as a Free Church schoolmaster, initially in Bowmore and then latterly in Portnahaven. There are interesting observations in the letters on the barefoot natives, the high quality of their Gaelic and the immensity of their ignorance. Duncan and his family often returned to Dunmaglass, even after the death of his parents, his mother Isabella's in 1856, his father Archibald's two years later. The ferry would have left them at Inverfarigaig on the eastern shore of Loch Ness, where Duncan's father-in-law, Alexander Grant, had been piermaster, and then it was on past Errogie church where Duncan and Elizabeth Grant had been married (on New Year's Eve, 1851) and he had begun his career as a schoolmaster. It was in Milton, not Portnahaven, that Elizabeth had given birth to their third son Duncan in 1863.

The three letters I've transcribed here deal with a tragic year, one of family loss and professional misadventure, and all written from Ireland. In a letter of 1865 Duncan tells Finlay that he had received a letter from a Rev. McLauchlan in Edinburgh inviting him to run a mission school in Ireland with a salary of 60 pounds per annum, supported by the generosity of Edinburgh congregations. Duncan was inclined to accept the proposal provided transport for the family was provided for. The destination was a minuscule townland in County Mayo called Ballinglen, about half a mile south of Ballycastle.

The following excerpt from the Rev. W. D. Killen's 'History of the Congregations of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and Biographical Notices of Eminent Presbyterian Ministers and Laymen' (Belfast, 1886) gives some of the background:

"Ballinglen. In the year 1845 the Rev. Mr. Brannigan was appointed by the students of the General Assembly's Collegiate Classes in Belfast to take the oversight of the Irish Schools, and at the same time

to act as itinerant missionary over a large tract of country. Before the end of 1846 twelve mission stations were formed. On the appointment of the Rev. Robert Allen to the superintendence of the Connaught Schools, Mr. Brannigan was directed to confine his labours more immediately to the Ballinglen district. From this station a memorial was presented to the General Assembly in 1848, signed by more than eighty persons, of whom a majority were originally Romanists, praying to be taken under the care of the Church. A commission having been appointed to inquire and report, the prayer of the memorial was granted, and Mr. Brannigan at once undertook the collection of the funds necessary for the building of the church, which was opened free of debt for divine service in 1850, by the Rev. Dr. Cooke, of Belfast. For a time the cause was well sustained, but emigration having set in, few of the original adherents remain, although at the census of 1861 over 150 registered themselves as Presbyterians. In November, 1864, both church and manse were burned down, but being insured, were rebuilt in 1865.”

In view of the unrest alluded to in one of the letters below, there must be a suspicion of arson.

1)
Ballinglen, Ballina,
Co Mayo, Ireland
6th April 1867

My Dear Friend,

Your kind letter came duly to hand and we were sorry to hear of the death of the little girl so sudden and so unexpected. It must have been trying to your wife in the state she was in. I am glad that she and the Babie are getting on well. We have lull here at present, whether it may be after the storm as some think, or only in the midst of the storm as others think, is very difficult to say. You are anxious to hear how the tempest passed over us. I am pleased to say that there was no actual rising in this place and not much in the county, as you would have seen in the Papers but Rumours excitement anxiety and sometimes alarms were more than you can have any idea of. The Protestants here were more in a state of great alarm and scarcely went to bed a night some of them and really it very trying when one is afraid of his very neighbours. I told you that my wife has been all along very anxious and weary and she was since in almost constant terror and you would pity the poor children especially at night – the least noise or barking of a dog would put them very quiet and make them look anxious and serious. I am sorry to say that it seems to tell very much on my wife's health and under the circumstances I consider it my duty to use [... illegible ...] in looking for another place and I have written to Dr. McLauchlan and to one or two more to that effect but places are scarce and very difficult to get. The country is now pretty quiet but I am not one of those who think that Fenianism is at an end. It will I think smoulder for a time and then watch an opportunity for another attempt. I have great reason to be thankful for the measure of health I enjoy, but the anxiety is not at all in favour of my complaint. I heard from my brothers of late from Stratherrick I dare say you heard that Alex lives now at Abercalder, they had a young son of late and are all well. I am sorry to hear of very disagreeable divisions ...

2)
Ballinglen
Monday morning
10th June 1867

My Dear Friend,

It is not likely that you have heard that we have had great trouble in our family for the last fortnight and it is with feeling that you can understand better than I can express that I write you a note to inform you that our dear Alick our eldest son is no more. On [the] Sabbath the 26th May he was suddenly seized with a severe pain in his left thigh which soon moved down to the knee and afterwards I may say to all parts of the body, it was what Doctors call a Rheumatic fever a terrible disease. He suffered greatly indeed but was very quiet since yesterday morning till 1/2 past 3 o'clock in the evening when he breathed his last as in a sleep and without any apparent struggle. We had great comfort of him during his short but trying illness as he gave evident signs from the very first of the gracious dealings of the Lord with his soul but on this I cannot enlarge. Pray that we may be supported and and brought to humble resignation to his holy

will and be enabled to say from the heart "Thy will be done". With the kindest love to Mrs. MacGillivray and yourself and all your family,

Yours affectionately,

D MGillivray

The Doctor says the fever is not infectious –

Here we have no continuing city of which we get many comings but as you used to say "it His own clean hand".

A Doctor was seeing him every day but it was the messenger to call him home.

3)

Ballinglen, Ballina,

Co. Mayo, Ireland

22nd July 1867

My Dear Friend,

My being rather unwell for the last ten days or so accounts for the delay in replying to your letter which came duly to hand. It is written "Behold, I stand at the door and knock". Many a way he knocks at my door and another loud knock was the arrival of your second letter on Saturday evening conveying the mournful intelligence of your dear Brother's death. I heard nothing of either his illness or death till then only that I heard that he was not keeping well of late. Like yourself I feel much at a loss what to say but perhaps that is better. There is no time I think at which it is more realised that the help of man is vain than in connection with the death of those dear to us. The Lord seems then to say "Come with me", come aside from the world and everything in it and seek to hold converse with Me who am coming thus near and speaking to you in such majesty. You may be sure the death of Angus has made a deep impression on my mind and awakened many thoughts of time and seasons long gone by. He was for a considerable time one of my most intimate companions and nearest bosom friend on earth and perhaps I may say that he conversed with me with as much openness of mind and freedom as he ever did to any especially on religious subjects. No wonder should I feel deeply as I really do. I do trust however there is every reason to hope that death to him was great even infinite gain.

It was good you went to Lagg, it did not seem to me from what you say that he was fit for being at the fire tho he got up and they would be better of you with them. What a blessing and cause of thankfulness to the Lord that he was so mercifully kept from saying anything unbecoming. As long as I live I shall continue to think so with regard to our own dear boy tho for some time the trouble was much in his head he was so mercifully kept to the one [illegible] namely the things of Eternity but he not [illegible] the severity of the trouble retained more consciousness than it seems Angus did. May the Lord grant in mercy to sanctify his illness and death to his poor wife and family and to you all. O there is such blessing in connection with sanctified afflictions "Blessed is he whom thou chastenest and teacheest". My dear friend, we often hear, read and even speak [about the] certainty of sickness and death but Oh don't you find that when they come they take us as it were by surprise and find us unprepared? I at least find it so and that makes me in a great measure to be as a Bullock unaccustomed to the yoke. I thought I would write you a longer letter this time but I must not try. I have had a very bad attack of Bowel complaint for the past ten days or so which I thought at one time was likely to finish my course here but I feel better now tho very weak. Please write me soon to let me know. You are quite right in thinking that the last bereavement was the worst in my case that is natural in the former case the dear ones were very near and dear indeed Oh we have no reason to complain but every reason to be thankful. May the remembrance of those gone before be the means of making us press forward towards the [illegible]. I have given up my situation here and agreed to back to Islay to my former place at Portnahaven if the Lord spares and continues health. When I first thought of going I had the prospect of the great assistance of dear Alick but the Lord says My thoughts are not your thoughts. With kind love and sympathy with your wife and yourself.

Yours very truly,

D MGillivray