



Malcolm Macdonald - Chief Constable of Sutherland Constabulary from 1887 to 1906

On 7 June 1887, Malcolm Macdonald, then an Inspector in the Inverness-shire Constabulary, stationed at Portree on the Isle of Skye, was appointed as the new Chief Constable of Sutherland.

He had joined the Inverness-shire Constabulary as a 3rd Class Constable on 2 December 1874 at the age of 26 years. Previously a farm servant, he had also served 2 years in the City of Glasgow Police before joining Inverness-shire.

A native of the Island of Skye, Chief Constable Macdonald stood 6'1" in height, had grey eyes and fresh complexion with dark and curly hair. He was a big man in all senses, with a considerable presence.

His promotion to Inspector came from the previous Chief Constable, William Murray, six months before Chief Constable McHardy went to Inverness-shire Constabulary from Dornoch.

In fact Mr MacDonald's advancement to Inspector had come quickly, only 13 months after being



made up to Sergeant at Beaulieu with only 9 years Police Service, some 7 of them in Inverness-shire. Such a rapid (at least in terms of promotions in Inverness-shire) ascent would likely not have pleased some of his colleagues as it was upsetting the established order ("dead man's shoes").

That feeling of resentment would not apply however if his colleagues had identified, as they probably did in this case, that he was what was (and still is) termed a 'flier' (accelerated promotion - such flight being both 'upwards' and 'away'), and would be off to another force in a promoted rank soon enough, so that the previous order would resume with no harm done.

The new Chief, aged 39 on appointment, was awarded an initial salary of £200 per annum. He appeared to settle in very well in Sutherland, a land very similar in terrain and attitude to his own home Island. That he made a lasting impression on the local population is not in dispute.

Sadly his wife died during his period in Dornoch, leaving the Chief to raise his family of six, three boys and three girls.

In November 1892 Mr Macdonald received a ten per cent rise in his salary, going up to £220, having served 5 years in the Force. The 15th of November seems to have been either the start or mid point of the Force's financial year. Almost all amalgamations of Forces occurred on 16 May or 16 November.

John Macdonald, eldest son of Malcolm, joined the City of Dundee Police in 1898 and had been promoted to Sergeant in the following year. He surely was a 'flier'. With only 14 years of police service, he would reach the exalted rank of Superintendent (and be appointed Deputy Chief Constable) in Dundee by 1912, and then from 1931 to 1936 would be Chief Constable of the City of Dundee himself.

Chief Constable Malcolm Macdonald died suddenly at his home in Dornoch on the afternoon of Thursday 15 February 1906 and a sense of shock was experienced all around the County, as demonstrated by the obituary carried in the "Northern Times" newspaper:-

*"It came as a shock to the northern public on Thursday afternoon to hear of the sudden death at 4.40 p.m. on that day of Mr Malcolm Macdonald, Chief Constable of Sutherland, at his residence in Dornoch.*

*"The cause of death, it is understood, was heart failure supervening after a sharp attack of colic, which began about 10 a.m. on the morning of his death.*

*"He was at the curling on Loch-in-treel, and in excellent spirits the day before. He got up on Thursday morning as usual and breakfasted with his family, after which he went outside and did some work on his own premises.*

*"Returning to the house he complained of a feeling of being gripped as if some one had caught him by the throat, this gradually going down the chest to the abdomen when pain set in, which was at times very acute.*

*"Dr MacLachlan was called about eleven o'clock, but no serious view was taken of the attack, and a prescription was given.*

*"Again at two o'clock the doctor saw Mr Macdonald, and, although he was still suffering nothing serious was apprehended; but unfortunately the unseen was at work, and he became alarmingly ill, and expired suddenly at the hour stated above, in the presence of his son and daughter and his sister-in-law.*

*"All the curlers, in view of the County Bonspiel, were out at Loch-in-treel, and when they heard the sad news on their return it could hardly be believed. The telegraph conveyed the news all over the county, and the sadness which it produced as it spread testified to the popularity of the deceased.*



"The 'Chief', as he was popularly known, was 57 years of age and a widower. His eldest son is superintendent of police at Dundee, and there are two other sons and three daughters, six in all, mostly grown up.

"Mr Macdonald was Chief Constable of Sutherland for eighteen years, having succeeded the late Chief-Constable MacLean in July 1887.

"He was appointed from the post of inspector at Portree, which he had occupied under Mr McHardy, chief constable of Inverness-shire for about five years.

"He was in Skye, of which he was a native, during the time of the crofter disturbances, and on one occasion he and the late Sergt Mackenzie, Kingussie, and four constables, visiting Glendale, encountered a violent mob, by whom the inspector was roughly handled, receiving injuries from the after effects of which he suffered for a long time.

"Mr Macdonald's connection with the Inverness-shire Constabulary began at Obbe, from which he transferred to Ardersier, afterwards becoming sergeant of police at Beauly.

"Since he came into the County of Sutherland the Chief was one of the most popular public figures, and was welcomed wherever people gathered together. He was a man equally at home at a social gathering or at a public meeting, ever having an open eye to his duty, and ever ready to take his full share of public work.

"It is a rare testimonial to a Chief Constable to say that he was one of the most popular men in the north and west of Scotland. From the nature of the duties falling to be executed by one in that position, people would naturally look for some enmity, at least on the part of those unfortunate enough to come on the wrong side of his official work. But the Chief had his own way of doing things. His official work never left the flesh raw or nor a feeling of revenge.

"Everyone knew the big soft heart he carried in his big frame, and any unpleasant work that may have fallen to the Chief was done in the most pleasant manner possible. Therein lay his popularity. He never talked "shop". He never spoke anything but well of people, and where he could not do that he held his peace.

"He gave a helping hand where he could, whether it was privately or in connection with public movements, either in the Burgh of Dornoch or in the County, or in his native island of Skye, and his death is mourned by a huge circle of friends all over the northern half of Scotland, who extend to the bereaved family every expression of sympathy.

"The Chief was a fine specimen of the Highlander. Standing considerably over six feet in height, and huge of girth and limb he was an imposing figure, and the beau ideal in the public mind of what a chief constable should be. Coming from the misty Isle of Skye his knowledge of the Gaelic language was extensive, and he spoke with a correctness of tone and felicity of expression which often excited comment.

"He was passionately fond of Gaelic song and story, and had an illimitable store of both, which, when it was tapped, was delightful. To see the fine erect figure, clad in real Highland dress, and to, at the same time hear him conversing in the Gaelic language, was to find the real embodiment of a Highlander, seemingly as far apart from English language and latter-day customs as the towering peaks of his native Cuchullins.

"Although out of Skye for many years he always manifested a keen interest in the doings of the island, and was regularly a prominent figure at the annual "field-day" at Portree, renewing acquaintances with his many friends and following with zest the fortunes of the competitors at the cattle show and the Highland games, to the prize-lists of each of which he was a standing contributor.

"Physically a strong man, he was naturally fond of the out-door life, although, within recent years,

*the attacks of rheumatism with which he was visited served to curtail his partaking in various games he played as much as he would have wished.*

*"Prominently, above all else, he was a golfer. Although he never tackled a club until he was about forty years of age, he worked himself down to "scratch" in a year or two, and for some years he held the record at the Dornoch course, and since then has always been reckoned as amongst the best five or six players the club possessed.*

*"He was also a well-known figure on the Tain, Brora, and Golspie courses, and his style of play - so easy, confident, and sure with clubs remarkable for their lightness and shortness - was always much admired.*

*"Then, as a curler - and golf and curling are the two premier games of Scotland - he was as keen and hearty a man as ever 'sooped a stone into the house' and none watched the counting of points with keener interest.*

*"In all respects he was an ideal man for his position and the 'good old chief' - decent soul that he was - will long live in the memories of those to whom he was known.*

*"It will be many long years ere he has been forgotten, and there will always be those for half a century to come who will remember with softening of the heart and a dimming of the eyes the admirable Chief who they loved so well. Requiescat in pace.*

*"The funeral took place to Dornoch Churchyard on Monday amid every appearance of mourning and sincere sympathy. It was largely attended by representatives from practically every corner of the county, and by all the officials and Constabulary. The remains were laid beside those of his wife and daughter, the coffin bearing the age of 57."*

*(The newspaper cutting was preserved by the late Kenneth Ross BL, final Chief Constable of Sutherland)*