



HAL
open science

'Every Time I Receive a Letter from You It Gives Me New Vigour': The Correspondence of the Scalan Masters, 1762-1783

Clotilde Prunier

► **To cite this version:**

Clotilde Prunier. 'Every Time I Receive a Letter from You It Gives Me New Vigour': The Correspondence of the Scalan Masters, 1762-1783. Dunan-Page Anne; Prunier Clotilde. *Debating the Faith: Religion and Letter Writing in Great Britain, 1550-1800*, Springer, pp.123-135, 2013, 978-94-007-5215-3. 10.1007/978-94-007-5216-0_8. hal-01639884

HAL Id: hal-01639884

<https://hal.parisnanterre.fr/hal-01639884>

Submitted on 17 Sep 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Chapter 8

‘Every Time I Receive a Letter from You It Gives Me New Vigour’: The Correspondence of the Scalan Masters, 1762–1783

Clotilde Prunier

In 1560, the Scottish parliament outlawed Catholicism. As a result, the now clandestine Roman Catholic Church had to resort to makeshift arrangements not to be altogether wiped out of the country. One of the most pressing emergencies was to contrive a means of training Scottish-born priests, as it was of the utmost importance that there should be enough clergy to cater to the religious needs of those who had remained staunch in the Catholic faith.¹

In the decades following the Reformation, Colleges were founded on the Continent, purposefully to maintain Scottish boys training for the priesthood. In the early eighteenth century, the four Scots Colleges were still the Scottish Mission’s main source of priests. The Vicar Apostolic, James Gordon, deemed the supply inadequate in many ways, and decided to establish a seminary on Scottish soil. In spite of the tightening grip of the law, which particularly forbade Catholics to teach, and the treatment meted out to priests in the aftermath of the ’15, a seminary was established in 1716 at Scalan, a secluded spot near Chapelton in the Braes of Glenlivet. Scalan was deemed a safe place enough to settle a seminary, as it was quite difficult of access. Further, it was located on the estate of the (Catholic) Duke of Gordon, whose influence ensured that the numerous Catholics living on his lands were out of harm’s way. The original building was burned down in the aftermath of the ’45 and a smaller, makeshift, one was erected in 1747. The foundation stone of the seminary, as it stands now, was laid in 1767.² On its foundation, it was meant to

My grateful thanks are due to the Catholic Record Society which awarded me grants out of the David Rogers Research Fund.

¹ On the Catholic Church in Scotland in the eighteenth century, see Johnson 1983; Szechi 1996; McMillan 1999 and Prunier 2004.

² For an account of the seminary, see Johnson 1983 p. 60–70 and Watts 1999.

serve Scotland as a whole, but became the Lowland seminary when the Mission was divided into the Highland and Lowland Districts in the early 1730s. It was hoped Scalán would bring a welcome addition to the Scottish Catholic clergy, providing the Mission with ‘heather priests’, that is to say clergymen who had received their whole training in Scotland, rather than abroad, at the hands of masters conversant with the peculiar demands of the local situation. There can be no doubt that this was Bishop Gordon’s design, as George James Gordon reminded Bishop Gordon’s successor, Alexander Smith, in 1763, while he lamented the new master’s apparent resolution to ‘turn Scalán into a kind of nursery for the foreign Shops; directly opposite to the wise intention of Mr Nicop: the founder’.³ It is no coincidence that the man who insisted Scalán retain its original purpose was himself the very first ‘heather priest’ ordained at Scalán and a former master there. Indeed, so intense were his feelings for his ‘old Nest’, that even after he left it to serve the mission of Aberdeen in 1739, he went on to subscribe himself, and was referred to, as ‘Scalanensis’ until he died in 1766.⁴ However, he could not but know that he was one of only four ‘heather priests’ bred at Scalán in almost half a century.⁵ Further, some of those boys sent to Scots Colleges had never attended Scalán at all, but had been tutored by their local priests, before pursuing their studies abroad. That happened to be the case of John Geddes, the new master appointed to Scalán in 1762.

The tensions between these two men’s views on the function and uses of Scalán are apparent in their correspondence with Bishop Smith. Indeed, except for the annual meeting of the Bishops and the administrators of the Mission,⁶ there were very few opportunities for face-to-face encounters, so that letters were by force of circumstance the main vehicle for all such exchanges of opinions among the clergy of the underground Church. In the late eighteenth century, correspondents still made use in their correspondence of aliases and of various metaphors, in particular commercial ones. For example, ‘labourers’ (ecclesiastics) catered for the needs of their ‘customers’ (the faithful) and ‘apprentices’ (prospective priests) were sent to ‘shops’ (Scots Colleges) to learn their trade.⁷ However, by then, most letters were sent

³ Scottish Catholic Archives, Blairs Letters [thereafter SCA, BL], George James Gordon to Alexander Smith, 7 March 1763. The foreign shops were the Scots Colleges on the Continent; ‘Mr Nicop’ was one of Bishop Gordon’s aliases: he was Bishop of Nicopolis.

⁴ ‘I should be very glad to see my old Nest, for which I still retain a very warm attachment; but fear it will not be in my power’. SCA, BL, George James Gordon to John Geddes, 19 June 1765. George James Gordon was a student at Scalán from 1717 to 1725. He was ordained there in September 1725 and came back as master in 1727, an office he fulfilled for over ten years.

⁵ George James Gordon was ordained alongside Hugh MacDonald, the first Vicar Apostolic of the Highland District. Francis MacDonald was ordained in 1736, but apostatised a few years later to become a Royal Bounty catechist. John Gordon was ordained in 1754 and was appointed to the mission of Glenlivet, but died in 1757, aged 28.

⁶ More often than not, that meeting was held in the summer at Scalán and was the occasion for drafting ‘Italian’ letters, that is to say letters to various dignitaries of the Roman Catholic Church in Rome.

⁷ See note 4 above. Both the aliases and the metaphors were too transparent by then to afford the people involved any protection.

through the regular post. While John Geddes was at Scalán, his letters went through Aberdeen before being put in the ‘south post’ by George James Gordon. On at least one occasion, Gordon urged Smith not to forward a letter Geddes had written in February 1763 to Cardinal Spinelli, which contained details about two boys at Scalán that he hoped to send to the Scots College in Rome. What Gordon resented was Geddes’s determination to have as many boys as possible instructed abroad, without attempting to see them through their studies at Scalán. That this was a live issue throughout his mastership, is manifest from Geddes’s answer to a letter Bishop Smith had written to him in 1765, making it clear to the master what his design for Scalán was. Geddes first reassured his Bishop that he would ‘endeavour to follow [his] plans to the utmost of [his] Powers’ but then concluded: ‘I also hope, it will be easy, if it shall please God to continue the present Peace we enjoy, both to prepare here some Apprentices for foreign Shops, which is certainly a thing of the utmost Consequence, and also to bring others farther on in their Business, according to your Desire’.⁸

As a matter of fact, in the eighty-odd years of its existence, Scalán was mostly used as a junior seminary, which did not make it the less essential to the Mission, as it supplied the Scots Colleges with students and, by way of consequence, the Mission with priests.

However, Scottish Bishops seemed to be of two minds about Scalán. They were in a constant dilemma—on the one hand, they were alive to the pivotal role it fulfilled; on the other, they were but too conscious that it was a drain on the Mission’s scant financial and human resources. Besides the cost of maintaining boys there, often for as long as five years, Scalán deprived the Mission, as the Bishops saw it, of an able ‘hand’—the master could have been otherwise employed, at a time when the Catholic Church in Scotland suffered from an endemic shortage of priests. This dilemma was particularly acute when Bishops had to make choice of a master. Their correspondence amply testifies to the fact that they had no doubt that the future prosperity of the Mission was mainly contingent on the success of the Scalán master, but they were painfully aware that supplying the seminary with a competent master put the present standing of the Church at risk by leaving whole areas unattended by a resident priest. In the last resort, Bishops seem always to have favoured the needs of their existing flocks over those of subsequent generations, though after much agonizing. In 1774, for instance, at their annual meeting, the Bishops for both districts refused to grant John Geddes the second master he had been craving for the Scots College at Valladolid. In the letter he wrote him, Bishop Hay gave the rationale for this decision:

The Souls of our present flock are our immediate, our first & principal Charge; we must render an account of them to almighty God, but not of those who may come after us; and tho it be our Duty to take all reasonable care to provide for futurity; yet when this cannot be

⁸ SCA, BL, John Geddes to Alexander Smith, 3 March 1765. The ‘peace’ refers to a lull in the priest-hunt in the north-east, but also to the end of the Seven Years’ War, as the naval blockade made it extremely difficult for Scottish boys to get to the Scots Colleges abroad.

done without the manifest ruin of those souls at present under our Charge, it is evident that Duty in this case obliges us to take care of the present & leave futurity to the Protection of Heaven.⁹

What happened in the 1760s is a case in point. As early as 1761, the Lowland Bishops had pitched upon John Geddes, in charge of the mission of Shenvall since his return from the Scots College in Rome two years earlier, as the perfect person to become the master of the seminary. However, they could find no replacement for him and had to put their scheme in abeyance until August 1762, when William Duthie eventually accepted to take over the mission of Shenvall.¹⁰ Geddes had barely been two years at Scalán, when pressing demands were made on the Bishops to send him to the Scots College at Douai. Though they refused to remove Geddes to the Continent in 1765, heaping encomiums on his skills as master, he was ordered to leave Scalán in 1767 to replace George Hay at Preshome, an essential mission in the Enzie, so that, when push came to shove, even the man, whom Bishop Grant claimed in 1765 was ‘so very necessary’ at Scalán, was allowed to be replaced by John Thomson, a relatively indifferent master,¹¹ who was in his turn succeeded by John Paterson, a former pupil of John Geddes’s there. Paterson, who self-confessedly wished ‘to be stil’d a second M^r John Geddes’,¹² remained in office until his untimely death in 1783.

In between them, Geddes and Paterson trained the bulk of the priests who served the Lowland District into the nineteenth century.¹³ Though a sizeable part of eighteenth-century Scottish Catholic correspondence is no longer extant, what has survived bears testimony to abundant epistolary links. The Scalán masters exchanged letters with their bishops and senior priests on the one hand, and with their former pupils on the other. Both Geddes and Paterson were compulsive readers and writers of letters, but while the former had a very extensive European network both within and outwith the Catholic community, Paterson’s was extremely circumscribed. There is no trace remaining of his passive correspondence, that is to say of the letters he received, except for three ‘collective’ letters Bishop Hay wrote between September

⁹SCA, BL, George Hay to John Geddes, 9 March 1774.

¹⁰The Bishops’ plan had foundered the previous year on another priest’s categorical refusal to move to Shenvall.

¹¹George Hay had been appointed procurator, which meant he had to be stationed in Edinburgh. Geddes himself later confided to Hay: ‘I own to you, that I thought nothing could excuse the sending M^r Thomson to Scalán [...] but downright Necessity’. SCA, BL, John Geddes to George Hay, 28 November 1769.

¹²Royal Scots College, Valladolid (now Salamanca) [thereafter RSC], John Paterson to John Geddes, 9 June 1776: ‘My ambition is, to be stil’d a second M^r John Geddes, this I hope you will say is not unlawful.’

¹³Alexander Cameron, James Cameron, John Farquharson, John Gordon (later vice-rector at Valladolid), William Hay, Alexander Innes and John Paterson were taught by Geddes. Thomas Bagnall, Andrew Dawson, Alexander Farquharson, John Gordon (John Geddes’s nephew), Peter Hay, Lachlan MacIntosh and George Mathison by Paterson. The last two mentioned only spent a few months in Scalán under Paterson’s supervision, but left the seminary to be trained by Geddes at Valladolid. One further priest, Paul Macpherson, must be added to the list. Though he was a pupil of John Thomson’s at Scalán, he was first taught reading and writing by Geddes, his local priest, and later studied for the priesthood at Valladolid while Geddes was Rector of the College.

and November 1772.¹⁴ Considering Paterson's declared passion for letters, which sometimes seemed to verge on fetishism, it is highly improbable that he did not keep any of them and it can only be surmised that his passive correspondence was either destroyed or lost after his death. His extant letters, mostly addressed to John Geddes and Bishop Hay, cover the years of his mastership (1770–1783). John Geddes's passive and active correspondences have fared better, though a substantial amount of letters is no longer available. While he was master, Geddes's letters had the same outlook as Paterson's: they were mainly to and from the Lowland bishops, Alexander Smith and James Grant, and George James Gordon, 'Scalanensis'. Both Geddes and Paterson, then, had privileged epistolary links with one of their predecessors at Scalan. It is worth noting that, on both occasions, it was at the Bishops' instigation that the masters entered into correspondence. When Bishop Grant entreated John Geddes, then in Spain, to write to John Paterson who had just been appointed to the seminary at Scalan, he reminded him of what his own situation had been:

I would Likewise wish, you would take the trouble to write to Mr Paterson. [Y]ou will have readily heard that he has been lately settled in Scalan. [H]e is quite sensible how far he is from having the qualifications of most of his predecessors placed there by our most worthy superiors, who were so happy as to have a great number of choices before them, whereas at present Settlements of this kind must rather be made by necessity than choice; but in the main he is a good Solid judicious Lad, extremely willing to do well and to listen to proper advice: when you was placed where Mr Paterson now is, you will remember that the late worthy Mr George Gordon, who was very capable of it, wrote many a long letter to you relative to your conduct in that important Station. I beg therefore that you in your turn will be so good as write to honest John your late pupil on the same subject. I'm fully convinced that he will shew all due regard to your advice, which your experience acquired by being some time there will render you more capable to give him than many others can be supposed to be.¹⁵

In that regard, the letters John Geddes and John Paterson wrote each other are of particular interest, as Paterson was not only Geddes's successor at one remove, but also, as Grant himself points out, a former pupil of his, and their multilayered relationship often shows through in Paterson's letters. The contents of those penned by Geddes can only be conjectured from his former pupil's, since none of them is extant. Once he left Scalan, Geddes kept in regular—though not frequent—contact with most of his pupils, mainly once they had themselves left Scalan to study at one of the Colleges on the Continent. He may have made the same recommendations to them, as he did to George Mathison, his pupil at Valladolid, who had just started officiating as priest in Scotland:

I will be glad to hear from you once every three Months, or at least once every half year.
I would wish that you and some others of my Acquaintances would let one another know

¹⁴ Besides Paterson, the recipients of these letters were John Thomson, one-time master of Scalan and by then in charge of the mission of Strathavon, and the newly-ordained Alexander Cameron, who was stationed at Tomintoul.

¹⁵ RSC, James Grant to John Geddes, 28 September 1770. Soon after he arrived at Scalan, Geddes wrote to Bishop Smith: 'I am very sensible of the Advantage I may draw from corresponding with M^r George at Abdⁿ, & shall most willingly obey you in having Recourse to him in Doubts'. SCA, BL, John Geddes to Alexander Smith, 27 November 1762.

when you favour me with a Letter, that you may not write me the same Pieces of News, and that your Letters at a due Distance may give me the satisfaction of knowing how you do, and what is going on in our Country.¹⁶

The major difference between Paterson and Geddes is that the former's master-ship almost encapsulates his whole adult life, while the latter lived on to become Rector of the Scots College at Valladolid and eventually Coadjutor to the Lowland Vicar Apostolic. This is reflected in their surviving correspondence. Letters to and from Geddes run the whole gamut of epistolary exchanges—from a young master seeking and receiving advice to a Bishop who, when needed, brought his authority to bear on the Lowland priests, his former pupils included. In between, Geddes was a highly respected Rector, whose former pupils turned to for advice, while he himself, beset with doubts when apparently promising students 'miscarried', sought reassurance from his Bishops. Paterson received letters from those of his pupils who had gone on to study at Valladolid, though it would seem he seldom wrote to them.¹⁷ The epistolary links between Paterson and his former pupils must of course have been of a somewhat different nature from those that existed between his predecessor and his own pupils. Paterson was too well aware that the seminarists at Valladolid would welcome news from home but, with Geddes on hand, stood in no need of guidance. Conversely, Geddes's pupils who trained for the priesthood at the Scots Colleges of Rome or Douai were eager to have his views on what they ought to read and study, and their former master was only too happy to oblige. On one occasion, Geddes's letter did not reach Paul Macpherson, then at the Scots College in Rome, who begged him to reiterate what he had first written, which he did, to Macpherson's obvious satisfaction:

If my gratitude towards you could be increased, I would have great motives to do so for ... the prudent advices concerning my studies which you was pleased to write me I promise you I will do all my endeavours to observe your wise counsels, and I am sure my companions will do the same. I am only sorry that I know but very little of the Greek language, which is one of your prerequisites.¹⁸

¹⁶ SCA, BL, John Geddes to George Mathison, 3 May 1779. Obviously, Geddes would have wanted his Scalán pupils to let him know about the situation in the Scots Colleges they studied at, which they did. Indeed, the letters Geddes received from the Scots College at Rome in the late 1760s and 1770s were the Bishops' main source of information on that College's dysfunctional state.

¹⁷ References to such letters can be found in Paterson's correspondence with Geddes, but none of them is extant. See, for instance, RSC, John Paterson to John Geddes, 6 July 1774: 'Give my kindest Compl^{ts} and blessing to your young folks, especially to my old Pupils[.] I would willingly write to them, but really time will not permit, hope therefore that they will excuse me at present, next time I write to you by post, shall add a few lines in that letter to them...I received Jo: Gordon & George Mathison's Letter do thank them for their kind remembrance [sic] of me, shall write them as I said before some other time.'

¹⁸ SRC, Paul Macpherson to John Geddes, 4 July 1776.

That this was not a one-off is manifest from Macpherson's regular expressions of gratitude, for instance in April 1777, just months before he left Rome for health reasons and went to complete his training at Valladolid under Geddes's direct supervision: 'I return you many thanks for the advice you was kind enough to give me concerning Controversy and speculative Divinity. I shall expect with anxiety something about Morality whenever you will find it convenient.'¹⁹ That Geddes was wont to offer such help is clear from a letter John Farquharson, another of his pupils, then at Douai, wrote to him:

In case you'll think proper to honour me with a line, I hope in going on, in your ordinary advertising Strain, you'll not fail to point out to me what books of Divinity are the most fit? what points I ought to apply myself to, in a particular manner &c &c. I may tell you, that as yet I'm an entire stranger to Moral Divinity, (which I fancy to be the most necessary for the Mission)...²⁰

On the face of it, religion cut a surprisingly small figure in the correspondence of Scalan masters with their superiors which is mainly taken up with 'business', that is to say the daily management of the seminary. This included securing the tack for the farm, hiring and sacking servants, providing foodstuffs on the best possible terms, as well as making and keeping the building fit for its purpose and, most important of all, balancing the books.²¹ This was no mean task for a single man, who was also in charge of the education and spiritual direction of, at times, as many as a dozen boys. Financial matters loom large in the letters written by John Paterson. When he took over from John Thomson, he found Scalan drowned in debts incurred by his predecessor, who had overreached himself in his attempt to improve the building. Though this was to be a major source of 'foughtiness' in Paterson's early days as master, he got the better of his anxiety and, towards the end of a long letter to Bishop Hay, wrote, tongue-in-cheek: 'I suppose you are wondering against this time that I am not speaking about money for this place'.²² The Mission was not only in straitened circumstances, it was also, as was hinted earlier on, short of priests. One way of getting round the difficulty of providing for Scalan was to have its master officiating as priest, answering calls from Catholics living in nearby missions that were vacant, such as Shenval or Strathavon. In the very first letter he wrote to Bishop Smith on settling at Scalan, Geddes adverted

¹⁹ SRC, Paul Macpherson to John Geddes, 24 April 1777.

²⁰ SRC, John Farquharson to John Geddes, 8 February 1776.

²¹ When Geddes took up his position in 1762, Scalan appeared to be lacking even in the bare essentials: 'I'm sorry your house is so ill provided of accommodation and the most necessary implements. But tho' the circumstances of times do not allow to be at great expences in the present uncertainties, yet I think that, at all events, the most requisite things for a decent tables [sic], clean beds &c should be got. Sure I am M^r Robⁿ will agree to this and allow the expences, if you represent the matter properly to him.' SCA, BL, George James Gordon to John Geddes, 9 June 1763.

²² SCA, BL, John Paterson to George Hay, 20 October 1771.

to what he foresaw would be a major hurdle: 'I find I will have a good deal of Difficulty arising from the Two different Employments I will have but I shall do the best I can'.²³

In spite of his repeated absences, the master was at the head of a closely knit community. In letters, the boys were referred to as the master's 'family', and Paterson wrote of his 'Bairns'. Considering the fact that most boys entered Scalán in their early teens—some were as young as eight years old—and spent a number of years there, it comes as no surprise that they would endow the master with a paternal role, which outlasted their time at Scalán. In 1776, 'after a Silence of Six whole years', John Farquharson wrote a long letter to John Geddes, looking both backward and forward:

I confess indeed, it's a mystery for me altogether unfathomable what could have been the motives which have induced you to testify so much regard, such tender and Cordial affection towards one, who did not in the least deserve it. What grieves me is my not corresponding & complying, to such fatherly care. All that I can say, is, that you have not bestowed your affection on an ungrateful heart. Often do I recall with pleasure the short but agreeable years, which I passed under your care, on the Banks of Crombie. When I reflect on my returning to Scotland, I'm already somewhat sorry, to think that I shall not have the Satisfaction of having you near me, in order to consult you, and get your salutary advices: After all, I do not as yet altogether despair, of meeting with you in Scotland, or at least of passing some part of my life, under your paternal inspection.²⁴

That may have been a hint at what a number of people expected, and Farquharson hoped, that is to say, that John Geddes would become Bishop Hay's Coadjutor on Bishop Grant's death, but it was also very much the expression of his feelings towards his former master: years before Geddes became Bishop, Farquharson would address him as his 'Dear Father' and subscribe himself his 'respectful & obedient child' or 'most Dutiful & respectful Son'. Even though Paterson undoubtedly looked upon his predecessor as the epitome of the good master, on a number of occasions he suggested that they were now colleagues of a sort, sharing in the responsibility to train priests for the Mission, and, more often than not, addressed him as his 'Dear Friend'. On the other hand, it is worth noting that Paterson did use similar formulæ in his letters to Bishop Hay. After his spell as a pupil at Scalán, Paterson had stayed many months under Hay's supervision in Edinburgh getting ready for his ordination, and as a result he looked on the Bishop as a 'loving',

²³ SCA, BL, John Geddes to Alexander Smith, 13 September 1762. Six years later, looking back on his tenure as master with mixed feelings, lamenting the 'money & Pains...lost on Boys of whom we can have little Hopes of their ever being of Use', he reminded Bishop Grant of the extra burden he had had to shoulder: 'I must also take Notice, that during almost all the time I had the Care of that House, I had it not in my Power to give one half of the Attendance I saw necessary; so that I thought it but Justice to attribute a great deal of the things, that did not please me to the Want of a prudent Superiour present with them more constantly'. SCA, BL, John Geddes to James Grant, 7 March 1768.

²⁴ SRC, John Farquharson to John Geddes, 8 February 1776. Scalán lay by the banks of Crombie Burn.

‘affectionate’ Father.²⁵ Hay reciprocated the feeling, observing in his first common letter to three young priests that he looked upon Paterson as ‘a Child of [his] own’.²⁶ Alexander Cameron was one of the addressees of that letter and a former pupil of John Geddes’s too. A poor correspondent,²⁷ he concluded the first in a series of letters acknowledging his deficiency pledging to mend his ways:

as I cannot expect you should write me, without my writing to you: let bygones be bygones, and, for the future, I promise, you shall find me a better child. It will give me the greatest pleasure to see you write, with the same freedom, I flatter myself, you would speake to me, on any subject whatsoever. I have the vanity to think you will find me as candid and ingenuous — as others.²⁸

He thus emphasized the role of correspondence as an intrinsic part of the relationship between master and pupil, as well as the similarity, as he saw it, between written and oral communication. When Cameron took over from Geddes at Valladolid in 1780, he went so far as to write to his predecessor, who had just left Spain after spending many a month putting his former pupil through his paces: ‘One can write many things they could not well say: whilst you were here we never spoke of some things which might have been discussed, perhaps not altogether uselessly.’²⁹ That letters were ‘written conversations between friends’, substituting for the physical presence of correspondents, was a commonplace, but Cameron’s views were exceptional—more often than not, correspondence was perceived as a second-best choice.³⁰ I have written elsewhere of the ambivalent feelings of writers deprived of the possibility to meet face to face and the various ways in which they attempted to make the absent present.³¹ Many correspondents touched on their inability to set down in writing their innermost sentiments and thoughts, often in the course of attempting to do so. In some cases, though by no means all, the priest’s uneasiness was partly due to the clandestine status of the Catholic Church in Scotland—it was felt that some things were best left unwritten lest they were used against the whole Catholic community if the letters were intercepted by malevolent persons. The inadequacy of correspondence was resentfully noticed, even—and mostly—by such a compulsive letter-writer as Paterson. He regularly wrote long letters to George Hay, giving thorough accounts of what passed at Scalan. However, he longed for an interview

²⁵ See, for instance, SCA, BL, John Paterson to George Hay, 25 December 1770: ‘Much Honour’d Sir & Loving Father’; John Paterson to George Hay, 20 December 1771: ‘I am Much Honour’d Sir, and most affectionate Father, your most loving and most obed^t Child while I am John Paterson’.

²⁶ SCA, BL, George Hay to Alexander Cameron, John Paterson and John Thomson, 12 September 1772.

²⁷ SCA, BL, Alexander Cameron to John Geddes, 25 July 1783: ‘I find, amongst my other papers, a more than half-finished letter to you, in which I tell you I had the pleasure of your letter of 26 Sept^r by last post’.

²⁸ RSC, Alexander Cameron to John Geddes, 9 June 1776.

²⁹ SCA, BL, Alexander Cameron to John Geddes, 26 March 1781.

³⁰ SCA, BL, Paul Macpherson to John Geddes, 28 October 1783: ‘as I cannot expect to have the pleasure of seeing you soon I must write you some thing in regard of myself’.

³¹ Prunier 2007.

with his Bishop: 'If I were at present just hard by you most willingly could I open the state of my whole conscience to you. I hope I will see you here this summer'.³² He soon after reiterated his desire to spend some time with Hay at Scalan in a misive which deserves to be quoted at length:

I received your last of date 13th Ult. and read it you may believe me with the greatest of pleasure, because I saw it had come from a heart most desirous of my welfare, and that the words of it had been dictated by the H. Ghost himself; wherefore with the grace & assistance of this same divine Spirit, I shall put in practice what you demand of me for my good to do. These H: S. are strong words, The great accounting day, arise ye dead and come to judgment, but which alas! have hitherto sounded but very little in my ears, God grant that I may now begin, and begin in earnest; all that I can say for myself, at present, is, that I really feel in myself an earnest desire of becoming good, and of serving that Adorable Being faithfully, who has already bestow'd upon me so many and so great favours. O Sir pray, and pray earnestly for me, that God Al: may give me constancy and perseverance in the doing of good, for this is my great, and very great fault, that I speculize much, but practise little; that I build many & very many Castles in the air, but never, nor never come to any kind of Maturity; that I know many times what should be done, but often, & very often fail much in the performance; and he who knows his Master's will, but does it not; &c O may God Al: grant that while I am preaching to others, I myself may not become a Cast away. When you come here, which [I] hope, & earnestly wish will be this summer, I shall lay open to you the whole state of my Soul and let you form a judgment, and tell me what you think. Your directions, and rules, I intend above all to follow; so correct, and chastise, and amend, whatever you see wrong, and I shall become as wax, to go into any form you please. This your last Letter to me so much pleas'd M^r Guthrie that he must have a Copy of it, and the original I am to keep, and to keep for myself alone.³³

Some *raisons d'être* of correspondence are adumbrated in Paterson's letter. Though it could not wholly replace a conversation, it still could fulfill a number of essential purposes, in particular as far as Scalan masters and their pupils were concerned. Letters were a channel of advice, not only from the master to his former pupils, as so often happened in Geddes's correspondence, but also from senior clergy to the master himself. It could come in various forms: in his early days as master, Paterson thanked Geddes for his 'good & friendly advice'³⁴ while he solicited Hay's 'correction, and charitable advice', which was apparently forthcoming and seems to have been of a more peremptory nature, verging on demand. Hay certainly felt it was his duty to provide young priests with epistolary instruction, as is abundantly clear from the three letters he wrote for the benefit of John Paterson, John Thomson, and Alexander Cameron in 1772.³⁵ In the first letter, Hay recounted the 'means in [his] power to contribute to give [them] all possible assistance', and suggested the three of them should hold 'frequent Conferences' and give him a detailed account of such meetings. He then went on to the means accessible to him:

I should communicate to you in writing from time to time what necessary advices for your Conduct may occur to me either from my own small experience & observation, or from

³² SCA, BL, John Paterson to George Hay, 22 March 1771.

³³ SCA, BL, John Paterson to George Hay, 6 May 1771.

³⁴ RSC, John Paterson to John Geddes, 13 November 1770.

³⁵ The three priests were 'neighbours'. Only three letters are extant, but there might have been more.

what lights I may have got from others. I am sorry that the many avocations & Employments I have got must hinder me from doing this so much or so frequently as I could wish yet as I look upon this as of no less importance than many other things I have to do I shall not fail, with God's assistance, to write to you in common as often as I conveniently can.³⁶

Hay thus highlighted the crucial role of letter-writing in making sure the Mission's priests, the Scalan master included, were not only instructed, but also suitably supported and encouraged. His statement that any future letters would be written to the three priests jointly indicates that he saw these very much as pastoral letters whose content was destined to be shared. That this was also often the case in practice with letters addressed to individual priests is corroborated by recurring references to letters being read to, or by, other priests. However, as the quotation from Paterson emphatically demonstrates, a letter could not be reduced to its content: while the words were readily shared and copied, Paterson was not to part with the original epistle. There are obvious practical reasons for Paterson's unwillingness to relinquish Hay's letter. Still, the extant correspondence testifies to the fact that letters, regardless of their actual content, were considered as the embodiment of the relationship that obtained between correspondents—what bonded them was their Catholic faith and more particularly their vocation. Indeed, my contention is that there is much more religion in the correspondence of the Scalan masters than meets the eye at first. William Hay, who had been John Geddes's pupil at Scalan, was eventually dismissed from the Mission in 1783 for inappropriate behaviour. In the months leading up to his removal, he had regular, though tense, epistolary exchanges with his former master, now Coadjutor to the Vicar Apostolic for the Lowland District. At the height of the crisis, William Hay, who never alluded to his Scalan days,³⁷ wrote to Geddes: 'the very writing me, makes me think that you pray for me', pointing to the fact that letter-writing was an eminently religious act.

If correspondence was a 'written conversation', it also assumed a cathartic function, sometimes almost akin to a substitute for auricular confession. On two occasions at least, Paterson wrote to Geddes of his ability to 'unbosom' himself to his former master. In his letter dated 28 December 1782, it came about as he recalled their 'last tête à tête over Cairndoulack',³⁸ but in the second instance, a month later, it clearly referred to correspondence:

I shall not be one Letter in your debt. Nay, I shall think myself honestly deal'd with, and, truly, honour'd, if you shall be pleas'd to accept of two letters from me, for one from you. I hope you will not take it amiss that I have propos'd this bargain to you, tho' bargains be not properly the work of the Clergy. I ever found it a happiness, for myself, when I met with a person, to whom, I thought, I freely could unbosom myself. It delights then to clatter out, the Childish thoughts themselves; because one is not afraid of their being

³⁶ SCA, BL, George Hay to Alexander Cameron, John Paterson and John Thomson, 12 September 1772.

³⁷ It is difficult to form a judgment from William Hay's letters whether Geddes did—the Coadjutor's letters are not extant.

³⁸ SCA, BL, John Paterson to John Geddes, 28 December 1782.

ill interpreted.— How often have I plagu'd you, with heaps of buff, and Stuff, and as often did you Condescend to my weakness and chas'd away my fears; and no Body ever hear'd of it.³⁹

Paterson, for one, seems to have been convinced that letter-writing in itself was somehow performative. A few months after he settled at Scalán, he lamented that he had 'so much fallen back' since he had left Hay at Edinburgh and that 'Meditations, & Spiritual Book ha[d] been entirely forgotten'. He then confided to Hay: 'you see how soon a person's fervour will Cool, however I hope this very telling of you will be a good means to wear the temptation off'.⁴⁰ It could then be argued that, irrespective of their contents, letters were essentially religious, not only in their inspiration,⁴¹ but also in their effect. '[Y]our words have a wonderful effect in me the reason of which I cannot easily account for', Paul Macpherson noted in one of his early letters to Geddes.⁴² When John Thomson was sent to Rome as the Scots Agent, he entreated his predecessor at Scalán to correspond with him: 'your letters will be a Cordial to me in my present Solitude for I assure you I have few friends here & many Enemies. My fortitude has been put to the trial ... but with God's help I shall persevere.'⁴³ As for John Paterson, he craved Hay's letters, including those that were 'somewhat sharp':

I beg of you for the future, still continue to correct me in whatever way you please, which shall be always agreeable to me, & with God Almighty's help I shall endeavour to do better; but this also I must beg of you, when you write me something severe, that you would soon after send me a Letter full of comfort, for I have need of that from time to time, at any rate.⁴⁴

In the context of the clandestine Scottish Mission, allaying the fears of the Scalán master, and bringing him some reassurance and encouragement, ran deeper than personal comfort. In an oft-quoted passage of his 'Brief Historical Account of the Seminary of Scalán' penned in June 1777 for the benefit of his students at Valladolid, Geddes asserted that '[t]he time, by the Goodness of God, will come, when the Catholic Religion will again flourish in Scotland; and then, when Posterity shall enquire, with a laudable Curiosity, by what means any Sparks of the true Faith were preserved in these dismal Times of Darkness and Error, Scalán and these our Colleges will be mentioned with Veneration.' He went on to praise 'those Champions, who stood up for the Cause of God, and far from being carried away by the Torrent of Prejudice, in spite of all Opposition and Delusion, went on stedfastly in their

³⁹ SCA, BL, John Paterson to John Geddes, 31 January 1783.

⁴⁰ SCA, BL, John Paterson to George Hay, 11 March 1771.

⁴¹ See, for instance, SCA, BL, John Paterson to George Hay, 6 May 1771, quoted above.

⁴² RSC, Paul Macpherson to John Geddes, 5 April 1776.

⁴³ SCA, BL, John Thomson to John Geddes, 16 February 1783. When Geddes left Spain, John Gordon, his former pupil at Scalán, then Vice Rector of the Scots College in Valladolid, made a similar request. Though he was in much friendlier surroundings, he used the same words: 'Your letters will be at all times a cordial to me'. SCA, BL, John Gordon to John Geddes, 26 February 1781.

⁴⁴ SCA, BL, John Paterson to George Hay, 14 September 1770.

Duty to their Maker'.⁴⁵ The champions he had in mind were not only the priests who had received their early education at Scalán, but also their masters, whose task it was to ensure the Mission was supplied with clergymen in the future. Theirs was a heavy responsibility. Sometimes it seemed almost impossible that they should grapple single-handedly with all their duties and they were bound to be oppressed by doubts as a result. Even Geddes at some point contemplated leaving Scalán to return to Shenval.⁴⁶ As for Paterson, he particularly prized Hay's letters, to whom he wrote, begging for a continuation of their correspondence: 'every time I receive a Letter from you it gives me new vigour'.⁴⁷

The vigour Paterson found in reading Hay's letters was the vigour to go about his daily business, but it was also the vigour to persevere in the face of adversity, the vigour to put Scalán to good use and eventually the vigour to keep up the Catholic faith in Scotland, so that if, as Geddes maintained, Catholicism partly owes its survival in Scotland to Scalán, it surely owes as much to the correspondence of the Scalán masters.

References

- Johnson, Christine. 1983. *Developments in the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland 1789–1829*. Edinburgh: John Donald.
- McMillan, James F. 1999. Mission accomplished? The Catholic underground. In *Eighteenth-century Scotland: New perspectives*, ed. T.M. Devine and J.R. Young, 90–105. East Linton: Tuckwell Press.
- Prunier, Clotilde. 2004. *Anti-catholic strategies in eighteenth-century Scotland*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Prunier, Clotilde. 2007. Monseigneur(s) et ami(s): la correspondance de John Geddes et de George Hay, 1759–99. In *La lettre et l'intime. L'émergence d'une expression du for intérieur dans les correspondances privées (17e–19e siècles)*, ed. Paul Servais and Van Laurence Ypersele, 55–79. Louvain-la-Neuve: Bruylant-Academia.
- Szechi, Daniel. 1996. Defending the true faith: Kirk, state and catholic missionaries in Scotland 1653–1755. *The Catholic Historical Review* 82: 397–411.
- Watts, John. 1999. *Scalán, the forbidden college 1716–1799*. East Linton: Tuckwell Press.

⁴⁵ RSC, Geddes Papers, John Geddes, 'A Brief Historical Account of the Seminary of Scalán'. The text of another copy, in the Scottish Catholic Archives, can be found in 'The College for the Lowland District of Scotland at Scalán and Aquhorties: Registers and Documents', W. J. Anderson (ed), *Innes Review* 14 (1963), 89–212.

⁴⁶ See SCA, BL, George James Gordon to John Geddes, 19 June 1765: 'I do not think you should entertain any thoughts of exchanging your present business, which plainly appears to be the place in which God would have you to be, for your former or any other station. We are allwise best and may expect the greater blessing and happy success in the situation the Divine Providence puts us in, by the order of good and wise Sup^{rs}.'

⁴⁷ SCA, BL, John Paterson to George Hay, 12 November 1771. It is not clear why Paterson apprehended their correspondence would lapse at that point, except for the fact that he was fully settled at Scalán by then and might have feared that Hay would no longer feel it necessary to write regularly to him.