PREACHING TENTS

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Scottish Kirk Session records occasionally contain interesting details about the making of outdoor pulpits. Only a handful of these pulpits are known to exist, but since they were important items in the repertoire of country wrights and because they are known to have appeared in Scottish communities abroad, notably in Ulster and the United States of America,[1] it is worth investigating their history.

A typical mention of a 'preaching tent', is as follows: '*Mr Jack agreed with Robert Scott, wright, for making a tent for the benefit of the work of the Sacrament without doors*'. This extract from the Kirk Session records of St Mary's, Biggar, notes the making of a tent for the celebration of Communion outdoors on 21 and 22 July 1734. The tent that Robert Scott made does not survive, but it is likely to have been a wooden structure similar to that illustrated in Fig. 1. This form, with pitched roof, front opening with bible shelf, and short legs to raise it from the ground, is consistent with that seen in most eighteenth century prints of the subject and tallies with the numerous picturesque descriptions left by foreign travellers in Scotland. Daniel Defoe,[2] Robert Southey[3] and Dorothy Wordsworth,[4] for instance, each recorded a first encounter with a preaching tent of this type. Representative of such visitors' descriptions is the following account made by Thomas Thornton in *c.* 1786.[5] A few miles north of Lauder, the author was:

> '*not a little surprised to find my progress stopped by a number of people, crowded together to hear a person, who occasionally peeped out of a sentry box. Enquiring what could be his intentions, I found it was a parson preaching to a half-drowned audience. As I was not, however, of the Kirk of Scotland, I drove on, somewhat astonished that the auditors could not be contented with hearing that gentleman's tenets delivered regularly once a week.*'

The holding of outdoor Communion and attendant sermons was not a weekly but an annual event. In Biggar, for instance, it was not observed even yearly and when held it was regarded as an occasion for the whole district. Several local ministers would take a share in the services and the event would take place one year in Biggar, another year in Culter and another at Symington. These Sacramental occasions happened all over Scotland and were not restricted to Highland, Island, or Lowland regions. The origin of regular outdoor Communion seems to be of post-Reformation date, perhaps reflecting a desire to keep holding open air religious festivals when these had all but stopped after 1560, but the practice certainly enjoyed a marked growth in popularity in the 1670s and 80s following the restoration of episcopacy by Charles II and James VII and II. In this latter case use of the preaching tent was a direct response to imposed religious settlement, but during the eighteenth century it became very firmly connected with Church secession. Tents were used by breakaway groups in the two splits against Patronage in 1733 and 1761, and during the nineteenth century, at the Disruption of 1843, when ministers

1. Preaching tent from Carnock, Fife, nineteenth century.

By courtesy of The Trustees of The National Museums of Scotland.

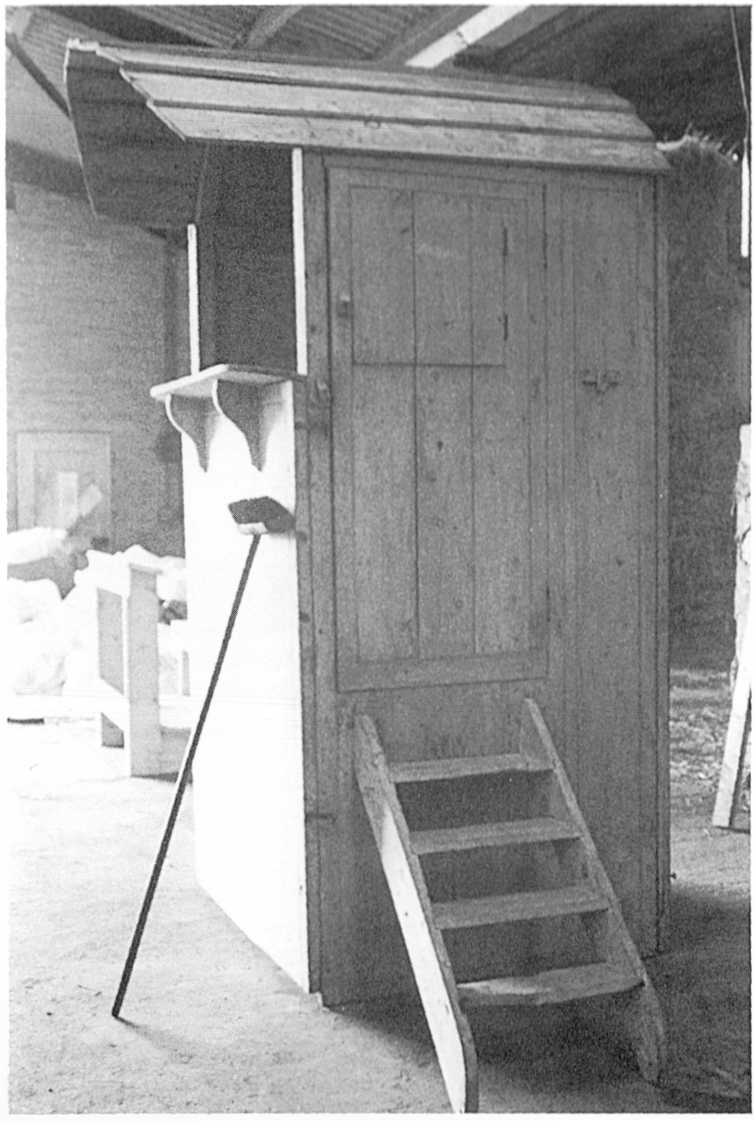
2. A. Carse and R. Scott, *The Holy Fair* from *Poems of Robert Burns*, Oliver & Co. Edinburgh, 1801

By courtesy of The Mitchell Library, Glasgow City Libraries.

3. 'Congregation at Wanlockhead, County of Dumfries,' showing Free Church of Scotland worshippers on their way to a tent sermon in 1846. Those in the foreground are carrying portable stools known as 'creepies'

Illustrated London News.

and their congregations left the established Church of Scotland to form The Free Church of Scotland. They were used later at the division of the Free Church in 1892, when the Free Presbyterian Church was formed. Since then, following the 1989 disciplining of Lord Mackay for attending the Roman Catholic funeral of a colleague, the Free Presbyterian Church has divided. Members of the new Associated Presbyterian Church with sections in both Scotland and Canada, now use worshipping space in the churches of other, host denominations. It is almost certain however, that the use of preaching tents died out after the Free Presbyterian Church had built their own new places of worship following the last split, in 1892. In some remote parishes these were not built until the 1920s and churches still have tents which were used in the early years of the twentieth century. The tent then, occupies a very firm place in the material culture of Scotland and rarely can a piece of outdoor furniture have been the focus of so much attention. Whether used for congregations which overflowed existing church buildings, or by itself at a 'preaching station', the tent was always at the centre of a large crowd. This was both because of the emphasis placed by the church on receiving the Sacrament, and the difficulty in getting to a place of worship. In the scattered communities of Ross-shire for



4. Preaching tent at Edderton, Ross-shire, nineteenth century

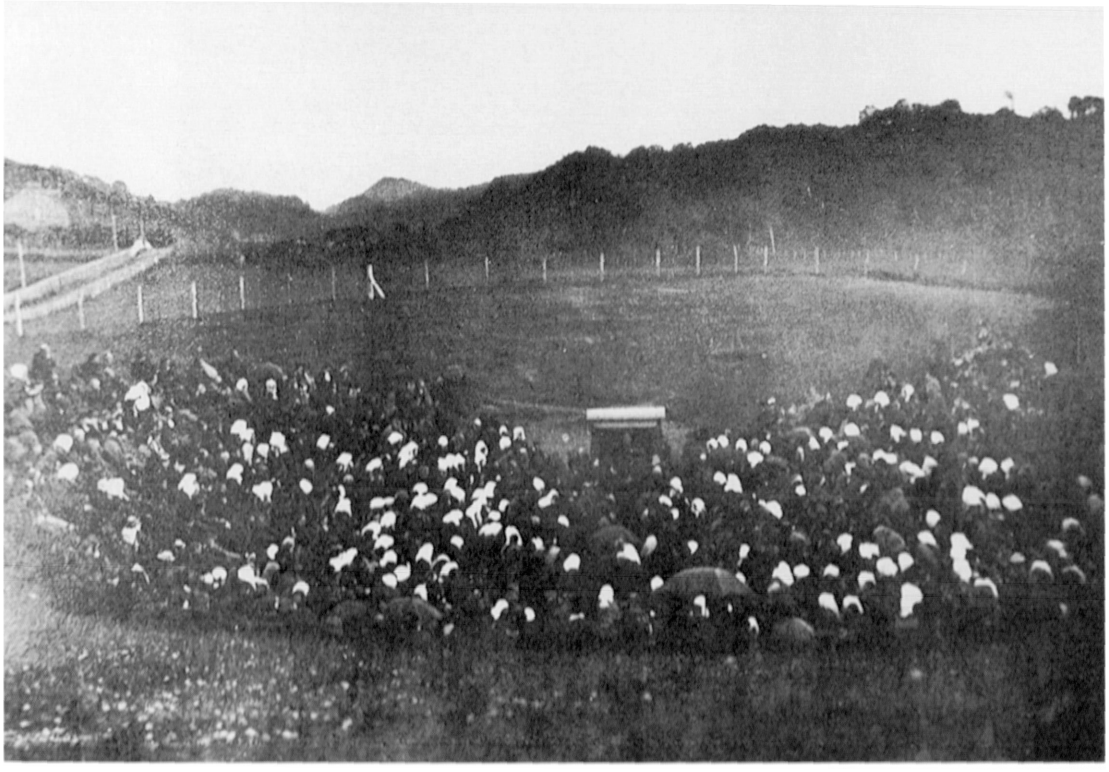
By courtesy of The Edderton Church Trust.

instance, when a gathering took place it could attract participants from as many as forty parishes and a congregation of up to eight thousand.[6]

It is not known what the earliest tents looked like, but it is probable that many were improvised structures made from canvas. Some nineteenth century descriptions indicate a continuity of this design. The frontispiece of *Disruption Worthies of the Highlands* for

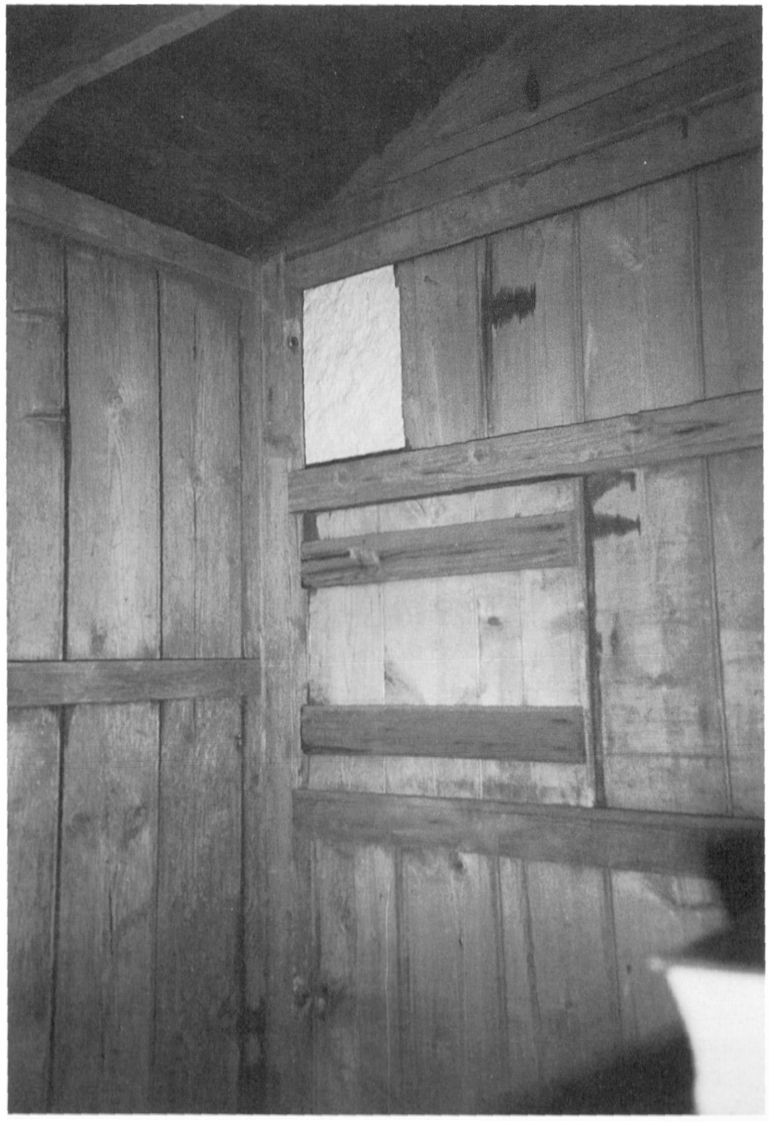
5. 'Refusal of site at Strontian. Preaching on banks of Loch Sunart, 1846' from *Disruption Worthies of the Highlands*

By courtesy of St Andrews University Library.



6. Tent Preaching at Gairloch

By courtesy of Gairloch Heritage Museum.



7. Interior of preaching tent at Gairloch

By courtesy of Gairloch Heritage Museum.

instance (Fig. 5), shows a wigwam-like tent being used at Strontian in 1846 and Norman MacLeod described an open air Communion at Kilmuir, Dunvegan parish, in 1824, which centred around: '. . . *a large tent, formed of spars and oars covered with sails, erected for the minister and his assistant* . . .'.[7] This is clearly an example of a maritime community using materials closest to hand for a hastily constructed shelter, but in other coastal regions there is evidence that tents were built of wood by boatbuilders. Turning

8. D. Wilkie, Tent Preaching at Kilmartin, c. 1817

By courtesy of The Governing Body, Christ Church, Oxford.

again, for illustration, to Ross-shire, a tent recently inspected in the abandoned eighteenth century church at Edderton (Fig. 4) is of clinker-built construction, with its roof taking the form of an upturned hull.[8] This falls within the north-eastern tradition of boatbuilders and coopers turning their hands to the manufacture of a wide range of items including chairs, beds and cradles, which have no particular connection with the sea. The most common type of Lowland tent was wright-made with boarded sides and a pitched or pyramidal roof. It is well-represented by the example from Carnock, Fife, which was acquired by the National Museum during the 1950s. (Fig. 1) This tent is of box form, 3.2m high and 2m square. The body, with outward-opening door on its right hand side and arched opening with bible shelf at the front, is raised on four chamfered legs and covered by a hipped roof. Steps which allowed access to the side door are now missing. Examination of the interior reveals that the wall panels and floor platform are fixed together by means of wrought iron hooks and eyes. The structure can be dismantled easily and, with the exception of the roof, stored as a flat pile of components. In this characteristic, tents are similar to knock-down box beds which, rather than being left in situ, were usually moved from house to house with the owning family. The same collapsible construction can be seen in a preaching tent now in the collection of Gairloch Heritage Museum, which was in use at Shieldaig on the southern shore of Loch

9. Free Church Communion, Plockton, Ross-shire, c. 1920

Torridon between 1893 and 1920. (Fig. 7) Fixed indoor pulpits in Scotland frequently had integral accommodation for a lay reader or more commonly, the Precentor, the church officer who led the singing. It is interesting to speculate whether or not preaching tents were used by both men in the same fashion. It seems that both usages pertained. David Wilkie's *Tent Preaching at Kilmartin c.* 1817, for instance, shows a booth for Minister only with the Precentor using a *Director* style chair situated in front of the tent. (Fig. 8) There is a step up to the elevated floor as in the Carnock and Edderton tents and the Precentor's chanter is placed in a hat on the chair seat before the pulpit window. Alexander Carse's illustration to Robert Burns's poem *The Holy Fair* meanwhile, shows a figure who is probably the Precentor inside the tent with the Minister. (Fig. 2) Precentors are recorded inside tents on the west coast and the two structures seen in use at Gairloch and Plockton (Figs. 6 & 9) are undoubtedly wide enough for the occupancy of two people. Given the small number of tents surviving, it is not easy to research such matters as decoration and exterior finish, but at least three examples; the Edderton tent, the Carnock tent now at the National Museum of Scotland and an eighteenth century tent recorded by George Hay at Kirkmichael, Ayrshire,[9] have extensive traces of white paint. This would presumably have been for the purpose of making the pulpit conspicuous amongst a large congregation.

The name 'tent' (Gaelic *teant*) is clearly rooted in the early appearance of this type of pulpit but during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it seems to have been universally applied to wooden structures. The English 'tent' thereby acquired a peculiarly Scottish usage in which 'tent preaching' could be understood to mean outdoor preaching with the use of a portable wooden pulpit. There is however much greater variety of terminology in Gaelic, which perhaps reflects the fact that tents were used more frequently, and more recently, on the west coast and on the western isles. In Gairloch for instance, they were known as *teantaichean* and *bocais*. *Paillun*, probably borrowed from 'pavilion', but the Gaelic word means both 'tent' and 'butterfly', is an alternative title. One of the most interesting names for the tent is 'ark', used in areas such as Easter Ross, where 'ark preaching' is more common a term than 'tent preaching'. There is theological analogy here with the Ark of Israel[10] but there is also an important visual analogy in that tents sometimes shared constructional features with boats. Preaching tents, like long Communion tables, stools of repentance and other wright work, fall into a distinctive

10. 'Congregation at Duthil, Inverness and Morayshire', 1846

Illustrated London News.

category of Scottish post-Reformation church furniture. They exist at a level where furniture merges with vernacular architecture and share with many other Scottish furniture types a quality of transience. Tents were always intended for temporary use, their construction was thus accordingly slight and it is quite fortuitous that several complete examples have survived in forgotten corners of the Kirk and Manse.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to Hugh Cheape for pointing out various references to preaching tents and for arranging the photograph of the Carnock tent at The National Museum of Scotland.

REFERENCES

1. See Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs, Scottish Communions and American Revivals in the Early Modern Period,* Princeton University Press, 1989.
2. Daniel Defoe, *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain & London*, 1727, Vol III, p. 62.
3. Robert Southey, *Journal of a Tour in Scotland in 1819*, London, 1929, p. 120.
4. Dorothy Wordsworth, *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland*, 1803, in *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, London, 1924, pp. 188–9.
5. Thomas Thornton, *Tour in Scotland*, 1804
6. Rev John Kennedy DD, *The Days of the Fathers in Ross-shire,* Inverness, 1927, pp. 110–115.
7. Rev Donald MacLeod DD, *Memoir of Norman MacLeod,* London, 1876, pp. 338–9.
8. I am grateful to Mrs Jane Durham of Scotsburn for taking me to see this tent.
9. George Hay, 'Scottish Post-Reformation Church Furniture', *PSAS*, 1954–55, Vol LXXXVIII, p. 56.
10. The preaching tent is very similar in function to the wooden tabernacle or ark carried through the wilderness, in the Exodus, as a place of sacrifice and worship.