

*HOME AND AWAY:
ALEXANDER MCGREGOR
(1845 - 1919) AND CATHERINE
MCGREGOR (1834-1914)
BY SANDRA CAIRNCROSS*

Alexander was the youngest child of Angus McGregor and Catherine Robertson, crofters in Lochaber, in the Highlands. His life is contrasted here with that of his elder sister Catherine, who was ten when Alexander was born. One moved away, the other took over the croft; one married but did not have children, the other had children but never married. Their stories provide an insight into life in the Highlands at a time of change.

The family croft was at Blarmachfoldach¹, a small community a few miles outside Fort William. It was a Gaelic-speaking area, with a distinct dialect, and one of the last places to celebrate the old Highland New Year on January 12th². We know from the 1911 census record that Alexander and Catherine were able to speak Gaelic and English.³



¹ [Blarmachfoldach | Canmore](#)

² [Ever felt that one Hogmanay just isn't enough? | Highland Mountain Guides \(highland-mountain-guides.co.uk\)](#)

³ See the Am posta pòsta/The Married Postman (Hugh McColl 1848 to 1928) blog for a fuller discussion on census records for Gaelic and English.

The population of Blarmachfoldach was over 800 in the 19th century. However in common with the rest of the Highlands and Islands, and indeed other areas of Scotland, the land gradually became cleared as families moved away, driven by economic necessity or more forcibly by landowners to make way for sheep.⁵ Today walkers on the West Highland Way will pass one of the clachans of Blarmachfoldach as they approach Fort William.

Alexander's father Angus is assumed to have died between in 1851 and 1861. The 1851 census lists him as head of a household comprising his wife, Catherine senior, and three sons: Ewen (born ca. 1829), Donald (born ca. 1837) and Alexander. His sister Catherine is not with the family – she may have been in domestic service elsewhere. By 1861 Alexander and Catherine's mother is now the crofter and when she died in 1869, the eldest son Ewen took over the croft. Catherine in turn took over the croft in 1894 when Ewen died.

Alexander, now a postal worker and married, registered his brother's death. His name was recorded as Hugh rather than Ewen, which seemed curious. Ewen is the anglicised version of Eòghann. In Gaelic, which the family all spoke, the first syllable tends to be stressed and so pronunciation sounds like Hugh,⁶ the anglicised version of Ùisdean.⁷ I have since come across other instances of this and it may also be that the names Hugh and Ewen were interchangeable as happens with other names, for example Jean and Jane.

Donald, the other brother of Alexander and Catherine, had become a shepherd and moved away.

Catherine never married but had two daughters, the first was born in 1857 and the second in 1874. The fathers of her daughters were not initially entered on the birth registration – in the case of an unmarried mother the father would have to be present at the registration for this to happen. However subsequent entries at the side of each record show that in both cases Catherine successfully petitioned the courts to have the fathers of her daughters named. Both daughters used their father surnames.

Alexander had joined the Post Office in 1870, the year following his mother's death. He would have been twenty-five and still living on the family croft. It is probable that the croft could not sustain both him as well as his brother, sister and niece, leaving him no alternative as the youngest but to find employment elsewhere.

He was appointed as a messenger on the on the Fort William to Arisaig route, 30 miles to the west coast of the mainland with views of nearby islands. Today the A830 connects Arisaig to Fortwilliam and the journey takes just under an hour. The road conditions would have been

⁴ © Copyright [Richard Webb](#) and licensed for [reuse](#) under this [Creative Commons Licence](#). [Blarmachfoldach © Richard Webb :: Geograph Britain and Ireland](#)

⁶ Listen here [LearnGaelic - Dictionary](#)

<https://learngaelic.scot/dictionary/index.jsp?abairt=E%C3%B2ghann&slang=both&wholeword=false>

⁷ Listen here [LearnGaelic - Dictionary](#)

<https://learngaelic.scot/dictionary/index.jsp?abairt=%C3%99isdean&slang=both&wholeword=false>

quite different in the 1870s (the first incarnation of the road had only been built some fifty years earlier⁸) and the journey would have taken considerably longer.

In addition to being employed as a postal messenger, it seems that Alexander had also invested in coaches including the mail coach itself.

An entry in an 1886 Directory⁹ lists the proprietors of the Arisaig Mail Coach in Fort William as being McGregor and Cameron. Alexander is probably the McGregor named. He gives his occupation as coach proprietor when he married in 1890, aged forty-five. Ann Kennedy, his bride, was thirty and a laundry maid.

The couple lived in Fort William and Alexander again gives his occupation as coach proprietor in 1891, and then as carriage hirer in 1901, the year in which he retired from the Post Office. I am curious why no reference is made to being a postal messenger in later records – perhaps being a coach proprietor was felt to be more prestigious?

Alexander died in 1919 aged seventy-five of heart block. He died in the street and the death appears to have been sudden. Nowadays heart block can be more easily diagnosed and treated. Electrocardiography equipment was then still in its infancy and probably not readily available in the Highlands. However, it may be that some of the symptoms of heart block, such as fatigue or shortness of breath, led to Alexander retiring from the Post Office in 1901. He became a farmer but was able to employ farm servants. He left an estate of just over £550.

Catherine had left the croft at Blarmachfoldach in her later years, moving in with her elder daughter and her husband in Ballachullish. Catherine died there aged seventy-nine in 1914. The cause of death was mitral incompetence, the most common form of valvular heart disease.

Two siblings with two long and but quite different lives. One who lived in the family croft for much of her life, and another who joined the Post Office, set up his own business and then become a farmer who employed others. Like so many others, both Alexander and Catherine moved away from Blarmachfoldach. However, the connection remained; Catherine's younger daughter, Alexander's niece, is buried in the graveyard at Blarmachfoldach, along with her husband and five of her children.

Further Reading

The Open University in Scotland offer a free online course Gaelic in Modern Scotland¹⁰ which explores the history of Gaelic and its relevance today.

There are numerous accounts of the Highland Clearances in Scotland. Professor Sir Tom Devine locates this in a Scottish wide context in *The Scottish Clearances: A History of the Dispossessed 1600-1900* (London: Penguin, 2019)

⁸ [The Rough Bounds \[Mallaig Heritage Centre\]](#)

⁹ 1886 Slater's <https://digital.nls.uk/directories/browse/archive/90660872?mode=transcription>

¹⁰ [Gaelic in modern Scotland - OpenLearn - Open University - Gaelic 1](#)

Fact Sheet: Alexander McGregor

Pensioner Details
<i>Pensioner Name:</i> Alexander McGregor
<i>Person ID:</i> SC1026
<i>Your name:</i> Sandra Cairncross
<i>U3A Group:</i> Scotland
Part One: Birth and Family
1: When and where was your pensioner born?
<p>Alexander McGregor was born about 1845 in Kilmallie, Invernesshire.</p> <p>This is taken from the 1851 Census which gives his age as 6.¹¹ McGregor has been transcribed as McGrigor</p> <p>No baptism record has been found</p>
2: Who were your pensioners' parents? Record any details you can find out about them here (e.g. occupation, religious affiliation, whether they could read or write)
<p>Alexander McGregor's death certificate (1919)¹² lists his parents as</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Angus McGregor (Farmer) and Kate Roberston <p>It does not state that they are deceased.</p> <p>Alexander McGregor's (1890)¹³ lists his parents as</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Angus McGregor (Crofter) and Catherine Roberston <p>Both are listed as being deceased</p>

¹¹ Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 5; Page: 6; Line: 9; Roll: CSSCT1851_111; Year: 1851 (Alexander McGregor)

¹² Downloaded from Scotland's People

¹³ Downloaded from Scotland's People

The 1851 census¹⁴ states that Angus is 60 and so his date of birth would be about 1791 and that Catherine is 49 and so her date of birth would be about 1801. Both were born in Kilmallie, Invernesshire.

Alexander was with his parents in the 1851 and 1861 census¹⁵

1851

The family is listed as McGrigor on the Ancestry transcription.

The household consisted of

- Angus Mc Grigor 60
- Catharine Mc Grigor 49
- Elven Mc Grigor 21 (Elven is a mis-transcription of Ewan)
- Donald Mc Grigor 14
- Alexander Mc Grigor 6

The address was 22 (in Kilmallie).

Angus is described as a crofter of 7 acres.

The birthplace of all family members is given as Kilmallie.

1861

The family is listed as Mcgregor on the Ancestry transcription.

The household consisted of

- Catharine Mcgregor 59
- Ewen Mcgregor 30
- Catharine Mcgregor 26
- Alexander Mcgregor 16
- Rachel Cameron 4

No address is given.

Catherine is listed as a crofter. Her birthplace is written as Sallachat, invernessshire.

Rachel Cameron is described as the Crofter's Grand daughter.

Alexander's siblings are discussed in Section 3 below.

¹⁴ See reference for Alexander McGregor Postal Pensions 1851

¹⁵ See references Alexander McGregor Postal Pensions 1851 and 1861

No further records for Angus McGregor have been found after the 1851 census and none for Catherin Roberston after the 1861 census. It is thus probable that Angus died between 1851 and 1861 and Catherine between 1861 and 1871.

3: Did your pensioner have any siblings? What were their names, and how old were they in relation to your pensioner? Use this space to record anything else you have found out about them (e.g. occupation)

Alexander McGregor (postal pensioner) was the youngest of four children, three boys and one girl). The siblings were identified from 1851 and 1861 census.

- Ewen or Hugh McGergor 1829 - 1894
- Catherine McGregor 1834 - 1915
- Donald McGregor 1837-
- Alexander McGregor 1845 - 1919

Note: Year of birth is inferred from census record.

There may have been other siblings who died in infancy and who do not feature on census records.

Ewen McGergor 1829 – 1894

In 1851 Ewen can be found working as an agricultural labourer and in 1861 as a crofter's son. He then becomes a crofter in his own right (1871 to 1891)

- 1871 Blarmacfoldach (Blarmachfoldach)
- 1881 School House Part Of School B
- 1891 Blarmaefaoldach (Blarmachfoldach)

He appears not to have married and his sister Catherine kept house for him.

Catherine McGregor 1834 – 1915

Catherine does not appear with family in 1851 census.

She is listed as a crofter's daughter in the 1861 census.

Catherine acted as a housekeeper for her brother Ewen.

- 1871 Housekeeper

- 1881 Housekeeper
- 1891 Crofter Sister

and became a crofter in her own right by 1901. The croft was at Blarmaefaoldach (Blarmachfoldach)

No record of Catherine having married has been found by a daughter Sarah Cameron, son-in-law Ewen Cameron and grandchildren can be found living with Catherine in 1901. Sarah is probably the Sarah McKenzie who can be found living with Ewen McGregor and Catherine in 1881 and 1891. She is listed as a niece of Ewen.

Ewen Cameron lived on a croft in Blarmachfoldach with his family prior to his marriage to Sarah. He is listed in the 1891 census, aged 29, as a crofter's son and in 1901, aged 39, as a road contractor.

Donald McGregor 1837-

Donald married a Barbara Haliday in 1870. He can be found working as a shepherd in the 1871 census and his occupation is listed as former shepherd in 1881. He is working as a farm servant in 1891.

Part Two: Marriage and children

1: Did your pensioner marry? What was their spouse's name, and when and where did they marry them? Use this space to record any extra details you can find out about their spouse (e.g. when/where they were born, their occupation)

Alexander McGregor married Ann Kennedy on the 18th Dec, 1890. He was 44 and she was 30. His occupation is given as Coach Proprietor.

They were married in Invergloy, Lochaber after banns according to the Free Church of Scotland.

Ann's parents are names as Angus Kennedy, Shepherd, and Mary McKenzie.

Ann's occupation is given as laundry maid.

She was born on the 12 Nov 1859 in Kilmonivaig, Inverness, Scotland (and so would have actually been 31 when she married).

Ann can be found living with her parents in 1861 and 1871.

Ann is not at the family home in 1881. Given her occupation as laundry maid it is possible that she is in service somewhere.

In 1891, 1901 and 1911 she can be found living with her husband.

Ann died in 1925.

2: Did your pensioner have any children? What were their names, and when they were born? Use this space to record any extra details you can find out about them (e.g. occupation, where they lived later in life)

The 1911 census states that Alexander and Ann had no children.

Part Three: Work

1: What occupation was your pensioner recorded as doing in census years? Please make sure to state clearly which year you are referring to

- 1851 Scholar
- 1861 Scholar
- 1871 Post Moosenger (messenger)
- 1881 Post Runner
- 1891 Coach Proprietor
- 1901 Carriage Hirer
- 1911 Farmer

2: What occupations were people living with your pensioner (e.g. spouse, children, boarders) doing in the census years? Please make sure to state clearly which year you are referring to

The occupations of all adults staying at the address where Alexander McGregor (postal pensioners) was on the night of the census 1851 to 1911 are listed below, essentially collating information provided in Sections 1 and 2.

Name	Relationship to Postal Pensioner	Occupation
1851		
Angus McGregor	Father	Crofter of 7 Acres
Catherine McGregor	Mother	none
Ewen McGregor	Brother	Ag Lab
1861		
Catherine McGregor	Mother	Crofter
Ewen McGregor	Brother	Crofter's son
Catherine McGregor	Sister	Crofter's daur (daughter)
1871		
Ewen McGregor	Brother	Crofter
Catherine McGregor	Sister	Housekeeper
John Roberston	Visitor: no relationship	Shepherd
1881		
Ewen McGregor	Brother	Crofter Of 15 Arable Acres
Catherine McGregor	Sister	Housekeeper
Angus McKinnon	Servant: no reationship	General Serv
1891		
Ann McGregor	Wife	Coach Proprietor's Wife
1901		
Ann McGregor	Wife	none
Hugh Kennedy	Visitor: brother-in-law	joiner
Margaret Fraser	Servant: no relationship	General Servant
1911		
Ann McGregor	Wife	None
Donald McDonald	Servant: no relationship	Cattleman (Farm)
George McKechnie	Servant: no relationship	Farm Servant
Mary M Kerr	Servant: no relationship	General Servant (Domestic)

Part Four: Anything Else

Please use this space to record anything else you have found out about your pensioner

Postal Appointment

The postal appointment book indicates that he was appointed in 1870 as a messenger between Fort William to Arisaig. This is a distance of over 30 miles.

His number is 67771 /70.

Mail Coach

An entry in the 1886 Slater's (late Pigot and Co's) Royal National Commercial Directory and Topography of Scotland suggests that Alexander McGregor was a joint proprietor of the Arisaig Mail Coach.

M'Gregor & Cameron, proprietors of Arisaig mail coach, Fort William

Alexander McGregor's niece Sarah McKenzie (daughter of sister Catherine) married a Ewen Cameron who lived on a neighbouring croft to her mother's. Ewen was a road contractor in 1901. There may be a connection with the Cameron who was a joint proprietor of the mail coach.

Gaelic

The 1911 census states that Alexander McGregor and his wife Ann had Gaelic and English.

Boarders and Visitors

A Ewen Kennedy can be found boarding with Alexander McGregor and his wife Ann in 1891 aged 16. He is a scholar.

It is likely that Ewen is Ann's younger brother. A son named Ewen aged 6 can be found with Ann's parents in 1881.

A Hugh Kennedy can be found visiting Alexander McGregor and his wife Ann in 1901 aged 29. He is a joiner. Given the names Ewen and Hugh can be inter-changeable, it is possible that Hugh is Ann's brother Ewen. However the age then should be 26. Another of Ann's brothers, John, is also recorded in 1901 census as a joiner.

A Sarah Ann McArthur is boarding with Alexander McGregor and his wife Ann in 1911. She is 11 and a scholar.

Death

Alexander died on the 28th November 1919 in Fort William. The cause of death is given as "Heart Block" and he died at Greenhill Road. His usual residence was Inseagan House. The death was registered on the information of the Procurator Fiscal.

Estate

Alexander McGregor left an estate of just over £555. The probate index states that he was sometime of Achinarnich Farm, Craignish, Argyll and latterly of Inseagan, Fort William. His wife is named as executrix.

Part Five: Your Sources

Please use this space to record the sources you have used

Alexander McGregor (Postal Pensioner)

Census

- 1851 Census Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 5; Page: 6; Line: 9; Roll: CSSCT1851_111; Year: 1851
- 1861 Census Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 2; Page: 3; Line: 19; Roll: CSSCT1861_70
- 1871 Census Parish: *Kilmallie*; ED: 2; Page: 3; Line: 7; Roll: *CSSCT1871_91*
- 1881 Census Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 2; Page: 2; Line: 14; Roll: *cssct1881_153*
- 1891 Census Parish: *Kilmallie*; ED: 3; Page: 41; Line: 2; Roll: *CSSCT1891_168*
- 1901 Census Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 3; Page: 14; Line: 12; Roll: CSSCT1901_180
- 1911 Census 1911 Census (Scotland's People): MCGREGOR, ALEXANDER (Census 099/2 1/ 1) Page 1 of 6

Other

- 1870 Postal Appointment British Postal Museum and Archive; Series: *POST 58*; Reference Number: 85
- *1886 Slater's*
<https://digital.nls.uk/directories/browse/archive/90660872?mode=transcription>
- 1890 Marriage Certificate (Scotland's People): MCGREGOR, ALEXANDER (Statutory registers Marriages 099/ 2 4)
- 1919 Death Certificate (Scotland's People): MCGREGOR, ALEXANDER (Statutory registers Deaths 098/B 69)
- 1920 Estate
https://www.ancestry.co.uk/imageviewer/collections/60558/images/40884_b206814-00321?pld=160000

Wife of Postal Pensioner

Ann Kennedy (wife)

Census

- 1891 Census Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 3; Page: 41; Line: 3; Roll: CSSCT1891_168
- 1901 Census Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 3; Page: 14; Line: 13; Roll: CSSCT1901_180
- 1911 Census 1911 Census 1911 Census (Scotland's People): MCGREGOR, ALEXANDER (Census 099/2 1/ 1) Page 1 of 6

Other

- 1859 Birth: <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/discoveryui-content/view/17890105:60143?tid=168569660&pid=162232481895>
- 1890 Marriage Certificate (Scotland's People): MCGREGOR, ALEXANDER (Statutory registers Marriages 099/ 2 4)
- 1925 Death MCGREGOR ANNIE KENNEDY 63 1925 098/B 4 Kilmallie (Inverness) (Search Result Scotland's People)

Parents of Postal Pensioner

Angus McGregor (father)

Census

- 1851 Census Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 5; Page: 6; Line: 5; Roll: CSSCT1851_111; Year: 1851

Catherine Roberston (mother)

Census

- 1851 Census Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 5; Page: 6; Line: 6; Roll: CSSCT1851_111; Year: 1851
- 1861 Census Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 2; Page: 3; Line: 16; Roll: CSSCT1861_70

Siblings of Postal Pensioner

Ewen McGregor (brother)

Census

- 1851 Census Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 5; Page: 6; Line: 7; Roll: CSSCT1851_111; Year: 1851
- 1861 Census Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 2; Page: 3; Line: 17; Roll: CSSCT1861_70
- 1871 Census Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 2; Page: 3; Line: 6; Roll: CSSCT1871_91
- 1881 Census Parish: *Kilmallie*; ED: 2; Page: 2; Line: 12; Roll: *cssct1881_153*

Catherine McGregor (sister)

Census

- 1861 Census Parish: *Kilmallie*; ED: 2; Page: 3; Line: 18; Roll: *CSSCT1861_70*
- 1871 Census Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 2; Page: 3; Line: 8; Roll: CSSCT1871_91
- 1881 Census Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 2; Page: 2; Line: 13; Roll: *cssct1881_153*
- 1891 Census *Kilmallie*; ED: 2; Page: 2; Line: 20; Roll: *CSSCT1891_168*
- 1901 Census Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 2; Page: 3; Line: 1; Roll: CSSCT1901_180

Donald McGregor (brother)

Census

- 1851 Census Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 5; Page: 6; Line: 8; Roll: CSSCT1851_111; Year: 1851
- 1861 Census Parish: Kilmonivaig; ED: 1; Page: 3; Line: 2; Roll: CSSCT1861_13
- 1871 Census Parish: Kilmonivaig; ED: 1; Page: 1; Line: 6; Roll: CSSCT1871_18
- 1881 Census Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 4; Page: 16; Line: 6; Roll: *cssct1881_153*
- 1891 Census Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 8; Page: 1; Line: 17; Roll: CSSCT1891_168

Other

- Marriage <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/discoveryui-content/view/1377572:60144?tid=168569660&pid=162232480884>

Niece of Postal Pensioner and her husband

Sarah McKenzie or Cameron (Niece)

- 1881 Census Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 2; Page: 2; Line: 15; Roll: *cssct1881_153*

- 1891 Census Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 2; Page: 2; Line: 21; Roll: CSSCT1891_168
- 1901 Census Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 2; Page: 3; Line: 3; Roll: CSSCT1901_180

Ewen Cameron (husband of niece of postal worker)

- 1891 Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 2; Page: 2; Line: 11; Roll: CSSCT1891_168
- 1901 Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 2; Page: 3; Line: 2; Roll: CSSCT1901_180

Brothers-in Law of Postal Pensioner

Ewen Kennedy (Brother-in-Law)

Census

- 1881 Census Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 6; Page: 5; Line: 16; Roll: cssct1881_153
- 1891 Census Parish: Kilmallie; ED: 3; Page: 41; Line: 4; Roll: CSSCT1891_168
- 1901 Census Parish: *Kilmallie*; ED: 3; Page: 14; Line: 15; Roll: CSSCT1901_180

John Kennedy (Brother-in-Law)

- 1901 Census Parish: *Kilmonivaig*; ED: 2; Page: 3; Line: 9; Roll: CSSCT1901_30