

**‘Gamli Sloan’:
William Gibson Sloan
after 175 Years**

Óli Jacobsen¹

The 175th anniversary of the birth of William Gibson Sloan fell on 4 September 2013. Sloan was the instigator of the Brethren movement in the Faeroe Islands, who by the time of his death in 1914, as a white-bearded, patriarchal figure, was known there as ‘*Gamli Sloan*’, ‘Old Sloan’. He was born in Dalry, in North Ayrshire, in Scotland, but it was in the Faeroes where he had great influence on religious life and, consequently, on Faeroese society. While the Brethren play only a negligible role in public life in most countries, in the Faeroes they are the largest Christian group outside the established church and the movement has had substantial influence in the archipelago.² To commemorate the anniversary of Sloan’s birth, a large party of Faeroese went to Dalry on the day, where they visited his birthplace and had a short commemorative service in the town’s North Street Gospel Hall.³

D. J. Danielsen (‘Dollin’)⁴ wrote about the family that the Sloans ‘were of Scottish origin but fled to Ireland during the reign of the Stuarts. Many of his relatives are famous men within medical science in Scotland.’ William’s parents were Elisabeth and Nathanael Sloan. His father was a handloom weaver, and William was born in the

1. This paper is taken from [Óli Jacobsen], ‘Gamli Sloan 175 ár’, *Friggjadagur*, 9 Aug. 2013, 18–19; [*idem*], ‘175 ára fœðingardagurin hjá William G. Sloan’, *Friggjadagur*, 27 Sept. 2013, 60–1; translation is by Tórður Jóansson with additional editorial material by Neil Dickson.

2. Cf. Tórður Jóansson, *Brethren in the Faroes* (Tórshavn, 2012).

3. The Faeroese were on a tour of Scotland from 2 to 6 Sept.

4. For Danielsen, cf. Óli Jacobsen, *Dollin: Havnarmaðurin, sum broytti heimssøguna* (Tórshavn, 2010); *idem*, ‘Daniel J. Danielsen (1871–1916): The Faeroese who Changed History in the Congo’, *BHR*, 8 (2012), 10–42.

family cottage at Bridgend of Rye.⁵ They were members of the Church of Scotland, and William was baptised by the parish minister on the 16 September 1838 in the family home.⁶ William almost died in childhood. He was playing on the riverbank of the Rye Water which runs close to the family cottage, when he fell into the water which has steep banks and deep pools. Nobody was present and he could just as well have drowned. But he had a fortunate escape, because Margaret Reid, the daughter of a farmer, had seen the accident through a window, and she succeeded in rescuing the drowning boy before he disappeared for the last time. Margaret Reid later married William Wylie, a tube manufacturer in Glasgow, and he built Doggartland House, on the banks of the Rye, for his new wife.⁷ On a visit in Dalry later in life, Sloan was happy to be able to thank the now elderly lady for saving his life.

As a young man, William liked dancing. He was also good at playing the violin and he also played at dances. William, however, had an evangelical conversion. By the time of this event he was working in Coatbridge in Lanarkshire as a store manager for Baird and Company, the ironmasters. Part of his duties was to sell alcoholic drink, but as this was now against his conscience. He resigned, and eventually obtained work as a salesman of Christian books. It was in this connection that he went to Shetland where he

5. A cottage of the type lived in by handloom weavers still stands on the spot where Sloan was born. In all probability it is the original building, but if not, then it is a replacement of the same type, although much altered since the nineteenth century, having been made into one house (from 2-3 dwelling places), re-roofed and the walls harled: architectural notes by Rob Close, 4 Sept. 2013.

6. Fred Kelling, *Fisherman of Faeroe: William Gibson Sloan* (Gøta, Faeroe Isles, 1993), 43.

7. Rob Close, e-mail, 10 Aug. 2013. After Mrs Wylie's death in 1913, the house was bought c.1917/8 by William Tytler, a Glasgow businessman and a Brethren member. Tytler owned well-known tearooms in Glasgow. When he died in 1930, the house and business passed to his daughters, the Misses Tytler, who owned it until after World War II. Doggartland House was therefore used in the early twentieth century for providing hospitality to preachers visiting the assembly in Dalry, which had been founded in 1864 (after Sloan had left the town), and a field behind the house was used by the assembly for the annual Sunday school outing.

joined the Brethren as one of the founder members Shetland's first assembly in 1864.⁸ Here he also became interested in the Faeroes, and when in Lerwick he wrote this in his diary on 28th May 1865: 'I have become very interested in the Faeroe Islands. I have heard that around 6,000 people live there and 700 Shetlanders fish there during the summer, also French and English, so that around 1,000 foreigners go ashore there each year.' He thought that there was a need for spiritual work in the islands: 'Therefore I feel an urge and am willing to go there to work in God's name and strength. So with the Lord's help I decide to go the Faeroes and preach Jesus.'⁹ A problem was that he was engaged to be married. However, the girl did not like his plans, so the engagement came to nothing.¹⁰

Alone in Tórshavn

Equipped with some Danish Bibles, a Danish grammar, an English-Danish dictionary and a letter of recommendation from a Shetland businessman to H. C. Muller, the sheriff of Streymoy, Sloan went on a smack from the small island of Papa Stour in Shetland to the Faeroes. Arriving in Tórshavn on a miserable and rainy day, Sloan was ferried ashore. The town consisted of only 170 poorly built houses, and Sloan, then aged 27, almost lost interest, became depressed and got the feeling that he could not carry out his plans in such a place. He did not understand the language, and it seemed as if rain and wind, houses and sheds, the nature and environment surrounded him with darkness and felt inhospitable.

On the first day he got whale-meat and blubber for dinner at Madam Olsen's, later the Hotel Djurhuus.¹¹ However, most of the

8. [George Peterson], *A Century of Witness in Ebenezer Hall, Lerwick 1885–1985* (Lerwick, 1985), 1.

9. Private collection, diaries of W. G. Sloan, MSS. A digital copy of these diaries is in the Christian Brethren Archive, University of Manchester Library.

10. Sigurd Berghamar, *...men Gud gav vökt: um William Sloan og fyrstu samkomurnar* (Afturljóð, Faeroe Isles, 1992).

11. This historic timber house is now called Áarstova and is owned by a daughter of Petur Háberg (see n.13 below).

time he stayed with the book-binder H. N. Jacobsen, who could speak English, and this undoubtedly helped him with his work. Sloan was very popular with children who gathered around him wherever he went. He sang for them, put his hand on their heads and said: "Believe in Jesus" in Danish. His main problem was the language. The people spoke the native Faeroese which is descended from Old Norse and is akin to West Norwegian dialects, but everyone learned Danish in school. It was in this last language he tried to speak, although in the beginning, as he later admitted, his Danish was very poor.

Sloan travelled between Scotland and the Faeroes the following summers until he settled down in Tórshavn in the late 1870s. It was often difficult for him to travel around the islands, visiting villages. He could arrive at a village, tired, hungry and wet only to learn that nobody would put him up. Sometimes he had to stay in outhouses, and occasionally this quiet and nice man was chased by farmers' dogs. At an open-air meeting somebody threw a dead cat which hit him on his chin. Sloan just put the cat down and said, "Don't treat the cat badly."

Sloan continued working for fourteen years without seeing any growth in adherents. But on Sunday morning 31 October 1880 his Faeroese friend Andreas Isaksen (Dia í Geil) was baptised in the sea in Tórshavn. This was arranged early in the morning so the townspeople should not get upset. But men in the town were early risers, so soon the baptism became a sensation which led to much anger and hysteria in Tórshavn. To be re-baptised was regarded as treason against the faith of the ancestors and was seen as an extremely bad thing. A couple of days later a man threw a deadly agricultural tool at Dia but did not hit him. However, Dia was slightly disabled and easily got angry and he was often bullied, not least after the baptism.

Around this time the movement got a hall, built in 1879. The plot was bought from the council for DKK216; and in the deed it says that the plot is for 'an assembly hall for the worship of God and the announcement of the Gospel and serving those who attached to this work.' Apart from some British Brethren present in the Faeroes, the

brothers Djóni and Andreas, Dia, í Geil signed the deed as witnesses. This demonstrates the tolerance of Djóni who was belonged to the established Lutheran church.

The building measured 6.3 x 9.6 metres. Sloan lived upstairs and had a small kitchen and a sitting-room downstairs. The rest of the ground floor was a hall. Sloan called the house 'The Hall at Tinghúsvegur', but most people called it 'Sloan's Hall'. Here the first Sunday School in the Faeroes was held. The hall was also used for other purposes such as abstinence meetings. Maybe this was because the founder of the Tórshavn's Abstinence Association, Djóni í Geil, was Sloan's brother-in-law. Soon the hall was too small, and a new hall, Ebenezer, was erected in 1906. Then Sloan's Hall was taken over by Tórshavn's Club and used for other purposes. Among these the Faeroese National Anthem was first performed in Sloan's Hall (the name had been retained) on Boxing Day 1907.

Acceptance

On the whole Sloan was a respected and popular man. A visitor from Denmark explained that when he arrived in Tórshavn, he was received by

Missioner Sloan, an old Scot, who has been an integral part of the town for a long time and is regarded as a *Pater Familias* and a central person in the environment. Sloan has excellent eye-sight and this showed when suddenly he shouted '*Grindaboð! Grindaboð!*' (Whales in sight). The whole town comes to life. Sloan, who knows that the first one who sees the whales gets the head of the biggest whale, shouts so that everybody hears him. His Faeroese language becomes mixed with English but the '*Grindaboð*' was understandable!¹²

12. '*Grindaboð*' is the Faeroese term for the whale-drive in which a school of whales is driven by boats to the head of a bay or fjord where they are slaughtered by the menfolk. The meat is then divided up by the locals according to strict and traditional rules. In earlier times it was an indispensable supplement to the Faeroese diet. Among Brethren, even the breaking of bread would be stopped for it as the whales' appearance was regarded as God's gift.

Another Dane, Godtfred Petersen, concluded after a visit to the Faeroes:

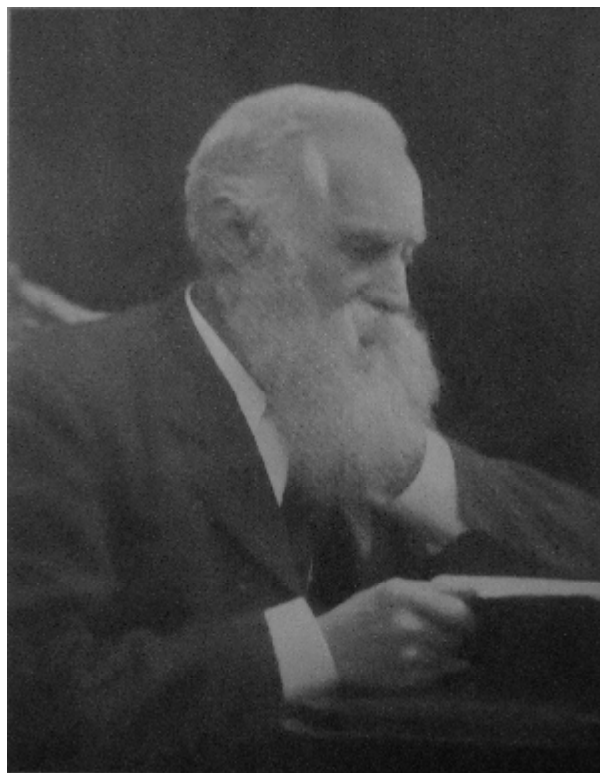
Mr Sloan has been able to be accepted by the people. Everywhere he is welcomed in a friendly way. He greets people in a courteous way, he holds out his hand, greets the children, asks how the husband, away on a fishing trip, is, comforts a mother who has lost her child, implores an old man to turn to God, encourages a blind woman to look forward to heaven and asks the children to take care of their younger siblings.¹³

A story has been told about Sloan on a visit to the village of Gøta. The house á Dunganum at South Gøta used to offer accommodation for guests. One day it so happened that both Sloan and the Lutheran Dean, the principal clergyman of the State Church in the Islands, asked for bed and breakfast. Only one bed was available, so the only solution was that both of them should share the same bed. Both were tolerant men, and thus they shared it. That this must have been slightly uncomfortable is another matter!

The second person baptised by Sloan was Dia's sister, Elspa. It is said that her father, Poul í Geil, was not pleased with this and he said that the two were going to make the nails for his coffin. However, his anger did not last long. William G. Sloan and Elspa married on 11 October 1881. He was nineteen years her senior. They were married in the assembly in Motherwell in Scotland because in the Faeroes only the Lutheran Church could perform marriages. Elspa was known as a lively and well spoken woman who had acted in the local theatre to great acclaim, for example from the Lutheran Dean, V. U. Hammershaimb.¹⁴ Elspa and William had six children. Andrew,

13. Petur Háberg, *Frá penni Petur Hábergs*, 2 vols (Gøta, Faeroe Isles, 2007), vol. 1, 21–62. These volumes are a collection of articles which Petur Háberg wrote, including different ones about Sloan. Petur Háberg was a leading member of the Brethren. His full name was Petur William. His mother was a niece of Sloan's wife, Elspa. As he was born a few days before the death of Sloan, Petur was named after him.

14. Venceslaus Ulricus Hammershaimb (1819–1909) established the modern orthography of Faeroese, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venceslaus_Ulricus_Hammershaimb> accessed Oct. 2013.



W. G. Sloan at 73

who later became an evangelist in the Islands, is the only one who has from second to sixth descendents still living in the Faeroes, and one his four children, Kristina, now an elderly woman of advanced years, was able to attend the commemorative event of her grandfather's birth in Dalry.¹⁵ In his address at the memorial service

15. William and Elspa Sloan's children were: Poul (1882–1953), Anna Elisabeth, called Betty (1885–1938), Elisabeth (1887–?), Archibald (1890–?), Ketty (1892–1968) and Andrew (1896–1973).

the Faeroese Brethren evangelist, Svenning av Lofti, recollected some stories still told in the Faeroes, of ‘Old Sloan’. Among them, was the following:

One day I had been at a morning service in my home assembly, “Ebenezer” in Tórshavn. I was walking with an elderly man called Palli á Lava. He was about 90 years of age. That morning he told me this story:

In my childhood I lived close to Mr. Sloan’s house. As we boys were playing football, it happened that the ball went over the fence into Mr. Sloan’s garden, which was a beautiful garden. The first time I had to go into his garden, over the fence, I was not sure what would happen. Will this man be angry? When I stood there I met William Gibson Sloan. He smiled, put his hand on my head, saying: “Believe in Jesus!” I took my ball and walked out of the garden. Since that moment I never forgot Mr. Sloan. Still today I feel his blessed hand on my head and can still remember his words: “Believe in Jesus!”

A few years after this occurrence, Mr. Sloan suddenly got sick and passed away after a few days. At the funeral service in Ebenezer people saw a little boy make his way forward and lay fresh flowers on Mr. Sloan’s coffin. The boy was Palli á Lava. He had gotten flowers from his mother and went to the funeral to pay his old friend the last honour, this man who had made such a great impact on the life of this little boy.¹⁶

Sloan died on his seventy-sixth birthday on 4 September 1914. He had become weak. It has been said that the fact that Britain had entered the First World War a month previously worried Sloan considerably. It has also been acknowledged that of all wars this one was probably the most irrational. This war led to the death of millions of young men, and all sides were losers. Tributes came from outside the Brethren movement. In 1965, on the centenary of Sloan’s first arrival in the Islands, William Heinesen, the most celebrated Faeroese novelist, paid homage to him in a radio talk.¹⁷ The

16. Svenning av Lofti, ‘William Gibson Sloan’, address given in North St. Gospel Hall, Dalry, 4 Sept. 2013 [3].

17. The attribution of Scottishness to J. S. Mill might seem surprising, for it was Mill’s father who was a native Scot; however, Heinesen may be using poetic licence

Heinesen family had lived next door to the Sloans in Tórshavn, and as a boy William Heinesen was a childhood playmate of Andrew William, Sloan's youngest son. In the broadcast Heinesen said:

With his white beard and pious countenance not unlike the Scottish philosopher, John Stuart Mill, he was for me a loveable personality as he walked about his garden among the blossoming red currant bushes and rowan trees, a gentle sage who knew the way of truth and life. It happened now and again as we played in Mr. Sloan's garden, that this humble and friendly white-bearded and black-clad Scottish missionary came and put his hand on our head and said "Believe in Jesus!" This felt like a blessing. I don't remember ever having seen a purer soul or a milder pair of eyes. It was obvious that this man wholly and fully was a good and large soul, a bearer of good news—truly an evangelist. As he stands in the garden among leaves and flowers so many years ago and yet so curiously vivid and alive in my memory, I want to honour the memory of William Gibson Sloan with gratitude.¹⁸

Kristin í Geil, who, as the editor of the independent, and often culturally radical, *Tingakrossur*, was a well-known writer in the islands,¹⁹ wrote an obituary of *Gamli Sloan* in her newspaper:

The meekness and humility which characterised Mr. Sloan's manner and appearance won him, as time went on, the hearts of many, although the opposition from the [State] Church at the beginning was often quite severe. His preaching was simple, and straightforward, as

to make his point, or it may be due to a very Faeroese awareness of how minority ethnicity can be swallowed by that of the dominant nation. William Heinesen (1900–1991) was a novelist, short-story writer, artist, sculptor and composer. He wrote in Danish, and is widely considered to be one of the greatest Scandinavian novelists of the twentieth century. On several occasions he was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature, but that he did not receive it is perhaps due to his own wishes. He wrote to the committee stating he did not want the prize as he felt that the first Nobel awarded to a Faeroese author ought to be to one who wrote in the native language. Religious themes are central to his work, and in his five novels an evangelistic group similar to the Brethren feature, most notably in *Blæsende Gry* (1934), Eng. trans, *Windswept Dawn* (2009). Cf. W. Glyn Jones, *William Heinesen* (New York, 1974), 24.

18. William Heinesen, quoted in Lofti, 'Sloan', [4].

19. Kristin í Geil was connected to W. G. Sloan by way of his wife, who was Djóni í Geil's sister, and Djóni was Kristin's father.

he himself was; but it was upheld by an unshakeable faith in God and a self-sacrificing love for his fellow-man, which commanded everyone's respect and made him beloved wherever he went. As one of the very few, his life was, in great and small circumstances, dominated by the example which is given in the life and teaching of Jesus, the Nazarene. Only the very few have been entitled to bear the name of Christian with the same rights as William Sloan.²⁰

As Svenning av Lofti said in his memorial address: 'As I was walking around here alone in the streets of Dalry today, thinking of William Gibson Sloan, I praised the Lord, that this man was not on the road to some place in the south, but was sent on the road to the north—to the Faeroe Islands.'²¹

20. Kristin í Geil, quoted in Kelling, *Sloan*, 234–5.

21. Lofti, 'Sloan' [4].