

# Back in Time

*Comann Eachdraidh Sgìre a' Bhac*

2023 Annual

£4.00



# From the Editor

We extend a warm welcome to all of our readers to the first *Comann Eachdraidh Sgìre a' Bhac* (CEBac) magazine in over 30 years. It was back in 1986 that the original *Comunn Eachdraidh* produced the first of a series of information booklets entitled *Litir Fiosrachadh*. Sadly, the society went into abeyance in the 1990s but, as a tribute to the work of our early pioneers, several of the articles they printed back then reappear in this 2023 annual.

Also to be found in the following pages are: the local events from 50 years ago, profiles of the district's residents who emigrated on the *Metagama*, and family histories from some memorials in Gress Cemetery. We mark the centenary of the Coll Drowning, remember Rev. Alistair Montgomery, and evoke memories of Gress Lodge in the post-war years.

The title of our magazine is shared with the popular section of *Loch a Tuath News* that looks back at events from 70 years ago. We were fortunate in having a *Gazette* district correspondent back then and this reminds us of the importance of recording events as they happen so that the readers of the future can appreciate the events that shape our lives today.

We thank Jayne and her team at *Loch a Tuath News* for their help in accessing photographs and other material and we would encourage our community to continue to contribute to our award-winning monthly magazine in the years ahead. Reference is made in the following pages to past editions of *Loch a Tuath News*; these articles can be easily accessed in the archive section of their website.

Feedback for our own first effort at a publication is of course most welcome and the contact details for the *Comann Eachdraidh's* office bearers can be found on this page.

*Best wishes*  
Iain Murray

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L-R Donald Macdonald (Back), Melanie Mackay (Upper Coll), Kenneth Maciver (Upper Coll), Anne-Louise Stewart (Coll), Margaret Stewart (Upper Coll), Catherine M. Macinnes (Back), Anna Tucker (Upper Coll), Murdo Macleod (Gress), Anne Ramsay (Back), Colin Tucker (Upper Coll), Anne Macarthur (Broadbay View), Kathryn Graham (Catherine Hill), James Macarthur (Broadbay View), Mary Ann Graham (Gress), Coinneach Smith (Gress)

Missing from photo are Cathy Macinnes (Coll), Iain Murray (Back), Ian Quigley (West Lothian), Kevin Murray (Back), Kenneth Stewart (Back), Angus Maclellan (Gress)



May 2022

The cover image, *St Aula's Aurora*, is courtesy of Magz Macleod, Gress (*Impact Imagz*)

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# CEBac - The Early Years

## A' Chàirdean

The main reason for our Newsletter is to keep you informed of the work of the Historical Project. We also hope that the historical snippets which are given will be of interest to you and that they might stimulate you into helping the members of the team in their research.

*Ma bhithas sibh faisg air an t-sean chanteen dèamamh cinnteach gu'n nochd sibh a-steach chum gun faic sibh an obair a tha dol air adhart agus tha mi cinnteach gum bithidh cupan te faisg air làimh cuideachd.*

These were the opening lines, penned by Dòmhnall Alasdair Dhòmhmaill a' Charagain, for the first Comunn Eachdraidh newsletter which was published in March 1986. They serve to reiterate the common aims that the old and new Comann Eachdraidh share but they also remind us of the loss of premises that our community endured when the old school, which housed the original historical society, was demolished in the 1990s.

The Community Hut has served us admirably for many years and it will shortly be joined on the Old School site by the Comann Eachdraidh's own cabin which will hopefully, in time, be replaced by a permanent purpose-built facility.

Some of the work that our earlier historians undertook can still be found in homes throughout the district: the newsletters, local phone directory, tape recordings of interviews with elderly residents, and a concert featuring the songs from the Back district. Sadly many documents and photographs that were collected back then are missing, and we would encourage all of our readers to search through their cupboards and attics in the hope that this archive can be re-established.

No group photograph of the original committee or minutes of meetings can be found, so we are reliant on the fragility of collective memory in order to place on record our appreciation of all those who contributed to the invaluable work

that was carried out over 30 years ago. If readers know of any omissions from the following list please do get in touch and the record will be amended accordingly

George Stewart, 2 Back  
 Donald A. Stewart, 28 Upper Coll  
 Kenneth Campbell, 31 Vatisker  
 Margaret Macdonald, 7 Broadbay View  
 Kenneth D. Murray, 14 Upper Coll  
 Peter Macleod, 39 Gress  
 Agnes Stewart, 19 Upper Coll  
 Katie Bell Campbell, 41 Coll  
 Angus Graham, 4 Vatisker Park  
 John Maclean, 22 Upper Coll  
 Joan Macleod, 16 Coll  
 Kenneth Murray, 21 Coll  
 Mary Ann Graham, 38 Gress  
 Ruairaidh Murray, 9 Back  
 Kenneth Murray, 23 Coll  
 Joey Macaulay, 8 Vatisker Park  
 John MacLennan, 24 Gress  
 Alasdair Maciver, 6 Back

## Càit' a' Bheil?

From the 1986 newsletter, we present a quiz of various places in our district. How many can you locate? Hopefully more than the editor who only managed 3 out of 10! Please turn to page 4 for the answers. The late Kenneth Murray, (*Coinneach Ailig John*), 21 Coll, provided some of the older place-names.

- |                      |                     |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Fèith na Starraig | 6. Na Creachainn    |
| 2. Bot an Dè         | 7. Breacair         |
| 3. Lèig a Bhìlich    | 8. Druim a' Bhac    |
| 4. Lèig an Thuim     | 9. Cnoc an t-Sioman |
| 5. An Glodhar        | 10. Carolina!       |

## Lighthill

A question that has puzzled some people over the years is "Where exactly is *Cnoc an t-Solais* (Lighthill) and how did it acquire its name?"

Well, the top of this hill is where no. 58 Back (*Taigh Dhubail*) is situated. This area is behind the main village street in Back and the crofts here were not allocated until 1858, many years after numbers 1 - 52 were occupied.

There were two weavers resident there, one known as *Tormod Buachaille* and the other as *Calum Breabadair*. As you will realise, a powerful light was an essential tool for a weaver. They would say that no matter when you would look up to this hill, a light could be seen. In fact, some said that this light would act as a guide to fishermen negotiating their safe passage to shore in Loch a' Tuath.

There is another hill further out towards the moor called *Cnoc an t-Sithein* and some have confused this hill with the real location of *Cnoc an t-Solais*. Today, the entire street connecting both hills is commonly known as Lighthill.

(George Stewart - *Litir Fiosrachadh*, 1987)

## The Broad Bay Monster

Loch Ness is not the only place in Scotland where marine monsters have put in an unexpected appearance, according to the *Morning Post* of March 19, 1880.

"A gigantic monster of the deep, supposed to be a sea serpent, was lately seen off the coast of the Isle of Lewis. It was from 60 to 80 feet in length, and was visible for 14 days, gambolling in an arm of the sea called Broad Bay. The creature was never observed to spout water, and seemed to have a mane like a horse, only much larger and of a white colour"

(*Litir Fiosrachadh*, 1986)

## Back in 1835

The following article appeared in the first *Comunn Eachdraidh* newsletter. It was contributed by the late Donald A Stewart (Dòmhnall Alasdair Dhòmhnail a' Charagain), 28 Upper Coll. The figure in the first column for each village is the number of people over 14 years of age (in 1835) and the second figure is the total number of inhabitants.

Gress	28	29
Back	205	303
Vatisker	130	208
Coll	169	263
Upper Coll	18	21
Gearraidh Ghuirm	42	83

The village of Gress by this time would have been cleared of its people. This would account for the lack of children as the population would be made up of older workers at the farm and the mill. Workers at the fishing station might well have boosted the numbers.

Back and Coll would have moved to their present sites and the statistics reflect a settled community for this time.

The farm at Vatisker would have been broken up and the land has been taken up by locals and incomers from as far away as Harris. The high number of children are indicative of quite a young age group.

The statistics for Upper Coll reflect those of a farm and its workers. Gearraidh Ghuirm is in the middle of a ten year resettlement. Most of these settlers came from Melbost, Borve and many went back there after the subsequent evictions. Four families, some of them originally from the village, resettled at Coll.

## Càit' a' Bheil?

Answers for Càit' a' Bheil? (Page 3)

1. The old name for *Allt Kate*, below *Uilleam Shandy's* house
2. The old name for *Lèig Chaluum Thormoid*, below 16 Coll
3. Present day Vatisker Park
4. Between No. 7 and No. 10 Coll
5. Centre of Back village
6. East end of Gress
7. From west end of Gress village down to Gress River
8. The straight road towards *Taigh a' Chaptain*, 48 Back (or Quebec, Canada!!)
9. Far end of Outend Coll
10. Area behind *Taigh Bailey* to *Taigh Iain Nis* at Vatisker/Coll boundary

## Seasons of the Year

The original newsletters provided a very interesting summary of the crofting year, written by the late Kenneth Campbell (Kenny Twèed), 31 Vatisker. In this section of the magazine we focus on Kenny's description of the first six months of a typical year in Back.

### January

The last fortnight of this month was known as *Faoilteach a' Gheamhraidh*.

### February

The first fortnight was called *Faoilteach an Earraich*. The *Faoilteach* was regarded as the time when the worst weather was to be expected with cold and gales. It often happened that during this period there would be three fine days which were known as *Trì Latha Ubhar anns an Fhaoilteach*. Also during this month occurred what was called *Fèill Bhrìde* (St Brides). The full moon during this month produced a very low tide and was taken advantage of for digging the sands for the shellfish called *mursaigean*. The best place for this was a sandbank called the Reef between the *Dùn* and *Port a' Bhàta* which became exposed for some hours during the ebb tide.

### March

During this month fell the festival of *Fèill Phàdruig* (St Patrick's Day). Another low tide this month was also good for *mursaigean*. These two exceptionally low tides were called *Reothairt Mòr Fhèill Bhrìde* and *Reothairt Mòr Fhèill Phàdruig*. Also during this month the sheep which had wintered on the moor were taken home.

### April

Now came the lambing time and the planting of the potatoes. Towards the end of the month the oats would be sown. During this month fell the *Càisg* (Easter) and

snow showers at that time were referred to as *Sneachd na Càisg*.

### May

This month was called *Bealltainn* and a cold spell about the middle of the month with hailstones was called *gaisean coimheach na Bealltainn*. Most of the other festivals were named after saints of the Celtic Church but this one was a pagan festival of very ancient origin. It has been said that the name is derived from the heathen god Baal, so often mentioned in the Old Testament.

It was about the middle of this month that attention turned to the barley crop to ensure that the meal chest would be filled during the winter. The fertiliser used was byre manure and this was applied liberally. Barley was not sown as thickly as the oats and the ratio was nine grains in a man's footprint. In the rotation of crops, the barley was planted where last year's potatoes were, the potatoes in last year's oat field, and the oats in last year's barley field.

After the first week of May the oat crop would be appearing and the sheep were then driven to the moor where they stayed until all the crops had been harvested. After the crops had been planted, the year's supply of peats were cut.

### June

About the 6th of June there would be a few cold days which were called in the south Buchan's Cold Spell but here they called it *Fèill Donain*

## The Tornado

On Saturday morning (May 3, 1919) the village of Lighthill, Vatisker, was thrown into a state of excitement by the noise and appearance of two black balls in the south west sky. One of them swept past about 10 feet off the ground with such terrific force that sheep were blown down, carts of manure were swept away like dust, peat stacks were scattered about, while the barn belonging to John Macleod, 45 Vatisker, was struck, and half of the front side was completely blown away. Then it took its course in a south easterly direction until it took to sea on the south side of Gress Farm.

(*Litir Fiosrachadh*, 1988)

# Broad Bay Disaster

This year marked the 100th anniversary of the last major drowning to occur in Broad Bay. To commemorate this significant event, we hereby reproduce an account of the disaster that first appeared in the Eilean an Fhraoich magazine in 1962. We thank the Stornoway Gazette for granting permission to publish the article.

Between four and five o'clock on a Monday morning in March 1922, a small open boat of about 15 feet keel, manned by a crew of six, proceeded with other similar craft from the village of Coll to fish off the mouth of Broad Bay.

The morning was fine, the wind being moderate from the north, but there was a heavy ground swell. While the process of hauling the lines was in progress the wind rose suddenly and, leaving half their lines in the sea, all the crews made for home about seven miles distant.

The boat skippered by William Macleod was in the wake of the others and more to the Tiumpan side of the Bay which was the lee-shore. During a heavy snow squall the other crews lost sight of Macleod's boat, and when the weather cleared she was nowhere to be seen.

Kenneth Murray, who was in one of the other boats at sea at the time said afterwards, "It was about four o'clock in the morning when we left Brevig landing place. There were four boats of us in company, including that of which William Macleod was skipper. It was a fine morning, with a moderate breeze from the north, but the northerly winds which had prevailed for some days previously had set up a heavy ground swell in the Bay.

"We reached the fishing ground, seven or eight miles distant, about 6 o'clock, and commenced to set our lines. We experienced some nasty hail and snow squalls, and in our exposed position the motion on the sea was too great to admit of fishing. We, accordingly, commenced to haul our lines but only secured two of them when the cord snapped, and we decided to make for home leaving the rest in the sea. The other crews also gave up fishing on account of the weather.

"William Macleod continued shooting his lines after some of us had made sail for home, but soon desisted and followed in our wake. We saw him coming several miles behind us, but lost sight of him in a very heavy hail

and snow shower. When the shower passed we could not find any trace of his boat, but we did not think then that she had foundered. The wind was very strong in the squalls and we had three reefs in our sail."

William Macleod was an intrepid seaman, and one of the most industrious fishermen round the shores of Broad Bay. His boat was a new one — he being the sole owner — purchased from Orkney only three months before the accident.

He was also accompanied in the boat by several other seamen of experience and skill, and this fact tended to allay apprehension as to their safety.

Donald Macleod, Brevig, skipper of one of the incoming boats, however, got together a volunteer crew and proceeded to search for the missing boat, sailing from the spot where she was last seen along the Point shore, but no trace could be found of her.

Telegraphic messages were also dispatched to the Point district to see if the crew had landed at any of the villages there. Search parties proceeded from Coll along the shore towards Portnaguran.

The worst fears were confirmed when at Garrabost there was washed up the oars, rudder, and part of the fishing gear of the ill-fated boat.

Next day the boat herself was observed off Aignish floating in a waterlogged condition. She was taken in charge by the coast guard and beached below the Old Churchyard. The boat, which was quite undamaged, contained all her ballast, a basket with a baited line that had not been shot, and another containing a line that had been shot and hauled, with some fish on the hooks.

The presence of these loose articles in the boat established the belief that she had not capsized but was swamped by the heavy seas that raced in her wake as she ran before the wind. Her mast was missing, but the sail was still attached to the boat. Three of the four reefs were in, so that she was sailing with approximately the same spread of canvas as the boats that made port safely.

The crew of the ill-fated vessel were : William Macleod, 16 Coll; John Nicolson, 1 Coll; Murdo Smith, 13 Coll; Andrew Graham, 20 Coll; Norman Graham, his uncle, and John George Maciver, 23 Coll.

On 22nd December, 1894, there was the memorable disaster in Broad Bay when four boats were lost with 19 men. Exactly a year previously a boat from Coll was lost with six men; and in March, 1898, a boat from Aird of Tong was lost with her crew of six.

## Footnote

We think that the aforementioned Kenneth Murray, who was interviewed for the article, was *Pòisean*, who lived at 57 Coll at the time of the disaster before later moving to 7 Upper Coll. Donald Macleod, who conducted the search for the crew, was almost certainly *Dòmhnall 'an Uilleim*, 25 Vatisker, who was the most renowned fisherman of his generation - in 1995, his daughter Christina Macdonald (*Bean Thormoid Neilein*) unveiled the memorial cairn at Brevig Harbour for all the men who lost their lives in the Broad Bay Drownings.



Brevig Cairn

# A Journey to the New World

Over the past few years the Loch a Tuath district has commemorated the centenaries of several significant moments in its history: the start and end of World War 1, the *Iolaire* disaster, and the land raids on Coll and Gress Farms.

In April 2023, communities across Lewis will mark one more major centenary: the sailing of the emigrant ship *Metagama* to North America. Our magazine's contribution to this iconic event consists of the following: the background to the mass emigration of the 1920s, a description of the ship, profiles of the local emigrants, and the story behind the poignant song that is most closely associated with the *Metagama*.

Grateful thanks to Margaret Stewart and to Colin Tucker for their contributions to this series of articles and also to Ian Quigley, of West Lothian, for sharing his encyclopaedic knowledge with us, thus enabling a comprehensive account of our emigrants' stories to be recorded.



**Lord Leverhulme**

## The Context

*Our first article sets the scene for the departure of the Metagama and explores the wider context of emigration from our shores during the last century. It was written by the late James Maciver, Tong, in 2006, and it is one of several valued contributions that James made to our knowledge of local history, via Loch a Tuath News.*

After the First World War a large number of servicemen came home and there was very little work to be had. The population of Lewis at the last census pre-1914 was around 29,500. Over 6,000 joined the forces and of those, 1,151 paid the supreme sacrifice. In 1918 Lord Leverhulme bought the Island of Lewis and Harris for the reputed sum of £143,000.

Lord Leverhulme started some schemes, for various types of works and improvements. Stornoway and nearby districts saw many of the returning ex-servicemen working in the town area. Other districts in both Lewis and Harris had also various forms of employment. The wages were good - in the early 1920s the workers were getting over £3 a week (by comparison in 1936, while building the No. 1 pier in Stornoway, the wage for unskilled labour was £1.16d or 36 shillings.)

At this time quite a lot of ex-servicemen were demanding land for crofts, and no wonder. They had endured a war that had sheer disregard for human life, and complete ignorance to the awful suffering of the common soldier. It is almost unbelievable that this applied to British and French High Command. What the ex-servicemen wanted was land that had been promised to them in 1912.

At one time many, myself included, thought Lord Leverhulme had been right in some respects, but I believe he had an inbuilt aversion to the crofters that is difficult to understand. His insistence on keeping the farms of Coll and Gress demonstrated his inflexibility - the MP for the Western Isles at the time said there was no reason why Lord Leverhulme's schemes and the granting of crofts to ex-servicemen, who badly needed some land for their needs, could not be carried on side by side. In fact Lord Leverhulme sacked about 100 men because they were accused of siding with the so called 'Raiders'. This was such an autocratic move that it was inevitable that the men turned against him, and when jobs and most of the schemes were stopped, it then led to the emigration that followed.

Lord Leverhulme did many good things, but also some not so good. The ex-servicemen had a lot of things said against them. Some blamed them for stopping the good work that went on. In fact Lord Leverhulme was beset with financial problems at the time and it was his bank that kept him going. He had to come out and the Lewis 'Raiders' and others were, and still are, handy scapegoats.

A lot of people were out of work and their thoughts turned to emigration. Arrangements were then made to get assisted passages on the emigrant ships to Canada for various jobs, but mostly farming. £16 (80 dollars) was the fare and many men, and some women too, took advantage of the opportunity.

There were three emigrant ships that sailed from Stornoway to Canada. They were *Metagama*, *Marloch*, and *Canada*. The best known was the *Metagama* which sailed from Stornoway on 21 April 1923. The liner was carrying over a thousand passengers from Glasgow. It was carrying among others, 10 men and 2 women from Tong, with 19 men and women from the Back district. From Lewis there were 260 persons, 242 men and 18 women. From South Uist there were 6 men and from North Uist there were 5 men.

The *Metagama* came into Stornoway Bay at about 10am and left again at 6.30pm. Many of them never again saw their native island. *Metagama* is a Red Indian word meaning 'Where the Waters Meet'. The emigrants from Lewis were ferried from the quay to the *Metagama* by the tender *SS Hebrides*.

Most of those who emigrated were sent to farms in Canada. Some of them were quite good but not everywhere, as there were many farmers who wanted more and more work. A lot of the Lewis men left at the earliest opportunity. Several of them had been in the awful trenches of France in the First World War, which for many years was known as The Great War. They had suffered horrors of different kinds and were not inclined to stand any bad treatment.

Several went all over Canada looking for work. Some found work on the railways, others on the island lakes, or on building and construction sites, in fact anything they could get. Some crossed the border into America (this was illegal) but many got American citizenship later on. A lot went to Detroit and Chicago. The Ford Motor Company was in Detroit, the type of work was repetitive, but the pay was good in comparison with other places. Some Lewis men who went to work there stayed for the rest of their working life.

When the Depression came in the late '20s a large number returned home, and although conditions were bad here, they could at least go out with the small lines and get haddock and other fish. Those who lived in the Broad Bay area were fortunate because it was one of the best fishing areas in Europe back then. Those that did stay in Canada and America had a hard time until eventually things got better and employment opportunities improved. Quite a number returned in the '50s for holidays and their descendants still come to Lewis to visit their relations. There were very few who emigrated to other colonies of the British Empire; between the wars there was little emigration.

On 3rd September 1939 the Second World War started and lasted until 1945. Some ex-servicemen and women, after getting demobbed, took the opportunities offered by the cheap assisted fares, sponsored by the government, for £10. They could go to any of the colonies but emigration wasn't on the same scale as after the First World War. New Zealand was the favourite destination for the islanders in the '40s and early '50s. Seemingly the climate there is similar to our own, but a bit better. Canada also had its share, but nothing compared to the '20s.

After the '50s, emigration more or less stopped, although some still left for foreign shores, but only singly or as a family. With the worldwide use of aircraft it is much easier to come back for visits. Many do come back visiting from time to time. In the olden days, over a hundred years ago, many of those who left never came back, and many places in the world still have traces of the Gaels who came over in difficult times and tried to bring a small part of their heritage with them. A lot of people from other places in Scotland left for a life on the other side of the world but in comparison, the Highlands and especially the Islands, for their size, sent more than any other part of Britain.

## The Ship

The *Metagama* was one of the fleet of Canadian Pacific liners which maintained the service between Great Britain and Canada during the inter-war years, carrying thousands of immigrants from every corner of the British Isles and further afield to settle in Canada.

In addition, the *Metagama*, which undertook her maiden voyage during the First World War, carried legions of Canadian volunteers across the Atlantic, while still maintaining a wartime commercial service. She then went on to serve for many years as one of the most notable immigrant ships of the inter-war years, also becoming known as the 'Bride Ship,' earning a memorable place in the thoughts of many on both sides of the Atlantic.



Postcard of the *Metagama*

The *Metagama* was built by Barclay Curle & Co Ltd, Glasgow in 1914 for the Canadian Pacific Line. She was a ship of 12,420 gross tons, length 500.4ft x beam 64.2ft, with two funnels, two masts, twin screws driving her at a speed of 15 knots. There was accommodation for 520 cabin and 1,200 3rd class passengers. She was launched on 19 November 1914, and sailed from Liverpool on her maiden voyage to Saint John, New Brunswick, on 26 March 1915.

She made her first voyage after the Armistice on 20 November 1918; in March 1922 she started sailing between Glasgow and Saint John. Her duties done in repatriating Canadian soldiers to their "home and native land," the *Metagama* began what would be her most long-lived work: bringing a new generation of immigrants to the Dominion.

In 1923 CPR's General Agricultural Agent announced a new immigration scheme to bring out thousands of farm labourers and domestic servants to the farms of Western Canada. The immigrants would come from Great Britain, Ireland, Switzerland, Denmark, Netherlands and Belgium. It was additionally announced that the first migration of young farmers from the Hebrides to Ontario under a provincial settlement scheme would begin when the *Metagama* would put into Stornoway Harbour to take 400 men and women between the ages of 18-23 to Canada.

During her career the *Metagama* was involved in only two serious accidents. On 26 May 1923 she collided with the Hogarth Line steamer *Baron Vernon* in the Clyde, and just over one year later was in collision in thick fog with the Italian ship *Clara Camus* off Cape Race.

She made her last transatlantic crossing in 1930, from Antwerp and Southampton to Quebec and Montreal. By then, the *Metagama* made 151 round voyages across the Atlantic; during that time she had carried 153,452 passengers and approximately 36,000 troops. She was then laid up at Southend until finally being towed to be broken up at Bo'ness on the Firth of Forth.

There are few, if any, descriptions of life and conditions on board the *Metagama*, but the accompanying illustrations give an idea of the accommodation the emigrants would have lived in during their voyages.

Colin Tucker



Above: third class smoking room, right: third class cabin

## The Song

Reference is made throughout the upcoming passenger profiles to a song entitled *Òran a' Mhetagama*, which was composed by John Stewart (1886 - 1942), popularly known as *Seonaidh Aonghais Dhòmhmaill Ruaidh*. John was born at 53 Coll (later renumbered 76 Coll) and he latterly lived on Kenneth Street, Stornoway, with his wife Mary (*Màiri Ruadh*, 71 Coll), their two sons Donald and Alex Angus and daughter Ciorstag, and his sister-in-law Christina (*Cairstiona Ruadh*).

An accomplished writer of traditional songs, he is also remembered locally for another composition, *Òran Twinkle*, which was written in memory of Murdo Mackay (*Murchadh a' Bhounce*) who died prematurely.

In an obituary in the *Stornoway Gazette* John was described as being "possessed of extraordinary gifts and a rare talent. He was mighty in prayer, and often led the praise in public worship, and could compose poetry with ease".

His most famous song records his feelings on witnessing the *Metagama* sailing past the Bràigh on its journey to the New World. It is a song that has been recorded by his great-niece, Margaret Stewart, 19 Upper Coll, who composed the air to the version that is commonly heard on *Radio nan Gaidheal*. It is taken from a 2013 compilation album entitled *The Scottish Diaspora, The Music and The Song*. We are most grateful to Margaret for providing us with a translation of John's poignant composition, verses that will no doubt attract renewed interest in the year ahead.





# The Passengers

## Mary Graham, Lighthill

Born in 1904, Mary was the daughter of Angus Graham (*Aonghas Mhurchaidh Ghreum*), 16 Back and Effie Macleod, 43 Vatisker. The family home was a blackhouse that was situated between *Taigh Jack* and *Taigh Milo* at the outer end of Lighthill Road, Vatisker. Mary's brother Samuel was the district's first fatality of WW2, losing his life in the sinking of HMS *Royal Oak* in Scapa Flow, Orkney, in 1939. Their first cousin Donald Macleod (*Dòo*), 2 New Street, Back, was their closest local relation.

Mary died at Long Beach, California, on 15 April 1966 aged 61. Several years later her stepdaughter posted the following online tribute -

*Mary was one of nine children. Her mother died when she was 10, and Mary eventually travelled across the Atlantic, unaccompanied, when she was a teenager. She spent some years in Canada, immigrated to Detroit, Michigan, in 1935. She was a Nurse Anaesthetist, and worked in Bronxville N.Y. in 1940. She told me of being in London during the German blitz of WWII, as a nurse. She met and married my father, Myron Brazier in 1950. Mary suffered from severe rheumatoid arthritis, which left her crippled. She was a smart and kind stepmother to me, who died much too young.*



## ◀ Murdina Graham, 55 Back

Murdina was the daughter of Malcolm Graham (*Calum Ghreum*) and his wife Margaret. She was aged 23 when she left for Canada, where she applied to work as a domestic servant. Sadly Murdina died not long after she arrived there.

She was one of eight in the family, several of whom continued to live locally: Mary Graham (*Bean Mhurchaidh Seònaid*) at 5 Gress; Catherine Maciver (*Bean Chulapain*) at 11 Upper Coll; Kenina Macleod (*Bean Dhòmhnaiill Gon*) at 27 Upper Coll and Christina Macleod (*Bean a' Ghille*) at the old family home. Another sister, Annie, emigrated to Manitoba, Canada.

## Murdo Graham, 20 Coll

*Murchadh Phico* was one of three sons in the family of John and Christina Graham who emigrated to North America - Angus left on the *Canada* in 1924 while John emigrated after the end of WW1 but died as a result of the Spanish Flu Pandemic which claimed the lives of millions worldwide between 1918 and 1920. Another brother Andrew was lost in the Coll drowning of 1922.

Their sister Catherine Stewart (*Bean MhicDougall*) continued to live at 20 Coll.

Murdo, who resided in Chicago, was one of the emigrants who returned home during the Great Depression. He married Dolina Stewart, 76 Coll, and the couple lived in Stornoway. Dolina's brother John (*Seonaidh Aonghais Dhòmhnaiill Ruaidh*) was the composer of the well-known song *Òran a' Mhetagama*. Murdo died on 6 June 1968 aged 67.

## William Graham, 5 Coll

Born in 1899, *Uilleam 'an a' Banntraich* served with the RNR during WW1 and was one of two brothers who emigrated to Canada - Donald left on the *Marloch* the following year. In common with several of the *Metagama* passengers, William returned home a few years later. Sadly he died prematurely as the result of a road accident at Tong on 1 March 1943.

He was survived by his wife Joan (*Seonag a' Bhrann*), formerly of 81 Coll, and by their young family. Jessie lives in the family home today, her sister Willina Martin has a home on the croft, and their late brother Kenneth lived in Stornoway. A tribute to William was published in the *Loch a Tuath News* edition from March 2013.

## John Maciver, 41 Coll ▶

*Iain Mhurchaidh 'an 'ic 'Oill Mhòir*, popularly known as *Ullaigean*, was the youngest of seven in the family of Murdo and Isabella Maciver. He served with the Seaforth Highlanders during WW1 and then as a Lieutenant Commander with the US Merchant Marine in WW2. He and his wife *Agnes Chaluum Iseabail* (36 Coll) settled in Detroit. Interestingly, Agnes was also a passenger on the *Metagama*, but on a different voyage, in 1926.

John worked as an engineer aboard the ships which sailed the Great Lakes, where he became the first man to have a licence for both steam and diesel engines. He died on 18 February 1983 aged 83. His daughter Peggy Morrison, who lives in Michigan, has been an invaluable source of information for this, and many other historical articles over the years.



### Kenneth Maciver, 1 Vatisker

Born in 1902, Kenneth was a younger brother of Donald and Mary Ann Maciver (*Dòmhnall agus Mary Ann na Criomaig*) whose home at 1 Vatisker is still fondly remembered by the older generation for its Christian fellowship.

Shortly after arriving in Canada, Kenneth crossed into the USA and was living in Chicago when he became a naturalised US citizen in 1929. He eventually settled in Florida with his wife Rose Costello who was an Irish immigrant. He last visited Back following the passing of Mary Ann in 1978. By the time of his death, on 15 September 1990, Kenneth was the last of the *Metagama* emigrants from the Back district.

### Alex Mackenzie, 36 Back ▶

*Ailig Aonghais 'an Bhàin* was the youngest of six in the family of Angus and Christina Mackenzie. Angus, their son, was lost in Mesopotamia in WW1, Norman emigrated to Canada, John (*am Borbair*) lived at 29 Upper Coll where his sister Kate also stayed, while another sister Isabella (*Bean Dhòmhnail Twice*) was married in Tong.

Alex was a factory worker prior to serving with the US Navy in WW2. He married Catherine Matheson, 13 Aird Tong, and settled in Rochester, New York, where he passed away on 22 May 1978 aged 77.



### ◀ Donald Mackenzie, 51 Coll

*Dòmhnall Aonghais Mhurchaidh Iain*, popularly known as *an Geamhradh*, was one of several *Metagama* emigrants who settled in Detroit, where he worked in the car factories. He was married to Isabella Morrison, 30 Vatisker. Her mother Peggy and young family emigrated to Canada and then to Detroit following the passing of her husband John (*Iain Ruairidh Ruaidh*) in WW1.

Donald's brother George also lived in Detroit as did his sister Peggy. Their brother Murdo (*Prem*) was married in Glasgow while their sisters Catherine (*Bean Chaluim 'an Duncan*) and Ishbel, continued to live in Outend Coll.

*An Geamhradh* is mentioned in the aforementioned Gaelic song *Òran a' Mhethagama*, which was composed by his neighbour and cousin *Seonaidh Aonghais Dhòmhnail Ruaidh*.

### John Maclean, 30 Coll

John was one of six in the family of Roderick Maclean (*Ruaraidh 'an Dhòmhnail*) and his wife Mary. On arrival in Canada, John worked aboard a ferry on Lake Ontario. Just three months later, on 2 August 1923, he lost his life in a drowning accident, aged 19. The following year Ruaraidh travelled to Canada aboard the *Marloch* to deal with his son's estate.

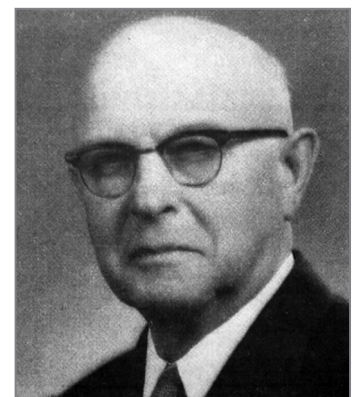
In the years that followed John's passing his sister Jessie remained in the family home with her daughter Mary. Two of John's brothers lived locally: Kenneth (*an Clàrc*) at 75 Coll and Roderick (*Tais*) at 12 Coll.

### Angus Macleod, 54 Coll ▶

*Aonghas Mòr Aonghais a' Bhàird* was the oldest in the family of Angus and Christina Macleod. His father died in 1902 after contracting pneumonia whilst working as a shepherd for Coll Farm. His mother was carrying her sixth child at the time and, as was customary, this child was also given his father's name and was known as *Aonghas Beag*.

Angus emigrated to Canada around 1913. He worked as an elevator attendant in Winnipeg. In June 1915 he was enlisted to serve with the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force. He saw active service at Ypres where he developed pleurisy and TB. He was discharged back to Canada on a military hospital ship and spent some months in a sanatorium.

On recovery Angus came back to Lewis, but subsequently decided to return to Canada, on the *Metagama*. He settled in Winnipeg and obtained a position with the Sunlife Insurance Company. In 1957 he was President of the North West Commercial Travellers Association of Canada.



He married and had two daughters, Sheila and Flora. Angus made a number of trips back to Lewis, his last being in 1955. He planned another visit in 1961 but died suddenly that year.

There were another five siblings born at 54 Coll: Murdo was lost in Mesopotamia during WW1; John settled in Brighton; Peggy married John Macinnes, Tong, and lived in Stornoway; Ishbel continued to live in the family home; and the aforementioned *Aonghas Beag* emigrated on the *Marloch* in 1924 and lived in Chicago.

### Donald Macleod, 4 Vatisker ►

Donald (*Dollan Loudie*) was the son of John Macleod (*Iain an t-Siaraich*, Upper Coll) and his wife Chirsty (nee Stewart) who was a sister of *am Plangach*. The family resided at 4 Vatisker prior to John being allocated no. 37 Gress in 1922.

After a period in Chicago and Buffalo, Dollan eventually moved to Detroit where he was employed on the Great Lakes. In 1931 he married Christina Macleod (*Cairstiona a' Mhuilleir*), formerly of 24 Back. The couple were close friends with the families of *Ullaigean* and *Geamhradh* all their days.

Dollan died on 22 August 1988 aged 87. An obituary in the Back News of the *Stornoway Gazette* concludes with the following words "Working and living in the Motor City, Dollan came in contact with many Lewis people and the hospitality of his home and his words of advice were regularly sought"

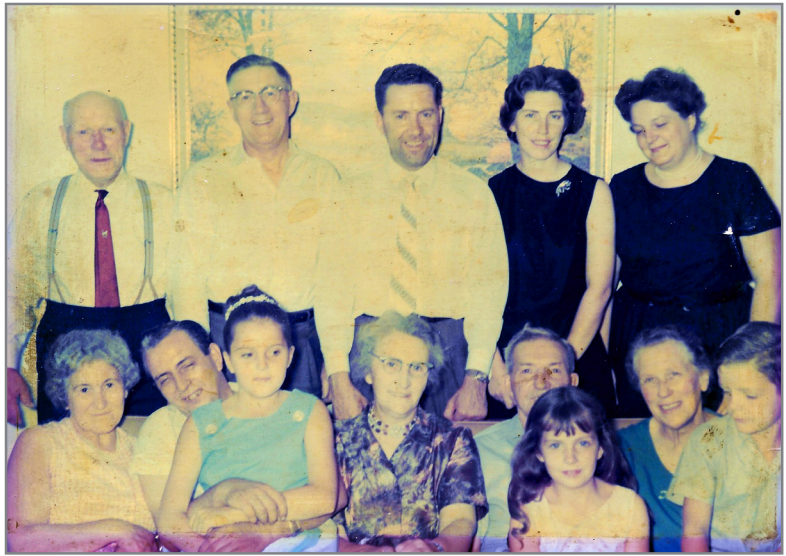


Photo shows Donald (second from left, top row) and his wife Christina (centre, bottom row). Also pictured are Geordie and Nellie Beaton (Back/Ontario) in top row and Dolina Graham (*Doileag Bheag*, Poileagan, Back/USA) bottom row, left. James (*Seumas a' Ghobha*) and Marion Murray (top left and bottom right respectively) were holiday visitors.



### ◀ Donald Macleod, 63 Coll (left)

Donald, known as *Pickwick*, was the second son of Donald (*Dòmhnall Dholaidh*) and Annie Macleod. His older brother Alex John was our district's only survivor of the *Iolaire* disaster.

In common with many of the *Metagama* emigrants, Donald discovered that the conditions encountered in Canada failed to match the promises made prior to their departure. After a spell in Ontario and Saskatchewan he arrived in Detroit where he was met by another Bacach, Alex Macleod (*Iasdaidh*), who helped him to secure work in the Ford factory.

Donald returned home during the Great Depression and lived in Stornoway with his wife Mary (*Màiri Dhuil*, 70 Coll). During WW2 he served with the Merchant Navy. He passed away on 4 April 1950 aged 48.

Photo shows Donald Macleod pictured with Agnes Maciver (*Agnes Chaluum Iseabail*, 36 Coll/USA)

### John Macleod, 49 Back ▼

John was one of six in the family of Donald Macleod (*Dòmhnall Bilidh*) and his wife Chirsty. Aged 19 when he left Lewis, he eventually settled in Prince Rupert, British Columbia, with his wife Mary. A seafaring man, he started as a deckhand, working his way through all the stages of promotion until he became master of a lighthouse supply ship.

His brother Norman was also an emigrant to Canada. Their sister Catherine Murray (*Bean Nomannie*) resided in the old family home.

John passed away on 18 May 1955. The following words conclude his obituary in the *Stornoway Gazette* "Although quiet and unobtrusive he had the calm confidence of one who had faith in his own abilities. The district that gave him birth and now mourn his loss is proud that he reached full reward for his worth before the end."

Photo is of John Macleod pictured with L-R Doileag Bheag (Poileagan/USA); Peigi 'an 'ic 'Oill, 47 Back; Màiri Uilleim, 62 Back; Peigi a' Heech, 29 Gress



### Malcolm Macleod, 8 Coll

Born in 1902, Malcolm was the son of John Macleod and Margaret (nee Macrae, 46 Vatisker). His half-brother William Macleod was lost in the *Iolaire* disaster on 1 January 1919.

In common with almost all of the *Metagama's* male emigrants, Malcolm applied for work on a farm. Among his fellow passengers was his first cousin Angus Macrae (*Scotch*). In the years that followed, his sister Mathilda (*Bean a' Pheideir*) continued to live at 8 Coll.

### Neil Macleod, School Street, Vatisker

Born in 1904, Neil was the oldest son of William Macleod (*Uilleam Barrant*), a well-known church elder, and Christina (nee Macritchie, *Cairstiona Mhurchaidh Òig*, 16 Vatisker). Neil was only 14 when his mother passed away. His brother Murdo and latterly their nephew Neil Angus Macleod resided in the old family home.

Neil and his wife Marie lived in Detroit where he was employed at Briggs Manufacturing, a producer of automobile bodies for Ford and Chrysler.



#### ◀ Angus Macrae, 46 Vatisker

*Aonghas Dhòmhmaill 'an Mhurchaidh*, popularly known as *Scotch* is actually listed as residing at Goathill Farm on the *Metagama* passenger list. This is where he worked from the time he left school aged 14 in 1919.

He continued his employment as a farmworker in Canada until he crossed the border to Detroit, Michigan, where he worked at the Ford plant. In the US he met and married his wife Isabella Macarthur, 32 Upper Carloway, where they brought up their daughter Ishbel and sons Angie and Norman.

The family moved back home in 1947. A very interesting account of their life in Detroit, written by *Tormod Scotch*, was published in the *Loch a Tuath News* in April 2009. Angus

Macleod died on 10 May 1970 aged 65.

### Alex Murdo Morrison, 14 Back ▶

*Ailig Murdo Chalum Eil* settled in Calgary, Alberta, and was employed in various occupations during the ten years he spent in Canada. In the dark days of the Great Depression Alex became an eloquent advocate for his fellow workers' rights.

On his return to Lewis he was elected to Ross and Cromarty District Council where he continued to campaign tirelessly for the disadvantaged in society. Following his marriage to Isabella Morrison (*Iseabail Mhòr*) he moved to 1 Back where he passed away on 30 November 1963 aged 61.

His daughter Bella Mary Matheson today lives at 14 Back and his son Alex John is in Inverness. A comprehensive account of Alex Murdo's life appeared in *Loch a Tuath News* in November 2021.



### John Morrison, Well Cottage, Vatisker

Born at 2 Back, *Iain Thormoid Choinnich* was married to Flora Murray (*nighean Aonghais Duinn*), Well Cottage, who was a sister of Mary Mackenzie (*Bean Choinnich Thormoid*). Their two children, Robert John and Christina, were infants when John emigrated and they moved to the USA with their mother in 1926.

John was employed as a carpenter and the family settled in Chicago. They were close friends with *Aonghas Phico* (20 Coll) and his wife *Iseabail Aonghais a' Bheel* (35 Back), who lived close by.

John's brother Murdo (*Murchadh Dioc*) continued to live at 2 Back while his sisters included Mary Jane Stewart (*Bean Sheoidhein*), 17 Back, and Margaret Macleod (*Bean Dòo*), 2 New Street, Back. Their oldest brother Finlay was lost in *Bàthadh Mor a' Bhac* in 1894.

### Alexander Stewart, 26 Coll

*Ailig a' Charagain* was one of two brothers who emigrated to Canada; Neil John followed him a year later on the *Marloch*.

Alex, who served with the RNR in WW1, eventually settled in Santa Barbara, California, where he lived next door to his first cousin Peggy Carroll (nee Stewart, *Peigi Dhòmhmaill Ruaidh*) of 10 Back, who emigrated to the USA in 1921. He was married to Ann Cruickshanks of Aberdeen and he passed away on 14 February 1954 aged 55.

His brother Neil John returned home during the Depression and lived at 16 Gress. Other family members included Murdo (34 Upper Coll) and Donald (29 Coll).

# Òran a' Mhetagama

Tha sinne seo gu cianail  
 's gu dè 'n t-ioghnadh ged a tha  
 A' smaoinichadh na ceudan  
 A rinn triall uain air an t-sàl  
 Is ged is mòr a bheannachd e  
 Gun d' dhealaich iad nan slàint'  
 Gur goirt a' nochd na faireachdainn,  
 Th'aig am pàrantan 's aig càch

*We are all melancholy here,  
 and little wonder that we are,  
 thinking of the hundreds  
 who have departed from us by sea;  
 and although it is a blessing  
 that they parted in good health,  
 painful, tonight, are the feelings,  
 of their families and others.*

Cha nàr leam ged a dh'aidichinn  
 Nuair sheall mi mach am Bràigh  
 's a chunnaic mi Metagama  
 's i ri seòladh sìos air fàir'  
 Gun d' mhothaich mi de chianalas  
 na shil mi sìos gu làr  
 's mi smaoinichadh nach coinnichinn  
 ri cuid aca gu bràth.

*I am not ashamed to admit,  
 when I looked out towards the Braigh,  
 and saw the Metagama,  
 as she sailed out of sight,  
 that I felt such sorrow  
 my tears fell to the ground,  
 with thoughts that we would not meet  
 some of them ever again.*

Chan e mhàin an t-àite seo  
 Tha 'n dràsda fo mhòr ghruaim  
 Bha buidheann às gach cearnaidh innt'  
 Bhon àirde deas is tuath -  
 's ged nach biodh dàimh no càirdean innt'  
 Tha cràidh ann a tha cruaidh  
 An tìr a bhi ga fàsachadh  
 den bh'innt' de bhàrr an t-sluaigh.

*It is not merely this place  
 which is currently in gloom -  
 There were groups from all areas,  
 from the north and the south -  
 and though there is no closeness or affinity,  
 there is pain that's hard to endure -  
 the country being emptied of  
 the flower of its population*

Co-dhiù tha sinn fo chianalas  
 Bho thriall iad as an àit'  
 Bha buidheann de na balaich innt'  
 Bhiodh maile rinn an gnàth  
 Bha Dòmhnall Beag mhic Dhoilidh innt'  
 'S Aonghas Aonghais a' Bhàrd  
 'S 'An Geamhradh' 's e bhiodh dùrachdach  
 Gar còmhnadh anns gach tràth.

*We are weighed down with sadness  
 Since they departed from this place  
 There was a group of the lads on board  
 Who were always with us  
 Dòmhnall Beag mhic Dhoilidh was aboard  
 and Aonghas Aonghais a' Bhàrd  
 And 'An Geamhradh', who so diligently  
 Assisted us at all times.*

'S ged bha 'n Geamhradh ort mar ainm  
 'S ann chaidh do bhaisteadh cearr  
 Oir cha robh neach bha aithneil ort  
 Nach mothaicheadh do bhlàths  
 'Sa riamh bho fhuair mi eòlas ort  
 'S tu còmhla rium ri d' cheàrd  
 Fhuair thu àit nam aignidhean  
 Nach caraich às gu bràth.

*Although they nicknamed you 'Winter'  
 You were wrongly named  
 As none who were acquainted with you  
 Could not but sense your warm disposition  
 And ever since I got to know you,  
 Alongside me in your profession,  
 You secured a place in my heart  
 That will never give way.*

Tha sinne uile dòchasach  
 Ma bhios sinn beò le chèil'  
 Nuair gheibh sibh cruinn de stòras  
 Na ni dòigheil sibh gu làr  
 Gun tig sibh cuairt a shealltainn oirnn'  
 A-nall don tìr seo fhèin  
 's ma thig, bheir mis' car làimhe dhuibh  
 gum faigh sibh fàill' da rèir.

*We are hopeful,  
 if you all survive,  
 (and when you can save enough money,  
 to satisfy you all),  
 that you will make a trip to visit us  
 back to this country,  
 and if you do, I promise you  
 that you'll receive a fitting welcome.*

# Stories Behind the Stones

Often, when visitors are walking through Gress cemetery, they see a headstone on which the engraved names or address may be unfamiliar. In this section of our magazine we will look at five such memorials and answer the question that our enquiring minds ask ourselves - *Cò bha sin?* (Who was that?).

One of the long term aims of Comann Eachdraidh Sgìre a' Bhac is to digitise the engravings of every memorial in the cemetery while they remain legible and to provide biographical details of the deceased where this information is known. This is a project that has been inspired by the work originally undertaken by the late Norman Stewart (Sonny) and his son Alasdair in recording every headstone in Gress.

While it may currently appear to be an ambitious aim, readers may wish to refer to a website for Hallan Cemetery in Uist ([www.hallancemeterysouthuist.co.uk](http://www.hallancemeterysouthuist.co.uk)) to get an idea of what might one day be achieved for our own burial ground.

A stone that is situated west of the hollow in the cemetery, was erected by Norman Macleod, 39 Kenneth Street, Stornoway, in memory of his wife and her extended family. Remembered by many as *Tormod a' Bhiod*, Norman owned a confectioner's shop on Church Street. His wife Catherine was born at 49 Back - she was a first cousin of, among others, *Catriona Dhòmhnail Bilidh* (*Bean Nomannie*), *Ailean Phudair* and *an Gille*.

The details of Catherine's parents, Kenneth and Annie Macleod, are also engraved on the stone. Kenneth, known locally as *Coinneach Beag*, was born at 51 North Tolsta. He was a survivor of *Bàthadh Mòr a' Bhac*, the disaster that claimed the lives of 19 fishermen in 1894. At the height of the storm, another crew member shouted that they would be driven on to the rocks. "We will not", replied *Coinneach*. "My mother's prayers will not let me on the rocks tonight", and they didn't, for even after his other two crew members had given up rowing through exhaustion, *Coinneach* persevered valiantly, and the boat eventually beached at Melbost. However, he never recovered from his exertions that night and he died in 1897, when his daughter was an infant - hence the reason she was known locally as *Catriona Anna*.

Interestingly, Kenneth's mother *Anna Mhurchaidh Bhuidhe* later married Norman Campbell, 8 Vatisker. Their son Alexander was lost in the *Iolaire* disaster in 1919. Alexander was the father of *Tuxy*, *Bean Sheorais a' Chran* and *an Gander*.

*Tormod a' Bhiod* and Catherine had a family of four, the last of whom, Annette, is buried beside her parents in Gress. Their son Donnie B Macleod, who is remembered on Lewis as a Nicolson Institute teacher, later became known to millions of TV viewers in the 1970s as the popular host of the BBC lunchtime show, *Pebble Mill at One*. He died in Aberdeen in 1984 aged 52.

The next stone, which is surrounded by a wall, is situated at the north end of the cemetery. It was erected by Donald M Martin (*Dan*), of Fort William, Ontario, in memory of his parents Allan (*Ailean Thormoid Buachaille*) and Christina Martin, 59 Back. Following Allan's death in 1927, Christina moved to Canada to be with her son and she is interred there.



Gravestone of Catherine Macleod

On the headstone are engraved the details of three sons. Donald, who was a private in the Australian Army, was lost at the *Battle of the Somme* in July 1916. Malcolm, who also served in WW1, was one of the young men from Back who raided Gress Farm on his return from the war. *Comann Eachdraidh Sgìre a' Bhac* has only recently discovered that Malcolm was allocated no. 7 Gress in the subsequent ballot, but he died in September 1922 before he could take up the tenancy which then passed to his father. Norman, who moved to Fort William, Lochaber, was the third son in the family to die in their 20s.

Also mentioned on the stone is Alexander Martin, 17 Vatisker, who was lost at sea on Christmas Day, 1943, when his ship was mined off the west coast of Scotland. His father *Alasdair a' Chòbie* was a first cousin of Dan Martin.



Gravestone of Allan Martin

Dan, who emigrated in 1922, was a distinguished public servant in his home town in Canada. When he passed away in 1964, around 1200 mourners witnessed the City Fire and Police Departments provide a 50-strong guard of honour at his funeral. A comprehensive tribute to his life, written by Neil Murray (*Niall Sheumais*), appears in the *Loch a Tuath News* edition of November 2000.

The harsh providence experienced by many families over a hundred years ago is exemplified by the inscription on a stone which is situated in the centre of the cemetery. Donald Maclean (*Dòmhnall Choinnich*) died on 26 May 1907, his wife Ann died the following week, and their young son Alexander was drowned on 17 July of the same year, within sight of the family croft at 5 Vatisker.

Eight years later the family suffered the loss of another brother, Norman, who, following his experience at Gallipoli, was hospitalised in Egypt where he died aged 22. Norman was one of Rector William Gibson's former students from the Nicolson Institute who made the ultimate sacrifice in WW1. The story of these young men was depicted in the stage play *Sequamur* a few years ago.

The last descendant of *Dòmhnall Choinnich*, his granddaughter Margaret Macgregor, passed away in 2006. She is fondly remembered by a generation of schoolchildren



Gravestone of Donald Maclean

in North Tolsta, where she initially taught, and also in Back, from where she retired in 1977.

Jessie Kennedy was born at 13 Back in 1888, the daughter of Donald Kennedy, originally of Calbost, South Lochs, and Catherine (nee MacMillan, *Catriona Nèill Dhòmhnail Bhàird*), 26 Back. She died on 23 May 1911 aged 22 years. At the time of her death, she worked as a servant in the manse at Back. Such was the esteem in which her employer, Rev. Roderick Mackenzie, held Jessie that he paid for her headstone in Gress. It is situated east of the chapel and its inscription is still just about legible.

A few years after her passing, her sister Christina Stewart (*Bean a' Phlangaich*) gave birth to a daughter Jessie (*Bean Ruairidh Thuigs*), who was named after her aunt. Some older readers will remember other members of the Kennedy family: Alex Neil, Dina and Agnes, who continued to live at 13 Back until they passed away in the 1980s.



Gravestone of Jessie Kennedy

A simple plaque, situated close to the main road, marks the resting place of a little boy who died almost 60 years ago but whose short life was well-documented in the years that followed. John Alex Macleod was born in 1960, the only child of Murdo and Peggy Macleod, 8 Upper Coll.

His mother was very young when her household (*Teaghlach Sheonaidh Toss*) became one of the original inhabitants of Upper Coll, residing at no. 24. His father was the oldest in the family of *Ailig an t-Siaraich* who resided at no. 8. However Murdo was known by some in the district as *Murdigan Bullar* as, in accordance with a practice that occasionally happened back then, he was actually brought up at his grandparents' home, at 26a Back (*Taigh Bullar*).

Following war service in the RNR, Murdigan worked at Christmas Island in the Pacific where the British Government conducted tests on the atomic bomb. Shortly after he returned home his son was born with severe birth defects.

Many other children of the nuclear veterans from Christmas Island were born with congenital deformities and unidentified illnesses. Owing to the levels of radiation to which they were exposed, those servicemen and their families have, for many years, campaigned for compensation from the Government. It is a campaign that was adopted by a national newspaper in the 1980s which published a very poignant photograph of John Alex sitting on his father's knee, an image that resonated with many of the newspaper's readers.

John Alex passed away on 19 December 1963. His parents, Murdo and Peggy, passed away in 1985 and 1994 respectively.



Gravestone of John Alex Macleod

# Memories of Gress Lodge

*In 2003, David Jones of Southampton wrote a history of the Lewis sporting estates, of which Gress Lodge was a site of interest for his research. He initially made contact with John Macdonald (Swannie), 40 Gress, who passed on the query to his brother Murdo (Murchadh Phraois) who lived in Glasgow. As a young boy, Murdo worked for the Lodge's owner Gilbert Holmes and he was able to provide the author with some anecdotes about this prominent individual. Murdo had previously recorded his story of an underground house at the Lodge in an article entitled Candle in the Sand, which can be found in the Loch a Tuath News edition from January 1998. The following is an extract of the letter Murdo sent to Mr Jones.*

During the war, Gress Lodge was closed up and used as a big store, a medical supply depot to back up the war effort. After the war, when it was gutted out around 1945, Mr Holmes, his wife and family moved in from his estate in Glenluce, Wigtownshire, home of his old mother, Lady Barry of Balgreggan. I was with him until I was called up for National Service in late 1947.

Mr Holmes was a real aristocrat, a gentleman of noble birth, more so on his mother's side. He was educated at Harrow, as was his prodigy Winston Churchill. A Tory through and through, "nationalisation means our ruin" was his war cry at the 1945 election. He was also an accomplished piper and turned down a commission in the Seaforth Highlanders to serve as a private in the Regimental Pipe Band.

As to his estate, Gress that is, it extended from Upper Coll to Garry Glen in North Tolsta and inland as far as Muirneag, bordering on Barvas Estate on the opposite side of the island. Mr Holmes spent a major part of his first year of tenancy killing off old grouse cocks. His systematic grouse pruning resulted in such a rapid increase in grouse coveys, that on a good day with a setter, a pointer, and a lab/retriever, he could bag anything from nine to thirteen brace a day.

There was also a good snipe shoot by the river on the Coll salt flats (now overgrown with weeds), woodcock by Glen Tolsta, and on the common grazing a mixed bag of snipe, pigeon and green plover. Incidentally he fed his kennel dogs (two setters and a pointer) with over-boiled and mashed fresh herring, buckets of it.

As for the fishing, well, during the war years, the Gress river, which at one time was considered one of the best salmon rivers on the island, had been poached to death by local lads and all the grand pools, once constructed on the upper reaches, broke loose through lack of dam maintenance. So it was that in Mr Holmes's time the poaching went on, perhaps more so because many of those involved were just back from the war.

Then Mr Holmes put a notice up on the window of the village Post Office: "A Poacher's Ceilidh will be held at Gress Lodge on such and such..... all poachers warmly invited". It was thought to be a joke, but the poachers turned up and, over a 36 gallon barrel of FiveX beer, a pact was agreed upon. It was that, in order to protect the salmon river to some extent, netting at the estuary and sea precincts should stop. Also, the number of salmon taken from the river would be accounted for to him, and that furthermore he should be given a fair share of the amount of fish caught. The poachers kept their word. How many fish were unaccounted for I do not know. What I do know is that on many occasions early in the morning I did see two or three fish on his doorstep.

The many moor lochs on the other hand were teeming with trout, but they were no more than tiddlers, overstocked and hardly worth the walk. Except perhaps what is still my own favourite, Loch Sgeireach Mhòr, but there again you are talking about a good three and a quarter mile trek from the Lodge.

I have kept in touch with the Holmes family throughout the years following their departure from Gress in the late '50s to Kinlochewe then to Leswalt (by Stranraer) and later, following his own death, his wife and family moved back up north to Torridon. Mrs Holmes died there not many years ago, but her daughter Morag Macdonald is (still I think) post mistress of Torridon Post Office, Wester Ross. The two older sons Alistair and Ronald also live in the area.

*Murdo, known to many as Meedo, passed away in Glasgow in 2015. We are grateful to his brother John (Swannie) for passing on this very interesting correspondence.*



Murdo Macdonald



# Back in 1972

Fifty years ago the national news was dominated by reports of widespread industrial strife, the Troubles in Northern Ireland, and the UK's negotiations for entry to the European Common Market. Further afield, the Munich Olympics were shrouded in tragedy, the Vietnam War continued and man landed on the moon for the last time (to date). Perhaps the year's most enduring legacy was the introduction of the suffix 'gate' to describe any public scandal, following the break-in at the Watergate Building in Washington, D.C., an event that precipitated the downfall of President Nixon.

Locally, however, there was a dearth of published news as the Back district had no regular correspondent for the Stornoway Gazette and, consequently, detailed accounts of births, weddings, deaths, etc. were generally not recorded. 1972 was, nevertheless, a very significant year, as you may appreciate from the following articles which the editor compiled with the aid of several existing resources and also the diaries of his neighbour, the late Catherine Stewart.

## 1 January 1972

In the Queen's New Years Honours List, John Murdo Macmillan, Head Teacher at Back School, received an OBE. The award recognised his services to education but he was also closely associated with several local organisations which included the Crofters Union, the Health Board, the Labour Party, Lewis and Harris Football Association, and An Comunn Gàidhealach.

He received his honour from the Queen Mother in March '72 and is pictured outside Buckingham Palace with his wife Etta (*Oighrig Anna Ailig Ruairidh*) and their daughter Sandra.



## 19 January 1972

Several of the older generation who passed away this year were veterans of the First World War. With the passing of Norman MacGregor (*Tormod Eachainn*) on this date, a link with a previous conflict was severed as, not only did Norman serve with the RNR in WW1, he was also a veteran of the Boer War, which was fought in South Africa from 1899 - 1902. This was a protracted, hard-fought conflict between the British Empire and the two independent Boer republics of the Orange Free State and the South African Republic (Transvaal). Several thousand lives were lost on both sides as the conflict descended into guerilla warfare before the Empire forces eventually overcame their opponents.



Norman, who lived at 54 Back, was aged 91, and it is possible that he was our last veteran of the Boer War. It would be helpful for our historical records if a complete list of all the local servicemen of this conflict could be compiled and we would encourage members of the community to get in touch with the Comann Eachdraidh with any information that they may have. The accompanying photograph of *Tormod Eachainn* was taken in Stornoway in the early 1900s.

## 26 March 1972

During the Back Church Spring Communion weekend, the assisting ministers were Rev. Alistair Montgomery, Scalpay and Rev. Douglas Macmillan, Aberdeen. At the Sabbath morning service, 16 new members sat at the Lord's Table for the first time, continuing a period of spiritual awakening in the congregation that had begun in the winter of 1970/71. During that season, hardly a week went by without a new person appearing at the midweek prayer meeting in Gress, Tong or Back. On one evening, 28 January 1971, five people went for the first time to the meeting at Back.

In his book *Memories of my Father*, Donald John Macaulay writes of a dream that his father Rev. Murdo Macaulay had in February 1970. It is recorded as follows:

*I saw a lady having partaken of the Supper for the first time, in her home with her parents who I thought were not professing Christians, and her sister and a friend from the neighbourhood came in to congratulate her; her sister kissed her, and I was told 60 more would come.*

By the time Rev. Macaulay retired in 1975, 63 new individuals had become attenders at the weekly prayer meetings, three more than he had seen in his dream five years previously.



### 11 May 1972

One of the worst peacetime disasters to befall the British Merchant Navy occurred on this date and brought great sadness to the Back district. At 0540 local time the cargo ship *Royston Grange* collided with the Liberian-registered oil tanker *Tien Chee* in dense fog in the Rio de la Plata, South America. In the ensuing explosion, all 74 of the *Royston Grange's* crew and passengers were killed, together with eight of the tanker's crew.

Among those who were lost was 37 year old John Macritchie (*Iain Chodaidh*), 16 Vatisker. An obituary in the *Stornoway Gazette* described him as "everyone's friend, and a particular friend to young lads from his own village who left home with him for the first time to join the Merchant Navy."

Also lost in the disaster was Alex John Macdonald, Galson. The ship's owners, Houlder Line, arranged for relatives of the deceased to attend a mass funeral at the British Cemetery in Montevideo, Uruguay, on 20 May. In the years that followed, the Macritchie family erected their own memorial to their brother at Gress. It is a prominent monument, situated close to the main road, at the north end of the cemetery.

This photograph was taken prior to the relatives leaving Lewis for Uruguay. Donald Macdonald, father of Alex John, is on the left, while centre and right are Murdo and Alex Macritchie, brothers of John. They were joined in London by another brother, Donald Murdo. The fourth person in the picture is Port Missionary, Ralph Briggs.

### 17 May 1972

The early 1970s witnessed an uptake in the consumer goods that we all now take for granted, with televisions, fridges and telephones becoming more common in homes across the island. It was a gradual process however, with many neighbours in Back sharing whatever gadgets they could afford. While the occupants of one household could nip next door to take a phone call, the residents there would come over to watch *Grandstand* or *Dad's Army*.

Until the advent of freezers, people had to rely on salt to preserve their produce for another day, but a new business that opened in May '72 tapped into the greater choice that this appliance offered the island's shoppers.

The Grillburger, a frozen food depot on Point Street, was founded by Ian Mackinnon, of Croftfoot, Glasgow, who came to Lewis prior to his marriage to Mary Ann Macrae, 15 Broadbay View. The business was an instant success and Ian remained at its helm for a remarkable 47 years.

### 30 June 1972

*School's out for summer, school's out for ever.....* The chart-topping song by Alice Cooper provided an anthem for all teenagers looking forward to their summer break in 1972. These were also lyrics that could be sung with conviction by many of the Secondary 3 pupils in Back School as the minimum school leaving age at the time was just 15. It is interesting to note that in the early '70s only around one in four pupils in Scotland continued their education past this age, in marked contrast to the generations that followed. This was to be a watershed moment however, as a major change in education awaited the returning school pupils in August.

The traditional prize-giving took place on this last day of term. The dux of the school was Chrisanna Mackay (*nighean Ruairidh a' Chèic*), New Park, Vatisker and the Leadership Cups were awarded to William Macdonald (*mac Mhurdigan*), 7 Broadbay View, and Joan Mackay (*nighean Aonghais Caoidh*), 60 Coll.

### 21 July 1972

One of the leading spokesmen of the post-WW1 Land Raiders' dispute passed away on this date. Murdo Graham (*am Beag*) was born in Shader



Barvas in 1896 and spent his formative years at 8 Back. He served with the Gordon Highlanders in WW1 and was wounded at Kemmil Hill. When peace was restored, Murdo was one of the Back men who marked out lots for crops and livestock on Gress Farm, in defiance of Lord Leverhulme's industrial plans for the district. Almost three years of legal proceedings ensued before the laird admitted defeat and handed control of the farm to the Board of Agriculture.

Murdo lived at 38 Gress where he and his wife Mary Ann brought up their three sons and four daughters. He is pictured with the well-known broadcaster Magnus Magnusson who interviewed Murdo in 1970 for a dramatised documentary entitled *Lord of the Isles: Lord Leverhulme*.

## 22 August 1972

Murdo Maciver (*Murchadh Ailein*), 31 Coll, passed away on this date aged 84 years. In a comprehensive tribute, penned by Murdo Macdonald (*Moley*), he was described as being the best-known person in the Back community. This was through his years of employment as a postman before the advent of the post van, during which Murdo would walk for miles delivering the mail and parcels across the district. His friendly, obliging manner endeared him to all of his customers and his passing was keenly felt. The tribute can be seen in the *Loch a Tuath News* edition of December 2003.

Murdo's passing was also of note as his was one of the last households to continue living in a blackhouse. By the end of the decade almost all of the blackhouses across the Back district, many of which by then were ruins, were cleared by the council's Job Creation Scheme, thus depriving the village children of an ideal playground for hide-and-seek but, more significantly, bringing to an end a way of life that had endured for hundreds of years.



## 25 August 1972

A longer than usual summer holiday finally ended as the children went back to school for the first day of term. The delay in their return was due to the preparation required to deliver a revolution that was about to take place in schools: comprehensive education.

Until 1972, pupils in Primary 7 sat a series of exams known as 'the Qualifying' whose outcome decided which educational establishment they would continue to in their secondary education. In England it was called the '11 plus' and the policy was abolished by Harold Wilson's Labour government in the late '60s.

What comprehensive education meant for the pupils of Back was that they would remain in their village school for the first two years of secondary schooling

before then moving to either the Nicolson Institute or Lews Castle School. All pupils were given the opportunity to learn such subjects as Classical Studies, Gaelic, Latin and French with more time spent on the sciences. The national school leaving age was raised to 16 the following year.

The top chart act of 1972 was T Rex and in the autumn their song that filled the airwaves was called *Children of the Revolution*. The 12 year olds who came to Back Secondary that term didn't know it at the time but that's what they were.

### S1 Class of August '72 (pictured while in Primary 7)

**Back row:** Stewart Macleod, 62 Coll; Calum Macdonald, Bellshill Cottage; Ian Roxburgh, 42 Upper Coll; Donald Stewart, 19 Upper Coll; Iain Murray, 57 Coll; Angus Mackay, 60 Coll; Alastair M Graham, 27 Back; Angus Maciver, 7 Back.

**Middle row:** Donald Murray, 23 Coll; Janetta Beaton, 40 Vatisker; Margaret Mackay, 54 Coll; Ishbel Macleod, 17 Back; Mina Martin, 58 Back; Dolina Macarthur, 50 Back; Donald J McCarthy, 3 Vatisker Park.

**Front row:** Barbara Macdonald, 41 Upper Coll; Angela Murray, Janitor's House; Marina Macdonald, 76 Coll; Joan Macleod, 5 Broadbay View.

### 13 September 1972

A memorable season for Back FC came to its conclusion with a 2-1 victory over their old rivals Point in the Eilean an Fhraoich Cup final. Their goal scorers at Goathill that evening were two young lads who came home from Glasgow for the latter stages of the football season: Allan Kerr (*mac Allina Ailein Phudair*, 7 Vatisker) and Andy Gray (*mac Màiread Sheumais a' Ghobha*, 52 Vatisker).



A fortnight earlier, a league decider between Back and Rovers produced possibly the most thrilling tie ever seen at Upper Coll. The away team needed to win while a draw would secure the first title for Back since 1947. In an incredible first half, Rovers raced into a 4-0 lead. The tide however started to turn with a goal from Allan Kerr in the 56th minute and then another one six minutes later. Andy Gray made it 4-3 after 81 minutes before 15 year old Willie Macdonald (*Uilleam Mhurdivan*) scored an equaliser in the dying seconds, resulting in emotional crowd scenes that are vividly remembered to this day.

An esteemed pundit once famously said "You can't win anything with kids." He obviously wasn't at Upper Coll in 1972.....

#### Eilean an Fhraoich Cup Winning Team - 13 September 1972

**Back row:** Kenny Macdonald (*Sgitheanach*), Allan Kerr, Kenny Macleod (*mac Kenny Luke*), Andy Gray, Iain Macdonald (*Iain Beag Iain a' Lally*), Donald A. Stewart (*Cab*)

**Front row:** Calum Macleod (*Gobs*), Iain M Campbell (*Iain Murdo a' Chuilidhein*), Murdo Macleod (*Flash*), Murdo Murray (*Bloxy*), Angus Stewart (*Aonghas Upsan*), Willie Macdonald

### 23 October 1972

Donald Campbell (*Dòmhnall Chuimhnidh*), 2 Upper Coll, left school, aged 15, in 1965 and immediately started work as an apprentice mechanic. He was employed by various companies for a while before founding the business, Donald Campbell Motors, on this date, aided by a budget of just £250. Initially he worked in a tiny workshop beside the family home before progressing from repair and maintenance to car dealerships with Peugeot and Renault. The humble beginnings for his company are a far cry from the busy garage and showroom that we all now associate with this successful enterprise in Gearraidh Ghuirm.

Sadly, Donald passed away prematurely in 2008, but the standards he set for quality and customer service were passed to his son and daughters who run the family business today.

### 25 October 1972

Donald Maciver (*Dòmhnall 'an Bhàin*), who was born at 7 Coll, was one of the first settlers in Upper Coll. His croft at no.



36 was originally allocated to James Macleod, 33 Aird Tong, who didn't take up the tenancy. Donald was one of several local men who were prisoners of war in Germany for almost all of WW1, having been captured at Antwerp in 1914. He is pictured third from the left in this picture along with Murdo Maciver (*Geadaidh*), John Campbell (*Iain Beag Mhic Mhurchaidh*) and George Macaskill (*Seòras a' Bhideanaich*).

On his return from the war he worked as a fisherman. He and John Graham (*Bruce*), 22 Coll, were ordinarily crew members with William Macleod (*Uilleam Alaidh*). As fate would ordain, the two men did not go to sea on the morning of March 20, 1922, when William's boat foundered in Broad Bay with the loss of all of its crew. Donald passed away 50 years later, on 25 October, aged 83.

## 15 December 1972

The traditional Christmas concert at Back School was a memorable affair with top billing going to Primary 6/7 for their tribute to the popular TV programme *The Good Old Days*. Under the guidance of their teacher Miss Stewart (*Catriona a' Chuibhleir*) the class performed a number of well received songs including *Roamin' in the Gloamin'*, *All the Nice Girls Love a Sailor* and *Daisy, Daisy*. A fuller account of the night's events can be found in the *Loch a Tuath News* edition from March 2020.



The colourful glamour of *The Good Old Days* could only be fully appreciated by the Back residents at their village school show, as BBC1, the sole channel an island TV set could receive, was transmitted in black and white. It would be another four years before BBC2 and Grampian TV joined BBC1 in colour on our screens, a social transition that was recorded for posterity in the folk group Flair's famous composition *Mast an Achaidh Mhòir!*

### The Good Old Days - 15 December 1972

**Back Row** - Don Neil Morrison, 58 Vatisker; Jamie Macdonald, 9 Gress; Robert Kennedy, Poileagan, Back; James *Bomie* Macarthur, 50 Back; Donnie MacIennan, 11 Vatisker Park

**Centre Row** - Isma Macleod, 43 Coll; Anne Mackay, 4 Vatisker; Norman Stewart, 18 Vatisker; Donald *Dano* Macdonald, 3 Lighthill; Alasdair *Red* Mackenzie, 3 Broadbay View; Alex Neil Stewart, 38 Vatisker; Jonathan Joy, Coll; Christina Macdonald, 20 Upper Coll; Kareen Macleod, 10 New Street, Back

**Front Row** - Iain *Buckie* Murray, 23 Coll; Cameron Duncan, 27 Upper Coll; Alasdair Murray, 9 Back; Donald Thomson, 24 Coll; Christine Macdonald, 3 Upper Coll; Mairi Macdonald, 81 Coll; Margaret Joan Macdonald, 7 Broadbay View



## 24 December 1972

It was often said of Rev. Macaulay that he never took a holiday. While that wasn't quite true, a glance at his preaching engagements over the festive period of 1972/73 testifies to the work ethic of this remarkable man.

During the Twelve Days of Christmas, 24 December through to 4 January, he prepared and delivered 12 sermons in his parish. There were the morning and evening services on the two Sundays, midweek prayer meetings at Gress, Tong and Back, the midday service on New Year's Day, and, with January 1 being a Monday, there was the monthly evening prayer meeting known as *a' choinneamh mhios*. The preparation required for his sermons would have been considerable - a typical Sunday service lasted 1 hour 50 minutes.

Additionally, he officiated at the wakes and funerals of two women from Back village; *Banntrach Thormoid Mhurchaidh Òig* was buried on Boxing Day and *Bean Dòo* on New Year's Day.

Finally, as far as the writer is aware, all of the aforementioned services were conducted in Gaelic.

And that's the way it was 50 years ago.....

# Farewell to Rev. Montgomery

*The following passage is an extract from a speech that was delivered in Back Church on the afternoon of Sunday, 27 November, 1994, by the Sabbath School Superintendent, Neil Murray (Niall Sheumais). The occasion marked the imminent retirement of Rev. Alistair Montgomery after 18 years of faithful service to the Back congregation. He and his wife Chrissie moved to Stornoway later that week.*

It is always a pleasure to have an occasion on which I have to praise someone I respect and admire. Although this afternoon by no means ends our esteem and affection for Mr Montgomery it is sad to think that from next Tuesday his presence among us will no longer be a present reality but a kindly and pleasant memory.

As you all know, Mr Montgomery is taking a well earned retirement from the responsibility of meeting the demands of the second largest congregation in the Free Church - officiating at weddings, funerals and wakes, visiting the sick at home and in hospital, and most importantly, preparing sermons.

But although we are losing our minister we are not losing a friend for I am sure there will be occasions when we shall be able to welcome him back among us. He will find that whenever that happens he has not been forgotten.

At the end of his permanent stay with us we should be thankful to God - for it is from Him every good gift comes - for Mr Montgomery's connection with us. We have learned to value the kindness, sympathy, gentleness and wisdom that he was always so ready to place at the disposal of all members of the congregation.

Fortunately Mr and Mrs Montgomery are not going far away, to Stornoway, which is only seven miles in distance and ten minutes in time. Stornoway was his own home town and I am sure he will renew old friendships and make new ones who will appreciate them both as much as we have done. We know that they will follow with interest the welfare of everyone from Back Sabbath School as some go on to become nurses, doctors, teachers, joiners, mechanics and mothers and fathers.

A little bird tells me that Mr Montgomery plans in the future, if spared and well, to do a little fishing and that is not surprising. You will remember that when Jesus called some of his disciples he told them that he would make them fishers of men. Mr Montgomery was an engineer and then a policeman until God called him to be a fisherman of men, women and children. He has been that for almost 30 years and only the Great Day will reveal how many he has attracted into the Gospel Net. We wish him success at the lochs and moors in his leisure moments.

The tokens of our feelings towards Mr and Mrs Montgomery will, I am sure, remind them both in their much deserved retirement, that the children of Back Sunday School would always like to be remembered as his young flock. May God richly bless them both.



The following evening, Monday 28 November, a retirement service took place in the church, at which Rev. Montgomery's predecessor at Back, Rev. Murdo Macaulay (by then aged 87), preached his last sermon. The above photograph marked the occasion.

**L-R: Angus Macdonald (Tong), Ishbel Maciver (Back), Rev and Mrs Montgomery, Rev. Macaulay, Katie Ann Macleod (Vatisker), George Morrison (Back)**

# The Gate of the Year



As we enter the darkest period of 2022 we derive some cheer from realising that our district is often at its most picturesque in the winter months. The glorious shades of red of a December sunrise, with the Assynt mountains appearing to be in close proximity, is a breathtaking sight, as is the rising of a full moon over Loch a' Tuath on a January afternoon, with the Eye Peninsula silhouetted in the foreground.

The above photograph, taken by Margaret Stewart, perfectly captures the beauty of a Winter sunrise from Upper Coll.

December 21, the shortest day, was in times past known as *Oidhche nan Tri Suipearan* (The Night of the Three Suppers)- the date on which three meals were supposedly eaten during the hours of darkness. It is interesting to note that the afternoon light actually increases a few days before this date while the mornings continue to darken until well after Christmas.

The following poem is one that the editor would like to share with the readers as we approach The Gate of the Year. It was composed by Jon Miller, Lochbroom, to whom thanks are given for allowing its inclusion in our magazine.

## Solstice

The hill folds in its shadow,  
the byre its armour  
of frosted slates.

Hawthorn, willow, rowan  
motionless at the turn,  
a held breath

unloosed in the sudden strike  
of winter sun,  
a sounding bell of light  
promising safe harbour,  
new hope, new year.



## Seumas a' Ghobha

The following is an edited account of an incident that was first recorded in a newsletter compiled by the Carloway Historical Society.

James Murray (*Seumas a' Ghobha*), 52 Vatisker (pictured left), emigrated to Canada around 1912. He was sent there by his parents, Neil and Catherine Murray, in order to protect him from tuberculosis (TB), that most contagious of diseases which had infiltrated their household, leading to the deaths of several young family members.

James settled in Manitoba where he gained employment, but he later decided to return home. Before boarding a train to Montreal he withdrew all of his savings from a bank. During the long train journey he realised that a man he had seen earlier in the bank was sitting beside him. James fell asleep and, on awakening, he saw that there was no one else on the train but himself. When he delved into his pockets, a horrified James realised that there was no money there - the aforementioned passenger had robbed him of his entire savings.

He immediately sought out the ticket collector. As he explained his predicament to the collector, he thought the face looked familiar and had features that were reminiscent of his mother. "Are you Angus Macarthur?" asked a curious James. The equally intrigued collector replied that indeed he was - he was James' uncle, formerly of 32 Upper Carloway, who had emigrated to Canada in the late 1890s. He gave James sufficient money to take him back to Manitoba where his brother Duncan lived. There he remained for another three years until he had saved enough to take him back home to 52 Vatisker.

## Mrs Paul

Isabella Maciver was born at 36 Vatisker in 1862, one of six daughters and a son in the household of *Coinneach Aonghais*. She emigrated to Canada as a young woman and married a German Canadian, Alexander Paul. They had one son, George. After her husband died she returned to Lewis, where she lived at the site of the housing block that now bears her surname (*Ionad Phòil*, which is at the entrance to Vatisker Park).

Her latter years were spent in a neat two-bedroomed wooden home at 1 Vatisker, across the road from 1 Back (*Taigh Iseabail Mhòr*). When she was in her mid-eighties she applied for a passport so that she could visit her

invalid son in Canada but this, unfortunately, was refused - George served with the Canadian Army in WW2 and he is commemorated in our district's Roll of Honour.

Mrs Paul is kindly remembered by the school children of those days who would pop in to see her on their way home from school. They were intrigued by the bellows which hung by her fireplace, the velvet curtains and her rocking chair. They also appreciated the biscuits she would give them.

She was cared for in her last illness by her nephew Donald Ferguson (*Dolaidh 'an Sìne*) and his wife Joan.

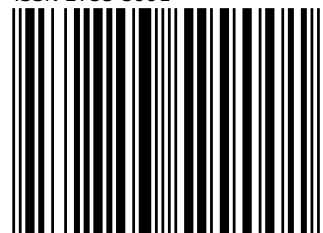


## Mòr is Anna

There is an otherworldly warmth and charm that emanates from this photograph which was taken on the steps of Back Church in August 1975. It is of Marion Murray (*Mòr Ruairidh*), 18 Back, and Annie Murray (*Anna John*), 52 Back, who were guests at the marriage of Sandra Macmillan and Colin Hutchison.

Mòr and Anna were first cousins of the bride's grandmother Catherine Murray (*Bean Ailig Ruairidh*, 9 Back). It is a connection that would be considered quite distant today, but one that serves as a reminder of the place that extended family members held in our lives back then.

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