



[How Alastair Macfarlane Found a Wife (1852)]

Translated verbatim from an original letter written by Murdo Macfarlane, 10 Marvig.

In the year 1852 two girls sat on the top of the cliffs known as Strathy Point. One, Betsy Macdonald who was fair-haired, had blue eyes and rounded head. She was well built and evidently of Nordic extraction. The other girl was Kate Mackay, a typical Sutherlandshire type, heavy built and dark brown hair and dark brown eyes.

Both of them were neighbours and were 17 years old. They had sat in the same spot the year before. It was the 12th of May. The days were clear, and gazing across the vastness of the North Minch in the distance, there was the faint outline of the beautiful Isle of Lewis. The wind was from the northeast, a brisk sailing breeze. Suddenly the fair girl stood up and excitedly pointed out to sea. 'Here they come,' she said, as the Isle fishing fleet came into view. The 'Marvig SY42', skippered by Alastair 'Thormoid' Macfarlane was on the port tack under a spread of canvas main and mizzen. Her starboard gunnel and deck were awash and heading for Whitehead. As she put about, the girls began to wave excitedly, and the skipper waved back.

Betsy said to Kate: 'Doesn't he and his crew look bold and brave. I'd like to go to the fishing at Wick where we might meet him.'

The whole fleet was now about on the starboard tack, and the 'SY42' had taken in a reef on the mainsail and was leading the fleet down The Minch, a white foam, as they headed into the blue. The next tack could take them near Pentland Firth and wait for the great current to turn with them and on to the east coast.

Back in Marvig, Lewis, the women were speculating about the new house that Alastair had built. Some wondered who the lucky girl could be when the fishing season finished. The house was about 200 feet long by 40 feet wide in three divisions, bedroom, storeroom, living room and byre (where the cows were kept) all under one roof of thatch. Round timbers taken from Gairloch Forest were made into peat fire box beds and bench seats.

Strath Bàn, in from Strathy Point is where Betsy Macdonald's home was on top of the hills overlooking the sea. Betsy lived with her father, four brothers and sister Maggie. Father and sons had gone in their boat with the others to the fishing at Wick on the east coast. Maggie and Kate Mackay were packing up their boxes to go to the fish curing in Wick. Betsy approached her mother and pleaded with her to let her go to the fishing in Wick with the other girls. Her mother thought she was too young, but finally allowed Kate and Maggie to go after their persuading.

They left, and a fortnight passed as they toiled at the fish barrels. The boats were coming in and they could see them as they entered into the breakwater through the old harbour. Suddenly Betsy shouted to Kate, 'There's SY42.' She had just made fast alongside their station. Soon their fish was sold, and was being carried in baskets to the girls' fishing box, and heading the team was Alastair Thormoid. He came straight to where Betsy was, poured his fish and bade the girls' good day. Betsy reminded him they were the same girls that had waved to them these past two years as they put about at Strathy Point. This was love at first sight and a romance unparalleled in Lewis folklore up to this time.

In 1901 I was keeping company with my grandmother. I was only a boy and she was in her nineties as she sat by the fireside and told me the story of her love, marriage and elopement from Wick in SY42, and my father's skipper of the 'Good Hope SY24' had just come home from the fishing on the east coast.

As my father shook hands with her and Alastair Thormoid, she whispered to my father, 'Alastair, did you see the ruins?' From the sea you could see what only the ruins of the old home were now. As I went to sea with my father in later years, he made a point of going to show me the ruins of where his mother came from. She related to me the story of her love affair as it developed that summer.

The girls that were with her kept the secret of her love affair from her father and brothers, and near the end of the season they decided to marry and she eloped with him in SY42. In the Church in the old town the banns were put up, but unknown to her folks. The girls kept the secret, and they were married on the Saturday, and sailed that night for Lewis. She was the first stranger to come to Lewis, married to a Lewis man, so the Lewis women received her with mixed feelings, but her cheery nature and personality appealed to them and great preparation was made to welcome her.

In the meantime, the news of her elopement had stirred the whole of Sutherland. Her father and brothers and neighbours made preparations to sail in their fishing boats to Lewis, as they were not going to take this lying down. Late in the afternoon a woman on top of Druimhanish overlooking The Minch gave out a cry and called that there was approaching a fleet of sailboats beating against a strong westerly wind.

A meeting of the elders of the three villages, Marvig, Calbost and Cromore got under sail and met the strangers at sea and hailed them. This began a diplomatic discussion such as had never been heard of since. By wise counsel the strangers were misled to follow them into Marvig Loch, and they anchored.

In the meantime there was a great slaughter of bullocks and fowl. Great peat fires were in service, and the whole district met these men who included her father, brothers and friends. When father met Betsy, she apologised and said she was sorry for keeping it a secret. Her new husband, wondering how the day would turn out, stood beside her.

A grey-haired old counsellor called for audience, and when all was silent he said, 'Men and brethren, this is a matter that must be put right between Betsy and her father.' He continued, 'If Betsy wants to go back with her father and brothers to her home, Alastair her husband is ready to let her choose.' So with a hand in her husband's hand, and the other in her father's, the big question was asked.

She answered, 'I want to be with my husband till life's end.' Her father kissed her on her wet cheek. Her brothers came forward with the others, and when they saw the new home, they said that they were content. They realised that their sister and daughter would be well looked after.

The celebration that took place in Marvig lasted a whole week and all had a great time. The year was 1855.

Written by Iain Macfarlane, nephew of Murdo Macfarlane in Australia passed to Angus by Peter and Zena Macritchie, 4 Moor Cottages, Marybank, Stornoway.

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