Reminiscences by Donald Macphail of Gravir (b. 1896)

Donald MacPhail 1896-1965, 'Domhnuill Mhurchaidh Dùnie' of 19 Outend Gravir was the grandfather of Donald M. Taylor who sent us a copy of the 'Reminiscences'. It was Domhnuill Mhurchaidh Dùnie who went to Port Sunlight just after the First World War, and worked as a clerk for Lever Bros. Eventually he settled in Babington in the Wirrel. David M. Taylor worked in America for a while and he is at present working in Brussels.

Life goes on and as time goes by we are apt to look back and feel that many things that were taken for granted and commonplace were in fact the most precious to one who is now isolated by convention and the need to earn a living. Early years spent in faraway places and memories of dear old stalwarts crawl to mind. How innocent we are and our childhood days and what a pity the innocence and straightforwardness of the child does not follow us through life. Truly innocence has its compensation.

I was born in 1896 in a village called Gravir, on the shores of Loch Odhairn. The houses were, and still are, built on the rocky slopes of this loch. Still in places that if you dropped any round article outside of the houses it would probably roll right down into the sea. My father was a fisherman who worked very hard to earn a meagre living and my earliest recollections are of a little thatched two gabled house exactly 10 yards above high water mark. My father was stern but kind, my mother was tall and strong, but how gentle when bandaging sore feet cut by the rocks. And her low crooning blending with the sound of the waters on the shore as she put me to bed and handed me over to Gods care for the night. Honest upright men and women to whom right was very discernable from wrong. My father was not tall but erect as a poker; grey twinkling eyes and a great sense of humour, which later, in Lewis at that time was an asset and no mean one at that? He was a fisherman, and believe me, if there is one man dependent on God's providence than a fisherman; I have yet to come across him.

Very early on in life I was introduced to the fishing paraphernalia, boats, nets, lines. When I started school, which by the way I disliked, I used to long for four o'clock, so that I could go fishing or sail by boat along the shore. There were no toys, as we know them now. Rough pieces of wood were good enough for us - who had never known better. No Father Xmas for us, no Xmas stocking, and just hard reality. But believe me it does a boy no harm to rough it. I have found it the best teacher in the world. But what fun we small boys used to have sailing these boats, and what delight when a seagull landed on one and nearly capsized it. And sometimes of course one more venturesome than the rest would fall off a rock into the water. I did very often, but oh, I dared not go home in wet clothes. So they had to be dried on the rocks first, but all the boys were loyal, and father would never know. And what jolly times searching among the seaweed for lobsters, crabs, winkles and fish left high and dry by the tide. And did I not feel proud when one day I saw a conger in its lair, the excitement when I managed to hold him and the terror when he nearly pulled me into the sea, as he would have done, had not my father come to the rescue. Let him go - not on your life. Better a ducking than be vanquished by a mere fish.

Days spent among the heather searching for beehives, rolling down the slopes, or swimming in the fresh water lochs, which abound on the moors. Natures bathing costumes too, of course we knew none other. One boy always had to be on the lookout for the water horse, a kind of legendary Loch Ness monster, invented by our worried parents to keep us from swimming in the lochs. The monster by the way was very fond of small boys, and liked nothing better in the food line. We believed them, but that did not stop us. We liked the spice of adventure.

All this energy required a lot of food and believe me there never could be too much of that for a boy. However as our main diet consisted of fish of which there was always plenty we did not fare so badly. No cakes! They were unknown anyway. No loaves for daily consumption. Loaves were only to be had on Sundays as a treat; otherwise it was oatcakes or flour scones.

Your stomach may revolt at the prospect of eating a cod's head stuffed with a mixture of oatmeal and liver but we ate it and liked it. In fact my only regret is that I cannot get it now. It tastes something like haggis with a fishy flavour. Colds were unknown to us, and I expect this had something to do with our food, which had to be wrestled out of the sea, or from the patches

of land, which the fisherman-crofter cultivated. These were the days of sail, and the fish market was far away, and there were lots of things healthy men and boys required.

For us boys' boots in summer were taboo, and we had to go to school and knock around without them; but that did not matter much. The soles of our feet were like leather anyway and it was not until the first flakes of snow fell that our boots were re-soled, or if we were lucky we got new ones. How I used to envy the boys who turned up at school with new ones, and did I not swank when I did. Gloves were to us luxuries and any boys who wore them were considered, to use a modern term, sissies, and got his leg pulled. Very often fingers were well nigh frozen on arriving at school. Each boy had to carry his slate to and from school, and all homework was done on the slate. Books were, with the exception of those required for homework kept at the school. The education committee did not supply coal, and each boy and girl had, in winter, to carry two peats each to provide fuel for the schoolroom. The fact that it provided fuel for the Schoolmaster's house also, did not worry us overmuch. The thought of getting punished if we failed to bring the peats predominated in our little heads and what a school that was, cold, damp and comfortless, and no playground to speak of. Built on the south side of the village the end of the loch where the sun could not shine on it from September to April. It is a great pity that its designers and the Scottish Board of Education, who sanctioned the building of it there, were not condemned to penal servitude in it, or at least made to spend a month or two in it each winter. And the pity of it is that this building that should have been condemned at least forty years ago is still being used, because forsooth, this rich country of ours is too busy to think of a country village so far away. Too busy looking after foreigners, and too busy making money and passing it on to Germans, Turks or any other impoverished country they want to put on their feet, but spending a few hundred pounds to build a decent schoolroom in the far away Hebrides, not on your life.

Maybe this gloomy building had something to do with the fact that I ran away from school on the first day. The thought of being cooped up in that dismal place was too much for my tender years. My father of course had something to say about this. But he was a very patient man and when later on in the day the Schoolmaster came to look for me and tried to win me over by bribing me with a sixpence I wavered and promised to go back in the morning. I can still remember running to my mother with the sixpence. Sixpence was quite a lot of money. It would buy a lot of sweets too, but sweets were never bought on any day except on Saturday. Then we could suck them in Church on Sunday. I remember my mother telling me as she tucked me in bed that night in her soft tones how I must always be obedient and patient, truthful and kind, and to have feeling for others. Poor mother she learned in the school of life for she could neither read nor write her native language. But she knew all the things that mattered, more than hundreds of mothers I have come across since, which have had the benefit of centuries of education.

School days were happy days if we only knew it. In the eight years I spent at Gravir School I cannot remember one day on which I was not late, or had work to do before going. Anything or any excuse that could keep me away from school was good enough, and eight years of five days per week I found excuses to be either late or away altogether. It is marvelous what a boy can think of when it is necessary to make excuses, but I will say that once I got into school I applied myself diligently to what I had to do, although at times I found myself looking very longingly through the windows, where I could see three miles of bay, and small boats and big fishing vessels, gently rolling therein.

Nature study was my favourite subject because on that afternoon set aside for this subject, we were taken on the moors and we did our nature study there. We gathered all sorts of wild flowers, and our teacher did his best to explain everything. And so in our youthful days we ramble on through life without a care happy youth! Caring not what the morrow may bring forth, seeking that which brings joy and avoiding sorrow, wishing we were older so that we could be up and doing. To get out into a world which looks wonderful? But alas, how many of us are able to make the most of it? Very few it all depends on the accident of birth.

But I am digressing. Let me get back to that bay again. My home was built a few yards from the shore, so that at high tide, only a very narrow strip of land came between the front door and the sea. And when the storms blew in from the east the waves spent themselves as drift against the gable. Even in calm weather the murmur of the sea was in my ears wherever I sat in the house, and was for me a lullaby. I went to sleep with this lullaby in my ears and on awakening it was still there. The sea is never at rest in those high latitudes nor is it ever at rest anywhere. In winter the sun never shone on this old cottage. The hills behind prevented this. This never worried me, for when the winter came and the snow covered the ground, the lochs became frozen over, and then indeed did I feel that life was not so bad for a little boy.

Long planks were laboriously pulled to the top of the hills and used as sledges and down we would shoot with hilarious shouts and many spills into the glen below. And when we got tired of that, there were the fresh water lochs to slide over. The poor old water horse was frozen in and we were safe enough.

What appetites this gave us and how we smacked into our meals, mainly fish, salad and potatoes. Salt fish when fresh fish could not be had. Meat used to be a rare delicacy, and was not for us except as a treat on rare occasions when a cow or a sheep was killed and sold between a few fishermen. Meat was never roasted; there were no ovens to cook in. Always stewed, but even that way it tasted quite good to us.

I was very fond of my grandfather. He was very tall, and must have had, once upon a time, red hair. I have never seen anyone with eyebrows just like his, pure bristles and inches long. Alas I sometimes think I have inherited them, or should I be proud of them? He never wore a cap or a hat, but a fancy coloured red handkerchief. I think it was wound round his head, like a Turkish turban. Grand old man really and he was very fond of me. After school I used to sometimes sneak along to his house a mile or so away, and do little things for him. Run errands mainly. In return he used to tell me stories of the men of Lewis in days gone by, their struggle with the sea, and with the elements. And how God was in the storms and the wind I did not think so. But in the homes of Lewis people there is a place for God, a time for God too. The worship of God was a standard practice, and I well remember how every morning the big Bible was produced a psalm read, some verses sung, a chapter of the Bible read, a prayer said, and this was repeated before the family retired for the night. Family worship to this day it still goes on. Still I confess that as a boy I found it boring, and my mind was mainly on other things. In the busy commercial world in which I find myself now there is very little time for God.

My grandfather had one particular cow to which I took a particular fancy to, and nothing pleased me more than to take this cow to the grazing moors. As she was called she would follow me everywhere. She knew what was good for her, and my turnips were better than any others. I can still see her big liquid lazy eyes as she chewed them. Alas she died a premature death by stepping into a bog.

When I was about eight and event occurred which was destined to make things more interesting for me. One morning, and a lovely summer morning too, my father came in and woke me up, and asked me to come outside. I wondered what I had done this time, but I always obeyed my father. He never played any tricks on me, nor had he ever asked me to do anything unreasonable, so outside I went. The tide was in and there riding alongside the pier was a brand new boat about fourteen feet long, complete with mast and sail, and painted a deep green. What a beauty she looked to me. At last, a small boat of our own, what could I not do with her? Years of enjoyment loomed before me. I could go shooting cormorants, puffins and seals. 'What do you think of her?' Father said. 'She is lovely', I replied. 'Yes' he said, 'We shall have to look after her.' It was always we. I was always treated as a pal by my father, a relationship which persisted until his end, and what a pal.

The advent of this small boat meant a lot. It had earning capacity. When the main herring fishing ended, my father started lobster fishing in the late autumn. At this time of the year it is very cold, but young as I was I used to help father after school hours to mend and bait lobster pots, and row or sail out with him to drop the pots in likely places. The shore is very wild and rugged round Gravir and there was always ground swell to contend with and woe betides the unwary. I remember one time sliding over a submerged rock, which nearly finished the boat's career and mine and fathers too. But as always he knew what to do and very soon they were off that rock.

The pots were set in the evening, and in the cold light of dawn we used to row out and pick them up again, emptying the lobsters out, tie their big claws. They were afterwards transferred to huge anchored boxes, which formed a sort of communal home until they could be carried to the market at Stornoway. We fed them on fish and how they managed to eat with their big claws tied up I never bothered to find out, but eat they did.

On fine days small lines were baited with little squares of raw herring. The lines were approximately four hundred and forty yards, long, and from this line dangled smaller lines with hooks attached, one every yard or so. We used to get haddock, whiting, bream, in fact a miscellaneous collection of fish, occasionally cod and conger. These small lines were not meant for conger and what a mess they used to make of the line. And you had to watch your boots too, for if a conger got you by the toes, well it was too bad for your toes. But it was a real satisfaction to see fish flapping all round your feet. Real live fish, some of which you knew you would be eating in an hour or two.

I often wonder at the patience of a fisherman sitting on the banks of a puddle in Cheshire and jumping with joy if he catches something weighing a few ounces. I could never take to that sort of fishing. It is not exciting enough, nor do I see much sport in playing fish at any time. My idea of fishing is to hook him and pull him in (and chance loosing it), then putting an end to its misery.

How nice it was to get home, dispose of the catch to all and sundry without ever a thought of payment except that at some time in the future we would be paid back in the same way when we happened to have no fish. Yes in Bonnie Scotland they were like that until the march of civilisation brought with it greed and the desire for money.

And when the peat fire was roaring up the chimney and the fami1y was gathered round the fire, how happy we all were. Visitors used to come round and I used to listen wide eyed to the stories of deep-sea adventures related. For some of these visitors had not always been fishermen, and the stories were of voyages, round the Horn and foreign places, with queer sounding names. I wondered if when I grew up to be a man, whether I would be a sailor too, and visit some of the places. That was thinking too far ahead but the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts as the poet said. Spring in Lewis is a joyous time, a time of toil. Young men's fancies do not turn to thoughts of love as it apparently does in more exalted places. There is work to be done. The spring-cleaning of boats, big sea going fishing boats had to be scrapped and cleaned, then be painted. They were beached for this purpose and we small boys used to give a hand. We could get into the corners where bigger men could not work. All kinds of paints were used in the decoration of these craft, greens, and blues, black and white. How trim, clean and neat they looked afterwards when they rode at anchor, the fresh paint glistening in the rays of the sun.

Nets were overhauled, and dyed. Buoys were given a dose of special tar inside and a coat of paint outside. Ropes, sails, blocks and tackles and all the other fishing paraphernalia were examined for flaws. Woe betides the fisherman who neglects his gear. His very life depends upon the worthiness of it. This was impressed upon me as a child because there seemed to be no future for me except as a fisherman. That did not bother me much and life was very interesting. I did not realise then what a struggle it was for a fisherman to make ends meet, hut as I grew older and harder tasks were assigned to me, it began to dawn on me that life was not going to be a bed of roses. But I was not dismayed, and I am glad to say that being a fisherman's son has taught me never to be dismayed under any circumstances. It also taught me patience and tolerance. I am glad this is so, and I am proud to say that my father had oceans of both these qualities. What a difference it would make to humanity if we all practiced more tolerance, if only the biting, slanging gossip could be stilled forever?

Summer in Lewis! How I loved to get up early, when the morning was young, dawn in the sky and a promise of a rare spell of fine weather, a faint land breeze blowing out of the loch, gentle wavelets lapping, the seaweed making a song of their own. Here and there, small and big fishing boats rolling as they always do in the oily ground swell that is eternal even in calm in the North Atlantic. Further out a fisherman in his small boat rowing steadily to the net set the night before.

In the hillside the lambs plaintively call for their mothers, cows facing the morning sun and breeze, their large staring eyes taking in that which they could not comprehend, chewing away as if nothing else mattered. A blackbird sings and the notes reach across the bay a moorhen takes fright, rises out of the ground and splutters away. Dotted here and there are the thatched cottages, smoke rising lazily from their chimneys? Smoke that is always there, for the peat fire was never allowed to go out, always revived from the embers of the last one. The brown bird too, cheerfully sings his morning greeting to the sun. Nature is awake but lazy humanity sleeps on.

The morning sun. How many of the teeming millions, which inhabit this globe have ever seen sunrise. Ask your friend if he/she has. You will be surprised how many will answer in the negative. How many would get up for the sheer joy of seeing it. Not many, and yet in Lewis I have seen old men do it.

How often in later years and especially in the Great War, out there in the Mediterranean with its so-called blue seas, and its dirty stinking ports have I longed for a sight of the early morning sunshine, and for a smell of the fresh-pure air.

And what I used to like was to see the sun peep over the hill side far away on the north east side flooding one side of the bay in warm light while the other side was still in the shadows, mist rising over the valley or glen as we used to call it, the heather not yet in bloom, but the signs are there, harbinger of the glory which was to come later. Here and there a salmon leaps clean

out of the water for sheer joy, maybe to have a look round and splash back into its element. One felt that there at least near peace and silence, and the solace that only communion with nature can give. Do we not all at times long for this sort of peace, truly one is nearer, or at least feels nearer to God in surroundings such as these.

Generally speaking the Lewis man has very little to say, but is a profound thinker, and you need never be surprised if you come across four or five of them sitting on a beach or pier, and saying just nothing, but you start a debate and they will soon show you they do not just sit, they think too. In winter they visit on another, and get involved in politics, and religious discussions. Somehow religion is deeply ingrained in most Scottish fishermen and in Stornoway on a Sunday night the east coast fishermen used to hold evangelistic meetings in the square, and all the townspeople came to listen and enjoyed the singing of hymns. 'Will your anchor hold' was a special favourite.

Well, to get back to summer in Lewis. When I grew up a bit my father used to leave me the small boat when he left for the summer fishing, and it was my responsibility to look after it. This was no small job because the coast was a stormy one at times even in summer. I used the boat a lot for pleasure of course but also for fishing for small fry. Herring, plaice arid such fish as whiting and haddock, which could be caught in the bay. But I was never satisfied until one day with two other boys we ventured out into the Minch with what shore fishermen call small lines. These lines were approximately a quarter of a mile to half a mile long and, as I have already mentioned, from them dangled other lines about a foot long on which were fastened small hooks. The hooks were baited with small cubes of fish, mackerel or herring. We set out on a calm afternoon, and could not use the sail, which was unfortunate. So we had to row. Rowing is good exercise, as you know, but we were not in need of exercise. And very soon we covered the few miles, which brought us to the open sea, and a slight breeze from the south fanned our faces and rippled the sea; and up went the sail... To the south one could see the dark sombre shapes of the Shiant Isles and to the east the hills of Western Scotland. There is always a swell in the Minch and one of the boys began to feel queer, but having disposed his dinner in Davy Jones locker he felt quite happy again and ready for anything.

We set our lines, leaving a buoy at each end as markers and sailed on towards the shore to pass the two hours away, by which time we hoped there would be enough fish on the lines to satisfy even us.

If we anchored the boat off shore and scrambled up amongst the heather and had quite an exciting time looking for seagulls nests on the cliff face. When we got back we found the end of the boat's painter was under water and only by swimming could we get to it. How many times my father had warned me of just such a thing happening I cannot recount, but there it was about six feet out of our reach. Well it was my boat and I had to swim for it and presently we were pulling our lines in. By this time the sky had undergone a change, and the breeze had freshened, and I was getting a bit worried, but the lines were loaded with fish, and so we continued to haul them in, cod, ling, eels, haddock, plaice, bream, all sorts, and the boat began to look heavy astern.

At last we got the last yard in. By this time it was blowing strongly due south and luckily for us we had to sail with the wind. It was a perilous job getting that sail up, but we managed it, and with the wind behind us, we ate the miles up to Gravir. It was a narrow escape for the wind blew to gale force during the night. But we did not care. We ventured out for the first time. Having got into the comparative safety of the loch we managed to partly row and partly sail the rest of the way home. My mother was glad to see me and had an anxious two hours watch as she saw us beating up the loch. She had had anxious times before and since that episode.

I well remember another time when I was alone in the boat, sailing along past Ceann Mhor, when a sudden gust of wind struck the sail. The golden rule in a small boat is never to tie the sheet, but to take a turn round some fixture, say a seat or a cleat and hold the end so that if a sudden squall does strike the boat you can let the sheet go, and thus save the boat from capsizing. Unfortunately I was on a long tack and I had tied the sheet with the result that the boat capsized and threw me astern into the briny. It was summer but in these high latitudes the waster is always very cold. The first shock left me gasping, but I could swim like a fish and could easily have swum the quarter mile to either shore. I got worried about what father would have to say and I determined to try and right the boat. This was no easy job because I had first of all to detach the sail and mast. The boat did not turn completely over, the sail prevented that, and with the help of a penknife, which I had in my pocket, I managed first of all to clear the sail and the mast pulled out. By hauling myself on the upturned bottom, for she had turned completely over by now, I managed eventually to get her right side up and there only remained baling her out. The baler was always tied to the stern seat and having detached it I commenced baling her out still swimming alongside. Presently I was able to climb inside and soon hade her

completely baled out. The sail and mast loaded aboard and I was soon sailing around again trying to pick up spare oars, bottom boards and the rest of the gear. Happily no one had seen me or so I thought anyway. I dare not go home wet so I anchored the boat, took my clothes off and whilst they were drying in the sun and wind, I sunbathed in the heather, and hoped for the best. When eventually I did get home the old man wanted to know why I had been so long and, casting his eyes round the boat, he noticed there were two fishing lines missing and the fat was in the fire. I could never summon up enough courage to tell my father a deliberate lie. I knew it would hurt him if I did, and whenever I was in the wrong I was encouraged to own up and take the consequences. I just owned up, and although he curbed my boating activities for a while, that did not worry me unduly. By mistakes one gains experience and I gained my experience in a hard school. Much of this experience has never been of much use. My life has run into a different channel, but that will be referred to later.

Lewis people are in the main superstitious. Why this should be so it is hard to say. The loneliness, the long winter nights may have something to do with it. Ghosts were believed in and it was quite a common occurrence for people to say they had seen something, and certain places were more notorious as ghost haunts than others, and as boy I confess I could never pass these places without experiencing hair raising fear, although I never saw anything. People heard things too, and I remember one peculiar experience that made me think. One night when the harvest moon lit up the north-side of the village, my mother was sitting by the fireside, the door was open, and a strong wind was blowing into the loch, I was sitting by the door watching the waves breaking themselves on the pier in front of the house, when she suddenly said she could hear the tramping of feet and women crying. It could have been the surf, the cries of sea birds, anything at all, but I had heard nothing unusual. The incident was forgotten for a few nights, three nights to be precise, on the fourth night a fishing boat put into the bay and landed a drowned fisherman. As my mother and I watched in the brilliant moonshine, we heard the tramping of feet and the cries of the relatives as the body was carried away. I thought it strange at the time but soon relegated it to the back of my mind a lot of the sea folk were quite convinced there was something in this seeing and hearing business. But I am convinced it was all just bunk, and a product of the imagination or fear.

For the womenfolk as well as for men folk, spring was a busy time and innumerable jobs had to be done. Peat cutting was one of them, and I used to enjoy myself and make myself generally useful. Neighbours joined in and in turn they were helped with theirs. It took two days, sometimes longer, to cut sufficient peat to last until the following spring. It had to be cut, spread out around the peat bog to dry one side, turned to dry the other side, then lifted like sheaves of corn and afterward stacked and covered with turf. A long and laborious process arid if the weather was wet; well this process took a long time.

The womenfolk and the boys and girls mainly did this. To carry the peat hoe was the job of the women. No doubt you have seen pictures of these women, barefooted with filled up creels on their backs and knitting whilst carrying it. Some still do it, but now motor transport will take the peat to the fireplace. I used to like these excursions of peat cutting on the moors, and when the work was done I liked to linger on the little top where I could see practically the whole of the island. One of my favourite spots was Ceanninan from which on clear days I could see as far as Tiumpan Head, Stornoway, Loch Seaforth, and within a few miles the dark heather covered hills of Harris. Away to the east the mountains of Western Scotland fifty miles away and to the southeast the sombre outlines of the Coolins, Isle of Skye, 70 miles away. Would I ever leave this island of mist and go into the world beyond? Did I really want to? Others did and I might too. Would the people beyond the horizon be as kind hearted and warm and sincere? But such thoughts were usually dispelled by the sudden appearance of another boy, and off we would go like wills o' the wisps to paddle in the mountain streams, or after trout in the shallows of the fresh water lochs, finally, arriving home tired and weary, but well satisfied with the day's events.

And so when I was about eleven I took every opportunity to get to sea with father on Friday nights especially as there was no school on Saturdays. Seasickness held no terrors for me. I got over that earlier on in life, and anyone who wants to be seasick has only to go to sea in a smelly fishing boat once or twice and I guarantee that will cure him pretty well forever.

SY1054 - Christened 'Force Castle' was a stout built square looking fishing boat and my father part owned it with my uncle Angus and John Matheson, or Ian Bàn (Fair John) as we used to call him. Ian Bàn was one of the nicest men I have ever come in contact with. As far as boys were concerned he had an understanding heart, and boys were his hobby so to speak. He had four of his own, but he was very fond of me too, and many a biscuit have I had off him. Biscuits, especially sweet ones, were luxuries to me. Ian Bàn was [???] with a rare smile, and spoke in a very soft voice and his wife was really the opposite. She was my auntie Annie and she had a very powerful voice. If auntie Annie was anywhere within a distance of a mile I knew I could hear her, but for all that her heart was in the right place.

What a delight it was for me to be allowed to go out with these men and do all the jobs a cabin boy could do on a fishing boat like the 'Force Castle'. Cooking was very crude of course, but any boy could fry herrings or boil potatoes. It was on the 'Force Castle' I had my first and last taste of seasickness and no wonder. That boat could do almost any type of roll except roll over. Ian Bàn watched me for a bit and then he said to father what Harry Lauder has said since, 'If the lad has anything in him, this sea will bring it up.' And sure enough it did, and when it was empty I just slipped below and ate more. As uncle Angus said, 'You can't work on an empty stomach'.

This particular evening we were sheltering from a wind blowing gale force, but later on the wind steadied and gradually blew itself out. So, up came the anchor, and we shot our nets off Loch Erisort and bedded down until dawn. How one can sleep at sea. But before going to sleep there was always a discussion, stories and song. I used to take a great delight in sitting astride the lowered mast and watch the sun disappearing way out west over Bernera hills making them look dark and foreboding. Away to the northeast Tiumpan Head looked like a snake's head stretching into the Minch. Surf breaking into spume as it struck the point. To the south Milead Lighthouse with its twinkling light that never goes out day or night. Keep clear; keep clear it seemed to say. Away towards Skye were the Shiant Isles, playground of the puffin, cormorant and gull, and the gannet too. The land was visible all around but the deep Atlantic swell was there too to remind us of the boundless ocean outside our ken. How I loved to see the old 'Sheila' painfully steaming along from Kyle to Stornoway. Pushing half the Minch before her bow and bringing the other half up behind and carrying His Majesty's mail, sheep, cattle and miscellaneous cargo, beside her human cargo, travelers from abroad home for a holiday, tourists, salesmen who would sell you anything from a needle to an anchor. Maybe the Territorial's were aboard for in passing we could hear the skirl of the pipes. The rails were crowded to have a glimpse of a fishing boat, to them maybe a sight for sore eyes. Others perhaps were scanning the low lying coastline with glasses to get a glimpse of the first village or the smoke from a peat fire and looking forward to the 'Sheila' slipping alongside the wharf, where the whole town turns out to meet her, a pilgrimage which the townspeople love rain or shine.

I wondered what work these people had to do. What kind of a world was outside my little island? Would I one day take the plunge and leave the bonnie hills and heather of my Lochs and the beloved folk who lived there. Factors for which we never bargain often decide that kind of issue. So I thought and turned to sleep with the others. Dawn came, and the tide by now had carried us as far as Kebbock Head and there were herrings in the nets. What a morning that was, but everyone was happy except perhaps Ian Bàn who kept a wary eye on a school of young whales which came dangerously near, taking the herring which had fallen out of the net and spraying us with their jets. I got really vexed with the whales and porpoises, and tried to scare them away with sinkers and stones. You see it was my job to scoop up the big herrings that got out of the nets, and the more I scooped up the better for me because mine were tied with the others and that was my reward or pay, and, a very remunerative one at times.

The gulls were going frantic all over the boat and around it, screaming and flapping their wings. Cormorants were busy under the water, and. there were the dogfish too. In fact it was a race between us and the whales, gulls and other enemies, of the succulent herring and the old 'Force Castle' was loaded down to the last plank. I suppose we should have thanked God that the weather was good on that Saturday morning. I know my father did and Ian Bàn's face looked as serene and wise, as the face of one of the five hundred Genii in their temple at Canton.

As there was very little wind a friendly trawler gave us a tow and gradually we neared Stornoway, the Mecca of the fishing fraternity in Lewis. We passed the monument at Arnish where Prince Charles landed on his ill-fated visit to the island. Passed the lightship and beacon and eventually tied up alongside the wharf. This was my first visit to Stornoway, with which I was to become familiar later on. No need for me to describe this little town. It has a pretty setting, and I will refer to it later on. Having disposed of our catch, I had a little time to look round. To me who had only been used to country cottages the hotels and shops looked enormous. And where did all the people come from? And what did they all find to do? The noise and bustle of derricks made me feel timid, but as others did not seem to mind that I soon got used to it. I had money in my pocket and there were shops to buy things. I explored them all or nearly all, but apart from buying some fancy flies for trout fishing I, like a true Scot, stuck to my money. I had other use for that. The merchant princes of Stornoway were, and still are, well practised in the art of making fools and their money part. Too well I remember how they took the poor weaver's tweed, and exchanged it for tea, sugar and meal, and greasy looking margarine. If a man took fifty yards of tweed to a shop and got half a crown a yard for it he was extremely lucky, and it was only bought on condition that the money was spent in that shop.

Daylight robbery of course but the poor weavers had no alternative. However, this problem was not worrying me on this particular day.

There was one place I wanted to see in Stornoway, and that was the Nicolson Institute. I had heard about this school, and had been told that some day if I was clever enough I would be able to attend it.

I found it at the back of the town and was quite impressed by it, but did not like it. Looked like a prison to me. Would I have to leave my boats, my loch, my heather, and the lovely hills and village, walk up and down the dreary street which led to this gloomy place, and do so for years? No, a thousand times no. But I was wrong. I enjoyed every day I spent there later, just because my teachers were well chosen and understood their business. But more about this later.

I retraced my steps back to the 'Force Castle', and felt that Stornoway did not impress me. So much noise, everyone was too busy to notice anyone else. The smell of rotten fish and kippers was everywhere. Smoke from the furnaces, and the kippering houses were all over the town. No, if all big towns were like that, I would avoid them forever.

My father was standing on the deck when I got back. I could not have been looking very pleased with my experience, for all that he said was alright Donald, we shall be leaving here in an hour. I said amen to that.

Believe me that boat was well down in the water with merchandise by the time we were ready to set sail. In those days the only means of transport between Gravir and Stornoway was by boat, and nearly every fisherman was commissioned by his friends to do their bidding in Stornoway, and bring home by boat their particular orders. The fishermen did this and carried the stuff home without payment or expectation of payment. They were in Stornoway and found pleasure in doing it. It was a characteristic of the Lewis fisherman that he should always be willing to help others, and they are a generous race. Honest, truthful and fearless. One boat was tied up just opposite 'Force Castle', and I marvelled at its beauty, surrounded by trees, and casting reflection in the calm sea below. The old Castle is no more. No 1 Wharf and the fish market. The old order gives place to it now.

Being Saturday it was imperative we should leave Stornoway in time to get home early so that the cargo could be unloaded before night fall, and we therefore set sail at 4 pm. By now there was a stiff northwesterly breeze blowing, and this was it our favour. We could set a straight course for Kebbock Head, and once outside the harbour, I was allowed to do the steering whilst the men made themselves busy tying the nets up and doing other jobs. We bowled along at a steady six knots and were quite happy. I always feel happy when my hand is on the wheel or tiller of a sailing boat. Exhilaration the landlubber can never understand. The boat is a live thing and you are its master. It has whims and characteristics that must be understood and the man or boy who has the sea in his blood soon gets to know his boat. Nothing pleased me more than to wrestle pith the tiller, to feel that I was master. Often now do I feel the urge to get back to the sea and to my boats? It is a great sensation to feel the boat cutting through the water, listing over with the force of the wind in the sail, and splashing the salt spray in your face. Believe me when you have acquired the necessary skill you will always want to go sailing. There is an element of danger too, but this only makes it more appealing.

Kebbock Head is a promontory that can be seen in clear weather from Stornoway Lighthouse, and once having passed it all I had to do was to keep the bow pointed towards it. The old 'Force Castle' was a heavy type of a fishing vessel and had a tiller instead of a wheel. Consequently I had to sit to windward and hang onto it like grim death. But with the aid of a rope to windward I soon got the knack, and from then on it was plain sailing.

I spent many happy days on the 'Force Castle' and felt many a pang when she was discarded for a more modern craft later on. She was beached about 200 feet from our house, high and dry. But somehow the fact that I could still go on board with other boys and pretend we were sailing the Minch. In her seemed to soften the blow. Nearly all our spare time was spent on board, and my mother used to say that she knew at least where, and that to her was some consolation. But alas all good things come to an end. Even old boats are of use. Her timbers were still good and she was broken up. I felt very sorry and sad about it all. It was like loosing and old friend, a pal. Boats are like humans, you take them into your confidence and you either love them or dislike them, and if you love them you never want to lose them. Nostalgic maybe, but there it is, and one day, who knows, I may yet return to them.

And so on this pleasant Saturday night we tied up along side the stone pier at Gravir, where our families met us. Saturday night in these days meant a lot of work, for no work could be done on a Sunday. Water had to be brought from the wells and stored either in casks or buckets. All

meals were prepared and sometimes even cooked. Sunday was the Lord's Day and the second commandment was literally to remember the Sabbath day to keep it Holy, in it thou shalt not do any work. Work, bless you, one could not even whistle, and to be see in a sailboat was one of the deadly sins.

Yet, if I got up on Sunday, I was given porridge and milk for breakfast, and it had to be at nine o'clock. At eleven we had fried fish, bread and margarine or scones, or maybe fried eggs. At twenty to twelve, rain hail or shine, we were on our way to Church, and at twelve we were there. Once inside the glebe (the square round the church), one could not even smoke. However, the fishermen and their wives were sincere enough in their worship. They were there to acknowledge God and to thank him for having saved them from the perils of the deep. Worship began with the singing of a psalm precented. Then a prayer, and one that did not last for half an hour was not worth listening to, and half an hour was a minimum. It did not worry the Minister any if the whole congregation was asleep by the time it was over. He would wake them up later breathing fire and brimstone at them, and make them sit up for it. God was made out to be a tyrant, and hell fire became a living thing. It used to frighten me anyway. I could not understand why my mother said God was kind and not to he feared, and the Minister that he was to be feared. It was too much for my little head, and I gave it up. The service was of two hours inaction and everyone was glad when it was over.

A great number of the churchgoers used to make Sunday a day outing, and they gave each other invitations to dinner. My family always came home, and brought friends with them, and I did not like this much because it meant I had to wait for my dinner, as only so many could eat at a time. Just like most boys really. After dinner I was free until four when I had to go to Sunday school. It generally took me two hours to get back home after school because it was my custom to take a roundabout way over the moor, where I could whistle, sing or shout as much as I liked. I was not alone on these excursions and as even the deacon's sons joined me I felt I was in good company. Our parents' hair would have stood on end if they had seen us unearth fishing rods and try for trout or milk a cow when we felt we wanted nourishment. Chasing rabbits, catapulting stones at grouse and even whistling, so long as we could do this, Sunday was not so bad after all. I often arrived home with cut feet, but there was always a legitimate reason, and my father had been a boy himself. I always felt he knew, but wise man he never said much. He was of an understanding nature and very often when I quarreled with another boy he used to say never get in a temper my boy, and do try and get the other fellow's point of view. He always impressed me with his patience and when I reached years of discretion I found it was a precious asset and cultivated it.

And so my young days slipped by, and I was soon to be fourteen years of age. At school I was told it would be advisable for me to go in for a scholarship and my father was anxious that I should sit for the examination. This came as a great shock to me. My life up to now had been a preparatory school for fishing and all it involved, and I was an expert in all its arts. Had I to leave my beloved boats, rods and fishing nets, my lochs, streams, my heather covered glens and hills, and sit all day in a stuffy school, just to absorb knowledge so that I could land myself what my father called a gentlemen's job, chained to a desk, a school room, or a doctor's surgery? No, never, it did not appeal to me. I disliked school now more than ever; I would make a hash of that examination and cheat them all. But fate was against me, my average marks for the year were considered the best in the class, or so my teacher said, and I was recommended for transference to the Secondary School (Gaelic) at Stornoway. I still think I must have been what is now termed a 'blue eye', because there was another boy, one Norman Matheson, son of Red Donald whom I always thought was a better scholar than I. I do not suppose he will ever read this, but you were a grand boy Norman, and I envy you even now, and it was great of you to congratulate me in view of the great disappointment you had. And you wanted to go too, and I did not.

I felt miserable all summer, and the sparkle of my earliest years left me. But it was no use. My father had made his mind up, and when I realised that nothing would alter his decision, I made my mind up to try and please him. After all he was very good to me, and the least I could do was to show appreciation, and for the rest of that Summer I did all the things I knew I would not be able to do for a long time, except maybe during holidays. The thought of leaving home, my mother, sisters, and brothers, made me appreciate them all the more. Home Sweet home, be it ever so humble, there's no place like home. Mine was humble all right, but it was still home. Now that I have seen quite a lot of the world I appreciate it more, much more. There was a peace around it I could feel, a friendliness that was given to it by the wild things of life, by mountain stream and sea. I cannot get that feeling here now, in the midst of rural Cheshire. The people were friendly when you met them and kindly when you visited them. A fast dying race replaced by men and women whose outlook has been contaminated by commercialism. Alas that this should he so.

One fine day, three other boys and I, decided to make a farewell trip to the Shiant Isles. We had decided to get up early, and this we did. My father was away fishing, and my mother did not like the idea, but my heart was set on this trip, arid after packing some food and drink in a small cask, we set sail. I can still see that bay swathed in the early morning sunshine. A familiar scene to me, and one of which I never tired. There was no wind, and the sail was useless, so we had to resort to rowing which is a tiresome business to say the best of it. We rowed two and a half miles, which brought us to Heirs Point to give it its English translation. Here there was a slight breeze from the shore and this, together with the tide, which flows fairly fast at this point, carried the boat on at a comfortable rate.

We had provided ourselves with shotguns and ammunition, and every now and again when a puffin popped his red beak and subsequently his black and white body above the surface one of us took aim and there was one puffin less. These birds are very pretty and their red beaks give them a kind of nosey-parker quizziness, which is most comical. The red in the beak of course predominates, but it is tinged with orange and a bluish grey, with horny sheath like plates, which moult after the breeding season. It is a common bird in the Minch, and yet I believe it winters in the Mediterranean regions. It lays a mottled whitish egg, which tastes very fishy. It is a diver and can stay for a long time under water. I have tasted its flesh too, and it is tough but palatable.

Presently the land breeze died down and it became flat calm. This was disastrous because oars were not of much use in the tide stream, but at about half an hour a sea breeze sprang up and we were happy once more, although it was against us. By sailing close to the wind, and beating, we eventually managed to reach the larger of the islands. I had never been before and I was not impressed except by the birds – gulls, puffins, cormorants, gannets in their thousands, but the view all around is marvelous. I could see as far south as Skye, and as far north as Tiumpan Head, Uist, and the mountains of Skye. Skye had a fascination for me and I wanted to go there, but it was too far away for a small boat and our navigation was rather limited in its scope, besides with a favourable wind it would take at least twelve hours. It was not to be thought of yet anyway. Alas I have never been to Skye, the nearest I have been to it is Kyle, the nearest railway station to Stornoway. We roamed around as boys do. Ate our food, and collected eggs galore. The Shiant Isles are very fascinating from a distance but not very romantic when you get to them. Why Compton Mackenzie ever bought them I do not know, except maybe that when he gets sick of his fellow creatures he finds sanctuary among the birds. The world and its troubles seem very far away. Indeed he is on a little world of his own when he goes there. I was disappointed and after a few hours there we sailed for home.

Now in these northern waters the weather cannot be depended on for long, and the morning may he bright and promising and the evening wild and stormy. Shortly after we left the Shiants behind, a sharp breeze from the North West sprang up, and it was with great difficulty that we managed to beat up against the wind. A choppy sea makes life in a small sailing boat very uncomfortable. Sail had to be shortened but the spray kept splashing over and the boys had to bale out in turn. To make matters worse we had very little ballast, and consequently the boat was harder to manipulate. Eventually we got in the lee of Kebbock head, and decided the wind was too strong to attempt sailing up the loch home. It was getting late, and I knew our mothers would be getting anxious. The only thing to do was to send one of the boys over the moors with a message that we were safe. That meant a walk of at least four miles, so we cast lots and my cousin was the unlucky one. Unfortunately for us he lost his bearings and arrived at a village called Lemreway some four miles in the opposite direction. By now it was getting dark and all the food and water was gone.

Eleven o'clock. So we decided to spread the sail over the fore part of the boat and get some sleep. We had not lain there long when we heard the thud of a propeller. Presently we could make out the shape of a trawler. She showed no navigation lights, and we decided she was one of many that had recently travelled within the three-mile limit. Trawling within the three-mile limit is illegal and the fine is £100 and confiscation of gear, but we could do nothing about it. We lit matches and burnt a tarry rag, and presently we saw her navigation lights coining on she steamed toward us. When she was near enough she hailed us, and they offered to tow us up the loch. I wondered if our frail craft would stand the strain but they steamed very slowly, and presently we were far enough up the loch to finish the trip by oar.

To make matters worse, the news that we were missing had by now reached every home and a party of men had left with food and drink. When they arrived at Kebbock Head and found we were missing they feared the worst. The consequences for me were very serious and I will not dwell on them. Sufficient t to say I had no more desire to visit the Shiant Isles. When I see them on my visits to the outer Isles from the deck of the mail boat they look as mysterious as ever, but I know there is no mystery about then, just a painful memory. My father saw to that.

You will have gathered by now that my hobby was sailing, and nothing gave me more pleasure than to set a sail, sit hit the stern and steer the boat out into the Minch against a north easterly breeze, arid the fresher the better. To feel the salt tang of the spray from the bow as it passed over the stern was food and wine to me. The land faded astern in a summer haze and one is conscious of a peace that passeth understanding. There are other riots on the ocean but they are far away. Often when three or four miles from the shore I used to drop the sail and laze in the stern sheets and even drop off to sleep. Once when I had done this an inquisitive trawler came alongside and nearly frightened the life out of me by blowing her steam whistle. They seemed quite relieved to find I was alive and gave me some fish. Another time I got mixed up in a school of whales, which gave me some anxious moments. One lash from the tail of even a small whale would be sufficient to finish off my frail craft. Whales have a playful habit of rubbing their backs against fishing vessels, but I managed to steer clear.

I could not of course indulge in this pleasure too often at this stage of my life. When once I left home for school I knew excursions of this kind could only be indulged in at holiday time and so I made the most of it. I was wrong, as you will read later on. Wherever I am and the sea is near you will find me tinkering about in boats, or fishing. I am a clerk but I think I could have been more of a success as a fisherman. And so, as the days passed by and the time drew near to leave home I got more depressed, and downhearted. I had work to do but my heart was not in it, and evening always found me wandering round some old haunt, and I found myself saying goodbye to favourite hills, dales and valleys, to caves and cairns, to lochs and streams, just as if they were old pals, which indeed they were.

People change, nature seldom does. If there is anything I love besides the sea, it is to stand on a hilltop and look round. It makes me conscious of my smallness my utter unimportance as compared with the mastermind who created the universe. And the sweep of a glen down to the sea! What compares with it? I am far away from them now but I can imagine every one of them, and the memory of them remains in my mind. Who was it said, ‘Memories are flowers’. Indeed they are, and just as sweet in winter’s showers as on a summer’s day.

The months flew by. Summer came to an end and the equinoxal gales blew themselves out and in the week that I was due to report. I was taken to the doctor with a cold on the chest. I was bad for a month, and it was in October 1910 that I was well enough to make the journey to Stornoway. Strange how the things that have mostly affected my life have happened in October, but more of that later. And so we say goodbye to these delightful Isles and gently steal away. I said goodbye to my mother and I can still see her standing in the door of that Hebridean cottage. There were tears in her eyes too, although I was not going so very far. But I was her favourite boy of three, and it was the first parting. Strange how we cling to our homes, and the memory of our childhood, and the freedom, and lightheartedness of our boyhood days. The average Lewis boy is taught to be kind to others, and wherever you may find them in later days, be it Africa, Australia or Canada, you will know them by their hospitality and consideration for others. They never forget their humble origin, or the old folks at home, and it is always an ambition when they have made good to return. Many of them never do, but they are in the minority.

And so I said goodbye to glen and the bay and the surrounding hills and watched them recede in the distance. Truly it was a very dejected who faced the future. No eagerness, no keenness. But boys do not fret for long and long before we got to Stornoway I was happy enough, and was quite looking forward to the new experience. This was not my first visit to Stornoway but I viewed it this time from a different angle. I had come to stay, and I disliked its streets, pavements and the everlasting din of carts, cars and lorries, but I thought of Broad Bay at the back of Stornoway, with its miles of clean salt washed sands and cockle shells that give it such a dazzling whiteness, and was comforted. I would make the best of what appeared to me to be a bad job. My father had faith in me and I would do my best to justify that faith.

The Scottish Board of Education gave me a free place in school, plus the magnificent sum of £15 per annum for four years. It just about paid for the books. My father had to find the rest of the money as far as they were concerned, but fortunately I was able to earn money on Saturdays and out of school hours, otherwise I am afraid I could not have continued at the Nicolson Institute.

That night I found myself in the company of four other boys lodged in an attic in Kenneth Street, where there were two double beds, a table and a couple of chairs, and very little space to turn round in. From the window I could see part of the harbour and ten miles away, in the dim distance, Kebbock Head jutting out into the Minch. Here in this little room we were expected to study and sleep.

When homework, and heaven knows there was always plenty of that, started in earnest, there was babble in the attic. One of us, Murdo Macleod (now Reverend), was studying Greek, and if ever I felt like consigning a boy to the nether regions it was Murdo, and I did on more than one occasion. Very unsporting of me considering his job in life was to be that of rescuing souls from the aforementioned regions. He took matters very seriously, was very earnest in his studies, and at times was affable and quite humorous. His brother Donald who was with us in the attic was quite different and hardly ever spoke unless to ask about something that he could not quite grasp.

I soon came to the conclusion that the best place in Stornoway to study and do my homework was the public library, and here I spent much of my time on winter nights. I confess I did not always study, there were very interesting magazines, books and maps in the library, and I kept on widening my knowledge by delving into these. That was the way the first winter, passed away. The other boys kept on telling me I would get nowhere if I did not stop in and study, but I kept on going to the library and found it easier to do my homework there; and just did not tell them.

On summer nights or evenings rather I took my books to the shores of Broad Bay. Here I felt more at home, and I could study with the sound of the sea in my ears. Here again I confess I did not always study. The sea was very enticing and I was a strong swimmer. There were kindred spirits round me who joined in the fun and when tired of swimming there was the football field on Goathill, and one could play hockey or even golf, until 10 pm. On arrival at my garret I generally found the other two Donald's and Murdo (now Rev) still absorbing knowledge in their own peculiar way. I found out also as time went on that my method of mixing lesson and play was the test. I was fresher in the mornings and I was able to apply myself to the days work at school with more zest. I kept my fresh colour to and looked the picture of health, whereas the two Macleods were white faced and unhealthy looking. Morrison was always ailing.

Up in the morning early was my motto. I loved to walk around the quays and wharves round about seven on summer mornings to watch the drifters and sailing boats come in with their catches of herring and white fish. Stornoway at this early hour is very much astir as it needs must be if the catch is a heavy one. The rattle of lorries, the screeching of blocks and tackle, as the baskets of herring are unloaded. Seagulls scream and fishermen shouting, fisher girls walking, talking and laughing. Fish salesmen in the market, selling and shouting, "going, going gone". It amazed me at first and I got used to it, but the novelty of walking round the harbour early in the morning never wore off, for I loved the panorama of masts and funnel, with the Lewis Castle, and the pine trees for a background. I was thinking of my stomach too, and very rarely did I go back to my lodgings without enough fish for us all. The Gravir fishermen saw to that and during my sojourn in Stornoway fish was my staple dish and my landlady knew how to cook and fry fish, and we boys knew how to eat it.

I had not been in Stornoway long before I made myself useful to an inshore fisherman who owned a small boat similar to my own at home. This meant that I was able to indulge in my favourite sport of fishing again, and I can assure you I made the most of it. I knew my mathematical teacher did not approve of it, but I ignored his admonitions. I had to have some pocket money, and this was one of my methods of earning it. In this little boat we, and by us I mean some dozen boys and girls, made trips to the lakes at Arnish where we often picnicked. At Arnish, overlooking the sea is a monument to commemorate the visit of Prince Charles to Lewis and here it was that he was supposed to have landed. Here one could wander in peaceful seclusion, sea bathe or sun bathe, or fish, off the rocks.

So far I have said little about the school itself. The Nicolson Institute at Stornoway was and still is one of the best-conducted secondary schools in the country. It has turned out, teachers, ministers, doctors, professors in thousands. At this time the Headmaster or Rector as we called him was Mr. W.J. Gibson, and if anyone deserves credit for splendid work, he does. He was the Nicolson Institute. His genius for organisation was unrivalled. Fair but firm we regarded him as fatherly and friendly. On admission each boy was interviewed separately and put at ease. If ever a man needed patience it was he, and he certainly exercised it. He knew each boy's family history and character. The erring boy was pulled back on to the straight course, and the backward boy encouraged and helped to understand. His kindness, his smile, his courage will live in my heart as long as I live, as I am sure it will live in the hearts of other Lewis boys who came under his guiding influence. We all loved him. He died in 1944, and messages of sympathy and condolence came from his boys from all over the world. I can say also that most of the teachers were well chosen too, and to suit Mr. Gibson, they had to be men and women of integrity. All specialists in their own line.

Colin Maciver, where are you now? Colin was my mathematical master, tall fresh and dark haired. He liked a joke too, so long as it was not on him. Math's was my favourite subject, and on this subject I was most inquisitive. He christened me 'Why', because I was always asking why? He floored me one day by saying, 'Your proclivity to talk is symptomatically becoming frivolous'. When I asked him if that was a new theorem he promptly said, 'Write out I am getting too cheeky' five hundred times, on top of homework too. Bu t I liked Colin all the same and no doubt deserved it. He often joined us in our fun and was very sociable. One could rely on him, and that is a great thing to say about anyone. Promises as far as Colin was concerned were pledges.

Our language teacher was John Macrae later to become Rector. He had a great sense of humour really but was very biting in sarcasm. He taught me Latin, or tried to. I was never any good at it, and my favourite 'modus operandi' (to use a Latin word) was to write the translation above the Latin text so that when I got up in class to translate I sounded good, too good for John, and I was soon found out. He knew all the tricks. He had patience though arid he needed to have, with a crowd of boys like us. Some were keen some indifferent and others who cared very little whether they learned anything or not. However, I did not do so badly myself. I kept in the first five in all subjects, Latin included, and how I managed it heaven only knows.

The Stornoway town boys took a thorough dislike to the 'Country Maws' they used to call us, and consequently we never moved about town as single units if we could help it, and woe betide the country boy who found himself confronted by a gang of town boys. My first experience alone was a rather unpleasant one. As I was walking along South Beach Street one night shortly after I came to Stornoway, whistling as if I had not a care in the world (which at that time I probably had not) I was surprised to receive free gratis and for nothing, a semi decayed mackerel which had been thrown at in, and which hit me full on the face. It made my face smart, and it made my prick smart too. There were five of them and the other four mackerel came after the first and landed on various parts of my anatomy. I spied the five boys and took them all on, but they were too much for me, although I gave a very good account of myself. My suit was spoilt and I had no other, so I had to stop away from school all next day while it was being washed and dried. Meeting the same boys some nights afterwards we pelted them with rotten eggs until they looked like omelettes. And so the merry days passed by, and the first holiday came round. My father came for me in a fishing boat called the 'Press On'. It was a stormy evening, and the wind was due south and dead against us. A trawler skipper promised us a tow if we could wait until dusk. So we waited. The trawler could tow us home in an hour or so, whereas if we sailed the boat it would, with a head wind, take about four. When the time came the towrope was fastened, but unfortunately my father did not know the rope had bees fastened to the stem. A towrope is generally fastened to the mast at deck level, and taken through a lead near the stem. Fastening it to the stem is risky because the constant pull is apt to pull the stem out

However, we started and I settled down in the little cabin forehead, and felt so much at home that I fell asleep. Presently I woke up end saw water pouring into the cabin, and I heard cracks that sounded like splintering wood. I guessed what had happened, gave out a mighty yell and jumped up the hatchway. 'We're sinking, we're sinking, and the stem's gone'. It had, four feet of it, but luckily it was all above water, and when we cut the rope and turned the boat round we found that she did not ship much water. So we set about six feet of sail, and altered course for Stornoway. The trawler on finding they were towing nothing had pulled the towrope in and found only the four feet of stem attached. They were greatly relieved to find us still afloat and escorted us back to Stornoway where we beached our boat, a very narrow escape. I had never seen my father in a temper before, but he was that night.

The next day, being a Sunday I decided I would walk the ten miles to the shores of Loch Erisort, get some kind love to ferry me across, and then walk the remaining six miles or so to Gravir. I set off on Sunday morning in very high spirits, and looking forward to eight weeks of doing what I liked. It was a grand feeling, and I felt like singing, and indeed I did. What nature thought of my effort cannot be guessed. The quality of my singing is indifferent and generally ends up in a kind of a croak now, and even then it was nothing to boast about. But I felt happy, and this generally leads people into doing the most ridiculous things.

I took a short cut through the Lewis Castle grounds arguing there would be few gamekeepers about and that they would have to be pretty good runners to catch me anyway, but I met no one. I stopped on the bridge over the River Creed to watch the salmon splashing in the pools. But I had no rod, and fishing here was taboo anyway. It was a grand morning, and the hills were purple and misty in the morning sunshine. There was no wind and the silence was overpowering after the din of Stornoway streets. Mist still covered the hollows for the sun was not yet strong enough to dispel it. It would he hot later on and I pushed on steadily, whistling now. You cannot walk very fast and sing at the same time, and whistling was next best. I had

by now walked five of the ten miles. Not too bad at all and I was congratulating myself when I felt a twinge in my heel. Good heavens I thought I must have a hole in my stocking, and sure enough there was.

Now a Lewis road at that time was not like any other road. I mean one could walk along a tarmac road fairly comfortably in bare feet, but you cannot do this on a Lewis road. It simply will not let you. There are loose stones, hit of peat, and cow manure all over it and by the time you have played football with these sorts of things for a few minutes you have had enough that is if you are courageous enough to try it. I had to take my boots off there was nothing else for it. The soles of my feet were hard enough heaven knows, 10 or 12 years of walking along the shore and on the moors had done that, but they were not hard enough for that road. So I took to the moor alongside it and plodded on. I agree this curbed my enthusiasm a great deal. God endowed me at an early age with plenty of patience, but I tell you that picking your way on a Lewis moor in bare feet calls for every ounce of it. When my feet got too hot I just stuck them into a peat bog. Believe me there is nothing else like a peat bog to cool ones aching feet.

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