



[The Elopement of Kirsty Macaskill and Alastair Louis (1856)]

There was usually a moral to the stories told in the village ceillidh house and romance had a prominent place on the agenda. In the mid-1850s parents took a keen interest in their daughters' choice of a prospective husband and if he did not meet with their approval they withheld their consent to marriage and nominated a candidate of their own choice, and the young ladies had no alternative but to suppress their amorous feelings and accept the choice of their more mature and wise parents. Divorce was unknown.

Obviously some of the young ladies had a mind of their own, and they were not always prepared to accept their parents' choice. One such young lady was 21-year-old Kirsty Macaskill, born in 1834 at 17 Gravir, 'Kirsty Dhomhnuill a Phiobair'. She was not prepared to substitute her own lover, Alastair Macleod, 9 Marvig, 'Alastair Louis', for her parents' choice of Norman Matheson, 'Cigar', from Gravir. Her parents, and particularly her mother, Anna Bard, who was a formidable lady from Gravir, a daughter of 'Iain Mhurchaidh Bhàrd', forbade Kirsty to associate with Alastair Louis from Marvig anymore.

Undaunted by the opposition of her large family of both parents and her six brothers (her other two sisters were on her side) she and Alastair Louis set about secretly planning to elope and be married at the nearest Church at Crossbost in 1856. As there were no roads in Lochs at that time they needed to arrange for a boat and crew to take them to Crossbost. Kirsty would also need to plan her escape from home without raising undue suspicion, and it was here that she needed the co-operation of her 24-year-old sister Mary who was unmarried and living at home. Her older sister Margaret, born in 1831, was already married to Alastair MacIennan, 'Alastair Dhonnachadh', 18 Marvig.

It was customary at that time for two young folk of the village to go to the peat banks on the moor daily, first thing in the morning to fetch home a creel of peats because there were no tractors or roads. Kirsty and Mary were in the habit of going to the moor for a creel of peats each morning, and before they left home one of the girls passed some of Kirsty's clothes out through the bedroom window 'uinneag na cùlaist' to the other who was waiting outside with her creel ready to hide the clothes and carry them away to hide them in the peat-stack on the moor, awaiting the day of elopement.

Eventually, all the arrangements were ready including a boat and a stalwart crew of young men from Marvig, ready and waiting at the departure point at 'Leac Dubh' within Marvig Bay, and all of Kirsty's clothes hidden on the moor in the peat-stack. That day the girls got up early in the morning in the usual way and went off with their creels to the moor for their daily quota of peats, only this time they knew they were going to race over the moor to Marvig where Alastair Louis and his team were waiting for them ready to whisk them off in a boat to Crossbost Church to be married by Rev. Robert Finlayson, Free Church Minister who served 99 per cent of the people of Lochs at that time.

Secrecy and the full co-operation of Kirsty's sister Mary were the essential features of the plan if they were to avoid raising suspicion at home. Apparently no one suspected that there was anything unusual going on in the 'Dhomhnuill a Phiobair' residence and the girls reached out to their peat-stack on the moor, and Kirsty dressed up in her Sunday best. Both girls then set off across the moor on the four-mile walk to Marvig at top speed.

Alastair the groom was already waiting for them with a boat and a crew of six oarsmen as well as a sail, and they sped off at once. Mary waved them off after wishing the young couple health, happiness, prosperity and a long life, and she hurried home to Gravir to break the news to her family. She filled her creel with peats as usual and as she was approaching her home in the afternoon, somewhat later than usual, she cried out excitedly as soon as she was within earshot that Kirsty had run off to Marvig in order to be married to Alastair Louis Macleod. She asserted that she did everything she could to persuade Kirsty not to go, but in vain, hence the reason she was so late reaching home.

Their mother, Anna Bard Macmillan, was dumbfounded and as soon as she recovered her composure she immediately gave instructions to her angry men folk, to hurry off at full speed to Marvig to stop their poor deluded sister from throwing her young life away in her folly. No time was lost by the MacAskill men folk. They hurried off to Marvig, but on reaching there they were told that the young couple were already on their way to Crossbost Church some time before. Their next move was to hurry along to their sister Margaret's home at 18 Marvig in order to borrow a boat and follow the misguided couple to see if they might be in time to save them from themselves. At the same time they strongly suspected their sister Margaret of complicity in this act of madness.

Before the MacAskill men reached Crossbost, the happy couple were already married, and on their way back home to Marvig, where they set up home and lived a long and happily married life, rearing a large family of three girls and three boys.

Years passed before Kirsty ventured to go anywhere near her family home at Gravir. However, one day she declared her intention to visit her family at Gravir. Alastair, her husband, warmly approved and offered to assist her with the young child by accompanying her across the moor, as far as the Gravir village boundary wall, 'Gàradh a Bhaile', which was as far as he would dare to go into that hostile territory.

On arriving at her parents' home unnoticed by anyone, she felt her courage failing her and she decided that prudence was the best form of diplomacy. She decided to send her young child in ahead of herself, and she would await developments at the back of the inner door, 'aig cùlaibh dorus an t-allain', to see how her peace offering might be received.

The MacAskill household were surprised to witness a bright young child marching up to the fire in the middle of the living room floor. The men folk were puzzled as to who this nice child was and after debating the identity of the child, they declared that she did not belong to the neighbourhood. Anna Bard, the mother, was however more discerning, and she called out in a loud voice, 'Claoidh mo chaoraich fhìn' (wool of my own sheep), and then she called out, 'Come on in Kirsty. What are you doing there at the back of the door?' Kirsty advanced to a cordial welcome from all the members of her family, and they were all reconciled that day as they rejoiced round Jean, the young child from Marvig, who subsequently married Donald Morrison, 7 Marvig 'Domhnuill Aonghais ic Allan'.

At that time all the crofts in Lochs were grossly overcrowded because of the clearances from Southern Park and croft 9 Marvig was no exception. In the circumstances, Kirsty and Alastair Louis indicated a willingness to build a new house near the MacAskill family at Gravir, but Anna Bard remained hostile to Alastair Louis and refused to agree to the suggestion that Alastair should build a house at Gravir. It is said that local humour surfaced when someone composed a Gaelic song about Anna Bard and the proposed new home of Alastair Louis at Gravir. Unfortunately that song like many others is lost to posterity so far as we know.

The irony of ironies was that Anna Bard ended her days in her old age with her daughter Kirsty and Alastair Louis at 9 Marvig.

The tigh-ceilidh was a valuable institution where our Gaelic culture and teaching in a variety of ways were imparted. This story may be taken as an example of a moral message being put across very effectively, but in an entertaining and enduring way. Some of the points that arise are:

1. The relationship between mother and daughter was not an ideal relationship, because the mother was too overbearing, and the daughter had to resort to evasion and lying. Perhaps there was an element of blame in both mother and daughter.
2. If it was in the Providence of God that Kirsty and Alastair Louis would marry and conceive children, all of which married in turn, then poor Anna Bard was on a losing wicket from the outset.
3. Despite Anna Bard's antipathy towards Alastair Louis and Kirsty, it was they who cared for her in her old age, at a time when there were no social provision for the care of senior citizens. It is to Kirsty's credit that she set aside her differences and sought reconciliation with her family, and the family in turn was glad to respond positively.

Anna Bard's prayer

A character like Anna Bard is usually the object of local satire in the Highlands. The following story is told about one of her frequent visits to Marvig to see her two daughters who were married there.

On one occasion Anna was accompanied by a friend, and on their way home from Marvig to Gravir, walking barefooted over the moor, Anna, who was a fairly stout lady, suddenly went down in a very treacherous miry bog. Her companion tried everything in her power to get her out of the slough, but poor Anna was only sinking deeper into the mire as she and her companion struggled desperately.

In sheer desperation her companion resorted to prayer as she heaved and puffed in a desperate effort to rescue Anna before she disappeared out of sight in the bog. Prayer, together with the best and united efforts of the ladies, seemed to work, and when Anna appeared to be out of danger, her companion was heard to say, 'Ni mi fein agus Anna chùis a nis a Chruithfhear'. (Anna and I will manage now Lord).

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