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The year is 1781

The harbour at Rodel is ringing with the noise of building. A new house is being built above the harbour for Captain Alexander MacLeod of Berneray, who has just bought Harris from his cousin, Norman MacLeod of Dunvegan. The Captain's first action has been to build himself a new house, as he means to live in Rodel himself, at the centre of his schemes to improve the estate and economy of Harris.

Captain Alexander was a son of Donald MacLeod, the "Old Trojan" of Berneray, who has had a colourful career as a supporter of Prince Charlie in the 1745 rebellion. The Old Trojan is buried in the family *Caibeal* - private burial enclosure – on the hill behind the tower of St Clement's church in Rodel, where a tablet to his memory was erected by Captain Alexander. This recalls his father's part in the Jacobite Rebellion – and also that he married for the third time at the age of 75 and had a further nine children, before dying at the age of 90!

Though Captain Alexander mentioned his father's third marriage on the tablet, he himself was a son of the first marriage, to Ann, daughter of Roderick MacLeod, chief of Dunvegan. Nor does he mention that he himself had a total of twenty-eight brothers, sisters, step-brothers and step-sisters!

Captain Alexander had been the captain of the merchant ship *Lord Mansfield* , and had earned himself a fortune in the East India trade. MacLeod of Dunvegan was deep in debt – his father had already borrowed money from the Captain - and when the estate of Harris was put up for sale in 1772 the Captain bought it for the sum of £15,000.

Captain Alexander decided that the real value of Harris was in its seas, rather than its land. He set up fishing stations all along the east coast of the Bays and encouraged fishermen to settle there – not just people from the machair but from all over the islands and the west coast of Scotland. He built piers and a net factory in Rodel and, most important of all, he built himself a new house beside the pier, in one of the most beautiful spots on the whole island. To have a resident landlord, interested in making a success of a local industry was a new experience for Harris!

The date is now 1819

William Daniell, an artist and engraver, is engaged on a visit to the Western Isles, and is sketching MacLeod's house in Rodel. Matters have changed there since the days of the Captain. His schemes for the establishment of a fishing industry have failed, due at least in part to the excise rules on tax on salt, but also because of the variability in the passage patterns of herring in the Minch. The Captain himself had died in 1790, and his estate had passed to his son Alexander, who had no interest in Harris, other than as a source of income. He lived in England, and refused even to use the name of MacLeod, preferring his mother's name of Hume.

Daniell's print of "Rowadill", as he called it, shows the house built by the Captain, and behind it the gardens which he laid out and put into the care of John MacLeod from the Isle of Muck – the ancestor of the "Gairneilear" MacLeods still in Harris

The Captain's developments were described by John Knox, who visited Rodel in 1786 and described it in his report to the British Fisheries Society –

Within the bay of Rowdil, on the north side, there is an opening, through a channel of only 30 yards wide, to one of the best sheltered little bays in the Highlands; from which on the opposite side, there is an opening of the same dimensions from the sea. This has water from any vessel to enter or depart at any time of the tide; and captain Macleod has deepened the south passage to fifteen feet at common spring tides. The circumference of this little harbour or bason is nearly an English mile; and here ships lie always afloat, and as safe as in Greenland Dock. Here the captain has made an excellent graving bank, and formed two keys, one at the edge of the bason, where ships may load or discharge afloat, at all times of the tide; the other on the graving bank.

He has also built a store-house for salt, casks, meal &c and a manufacturing house for spinning woollen and linen thread, and twine for herring nets, which he makes for his own use. He has procured some East Country fishers, with Orkney yawls, to teach the inhabitants; and has built a boat-house, sixty feet long by twenty wide, capable of holding nine boats, with all their tackling &c.

He has raised, or rather repaired, a very handsome church, out of the ruins of an old monastery, called St. Clements. He has also built a schoolhouse and a public house; and he is now carrying on good cart roads from the keys to the village, and from thence through the country, to facilitate the communication with the west side of the island. He has done something in the planting way, and he finds that the hazel and sycamore thrive best.

The quays and the "bason" are in the foreground of Daniell's print, with the net manufactory and the harbourmaster's house to the right, while above them is the tower of St. Clement's.

There is no trace of a village in Daniell's print – and with good reason! In 1817 Alexander Norman MacLeod, the only son of Alexander Hume, had married, and he brought his new bride to Rodel. John MacDiarmid of Scalpay told the story to the Napier Commission in 1883 –

“I will tell you how Rodel was cleared. There were 150 hearths in Rodel. Forty of these paid rent. When young MacLeod came home with his newly-married wife to Rodel he went away to show his wife the place, and twenty of the women of Rodel came and met them, and danced a reel before them, so glad were they to see them. By the time the year was out – twelve months from that day – these twenty women were weeping and wailing; their houses being unroofed and their fires quenched by order of the estate. Some of the more capable of these tenants were sent to Bernera, and others were crowded into the Bays on the east side of Harris – small places that kept three families in comfort where there are now eight. Some of the cottars that were amongst these 150 were for a whole twelve-month in the shielings before they were able to provide themselves with permanent residences. Others of them got, through the favour of Mrs Campbell of Strond, the site of a house upon the sea-shore upon places reclaimed by themselves.”

Where the village had been was made a farm, initially for MacLeod himself, but latterly for his factor, or estate manager, Donald Stewart. Within a few years Stewart and his successors had cleared the crofters out of every piece of worthwhile land in Harris, and sent them to Cape Breton in Canada, or among the fishing villages that the Captain had set up along the east coast Bays of Harris.

The year is 1850

Donald Stewart has been succeeded as factor in Rodel by John Robertson MacDonald of Lyndale in Skye. Alexander Norman MacLeod has been forced to sell Harris to pay off some of his debts, and the estate has been bought by the Earl of Dunmore. MacDonald's brother James Ruadh is tacksman of Balranald in North Uist and factor there, and between the two of them they rule the whole of Harris and North Uist.

On this particular night, there is a turmoil in the house at Rodel. Men have broken in, and are searching the house, looking for the factor's niece, known in songs and story as Seasaidh Bhaile Raghail – Jessie of Balranald. She had been engaged to Donald MacDonald of Monkstadt in Skye, who had been employed as assistant factor in North Uist, but he had been dismissed for being too lenient with the crofters, and a new assistant, Patrick Cooper, had been brought in from the mainland. James made it clear that he expected Jessie to transfer her affections to the new assistant, but Jessie had a mind of her own, and decided to elope with Donald.

My Dearest Donald

If the bearer of this letter meets you on your way here, you must return home. It seems that W Macneil suspects, or else has heard what we have been intending to do. As he had no opportunity of telling Papa of it, he deputed John MacDonald to do so, which he did last night, and Papa immediately wrote William to find out all he knew of the matter. I heard this from the grieve's wife. John MacDonald told her husband of it. Now, my own Donald, we must be off this night. You had better not come till half-past eleven o'clock. I shall be quite ready to start with you.

So Jessie wrote to Donald on Thursday, 14th February 1850, and that evening she escaped down a ladder from a window in Balranald House, and set off with Donald for Lochmaddy, where Donald MacLeod from Harris had his boat, the *Eliza MacLeod*, waiting to take the couple to Skye. It was a wild night of storms, and they only just managed to leave Lochmaddy before Cooper and Balranald arrived in pursuit. The pursuers headed for Skye also, unaware that the *Eliza MacLeod* had been forced by the bad weather to make for Tarbert. There they were met by Jessie's brother, who took her back to their uncle's house at Rodel, leaving Donald to return to Skye alone.

But Donald was not beaten yet. In Skye he got another boat, the *Eliza Clow*, and sailed with another crew for Rodel, arriving there on Saturday 23rd. They entered Rodel House, and searched until Donald found Jessie was sleeping in the "Red Room", along with her aunt. Donald wakened Jessie, but unfortunately her aunt was wakened also, and gave the alarm. Her husband locked Donald and Jessie in the "Red Room" then went for help, while Cooper, who had by this time arrived in Rodel also, was threatening to shoot the raiders, until his gun was forcibly taken from him. Donald in the meantime shouted to his men to the rescue, and he and Jessie were released, and made their way out of the house, traditionally by way of a window.

Donald was eventually tried in Inverness Sheriff Court for housebreaking and assault, but he claimed that it was Jessie who was forcibly held against her will, and the proceedings ended with his triumphal acquittal, and Donald and Jessie being cheered down the streets of Inverness!

Donald and Jessie eventually made their way to Australia, while John MacDonald took advantage of his position as factor to take his revenge on all the local people who were involved in such an affront to the dignity of his family.

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The date is 1925

John MacDonald the factor is long dead, and his house at Rodel has become a hotel. The Dunmores have gone also, and Harris has been bought by Lord Leverhulme. Like Captain Alexander, he had great plans for the development of the fisheries around Harris, and had started to develop Leverburgh as a major fishing and fish-curing port.

But Leverhulme too has died, and his heirs have decided that the fishery project is not viable, and have withdrawn all the investment from it, and put Harris up for sale.

The Rodil Hotel and Fishings

The Rodil Hotel is an old-fashioned Shooting Lodge in a beautiful situation beside the seashore at the south-east corner of South Harris.

It is about 24 miles distant from Tarbert and 2 miles from Leverburgh, where there are shops and Post Office.

The House stands beside a small harbour and faces south. It is mainly of stone and slated construction, and contains –

On the Ground floor – Lounge with glass roof, large Drawing room, Smoking Room, Dining Room, Bar and Office, 3 bedrooms, Bathroom with w.c. and Lavatory Basin, Storeroom, Cellar, Kitchen, Milk House, Servants' Bathroom and w.c., Wash-house and Laundry, Pantry and Larder.

Upstairs are 6 Bedrooms, Bathroom with w.c. and Lavatory Basin, and Linen Cupboard.

There is a good supply of water by gravitation, and the baths are heated by a separate boiler.

The lighting is by lamps, and the drainage is effectively disposed of in the sea.

There is a good Garden, Garage and Byre, and a stone and slated Cottage goes with the Hotel.

Despite this attractive description in the sale particulars by Messrs. Knight, Frank and Rutley, the hotel and adjacent lands reached only a price of £3500 at the sale, the hotel itself being taken over by John Morrison from Leverburgh.

The year is 2001

Once again, the harbour at Rodel is ringing with the noise of building. The hotel had been taken over by Jock MacCallum from Stornoway, who ran it very much as a fishing hotel. It was the obvious focus for trips to the south of Harris, and a very popular destination for an afternoon visit, taking tea in the lounge beside the window through which Jessie had eloped. The steamers called at Rodel Pier, or latterly stood off-shore, while the hotel launch went out to pick up passengers, who depending on the tide, might then have to clamber over slippery, sea-weed coated rocks up to the hotel!

Louis MacNiece, the author, stayed in Rodel on his visit to the Hebrides in 1938 –

The Hotel at Rodel is at the end of everything. In front of it lies a fishing pier with a nice grass promenade leading on to it. The view seawards is blocked by an island. Everything is very quiet, not to say muggy. The hotel was having its spring-cleaning. Sofas and chairs sat outside on the gravel looking as if they had no intention of ever returning to their rooms. There were a few lazy gulls.

Next morning Rodel became more alive. A boat had been out in the dawn catching herring. What I first noticed looking from my bedroom window was something large shaking itself, shaking a shining mane, loosing sequins to the sea – the net! Half a dozen men were standing on the end of the pier knocking the net against the wall of the pier so that the fish fell back into the boat.

Over the years, the hotel had fallen into a serious state of disrepair, and various parts of it had to be closed, until only the bar was left in operation. Now Jock's grandson, Donald MacDonald, and his wife Dina are having the hotel rebuilt, and we can look forward to Rodel Hotel becoming again what it once was – the focus of the tourist trade in the south of Harris. The fishermen are still at the pier and Captain Alexander's quays are still in use.

It is good to see the old house regaining its character - and if you hear any strange noises during the night, it is only Donald and Jessie climbing out of the window!