



[The Courtship of Kirsty Mackenzie and Donnchadh Bàn (1830s)]

Itinerant travelling tradesmen were a feature of life in Lewis in the 18th and 19th centuries. Boat builders, tailors and stonemasons etc., moved from village to village as and when they could find work. Very often a tradesman might stay in a village all winter while work was available in his trade.

Duncan Morrison, 'Donnachadh Bàn Tailear' from Harris was an itinerant tailor and in the course of his travels he came to Marvig, Lochs where he was engaged as usual in tailoring for local demand, while the work lasted. While working there he met and courted a young lady from the village by the name of Kirsty Mackenzie, 'Ciorstaidh Alastair 'ic Mhurcaidh', born 1811. Eventually they entered into a form of engagement to marry, by exchanging home-made heart shaped wooden lockets, to be worn by each as a necklace. Expensive diamond engagement rings were not yet in vogue, at least not in their society.

Presently Duncan returned home to Harris temporarily and while there he became ill, and he took a long time to recover. In those days there were no telephones or telegraphs and communication by letter was not possible either, because of lack of education and even a lack of postal service. The only way to transmit a message was to rely on the off chance of meeting someone travelling that way by foot. Duncan was therefore unable to tell her that he was ill and that he intended to return to Marvig as soon as he was better.

Eventually Duncan recovered sufficiently to enable him to make his way back to Marvig, Lochs. He reached the village in the evening in the autumn and the first few homes he came to were empty. He was puzzled and eventually he met someone who informed him that everyone in the village was in a certain house at a betrothal party 'reiteach'.

Knowing he would be welcome in any house in the village he proceeded to the house where the 'reiteach' festivities were in progress. On arrival at the celebrations he was taken aback, because to his great surprise the prospective bride was none other than Kirsty Mackenzie his girlfriend. It seems she had given up hope of Duncan Morrison ever coming back.

While Duncan was very disappointed, he did notice however, that there was one redeeming feature in the situation. Kirsty was still wearing his heart shaped wooden locket as a necklace.

As Duncan was an accomplished singer and composer of Gaelic songs, they prevailed upon him to sing in order to entertain the company. He was reluctant at first, but eventually he agreed because he saw in that request an opportunity to communicate with Kirsty.

He improvised by adapting new words to an old tune. The gist of what he sang at one point was that he did not know where the maiden's heart was, but he knew where his own was. She was wearing it as agreed, next to her own heart. Kirsty got the message and the outcome was that she and Duncan made it up and eventually got married in 1839. Unfortunately the actual words that Duncan used in his improvised composition are long lost.

Kirsty and Duncan set up home in Finsbay, Harris, where they raised a family and lived a long and happy life. We are assured that basically the story is quite true.

[ends]

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