



The Wedding of Matilda and Young Norman (1839)

Apparently, the custom of parents arranging for the marriage partners of their offspring, particularly their daughters, was prevalent in Lewis down to the middle of the 19th century, only about 150 years ago. More than one case was talked about in the Calbost Ceilidh House in our youth. We were sceptical about these stories at the time, but since then we have confirmed the truth of the manner in which the local village couple, Matilda Macleod and Norman Òg Mackenzie became man and wife.

On the morning of 11 February 1839, 22 year old Norman Òg Mackenzie, 4 Calbost stepped ashore at the Calbost pebbly beach known as 'Mol a Ghò' after an overnight fishing trip for white fish in the Minch with great lines (lin-mhoir). A friend was awaiting him on the shore with the message that his 21 year old girlfriend, Matilda Ross Macleod, daughter of Calum Bàn and Ishbel Ross, 4 Cromore, was about to be whisked away secretly, against her will, by her family and friends, in a boat across Loch Erisort to the only Church then in the Parish of Lochs, at Keose in order to be married to a local young man of her parent's choice, Iain Òg Macleod from Cromore. Without hesitation, Tormod Òg and his crew stepped back into their boat, just as they were, in their fishing garb, and sailed off for Keose as fast as they could. The lady that brought the message was heard to say, 'The 'Cassag' (Norman's nickname) went and good luck to him'. 'Dh'fhalbh a 'Chassag', agus gu rachadh gu math leis'.

As fortune would have it, Norman and the Calbost men were seated in the Keose Church before the minister arrived. The Minister was none other than the well-known Rev. Robert Finlayson, the first Evangelical Minister that came to Lochs, and only 3 years later at the time of the Church Disruption in 1843 he and his whole Lochs congregation left the Parish Church at Keose and built a new Free Church at Crossbost.

The bride arrived at the Church and the marriage ceremony commenced in the usual way by proclaiming the Marriage Banns, something after the following fashion: 'If there is anyone anywhere who can give a valid reason as to why Matilda Ross Macleod and Iain Òg Macleod, both from Cromore, Lochs, should not be joined together in holy matrimony this day, let him or her speak out now or forever hold his peace.'

No sooner had the minister finished speaking than the silence in the Church was interrupted by the scuffle of feet as Norman Òg Mackenzie was rising to his feet in his clumsy leather sea boots. The startled Minister looked up as Norman spoke out in a steady and clear voice, saying that: 'It is I, and not Iain Òg Macleod of Cromore that Matilda wants to marry because we are deeply in love'.

For a moment the poor Minister was in a dilemma as he considered this unexpected turn of events. At first he hesitated, but quickly composed himself and declared that the proper thing to do in the circumstances was to ask the bride to state her own real choice.

The drama continued to unfold as Matilda responded without hesitation: 'S e mo roghainn Macchoinnich nam botannan mor'. (My choice is Mackenzie of the thigh leather sea boots.)

Uproar followed as the Cromore folk appealed urgently to the Minister to cancel the service in order to avoid trouble. The Minister remained calm and responded by saying that, 'Delay was more likely to cause trouble and therefore he proposed to continue with the marriage ceremony of Matilda Macleod and Norman Mackenzie in accordance with their own request, freely expressed in front of many witnesses'. Thereupon Matilda and Norman were duly married and there is a record of their marriage recorded in Register House, Edinburgh.

Outside the Church, Matilda's so-called friends remonstrated with her at what she had done saying that she brought shame on herself and all her people in the eyes of the whole large Parish of Lochs: 'A Mheagailean, a Mheagailean, de rinn thu? Thug thu nàire ort fhein agus air a h-uile duine a bhuineas dhut ann an sùilean coimhcheangal mor an Loch.'

Matilda responded with a chuckle saying, 'Tha mi coma, agus mi air mo roghainn fhaighinn'. (I don't care seeing as I got my choice).

The story of Norman and Matilda is a true story about people that really existed in the flesh. The story was first related to us by Angus Morrison, our host in the ceilidh-house. Both Angus and Norman lived together in Calbost for 48 years prior to Norman's death in 1900. Later on Norman Òg's grand-daughter Matilda Mackenzie, 12 Calbost, who was a young girl when Norman, her grandfather died, related the details of the story to us. However,

it was another near relative, Chirsty Kennedy that had a remarkable grasp of the details of the event. All that was confirmed by others, such as the Smith family.

The sequel to the drama was that Norman took his bride home to 4 Calbost where the ruins of the family home may still be seen. There they lived a long and happy life and raised a family of 2 girls and 4 boys. When Matilda Ross Macleod died in 1882 her husband was away at the Caithness fishing and he could not get home in time for the funeral (such were communications in the Highlands at that time). That affected him badly, said his granddaughter. Norman died in 1900 and there is a headstone on their grave in the oldest part of the Gravir cemetery. The couple's descendants made, and continue to make, a significant contribution to the welfare of our Island and further afield.

Jess, their daughter was the mother of Alexander Maclennan, Holy Alex, one time Provost of Stornoway. Another near descendant is the present Convener of the Western Isles, Donald M. Mackay of 28 Gravir. Norman was a romantic, and a man who struck a decisive blow in favour of emancipating women from the form of enslavement they suffered from in Lewis at that time.

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