

The Guardian, Charlottetown, Thurs., July 18, 1968

ACROSS THE ISLAND

Island Born Scot Tells Of Homeland

By NEIL A. MATHESON

MY FRIEND, Chief Justice Thane A. Campbell, mailed to me recently a story by Edith S. Nicholson of Isle of Skye, a Scottish Island from which many of our ancestors came, including my own mother's people.

Adding to the interest was the fact Mrs. Nicholson's husband is Calum Nicholson, who was born in Valleyfield, P.E.I. on the farm where his brother Norman now resides. Mrs. Gordon Holmes, Park Terrace, City is a sister.

A few days later, however, the Chief Justice sent word that the Nicholsons were on the Island, and I enjoyed this week a most pleasant afternoon visit with them on the lawn of the Holmes people.

Mr. Nicholson's forefathers came from Scotland in 1802, Mrs. Nicholson said in her piece in the magazine "In Britain" and notes her Calum reversed the process by going back to Skye where he had lived several years in Sconser.

Calum, or Malcolm as he was called then, interrupted third year Prince of Wales to join the Canadian Army back in the days of the First Great War, 1914-18. Returning he attended Dalhousie University, Harvard, then employed a fellowship at Yale and spent most of his professional career – education – in Philadelphia, 1923-1960.

Harvest Excursion Trip

BEFORE HARVARD, though, he had a visit to Western Canada via the colorful harvest excursion which other people recall with interest – it cost him all of \$14.00 for the fare, he recalled. There was also a short spell of teaching in that area.

He made the trip to teach school but enjoyed the \$10 a day he received for working in the harvest field, a tremendous wage in those far-off years.

Mrs. Nicholson's story notes that Calum's forefathers who came to Prince Edward Island in 1802 were victims of "The Clearances" of the early 19th century, when many of the crofters of the Western Highlands and Islands were evicted from their agricultural holdings in order to make way for sheep farms.

"Many were the sad songs composed by the exiles in far away countries, but Malcolm . . . instead of singing laments about his native land – the reference here is to Skye, apparently – he is one exile who came home to be happy."

Longing For Homeland

I ASKED Mr. Nicholson if it were the natural longing of a Scot for the land of his fathers that made him go back to Skye, and he agreed it was.

The natural follow-up question, I think, was how was he received in Skye, and other spots he visited in the Highlands.

The welcome was warm and the Nicholsons felt very much at home.

Mrs. Nicholson had spoken in her "In Britain" story about the Ceilidhs – roughly it's pronounced "Kaylees" with a long "A", and I asked Calum about it. These warm gatherings are general, but I gather they are more elaborate and more formal than the Ceilidhs we knew in this province when Calum and I were boys. Here they were a few neighbours gathering for a visit and the inevitable story telling and gossip.

The Sconser folk gave the Nicholsons a Ceilidh – it was his Gaelic choir – for example, when they were leaving Skye. There were speeches extolling the virtues of Calum – he insists he never knew he had any – there were the inevitable drinks and tasty sandwiches, there were Gaelic songs and then there was more Gaelic singing.

Gaelic In Valleyfield

MR. NICHOLSON learned the Gaelic in Valleyfield as a boy, and he never did forget the language. He polished up on his reading and spelling during the later years of his professional career, so he reads it easily now.

He had greatly enjoyed a visit with Bishop MacEachern, a Gaelic scholar, the afternoon of my visit.

Mrs. Nicholson refers to Ceilidhs as "delightful evenings of music, song and verse . . . that are part of the Gaelic way of life."

Calum fitted easily into that way of life in the Highlands from where his ancestors came to this Island more than 165 years ago. Edith says in her story "Calum joined a Gaelic choir, helped the neighbours with the hay and potatoes, repaired gates and painted byres (barns)".

Mr. Nicholson greatly enjoyed his experience with the Portree Gaelic choir and competed once at the National Gaelic Mod – it lasts a whole week – where more than 100 choirs would be competing. They were mixed choirs and would run 30 to 40 people for each group.

Mighty Chorus Of Song

ON THE FINAL night they would have a grand choir with massed choirs. They'd sing old Gaelic hymns, with the precentor singing the line – as it was here many years ago – and then the entire massed choir joining in a mighty chorus of song.

We talked of many things, many of them personal, but I hope Calum won't mind if I tell you two of them. Once on a visit to "the Braes" – everyone was a Nicholson – he met a Mary Nicholson who was almost blind. Coming close to Calum she put her hands on his face and on his head. Carefully she felt the facial contours and characteristics. She felt his ears, the hair lines and subjected his entire head to a most careful scrutiny with her hands.

Then she exclaimed, with that bit of added warmth, "You are one of us" which means they were related, then called for a drink of milk to celebrate the occasion.

Some folk would think Scotch whiskey would be a more appropriate drink, but Calum observed “milk goes back farther than the whiskey.”

Gaelic Got Action

THE OTHER concerns a visit to a store for climbing boots – they were to climb in “The Cuillins”.

Nobody was waiting on them and Calum turned to his wife and said in Gaelic “Let’s get out of this crazy store, there’s nothing here anyway.”

Immediately the proprietor rushed up greeted him in Gaelic and said “I thought you were one of those crazy Americans looking around.” The service “was top notch after that.”

Getting back to the Gaelic speaking in Scotland, he told me they speak Gaelic in Skye. If you see a group of people talking on the street in Portree, 75 percent of them would be speaking Gaelic.

Calum had visited Skye several times on his vacations, when he still lived in Philadelphia and heard no Gaelic. Thinking him a foreigner, they would shift into English when he approached.

Peat is a fuel that is loved by the Highlander for its aroma, among other things. A visit to Stornoway, shortly before the Nicholsons left brought a parting gift of a piece.

“I want you to take this piece of peat with you to Philadelphia, when you get lonesome for Skye, or the Highlands, burn a piece and dance around like this – a Highland dance – and it will cure your loneliness,” the donor told him.

The Nicholsons will stay next winter in East Otis, Massachusetts. I believe that Calum wants to return to Skye – I did not ask him directly – but Mrs. Nicholson told me there are some financial restrictions that apply in Britain after three years – they were in Skye for that long – and they may prove cumbersome. I’ll not go into them here, but they concern British tax assessments that would be applicable.

Weather In Highlands

ONE OFTEN thinks of the Highlands as a forbidding place weatherwise. But there are exceptions. Edith said of their first winter in Skye, for example:

“The winter was the mildest in a hundred years . . . There was no frost or snow after the beginning of January and the flowers never stopped blooming. . . Spring in the Hebrides is incredibly lovely, with long golden evenings and sunset colors that linger in the sky until nearly midnight. Cuckoos are calling, lambs are bleating and in the fields are the bluebells of Scotland that we hear about in the old song.”

But the Highlands can be rough weatherwise as well. She recalls times when “Loch Sligachan resembled an inferno, with the wind lashing spray skyward like steam boiling from a cauldron. Walking in that kind of weather, we could believe the story about the children having to put stones in their pockets to keep them from being blown into the loch.”

And so I leave the Calum Nicholsons, my thanks to my friend The Chief Justice for telling me about them.