

Neil MacLean of Salum, Tiree & Shoal Lake, Manitoba

*by
Mary MacLean*



Neil MacLean, c. 1890s

It was in the late 1990's on my first trip to Tiree that Angus MacLean went to one of his many bookcases in "The Coolins" and found a blue leather bound book. He leafed through it until he found the spot and said with great pride "This is a song about your grand-dad Neil MacLean." I was so pleased to learn that my grandfather had been remembered but dismayed to learn that the book, *Na Baird Thirisdeach* was in Gaelic, so I could not read or understand the song. A few months later I received this letter and translation from him:

Have enclosed your grand-dad's song by A. Stewart in Gaelic, although modern typewriters were never made for writing in that language - no keys to mark in the long and short accents. I have tried to translate the song as the bard composed it, but like everything especially stories and song, they lose something when translated into English.

The story that inspired the Tiree bard Alexander Stewart of Caolas to compose these verses to Neil MacLean was as follows--

In the 1870's, on the Isle of Mull there was a wedding pending between a very prominent man and a lady of very high authority from a rich and noble family. The bride's father insisted that nothing would do for the wedding banquet but venison and that from a particularly magnificent royal stag that roamed the hills and ancient forest of Mull.

Accordingly, he instructed a party of Englishmen who were stalking in that part of Mull to get the stag and they would be well paid for their efforts. The hunting party went out several days without any success. Each day they came back with the same story '*We couldn't get him.*'

The bride's father was very discouraged as he had promised his daughter this 'special' venison on the banquet table. A friend, seeing his disappointment suggested he employ the services of a sailor who at that particular time was sheltering his boat in Tobermory Harbour. This sailor had the reputation of being a marksman. The bride's father took his friend's advice and sent for him. Neil readily agreed to help.

The following day the English party went out again, but this time they were accompanied by one of the best rifle-shots in the Highlands. After a few hours searching the almost impenetrable quarries of Ben More the stag made its appearance but only for an instant. That moment was all the Neil needed, for with one quick unerring shot at almost impossible range the noble stag dropped dead with a bullet through its heart... well and truly 'grassed.'

On arrival back at the bride's home her father took Neil into his gun-room and offered him the best gun in the racks. Neil declined the generous offer, saying: *I would never wish for any gun but my own. I have grown up with her and we understand each other, Thank you Sir, for your kind offer.*

It is not recorded but Neil would have been well paid for his days work.

from ***Na Baird Thirisdeach:- The Tiree Bards,***
Being The Original Compositions Of Natives Of Tiree At Home and Abroad,
Edited by the Rev. Hector Cameron.
Published by The Tiree Association, 1932

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About the Bard

Alexander Stewart was a son of Alasdair a' Ghaidseir, and was born in Glasgow about 1859. He was brought up by an aunt in Caolas, Tiree, since early childhood. He was a bard of unquestionable merit. He has a sense of style and rhythm, and an easy flow of apt diction. His humour is inoffensive, and his more serious productions indicate soundness of thought. One should expect him, had he lived to riper years, to attain to a high place among our Gaelic Bards. He was only 25 or 26 years of age when he was accidentally killed in MacLaren's Ironworks, West Street, Glasgow.

**Oran do Niall Mac Illeathan
'S e fagail Thiriodh a dhol do Chanada**

*Mo ghradh air an oigeir a sheoladh na tuinn,
A mharbhadh na geoidh is na h-eoin air an tuim,
A riofadh an seol ann an doilich na gaoith,
'S cha mhiosa gu feum thu air reidhlean an fhuinn.*

*'S tu dhireadh na mullaidh 's an tuinnich na feidh,
Gu h-uallach le'd ghnna 's a chuireadh an reis;
'S tu dheanadh an tuilleadh 's a chuireadh tu'n ceill,
'S tha fios aig na Muilich air; chunnaic iad d'euchd.*

*Feumaidh mi'n tus mar tha chuis a chur sios,
An doigh air an d'fhuaradh thu suas leo air tir;
Bha 'm bata san chala 's i fantuinn ri sid,
'Bi 'n gunna do roghainn chur air aghaigh na tim.*

*Nuair dh'imich sibh comhla le'r n-ordugh gu leir
'S a chaidh fear air taobh mar a shaoileadh e-fein;
Nuair shinn thu ri d' shuil i le stuiradh do leus,
Bha'm fiadh air a leon' gun deo air an fheur.*

*Nuair shoirbhich le'd lamhaich bha cach ruit an diumb;
Na Sasunnaich uaibhreach bh'air chuairt feadh na duthch;
'S ann b'aill leotha coimhead le coimhicheas dur,
Air teomachd is gliocas an Tirisdich uir.*

*Bha cairdean na bainnse le taingealachd ruin
A g'iarradh do chomuinn, 's lean thu do thurn;
Ach dhiult thu le deachainneachd, 's bu chomain a' chuis,
'S mur d'fhuair iad thu fein, rinn iad greim air do chliu.*

*B'e Seonaid ni'n Dheorsa o'd 'oige do lann .
Cha d'aichich i riamh dhuit nuair dh'iarradh tu'n crann;
Le doimhneachd na durachd 's an luths bha na com,
Le 'braise 's le cumhachd, bhiodh buille na bonn.*

*'S e thogadh dhomh m'inntinn 's a dhireadh i'n aird,
An gille dubh dhonn nach bu throm air a' bharr;*

*'S ma dh'fhagas tu sin 's dol do thir nan craobh ard,
Bidh cuid de 'd luchd duthcha bho thursa' gu brath.*

*Ma sheolas tu null bhuainn thar tuinn a' chuinn shiar,
Atlantic nam meall mar na beanntan 'am miad;
Bheir aon diu, nuair dh'eireas na speuran bho lias,
Mar ghrein ann an tinneas bho sgiobal nan nial.*

*Bha thusa ro-chleachd-te marachd nan tonn.
Gu tric ann an gabhadh nuair dh'fhasadh muir throm;
Nuair sheideadh am brios oirre dìreach an ceann,
Bu mhath air an chlar thu 's gu h-ard anns a' chrann.*

*Tha moran toirt cliu ort, 's mi'n duil nach eil ann
Aon neach nach robh gradhach mud'abhaist gach am;
Ann an Galldachd no'n Gaidh'ltacht bhiodh cach ort an geall.
'S tu ruin san tigh-orsda nach soradh an bonn.*

*Bu dual dhuit o d'mhuinntir gu'm buinneadh tu meas,
'S thu shiol Chloinn 'Illeathain a b'ealanta 'chleachd;
Is cha do leig thusa na bhuinneadh dhuit seach,
Ach lean thu ri'd dhuthchas an giulan 's an ceart.*

*Ar durachd 's ar guidhe gu'n ruig thu gu slan,
'Ar n-urnuigh gu'n till thu mu'n crìochnaich do la;
Gu'n eirich gu subhach dhoibh uil' air do sgath,
Do chairtean gu leir, mar riut fhein, fhir mo, ghraidh.*

An unmetred translation of Neil's song:

**A Song for Neil MacLean
on his leaving Tyree to go to Canada**

My best wishes for the young man that could sail the high seas -
That could kill the wild geese and birds on the waters -
That could "reef" the tall sails in the force of the breeze
And he was just as light-footed on the dance-floor.

It is you that could climb the high hills where the red deer wander,
So light-footed with your gun and take them on the run;
The more you would get the more you could prove.
The Mull people knew, they saw your good work.

I must now relate and put down how it was -
 The way you were introduced to the party ashore.
 Your boat was in the harbour waiting for the weather -
 The gun was your best way of passing the time.

When you walked with them in line in orderly fashion
 And one would go on each side of you as he chose;
 When you presented your gun with your eye to direct it
 The deer was shot dead without breath on the grass.

With your success the rest were jealous of you -
 Those proud Englishmen that were on a trip to the country.
 They would look with obstinate surliness
 At the expertise and wisdom of the young Tyree man.

The wedding relations were friendly and thankful
 Asking for your presence and it was small wonder,
 But you declined their offer and followed your wisdom
 And if they didn't get yourself they remembered your favour.

Janet daughter of George was the gun from your youth.
 She never failed you when you asked her help.
 With the intensity of your concentration and the strength in her body
 With the steel in her barrel she always served you well.

This would make my mind glad and lift it up -
 The dark brown lad that was so light on his feet
 And if you leave us to go to the country of tall trees
 Some of your friends will be sad for evermore.

If you sail away from us on the Western Ocean waves -
 The Atlantic billows like mountains in size.
 One of them, when it's stormy will blot out the sky
 As if the sun was sick and under the clouds.

You were very knowledgeable in sailing the seas -
 Many times in danger when the weather got stormy.
 When the wind would increase and a head on sea -
 You were good on the deck and also in the topmast.

There are many that praise you - and I'm thinking -
 There isn't one person that wouldn't wish you well.
 In the Lowland and the Highlands everybody will be like this -
 It is you, my dear, in the bar, that wouldn't grudge the money.

It is what you inherited from your people that made you so popular
You are the seed of the Clan MacLean that were so light on their feet
Not once did you let your relations down
And you kept to your traditions in carriage and right.

Our prayers and wishes that you will reach safety
And that you can come back to see us before your life ends
May we all be blessed with happiness because of you
And your relations all, like yourself - my dear man."

Neil did immigrate to Canada in 1879 with the majority of our family. He was 28 when he left Tiree with his widowed mother, brothers and sisters and many of their families. Neil set up his original homestead of 100 acres in the Shoal Lake area of Manitoba with his mother and one of his elder brothers - Big John. He took his gun "Janet" with him and no doubt provided many a meal for the family in pioneer Canada.

In 1889, Neil married a young teacher of Irish descent, Mary R.V. Hamilton and together with Big John they continued to improve their homestead.

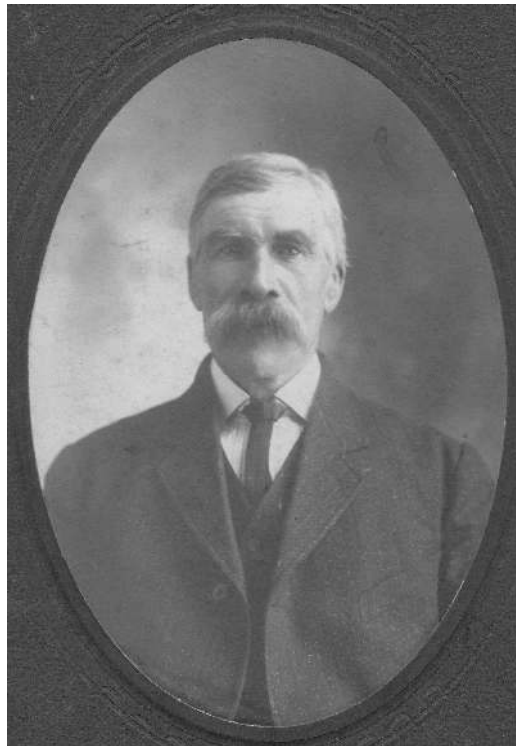


Neil MacLean, c.1900

From a History book on Manitoba:

Neil MacLean was a native of Tyree, Scotland and came direct from that country to MB in pioneer times. He took up a homestead claim and acquired land in other ways, his holding aggregating 640 acres in township 17, range 23 and township 18, range 24. Upon this property he carried on mixed farming, giving a great deal of his attention to raising grain and likewise becoming extensively interested in stock-raising. He kept 40 head of cattle & 14 horses, his animals always commanding a ready sale upon the market. From time to time he made substantial improvements erecting a fine residence and good farm buildings and installing the needed equipment. He was a liberal in his political beliefs and his religious views were in accord with the doctrines of the Baptist Church. In the course of years he became widely popular in the part of MB, to which he had come as a pioneer, his upright life and high standards of integrity gaining him the respect and esteem of all with whom he was brought in contact. In the more private relations of his life he displayed great kindness, geniality and courtesy and his death was regarded as a distinct loss to the community in which he lived. During her husband's life Mrs. McLean aided in important and various ways in the conduct of the farm and after his death carried forward ably the work which he had begun, meeting with important success.

Unfortunately Neil was never able to returned to Tiree; he died early in life at the age of 55, from consumption (TB). His young widow and their surviving 8 children managed with help and assistance of Neil's elder brother Big John, who became our family's provider and protector until his own death in 1913.



Big John MacLean, c.1900s

During that same trip to Tiree, Angus pointed out the remains of a shooting hide in Coalas, on the south side of the wee *Loch an t-Sleibh Dheirg* near the road, that was originally built by Neil - many of our family made good use of it over the years including Angus.

I know from other family stories that my grandfather was very happy and content with his life in Canada but I always thought it sad that after he settled in Manitoba, he never saw the sea again.

Mary MacLean
The Coolins, Scarinish, Tiree