

A Fragment of McLeod Tartan

Because white settlement took place such a short time ago, there are a number of people who arrogantly and wrongly refer to Australia as a young country. Few of us agree with this premise; but at the same time we do sometimes feel that our roots here are not very deep and we're eager to snatch at anything that points to a longer association with the lands of our forefathers. Like this fragment of McLeod tartan, for instance --

A hundred and seventeen years ago a young Scotsman named James McLeod, who was the second son of the tenth McLeod of Raasay, was also alieutenant in the exclusive Scots Greys. He married in 1838 and because of poor health purchased Land Orders in London and with his bride sailed for South Australia on the Pestonjee Romanjee

The Colony's second governor was aboard the vessel too -- Lieutenant-Colonel George Gawler, Knight of Hanover, with his wife, children and staff. The families became close friends and when they reached Adelaide the vice-regal pair insisted that the McLeods should stay at Government House until they had a home of their own. This was a simple matter of pitching a sleeping tent in Government House grounds -- Mrs. Gawler called it a marquee, which made it sound much grander. Meals were taken with the Gawlers in the official wattle-and-daub, thatch-roofed vice-regal residence.

Having settled his wife as comfortably as possible James McLeod set out for Sydney where he intended buying cattle and sheep. He took with him William Douglas, whom he had brought out with him to be his factor, and left Mrs. Douglas to care for Mrs. McLeod for four months.

Mrs. Gawler wrote to England that Mrs. McLeod played delightfully on her harp and piano, and as a consequence the Gawler's daughter Julia had become quite musical. She also taught Julia and the boys painting and drawing and was a decorative asset to the household. It is recorded that she wore her hair in a beautiful plaited crown. Life was by no means all gentility though, for James Hawker, the Governor's aide-de-camp, had to help extract a large centipede from that beautiful plaited crown at breakfast one morning. It had fallen from the billowing calico ceiling of the Government House dining-room.

In 1839 James McLeod, still in poor health, returned from Sydney and took up 240 acres of land thirty miles south of Adelaide on the fringe of McLaren Plains. He called his property Rona, a name with a nostalgic charm for wearers of the McLeod tartan, for it is the official name of the Isles of Seals off the coast of Inverness.

William Douglas was appointed overseer and Mr. & Mrs. James McLeod settled into a pre-fabricated Manning hut which they'd brought with them from England. Large eucalypts abound here and the task of felling them with axes and mattocks for clearing ready for crops and grazing must have been a long and strenuous one. The timber was used for fence-making and out-house building, and for floors and shingle roofs.

As sheep and cattle were bought or bred the job of watching over them in often-unfenced scrub would have demanded constant vigilance and more employees. Ploughing had to be done with bullocks and the wheat and barley harvested with reaphooks, sickles and flails before carting the grain over thirty miles of bad roads in a bullock wagon to Adelaide.

James McLeod's health failed to improve, so two years later his nineteen-year-old brother Loudon boarded the ss "Java" and came out to help. Loudon brought with him their widowed mother, but Mrs. McLeod Snr. could not bear to lose touch completely with civilisation and society, so instead of going out to Rona to live she settled in Adelaide's fashionable residential quarter, Tavistock Buildings in Rundle Street.

It was largely thanks to Loudon's energy and enterprise that in 1843 Rona had thirty-five acres under wheat, 2 acres under barley, and one acre each in oats, potatoes and garden; in addition to the 40 acres of cleared land the property was running 1,000 ewes, 20 cattle, 4 horses and 5 pigs, and Loudon applied to the Government for migrant labor to help cope with so many activities. A magnificent orange tree which still yields fabulous crops of fruit at Rona must be well over a hundred years old and is believed to have been planted by the McLeods.

James's health continued to deteriorate and next year the overseer left to take up land of his own nearby. Nevertheless the Rona family must have sent home good accounts of the new life for in 1846 John, the eldest brother who was the eleventh McLeod of Raasay, sold his Scottish estate to one George Rainy and brought out the remaining brother Francis. On arrival they learnt that James had died earlier that year and had been buried on his property near McLaren Vale.

Not long after this their mother died at her Rundle St. residence, and her will was found to contain a request that James's remains should be removed from Rona and interred with her own in a vault at West Terrace Cemetery.

A full account of this removal was given to the Register by the

undertaker who explained that he took a spring cart with a pair of sturdy horses, a man to drive and dig, and a shell to contain the coffin, and set out for McLaren Vale and Rona. James's remains were exhumed and they set out for Adelaide, after going a few miles reaching the hill from which they looked down into the Noarlunga horseshoe. This predecessor to the present road was a little further inland and met the river several hundred yards upstream from the present bridge. The road looked perilously steep and the undertaker uneasily decided to get out and walk, but the driver elected to remain in the cart where he could more easily control his horses. Soon the brakes failed, the horses got out of control, the cart capsized, and driver and coffin were thrown out. Noarlunga residents waded through the stream to disentangle the horses and to carry the driver to the nearby Horseshoe Inn. He was attended by Dr. Myles of Noarlunga but died a little later.

The driver hastened to town to get another cart and four days later James McLeod's remains were once more laid to rest, this time beside those of his mother in the consecrated ground of West Terrace Cemetery.

In his letter to the press the undertaker paid a public tribute to the driver for devotion to duty, assured McLeod's family that the remains had not been scattered far and wide as had been rumored, and protested vigorously that the Colony had lost a very useful member of society through the appalling condition of one of its most important thoroughfares.

In 1846 Mrs. James McLeod and her two children returned to England; whereupon John, Loudon and Francis decided to buy new land in

the south-east, where the Tatiara district had just been thrown open. Rona was sold, but the house which succeeded the Manning hut still stands on the foothills that ring McLaren Vale, and the nearby hill is still sometimes spoken of as McLeod's Hill by old residents.

In the south-east John bought Nalang station and the three brothers set about the hard task of clearing. At one time Loudon had trouble with aborigines of the Glenelg River tribe who wpeared his devoted native servant Jemmy and Jemmy's ten-year-old son and also took away Jemmy's lubra. Thereupon Loudon collected neighbors and a police officer and set out in pursuit. After a thirty-five mile ride they caught up with their quarry, who turned to fight. A spear pierced Loudon's hat, but after a little the white party gained control and ~~three of the natives were brought in and charged~~ in the Supreme Court. Today's visitor to Nalang may see John's tombstone and read -- "Erected in memory of John McLeod, Esq., of Raasay and Chief of the Clan Torquil, who died June 6th 1860, aged 55 years."

And back in Scotland the islands of Rona, whose name James McLeod so lovingly peppetuated, have been evacuated by the last inhabitants who no longer cared to carry on the struggle for such an isolated and harsh existence. The last crofter left South Rona early in World War 11, after carefully leaving in the living-room of the dilapidated cottage the customary table and chair for a stranger, with a Gaelic Bible on the table. Now only the seals and the seabirds watch the occasional boat that cruises in the vicinity of the islands of Rona which were once dear to James McLeod.