

How Alice got her Headstone

The old slab of Italian marble on the grave in front of our house may have had a wooden fence around it, but I never saw it. It just lay there, broken, on a crumbling slab of concrete in the dust. The lambs played on it and contractors ran into it with their machinery, and remonstrated with me for leaving an effing great slab on concrete lying around the effing paddock.

It bears the inscription "Erected in memory of John Macleod Esq of Rasay and Chief of the Clan Torquile who died June 6, 1860 aged 55 years". Rasay and Torquile? I had no idea.

My grandmother had told me of the legend of another person buried there. One of the Macleod women she thought, but to me it was just a rumour over which I never lost any sleep.

Everyone around Bordertown knows the Macleod story, or thinks they do - about how Loudon Macleod came to South Australia in the 1830's. About how an Aborigine called One-Toe Charlie guided Macleod, Scott and Binnie to the legendary 'Good Country' on the Eastern side of the 90 Mile Desert. About how they found the horse tracks of other explorers and rode all night from Wellington to Adelaide to stake their claims first and founded their sheep stations, Nalang, Cannawigra and Wirrega. And why Bordertown streets are named after the pioneers and why 3 of the colours of the Bordertown Primary school teams are red for Macleod, Blue for Binnie and Yellow for Scott.

About 40 years after the Macleods left my Great Grandfather, William Henry Hunt, bought Nalang in 1910. Jenny and I are the 4th generation of our family to live in the old house which is the only one of the 3 original homesteads still in use today.

A Chance Encounter

Jenny's parents, Ken and Edna Gunn, lived in Melbourne. In 1987, after Ken retired, they went down to Tasmania to look after Edna's parents who were getting a bit dodderly at that stage.

Ken and Edna were right into family genealogy. Edna's G-G-G-G-Grandfather, Daniel Stanfield, was buried in St David's churchyard, Hobart, in 1826. He had sailed into Sydney Town with the first fleet, then went on to Norfolk Island and ended up in Van Diemen's Land.

"Not as a convict!" Edna would hasten to assure us "he was a Marine"

So what with one thing and another, with time on their hands they often found themselves in the Genealogy department of the Hobart Library. So it was all Ken's fault in a way. If he'd hadn't stopped to talk to Mr. Macleod, the rest of this story might never have happened.

One day in the library, quite by chance, Edna came upon a sketch of a house in a place called 'Fenton Forest', and they were immediately taken by the similarity to our house, here at Nalang.

Ken made some enquiries, and the Librarian directed him to 'that chap over there' so Ken introduced himself. The chap said his name was Roderick Macleod .

'Ah, yes' said the chap, "the house in Fenton Forest. That was where my great- grandmother grew up. Her name was Alice Fenton, and she married a chap called Frank Macleod and they went to live on a sheep station in South Australia in the 1850s'."

Roderick was curious as to why Ken was interested in the house at Fenton Forest.

"Oh' said Ken, "I was just taken by the similarity of it to my daughter and son-in-laws house at 'Nalang' near Bordertown."

There was a stunned silence.

'Come around to my place tonight and I will show you something' said Roderick.

That evening he carefully unwrapped a pair of small daguerreotype photographs taken in the 1860s. One was of Frank and Alice Macleod and their children in the front garden of a house, and the other, a photo of a young woman, was of Alice

'Good heavens' said Ken, 'that's Nalang - Nalang 140 years ago but unmistakably Nalang '.

'Yes' said Roderick, 'The little boy in the kilt was my grandfather. But Alice died when he was four and the family had to move away from Nalang'. He wasn't sure of the whys and wherefores. The two daguerreotypes were some of the few things they managed to keep.

Roderick was surprised to hear that the homestead was still being lived in. Up until that moment he wasn't even aware it was still standing.

So that's how it started. Jenny and I wrote to Roderick Macleod after we heard this story, and invited him to come over for the Tatiara 150 celebrations. He and his wife, Mary, were delighted to accept. We shared a meal, then after we showed him around Roderick unveiled a plaque on the wall outside our front door. "Nalang, Original lease of 126 sq miles granted to Loudon Macleod on 26 Feb 1846. Home of the Hunt family since 1911"

Dad and Jenny do some digging

Fascinated with the story so far, Jenny and my Dad did some research and made some remarkable discoveries. History, it seems, is written by the victors, not the vanquished.

There were four Macleod brothers. Loudon was the mover and shaker, the business man who the legend recalls as being the first white settler in the Tatiara, but he never lived here permanently. His younger brother, Frank, recently retired from the East India Company was the manager of Nalang and Chief John, the eldest and a widower lived here with them. He's the bloke buried in the front paddock. We think there was a James as well and a sister or two but they don't figure in this story

We learnt that Alice's father was also a retired East India man, so it's likely she and Frank met at her father's place. Possibly a regimental reunion or something, we don't know. They became engaged and Frank had the Nalang homestead built in 1857. Alice no doubt had some input into the design. It would certainly explain the resemblance between this house and her home in Fenton Forest.

We had a builder doing some stone work recently and he commented that given the time, locale and type of construction, it was very likely that Chinese labourers were used in its construction. They

were being landed at Robe at that time and not all of them found their way over to the Victorian gold fields.

Alice married Frank and moved to Nalang in 1858 when she was 22 years old and the Hobart papers at the time recorded it as being one of the social events of the year

So the Macleod boys were doing pretty well for themselves by this time. Hidden away on the other side of the 90 Mile Desert with a lot of sheep, it is probable that the South Australian government was quite unaware of their 80,000 acres of fertile land until the Surveyor General of the colony, Mr George Woodroffe Goyder- he of "Goyder's Line" fame- surveyed the area in the 1860s.

A Shameful Story

Mr Goyder must have reported back to Parliament in glowing terms, because in 1865 the South Australian Legislative Council decided on a policy of 'Distraintment' of the pastoral leases. The dictionary defines 'distrain' as "the seizure of goods or property to enforce payment of debt".

One of the first areas to be 'distrainted ' was the Tatiara and Nalang was the first property on their list. Unless they bought their house and improvements from the government, at the government's valuation and paid a tenfold increase in rent the Macleods would be kicked out. Nalang would be cut up and redistributed amongst the landless peasants.

In 1867 at the age of 31, Alice died from 'vomiting and exhaustion'. She had given birth to 5 children in 10 years and watched 2 of them die. Isolated by endless miles of scrub, with her family and privileged upbringing far across the sea, the threat of losing her home through 'distraintment ' must surely have contributed to her death.

She was laid to rest in the front paddock alongside her brother-in-law, Chief John, as my Grandmother's legend said.

1867 and 1868 were years of severe drought. Although there was grass, there was no water and sheep died in their thousands. Later in 1868, Loudon Macleod died, and the lease on Nalang was reassigned to Frank. On the transfer of the lease the government increased the rent from 320 pounds to nearly 2000 pounds per year, a fortune in those days, which Frank was unable to pay.

Within 12 months Frank Macleod was bankrupt. Dispossessed, he was evicted from Nalang by the sheriff. He took the children to Tasmania where they were brought up by Alice's aunts. With most of their family mementos and history lost, the kids grew up more Fenton than Macleod.

The lease on Nalang was assigned to the 'Queensland Mortgage & Investment company'. The reader may well be surprised to find that the principal share holders of that company were in fact George Woodroffe Goyder and George Riddock M.P., the leader of the Legislative Council.

In 1870 the rent was found by parliament to be excessive and reduced to 500 pounds

Frank Macleod died in Melbourne in 1874, I imagine a shattered and heartbroken man.

A Headstone for Alice

Following the death of the senior Macleods, the hereditary title of Chief passed to Chief John's nephew Loudon Hector (the small boy in the kilt in the daguerreotype), and on down through the generations to Roderick himself.

Chief Roderick died in 2001, and his son John, who is my age, became the new Chief.

John visited Nalang in 2004 and of course we visited the gravestone. After a bit, he said 'How do you put up with that thing in the front paddock like that?'

I said I had often thought that I'd like to shift it out of the way, and John suggested we put it in the front garden.

"And while we're at it" he said, "We'll do a headstone for my great- great-grandmother"

So we did. Clan Macleod put up the funds to restore John's headstone, and they also had a bronze plaque cast for Alice. It reads "In memory of Alice Jamesanna Macleod (nee Fenton) Born 8 May 1836, died 26th January 1867, Beloved wife of Francis Hector George Macleod".

In 2008, to the skirl of a bagpiper, toasts in single malt scotch and many speeches, in their full ceremonial kilted regalia the members of Clan Macleod unveiled John's restored headstone and Alice's new plaque in the garden here at Nalang. Later that evening John made a suggestion. 'Why don't you come over to Scotland for the Clan parliament? It's on every 4 years and the next one is in 2010. We'd love to have you'.

Raasay

So in July 2010 we flew into Glasgow and spent a week in a cottage near Glendale on the Isle of Skye. It was wonderful. Most of the celebrations took place in the village hall in nearby Dunvegan on the western end of the island. There were Macleods from all over the world. Because of the gaps we were able to fill in their time on Nalang, Chief John proclaimed us 'Honorary Macleods' and made us feel very welcome. We also discovered that the Macleods and the Gunns (Jenny's family) have close and ancient links that go back over 1000 years.

On the last day of the Parliament we caught the ferry at Sconser and crossed from Skye to the small Island of Raasay, where we visited Raasay House. And there on the other side of the planet, among a display of photos of all the grand houses and castles of the clan over the centuries was a photo of our old place here at Nalang. It was the strangest feeling, to find we had a part in all that history.

Out the back of Raasay House in the church yard, quite by chance, we came across the ruins of a tiny chapel, and therein found a gravestone which read "Sacred to the memory of Julia Hastings Macleod, daughter of John Macleod of Rasay and Mary his wife, Born 6th of September 1836, died 12 April 1839. 2 years and 7 months".

Our John's wee daughter. He must have buried her just prior to coming to South Australia. It seemed so sad, her so small and her father so far away.

Jenny and I climbed down the perilously steep path to the stony beach out the front of Raasay House where the waves of the Atlantic crashed and selected a pretty blue stone which I then had to cart around in my luggage for the next 5 weeks. We put it on his headstone when we got home.

John Macleod will never return to Raasay and his little girl, so we brought a piece back for him.

Bill Hunt, Nalang.

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