

From Clan MacLeod Society South Australia Newsletter February 2010

I include this article for an insight into the person who is a Chief of this Clan, and for an outsider's view of his situation. It doesn't intend to represent any views of this Clan Society, or Secretariat.

From The Times

January 27, 2010 Mike Wade

The curse of the MacLeods — a very dodgy builder

(James Glossop/The Times)

Hugh Magnus MacLeod of MacLeod: "Privilege means responsibility, silver spoons come with conditions".

In his estate office, Hugh MacLeod of MacLeod, the 30th chief of the clan, is scratching his beard and pondering a request. Could he don a kilt and pose for a photo outside Dunvegan Castle, the ancient family seat, on the wild north west coast of Skye? "No, I'm not doing that," he answers bluntly. Hackneyed images of the country laird are, MacLeod acknowledges, what people have come to expect of clan chiefs — but, as his trainers and North Face jacket suggest, this chief does not believe in playing to the crowd.



MacLeod, 36, is a Londoner with his own film production company, who describes himself as "estate manager" of Dunvegan, the dilapidated castle that he inherited nearly three years ago. This morning he will announce the first phase of its refurbishment, a £1.1 million roof repair — funded to the tune of £700,000 from the public purse — that begins next week, and should be completed by Christmas.

This is a far cry from tactics employed by his father, John, who caused uproar when he suggested selling the Cuillins, Skye's daunting mountain range, to fund works at the castle and to sustain a 65-square mile estate which is asset rich, but cash poor.

It is a sure sign of the straitened times that, during the works, it will be imperative to keep annual visitor numbers up at around 100,000, to maintain the castle's fragile economy. Then, two or three years down the line, when the estate has had time to recover its financial position, a slow programme of works will roll out over perhaps 25 years, to return the magic to Dunvegan, the most monstrously disfigured of ancient relics.

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Over the centuries, plenty of blood has flowed around these walls, occupied by MacLeods for 800 years since Leod, son of Olaf the Black, founded the dynasty. But for modern clansmen the problems really set in after a fire in 1938 destroyed part of the castle.

Dame Flora MacLeod, Hugh's great grandmother, decided to commission an architect to construct a new south wing, handing the brief to a certain MacLeod — it was no coincidence — of Inverness. This proved unwise. The resulting “diseased limb” of stone, pebbledash and tar has all the charm of the worst public housing of the postwar era accentuated by the application of grubby harling to the castle walls. To make matters worse a copper roof was installed which failed within four years and has continued failing ever since, rendering many of the private rooms uninhabitable. The buckets indoors speak for themselves.

It is a challenging inheritance for an Englishman, who studied at the University of London and the Sorbonne. He is close to Elena, his younger sister, and Stephen, his half-brother. and believes they have not necessarily lost out in the division of family spoils. “Privilege means responsibility, silver spoons come with conditions. A place like this is a shed load of work. My sister and brother can enjoy it as much as they want and stay at the house as much as they like without having to worry about anything.”

The care of the castle, and the shops, cottages, and boat trips it supports, adds up to ten-hour working days, but MacLeod denies that the estate is swamping his life. On the contrary, he insists that he will re-invigorate his production company in London and plans to attend the Cannes festival this year. He is even looking for a director to work on a film drama that he first mooted ... well, probably before he became the 30th MacLeod of MacLeod.

The immediate reality is a half-life spent away from his French wife, Frederique, a former actress, and Vincent his young son who remain in London. “My life is like an oil rig worker’s rota,” he says. “I do two weeks on, two weeks off. This is where I work. I’m managing the business and looking after the people I employ. It keeps me fresh. A life of contrasts. The commute is beautiful.”

A new generation of clan chiefs has shown the same will to adapt and survive. Clan Donald, sometime bitter enemy of the MacLeods, are led by Godfrey, the 8th Baron MacDonald, who runs a hotel with his wife, Claire MacDonald, the celebrated chef. “They are not a military menace these day, more a culinary threat,” says MacLeod.

“We all have day jobs. It’s not the Brothers Grimm — fairytale aristos stroking our sporrans in front of the fire. “I don’t see myself as an owner of all these things, but a custodian. It’s like a kind of museum curator, making sure that everything is properly maintained and seen by the public and passed on to the next generation. Keeping it preserved, conserved and in trust.”

Just as Leod would have wanted.