



Clan MacNicol



226 Peter Spring Road,
Concord, Mass. 01742

Dear Clan MacNicol member,

I am writing to you as one of the Trustees of Urras Clann MhicNeacail. In 1987 our clan purchased 130 acres of ancestral lands near Portree on the Isle of Skye in Scotland, and since that time a number of our members have been able to visit the land and appreciate its beauty. Some years ago I volunteered to produce a brochure about the land, for two purposes:

- For visitors to the land to have a guide to its features and history of the Clan's association with it
- For clan members who have never had the opportunity to visit the Isle of Skye, to give them a pictorial souvenir of how it looks

Barbara and I have visited Skye many times since that first memorable trip in 1987, and from the many photographs from these trips I have chosen some pictures which I hope will give you an idea of how magnificent the area is. The land is held in conservation in perpetuity for everyone to enjoy. The only development we will ever do are improvements to its accessibility and safety, but mainly we hope to keep it in its natural state for future generations to appreciate.

I hope this little booklet will bring back memories to those who have visited Skye, and encourage others to make the trip there for themselves some day

Yours in kinship

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Clan MacNeacail

A Visitor's Guide to the Lands of
Scorrybreac near Portree, Isle of Skye



by Murray Nicolson

Dedicated to the Chief of Clan MacNeacail
Iain MacNeacail of MacNeacail and Scorrybreac

February 2002

Clan MacNeacail

This brochure describes the lands associated with the Highland Clan MacNeacail, near Portree, on the Isle of Skye, Scotland. The lands on Ben Chracaig were purchased by the Clan in 1987. The land around the ruins of the old house of Scorrybreck on Ben Torvaig is privately owned but may be accessed by permission of the farmer. To encourage your enjoyment of these lands, this booklet has been prepared to describe the sights you will see as you visit. Pages 2–15 cover Ben Chracaig, pages 16–18 describe Scorrybreck House.

For many years, the Chiefs of Clan MacNeacail lived at Scorrybreck, on Ben Torvaig, but the last Chief left the island in 1825 and his descendants now live in New South Wales, Australia. In the early 1980s, efforts were made to re-establish Clan MacNeacail societies in Australia and North America, and while that was proceeding, clan members were advised by the late Ian Ferguson Nicolson, Isle of Man, that the lands of Ben Chracaig were being put up for sale. With its location very close to the old house of Scorrybreck, it was agreed that this would be an ideal purchase for the Clan, the lands to be held in perpetuity for conservation and the enjoyment of both local people and visitors to Portree from around the world. Contacts were made with Nicolson's living on the Isle of Skye, and a combined fund-raising effort in Scotland, North America, Australia, and New Zealand raised the funds to buy the land outright in 1987. The 130 acres on Ben Chracaig are now administered by Urras Clann MhicNeacail, a trust whose ten board members are drawn from around the world, and by a local Management Committee.

The lands of Ben Chracaig are freely open to the public, to



walks its footpaths and enjoy spectacular views both from along the shoreline and from atop its high cliffs. The land is maintained by the Skye Management Committee, under the chairmanship of Jan Nicolson of Portree, which has been responsible for many improvements to amenities since the land was purchased.

How to Get There

Follow the signs for the Cuillin Hills Hotel from the centre of Portree. The entrance to the land is along the shoreline below the hotel; there is a small parking space as the path begins. (See map on pages 10-11.)



The Chief's son, John Nicolson of Scorrybreac, and Jan Nicolson with the Nicolson Nose trophy (see also page 7)



A Walk around Ben Chracaig



A view from the top of Ben Crachaig looking south towards the Cullins.

A map of the lands of Ben Chracaig is shown on pages 10-11. The walk begins at the footbridge, which you can reach either from the parking lot by the shore, or by a path down from the front of the Cuillin Hills Hotel. Enter through the gate after crossing the bridge. There are three walks you can take: a short walk out to the point (Sgeir Mhor) and back; a longer walk, which continues on the new section of footpath along the shore to the wall at the edge of the property and back; and finally, a more strenuous walk, which climbs steeply up alongside the wall and around the perimeter of the land, ending back at the Cuillin Hills Hotel.

Another strenuous but rewarding hike is to climb a narrow path which begins behind the Cairn and reaches the top of the sea cliffs. Walking along the top of the cliffs you eventually meet



the circular walk at the wall, from where you may either turn left to return around the back of the property, or turn right and make a steep descent to the end of the wall near the shore and return along the shore path.



The walk east towards Sgeir Mhor ("The Black Rock") which boats must take care to avoid as they enter Portree Loch, with Ben Tianavaig in the background.



The Cairn



This cairn was built by the late Murdo Nicolson of Portree and dedicated by the Clan Chief in 1989. Incorporated within the stones of this cairn is a stone taken from the ruins of the old house of Scorrybreac during the First World War by Norman Alexander Nicolson, the father of the present Chief, and returned by the present Chief from his home in Australia. On the cairn is a plaque inscribed with the names of those clanspeople from around the world who contributed to the land purchase in 1987 and to the subsequent maintenance work.



Take a look behind the cairn — can you spot the curious stone that seems to exemplify a characteristic of many Nicolsons — the “Nicolson Nose”?



As you stand with your back to the cairn, you have a magnificent view looking over Portree Loch south towards the Cuillin Hills 20 miles to the south. To your left across the Loch rises the summit of Ben Tianavaig, and to your right is the harbour of Portree with its painted cottages. The four seats were dedicated by clan members to Lady Dorothy Nicolson, Ian Ferguson Nicolson, John Hurt Nicholson, and Lady Juliet Nicholson.



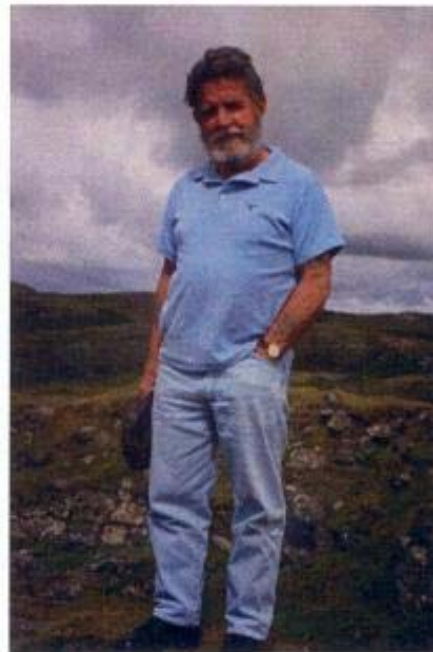
Murdo's Well

(Tobar Mhurchaidh)



Murdo's Well, inscribed, "To the Glory of God and in grateful memory of those of Clan Nicolson who died for their countries in the cause of justice."

Murdo Nicolson, who built the Cairn, also built this well in memory of his uncle and those who fell in wars in the service of their country.



Murdo Nicolson, BEM, was born in Bayfield in Portree and lived in the town until he left to join the Marine Commandos during the War. After the War, he spent several years at sea, then joined the Highland Light Infantry, where he rose to the rank of Colour Sergeant-Major. Over his 25 years in the regiment, he served in many countries of the world. He was fiercely proud of the Clan's purchase of the land of Ben Chracaig, and worked on it tirelessly until his untimely death in 1997.

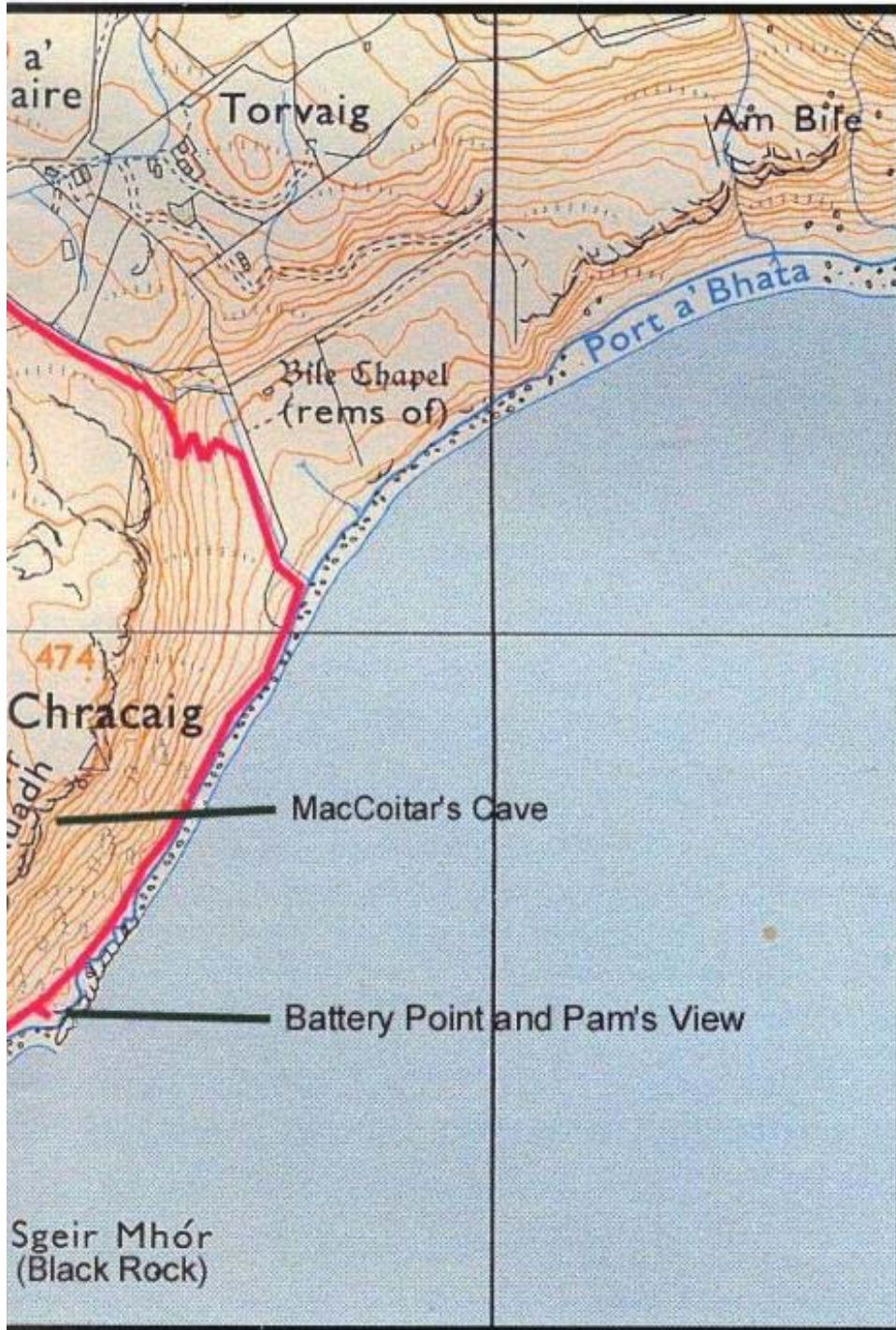
Culdee's Well

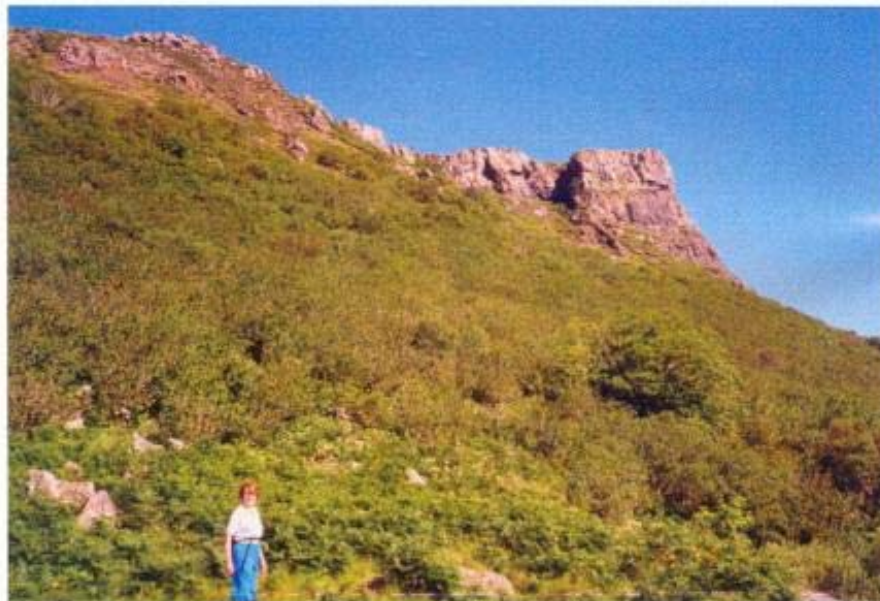


As you approach Sgeir Mhor and Battery Point, you come across the site of an old well, which Tish Nicolson says used to be known as Culdee's Well. Its water was reputed to have healing properties. In much disrepair, it was restored in 1997 by the widow of Alastair C.M. Nicolson of Balfraon, another contributor to the purchase of Ben Chracaig for the Clan, who visited here often.









The cliffs of Ben Chracaig as you approach Battery Point.

At the corner of the path you come to Battery Point, so-named because there was a gun emplacement here to protect Loch Portree during the Napoleonic Wars. If you look closely, you can see a vertical cleft in the cliffs near the top — this is MacCoitar's Cave. Derek Cooper in his book writes: "This Cave of the Cottar's Son is said to have been where a young man hid to save himself from the press gang. Another legend relates that MacCoitar was a brigand who used the cave, high above the bay, as a base from which to raid ships lying at anchor." Yet another legend is that the cave runs all through the island and emerges in Loch Bracadale. One of our clan members claims in his youth to have climbed and entered the cave, and survived to tell the tale!



Pam's View

(Sealladh Pham)

Facing the sea is a natural stone bench inscribed "Pam's View," named after the beloved late wife Pamela of the current Chief of Clan MacNeacail, Iain MacNeacail



of MacNeacail and Scorrybreac, who lives in Ballina, New South Wales, Australia. Scorrybreac and his wife have visited the Isle of Skye many times, and this beautiful spot was very



precious to her. Near you, and jutting into the Loch is Sgeir Mhor, the "Black Rock," which is covered at high tide. Across the Sound of Raasay you can see the northern end of the Isle of Raasay. Behind you rise up the cliffs of Ben Chracaig.



A FOOTNOTE ON THESE LANDS

From *The Misty Isle of Skye*,
by J.A. MacCulloch, Oliphant, 1910

Thus it is easy to see that the natural surroundings of Portree make it what it is, and this suggests a closer treatment of some of them. The tourist who makes Portree his headquarters, and from there dashes off to see the Quiraing or Coruisk, or the Coolins, or Dunvegan, knows little of the charming "bits" so near at hand, where so much variety and beauty is spread before and around one. If he be of an independent turn of mind, he may discover some of them for himself, but this seldom happens, and their true value remains known only to those who live year in year out in their midst, and can wander to them at the appropriate season.

Between the two frowning basaltic cliffs on the north side of the entrance to the bay the oolite which everywhere underlies the basalt is exposed to view. It runs sloping upwards in long yellow strata full of fossils far above the blue waters, and on its top lies a lush green meadow. In one or two places wind and weather have eroded the cliff and left great hollows under a canopy of stone where one may sit in quiet and look down on the placid sea or watch the lights and shadows changing on the rugged face of Ben Tianavaig across the bay. Here and there a limpid fountain trickles down through a deep crevice lined with thick curtains of moss, where lurk hartstongue ferns and black maiden-hair, or in the drier cracks of the limestone the rare little wall-rue or the glossy sea spleenwort. Thyme overhangs the cliff's edge, and the oolite is everywhere channelled and grooved, and in these grooves and channels ivy has taken a firm hold, so that it sometimes completely hides the rock beneath a deep green mantle. Its roots, where they are exposed, are of the thickness of a man's arm. In the meadow which runs inshore grow hemlock, meadow-sweet, and purple vetch, often as high as one's head; in the more barren patches peep blue violets, masses of eyebright, the green sun-spurge, the golden buttercup, or, earlier in the year, the pale primrose and the purple hyacinth.

A little beyond are the crumbling stones of one of those tiny ancient Celtic churches, rude in architecture, in which the voice of praise has long been silent, and where the too luxurious vegetation girdles the



long-forgotten graves, and lulls them to a deeper sleep. But not all, for there is one stone of recent erection with a touching epitaph. It tells of a sailor who, weary of life, committed suicide in the loch. He was buried here, not in the parish churchyard, and rumour hints darkly of those who, thinking even this ancient place of graves too sacred for the bones of one who had raised an impious hand against himself, cast him back once more into the sea. Peace be to his soul, wherever his body lies. "He was a faithful servant to his earthly master."

A ludicrous story attaches itself to this place. Two solitary trees rise gaunt and high among the deserted ruins. They mark the graves of the successive wives of an islander who kept their memory green by these memorials, but who, when his time came that men should gird and carry him, found none to do the like for him.

Above this old churchyard is a narrow glen down which a burn trickles to the sea. It terminates in the precipitous flank of the cliff, over which the water dashes, through masses of birch and hazel, forming a cool, shadowy grotto with deep recesses where lurk asplenia and hollyfern in plenty. All around are thick clumps of fern and bracken, beds of yellow primroses, blue violets, white anemones, while the air is scented with their perfumes and the aromatic odour of the bracken. Overhead is the black frowning cliff, looking as if it would suddenly dash itself downwards. Beyond it is the ruined heap of Dun Torvaig, and near by the gable of the ancient house of Scorrybreck. Somewhere here Prince Charles hid from his pursuers after having crossed to Skye from Raasay, beyond the sound. Far below are the ruined church, the green meadow, the rolling sea. In front is Creag Mhor, rising skywards; across the water is Raasay and the steep flanks of Ben Tianavaig, and in the far distance Ben Alligin looks down upon the glories of Loch Torridon. You see all this on an early summer day, when sea and sky are sapphire and a haze hangs over the slopes of Raasay with their variegated surface of brown and grey and green. The lambs are calling, the plovers are shrieking, the gulls poisoning themselves irresolutely in mid-air, and then, with a wild cry, darting off into the far distance; some fishing-boats are putting out to sea, their brown sails now bellying, now collapsing, as they tack hither and thither, seeking for a breeze. These are the only signs of life in the joyous landscape, and you feel how good a thing it is to be alive, while the air is full of the tang of the sea and the perfumes of summer, and the eye rests gladly on the beauty of earth and sea.



Scorrybreac House on Ben Torvaig

(Taigh Mor Mhic Neacail shuas ud)



The ruins of Scorrybreac House.



This is the site of the old house of Scorrybreac on Ben Torvaig, associated with the Nicolsons of Scorrybreac for the whole of their recorded history. It fell into ruin when the last Chief left the island in about 1825, and was demolished in the 1880s. At that time, the story is told that workmen found old papers relating to the clan — and burned them to cook their supper! And so many of the clan's most important papers have been lost.



In the 1930s, Dr. J.G. Nicholson researched clan history and published his book, *The Clan Nicolson*, in 1938. He had a monument raised on the site of the old house, whose walls you can still see.

J.G. Nicholson, in his book, describes an important tradition in the clan's history — the visit of Bonnie Prince Charlie:

Scorrybreck figures in the adventures of Prince Charlie, although it was not the house of the Chief but only a byre in which he took shelter. During his wanderings after Culloden as a fugitive, tracked everywhere by enemies thirsting for the reward offered for his capture, he crossed from Raasay to Skye and landed under the cliffs at Nicolson's Rock. From there the wet and weary party struggled up the craggy slopes until they reached what Boswell calls "a cow-house belonging to Mr. Niccolson of Scorbreck." Prince Charlie's Cave, situated to the northwards of where he landed, was for long thought to have been his hiding-place, but it was never tenanted by him. During all these months of eluding his pursuers his presence was not intimated even to friends, except when necessary, partly to prevent additional risks, and partly to avoid their imprisonment or death if they were afterwards found to have aided or sheltered him. But an exception was made on this occasion, for the Chief, a trusted adherent of the Jacobite party, either visited him in the byre or provided means of comfort during his concealment there. The lock of his hair which the Prince cut off for the Scorrybreck ladies, and the glass which he drank from, are two of the few things which were preserved when the family left their old home, and they are still amongst the most treasured relics belonging to the present Chief.



Scorrybreac House in Poetry

It is hard to relate these sad ruins to the "great house of MacNicol up yonder" as it was commemorated in Gaelic song for many hundreds of years. A traditional song commemorates the marriage of the then Chief Malcolm Nicolson to Margaret, the sister of Iain Garbh Mac Ghille Chaluim, the Chief of the MacLeods in Raasay, the island across the water from these lands of Scorrybreac:

To Scorrybreac where the festivity is wont to be
To the wide hall of the family of Donald
Where wine is got to drink
From brown goblets of ornamented rim
Trenchers and plates of pewter
And a vat for brewing barley...
In the great spacious house of swept floor
An apple would roll up and down it
And one would get that in the house of my loved one
Pig being scraped and cattle being flayed
And gold candlestick on white tables...

The Legend of The Fairy Cattle

J.G. Nicholson, in his book, told the legend of the Fairy Cattle: The lands of Scorrybreck are associated with one of the legends of Skye folklore. The crodh sith, or fairy cattle, used to swim across from Raasay to enjoy the grazing of the succulent pastures on the slopes of Scorrybreck. If anyone chanced to observe them he hastened to lift some of the soil from a churchyard and throw it between them and the sea. This formed a sacred barrier which prevented the recall of the fairy owners being heard. The cattle were unable to return until they had heard the signal, and so had to remain and were joined to the herds on the island, being regarded as a valuable addition to the farmers' stock. Unfortunately, history does not relate how many were added to the Skye herds.

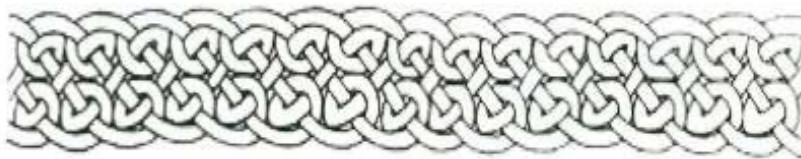


The FIRST Meeting on Ben Chracaig



Clan members at the dedication of the Ben Chracaig lands in 1987:

(Standing) Murdo Nicolson, Ian Ferguson Nicolson, Ian MacNeacail of MacNeacail and Scorrybreac (Clan Chief), Forrester Nicolson, Murray Nicolson, Burke Nicholson, Judy Nicolson, Tish Nicolson. (Seated at front) Pam Nicolson, Juliet Nicholson, Barbara Nicolson.



Note: Since this booklet was printed in 2002, there have been a number of changes to the names and addresses of persons shown on the previous page. Where there is a difference between the names shown in the booklet and those on the web site, the web site information is likely to be the more current.