

The Account of
Roderick Macrae

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I am writing this at the behest of my advocate, Mr Andrew Sinclair, who since my incarceration here in Inverness has treated me with a degree of civility I in no way deserve. My life has been short and of little consequence, and I have no wish to absolve myself of responsibility for the deeds which I have lately committed. It is thus for no other reason than to repay my advocate's kindness towards me that I commit these words to paper.

Mr Sinclair has instructed me to set out, with as much clarity as possible, the circumstances surrounding the murder of Lachlan Mackenzie and the others, and this I will do to the best of my ability, apologising in advance for the poverty of my vocabulary and rudeness of style.

I shall begin by saying that I carried out these acts with the sole purpose of delivering my father from the tribulations he has lately suffered. The cause of these tribulations was our neighbour, Lachlan Mackenzie, and it was for the betterment of my family's lot that I have removed him from this world. I should further state that since my own entry into the world, I have been nothing but a blight to my father and my departure from his household can only be a blessing to him.

My name is Roderick John Macrae. I was born in 1852 and have lived all my days in the village of Culduie in Ross-shire. My father, John Macrae, is a crofter of good standing in the parish, who does not deserve to be tarnished with the ignominy of the actions for which I alone am responsible. My mother, Oona, was born in 1832 in the township of Toscaig, some two miles south of Culduie. She died in the birthing of my brother, Iain, in 1868, and it is this event which, in my mind, marks the beginning of our troubles.

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Culduie is a township of nine houses, situated in the parish of Applecross. It lies half a mile or so south of Camusterrach where the church and the school in which I received my education are located. On account of the inn and the emporium in the village of Applecross, few travellers venture as far as Culduie. At the head of

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Applecross Bay is the Big House, where Lord Middleton resides, and during the sporting season entertains his guests. There are no spectacles or entertainments to detain visitors in Culduie. The road past our township leads to Toscaig and to nowhere beyond, and in consequence we have little contact with the outside world.

Culduie is set back some three hundred yards from the sea and nestles at the foot of Càrn nan Uaighean. Between the village and the road is a tract of fertile ground, which is cultivated by the people. Higher into the mountains are the summer grazings and the peat bogs that supply us with our fuel. Culduie is somewhat protected from the worst of the climate by the Aird-Dubh peninsula, which projects into the sea, forming a natural harbour. The village of Aird-Dubh is poorly served with arable land and the people there are mostly concerned with fishing for their livelihoods. A certain amount of exchange of labour and goods takes place between these two communities, but, aside from such necessary contact, we keep our distance from one another. According to my father, Aird-Dubh folk are slovenly in their habits and of low morals, and he has dealings with them only on sufferance. In common with all those engaged in the fishing trade, the men are devoted to the unrestrained consumption of whisky, while their womenfolk are notoriously wanton. Having been schooled with children from this village, I can vouch for the fact that while there is little to distinguish them physically from our own people, they are devious and not to be trusted.

At the junction of the track connecting Culduie to the road is the house of Kenny Smoke, which, being the only one boasting a slate roof, is the finest in the village. The other eight houses are constructed from stones reinforced with turf and have thatch roofs. Each house has one or two glazed windows. My own family's house is the northernmost of the village and sits somewhat at an angle, so that while the other houses look out towards the bay, ours faces the village. The home of Lachlan Broad is situated at the opposite end of the track, and, after that of Kenny Smoke, is the second largest in the village. Aside from those mentioned,

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the houses are occupied by two further families of the clan Mackenzie; the MacBeath family; Mr and Mrs Gillanders, whose children have all gone; our neighbour Mr Gregor and his family; and Mrs Finlayson, a widow. Aside from the nine houses there are various outbuildings, many of quite rude construction, which are used for housing livestock, storing tools and such like. That is the extent of our community.

Our own house comprises two chambers. The greater part consists of the byre and, to the right of the door, our living quarters. The floor slopes downwards a little towards the sea, which prevents the dung from the animals running into our quarters. The byre is partitioned by a balustrade constructed from scraps of wood gathered from the shore. In the middle of the living area is the fire and, beyond that, the table at which we take our meals. Aside from the table, our furniture consists of two sturdy benches, my father's armchair and a large wooden dresser, which belonged to my mother's family before she was married. I sleep on a bunk with my younger brother and sister at the far end of the room. The second chamber at the back of the house is where my father and elder sister sleep; Jetta in a box-bed my father constructed for this purpose. I am envious of my sister's bed and often dreamt of lying with her there, but it is warmer in the main chamber and in the black months when the animals are indoors, I take pleasure in the soft sounds they make. We keep two milk cows and six sheep, which is what is allowed to us by the division of the common grazings.

I should state from the outset that some bad blood existed between my father and Lachlan Mackenzie long before I was born. I cannot testify to the source of this animosity, for my father has never spoken of it. Nor do I know upon whose side the fault lies; whether this enmity arose in their lifetimes, or is the product of some ancient grudge. In these parts it is not uncommon for grievances to be nursed long after their original source is forgotten. It is to my father's credit that he never endeavoured to perpetuate this feud by proselytising to myself or other members of our family.

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For this reason, I believe that he must have wished for whatever grievance existed between our two families to be laid to rest.

As a small boy, I was quite terrified of Lachlan Broad and avoided venturing beyond the junction to the end of the village where the members of the clan Mackenzie are concentrated. In addition to that of Lachlan Broad, there are the families of his brother, Aeneas, and his cousin, Peter, and those three are notorious for their carousing and frequent involvement in altercations at the inn in Applecross. They are all three great powerful fellows, who take pleasure in the knowledge that people step aside to let them pass. On one occasion, when I was five or six years old, I was flying a kite my father had made me from some scraps of sackcloth. The kite plunged into some crops and I ran, quite unthinking, to retrieve it. I was on my knees trying to disentangle the string from among the corn when I felt myself gripped on the shoulder by a great hand and roughly hauled to track. I was still clutching my kite and Lachlan Broad tore it from me and dashed it to the ground. He then hit me on the side of the head with the flat of his hand, knocking me down. I was so frightened that I lost control of my bladder, causing our neighbour a great deal of mirth. I was then picked up and dragged the length of the village, where Broad berated my father for the damage I had done to his crops. The commotion brought my mother to the door and at this point Broad released me from his grip and I scuttled into the house like a scared dog and covered in the byre. Later that evening, Lachlan Broad returned to our house and demanded five shillings in compensation for the portion of his crops I had destroyed. I hid in the back chamber with my ear to the door. My mother refused, arguing that if any damage had been done to his crops, it had been caused by him dragging me through his rig. Broad then took his complaint to the constable, who dismissed it. One morning, some days later, my father found that a great portion of our crops had been trampled underfoot overnight. It was not known who carried out this destruction, but no one doubted that it was Lachlan Broad and his kinsmen.

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As I grew older, I never entered the lower end of the village without an accompanying sense of foreboding, and this feeling has never left me.

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My father was born in Culduie and lived as a boy in the house in which we now dwell. I know little of his childhood, only that he attended school rarely, and there were hardships such as my generation has not known. I have never seen my father do more than sign his name and, although he insists he can write, a pen sits awkwardly in his fist. He has, in any case, little need for writing. There is nothing he requires to commit to paper. My father is wont to remind us of our good fortune in being brought up in the current times with the luxuries of tea, sugar and other shop-bought goods.

My mother's father was a carpenter who built furniture for merchants in Kyle of Lochalsh and Skye, and sailed his wares round the coast. For some years my father had a third share in a fishing vessel, which anchored in Toscaig. The other parties in this concern were his own brother, Iain, and my mother's brother, whose name was also Iain. The boat was named *The Gannet*, but was always referred to as 'The Two Iains', which irked my father as he was the eldest of the three and, by virtue of this, thought himself head of the enterprise. As a girl, my mother liked to go to the pier to greet The Two Iains. It was assumed that she went to welcome her brother, but her real purpose was to watch my father as he stepped from the boat, his foremost foot hovering above the water as he waited for the swell to propel the vessel to the quay. He would then secure the rope to a bollard and heave the boat to the wall, all this accomplished as if he was quite unaware of being observed. My father was not a handsome man, but the unhurried manner in which he went about the business of tethering the boat drew my mother's admiration. There was something, she liked to tell us, in his flickering dark eyes which set a quickening in her throat. If my father was nearby, he would tell my mother to stop her tittle-tattle, but he did so in a tone which betrayed that he took pleasure in hearing it.

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Our mother was the great beauty of the parish and could have had her pick of the young men. In consequence, my father was far too bashful to ever address a word to her. One evening towards the end of the herring season of 1850, a storm broke and the little vessel was smashed against rocks some miles south of the harbour. My father swam to safety but the two Iains were lost. Father never spoke of this incident, but he never again set foot on a boat, nor would he allow his offspring to do so. To those ignorant of this episode in his past, he must have seemed to have an irrational fear of the sea. It is due to this incident that it came to be regarded in these parts as inauspicious to venture into an enterprise with one's namesake. Even my father, who scorns superstition, avoids doing business with anyone who shares his name.

At the gathering following my uncle's funeral, my father approached my mother to offer his condolences. She looked so forlorn that he told her he would gladly take her brother's place in the coffin. These were the first words he had ever addressed to her. My mother replied that she was glad it was he who had survived, and that she had prayed forgiveness for her wicked thoughts. They were married three months later.

My sister Jetta was born within a year of my parents' marriage and I followed from my mother's womb as swiftly as nature allows. This proximity in years bred a closeness between my sister and I which could scarcely have been greater had we been *bona fide* twins. Yet in outward appearance we could hardly have been more different. Jetta had my mother's long slender face and broad mouth. Her eyes, like my mother's, were blue and oval and her hair as yellow as sand. When my sister reached womanhood, folk were wont to comment that when she looked at Jetta, my mother must think she was gazing upon her fetch. For my part, I inherited my father's heavy brow, thick black hair and small dark eyes. We are, moreover, similar in build, being of shorter than average stature, and barrel-chested with wide shoulders.

Likewise in temperament we mirrored our parents, Jetta being quite gay and gregarious, while I was said to be a taciturn and

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gloomy boy. In addition to her likeness to my mother in appearance and character, Jetta shared with her a great sensitivity to the Other World. Whether she had been born with this gift or had learned it from some secret teachings of my mother I cannot say, but both were prone to visions and were greatly concerned with omens and charms. On the morning of her brother's death, my mother saw an empty place on the bench where he should have been sitting at his breakfast. Fearing that his porridge would grow cold, she went outside and called him. When he did not answer, she went back inside and saw him at his place at the table, shrouded in a pale grey winding sheet. When she asked where he had been he replied that he had been nowhere other than the bench. She begged him not to go to sea that day, but he laughed at her suggestion and, knowing that providence could not be bargained with, she said nothing more about it. Mother often told us this story, but only outwith my father's hearing as he did not believe in such uncanny happenings and did not approve of her speaking of such things.

My mother's daily life was governed by rituals and charms intended to ward off ill fortune and unchancy beings. The doorways and windows of our house were festooned with sprigs of rowan and juniper, and concealed within her hair, so that my father could not see it, she wore a plait of coloured yarns.

During the black months, from the age of eight or so, I attended school at Camusterrach. I walked there each morning hand in hand with Jetta. Our first teacher was Miss Galbraith, who was the daughter of the minister. She was young and slender and wore long skirts and a white chemise with a ruff at her neck, secured at the throat by a broach depicting a woman's profile. She wore an apron tied around her waist, which she used to clean her hands after she had been writing on the blackboard. Her neck was very long and when she was thinking she would cast her eyes upwards and tip her head to the side so that it made a curve like the handle of a cas chrom. She wore her hair secured on top of her head with pins. While we were at our lessons, she would let her hair down and hold

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the pins in her mouth while she fastened it back up. She did this three or four times a day and I took pleasure in secretly observing her. Miss Galbraith was kind and spoke in a soft voice. When the older boys did not behave, she had great trouble quietening them and only succeeded in doing so by threatening to fetch her father.

Jetta and I were quite inseparable. Miss Galbraith often commented that I would climb inside the pocket of my sister's apron if I could. For the first few years I spoke very infrequently. If Miss Galbraith or one of my classmates addressed me, Jetta would answer on my behalf. What was remarkable was the accuracy with which she expressed my thoughts. Miss Galbraith indulged this habit and would often ask Jetta, 'Does Roddy know the answer?' This closeness between us isolated us from our peers. I cannot speak for Jetta, but I felt no desire to befriend any of the other children and they showed no desire to befriend me.

Sometimes our classmates would gather round us in the playground and chant:

*Here stand the Black Macraes, the dirty Black Macraes.
Here stand the Black Macraes, the filthy Black Macraes.*

The 'Black Macraes' was the nickname given to my father's family, on account, he claimed, of their swarthy colouring. Father greatly disliked this designation and refused to answer if someone addressed him in this way. Nevertheless, he was known to everyone as the Black Macrae and it was a source of amusement in the village that, given my mother's flaxen hair, she came to be known as Oona Black.

I too disliked this name and felt it to be a particular injustice that it was attached to my sister. If our classmates' chants were not interrupted by the end of the break, I would strike out at whoever was in front of me, an act which only served to increase the glee of our tormentors. I would be pushed to the ground and accept the kicks and blows of the other boys, happy to have diverted attention from Jetta.