

Loch a Tuath News

HMY Iolaire

1 January 1919



Foreword

New Year's Day 2019 will mark exactly 100 years since the Admiralty yacht *Iolaire* grounded and sank on the Beasts of Holm by the mouth of Stornoway Harbour. Of the 280 men aboard, the mass of them Royal Naval Reserve ratings returning from the Great War, only 79 survived. That bleakest of New Years has left a hollow echo of grief through generations of islanders, even to this day.

This Hogmanay, many of us will witness the last major commemoration of the *Iolaire* Disaster in our lifetime. It is therefore appropriate that, here in the Loch a' Tuath district, we should pay tribute to those who lost their lives in this incomprehensible tragedy and examine the impact and legacy it left on our community.

In 1999 *Loch a Tuath News* marked the 80th anniversary with an account written by the late James Maciver (*Jimmy Iain Sheumais*), 16 Tong. Ten years later, the journalist John Macleod provided more local background for our readers prior to the publication of his book *When I Heard the Bell - The Loss of the Iolaire*. Many of the details of the disaster contained within this supplement rely on these two excellent accounts as their source.

Although relatively modest in scale, our supplement will add a stone to the cairn of the many commemorations which the island community has already undertaken to mark this seismic event in our local history. We hope that readers will consider our contribution to the milestone anniversary to be informative, poignant and thought-provoking.

Iain Murray
Guest Editor

The Disaster

Formerly known as *Amalthea*, the yacht *Iolaire* was pressed into service on 6 November 1918 having been renamed by the Admiralty. The previous *Iolaire* was the flagship of the Stornoway anti-U-Boat patrol, taking its name from the naval base at Stornoway. She was captained by Commander Mason and had a total crew of 24.

On New Year's Eve, 1918, hundreds of servicemen were returning home on leave. Over 500 persons congregated at Kyle of Lochalsh looking for a passage across the Minch. The Armistice had been signed on 11 November and, after four long years of war, the servicemen were eager and excited to greet the New Year at home.

At Kyle there were soldiers, sailors and civilians waiting to board. The vast majority of the naval personnel were assigned to the *Iolaire*. The remaining passengers were put on board the SS *Sheila* which was the regular mail steamer on the Stornoway—Kyle run. As providence would ordain, four servicemen from Tong came over on the *Sheila* that night—Tong was possibly the only village on the island not to incur any casualties in the tragedy that ensued.

The *Iolaire* left Kyle at 7.30pm. She passed the northern end of Rona at about 10pm and moved out into the Minch at her top speed, which was not as fast as that of her predecessor. Shortly after midnight the yacht passed



Iolaire

the fishing boat *Spider* about 12 miles outside Stornoway. By now there was a force nine gale blowing and she was at times dipping her rails with the severity of the weather. For some unknown reason, as witnessed by the crew of the *Spider*, the yacht followed a course further east than she should have. One theory, proposed by the late Captain John Smith (master of the *Loch Seaforth*), was that the Tiumpan Head lighthouse was mistaken for the Arnish light on the approach to Stornoway.

At 1.50am on New Year's Day the Arnish light was belatedly sighted but the disastrous course the ship had taken could not be rectified at this stage and she struck the rocks, the Beasts of Holm, five minutes later. It was said that it was about half an hour before the first man managed to reach dry land. An hour later, at 3.25am, the *Iolaire* had all but disappeared.

In the ensuing chaos some of the men attempted to swim ashore. It was a pitch black night and the conditions were dreadful, causing many to lose their lives in their valiant struggles.

John Finlay Macleod of Port of Ness managed to swim to shore with a lifeline. A hawser was attached, pulled ashore and made fast. Forty men were rescued by the aforementioned hawser and a few more were saved when the ship turned broadside on to the shore. This broke the force of the wind and sea momentarily, allowing a few men to get off the vessel. Donald Morrison of Knockaird climbed the ship's mast and clung on as she submerged. He was picked up alive the next morning at 10 o'clock, having spent eight hours at the scene.

Of the 201 men who perished, 56 bodies were never recovered; eight more, brought ashore, could not be identified. Overnight, on 1 January 1919, the war-related dead in the island increased by 20 per cent.

Per head of population, the villages of Broad Bay did not suffer the heavy loss of life experienced by other island communities. The Point district was bereaved of 39 men which included ten from the small village of Sheshader; Tolsta and Leurbost both lost 11 men and Crowlista in Uig had six *Iolaire* passengers, all of whom were drowned.

Such statistics, of course, cannot express the tragedy of the situation. Whether there was only one widow in a village or there were many, each household suffered the profound emotional and economic consequences of losing an able young man. That the disaster took place so far from the dangerous fields of war, and so close to the safe harbour of home, made for the bitterest of stings. For those families, the experience of having their glad expectations of a longed-for homecoming so cruelly smashed against these rocks led to a deep and lasting incomprehension: there could be no words of comfort, no words of explanation to lessen their grief.

Nine of our local men drowned on that darkest of nights. Four sailors from Coll were lost, with just one survivor from the village, 20-year old Alex John MacLeod (63 Coll). Four sons of Vatisker — including two brothers — died with the *Iolaire*. The youngest of our local fatalities was from Back.

Alex Beaton, 37 Coll, was only 28. Two years earlier his younger brother James had made the ultimate sacrifice on the Western Front. Donald MacDonald, 11 Back, and William MacLeod, 8 Coll, were just boys of 19. John Morrison, 10 Coll, left a widow with eight children. The brothers Alex and Donald Campbell left two widows and, between them, four children. William John 'Robert' Murray and John MacAskill of Lighthill were neighbours. Murdo MacLeod, 30 Coll, had survived his wife; now his little girl had lost both her parents.

On 10 and 11 February 1919 a special Public Inquiry was held in Stornoway Sheriff Court House, with Sheriff Principal Macintosh presiding. The Inquiry found numerous faults, the principal ones being lack of prudence in entering harbour and also insufficient lifeboats or rafts. What was perhaps most vexatious for the bereaved families was the knowledge that many of the passengers aboard could themselves have steered the yacht into the harbour with relative ease.

The Admiralty showed an unfeeling, uncaring attitude to the enormity of the effect of this tragedy which befell Lewis and gave scant attention to the official inquiry. Incredibly, the wreck was put up for salvage within three weeks of the sinking. The sheer strength of the ensuing public outcry made them give way. The wreck was never moved.

Fifty years after the disaster, the ship's bell was recovered from the sea bed by divers and presented to the then Stornoway Town Council. It can now be seen in the museum at Lews Castle.

The aforementioned John Finlay Macleod, Port of Ness, was awarded the Royal Humane Society's Silver Medal for his great gallantry. He went on to become a noted boat builder for many years. He died in 1978.

Even today, beyond the Western Isles, remarkably few have heard of the catastrophe, although the *Iolaire* remains Britain's worst peacetime accident at sea since the *Titanic* and the worst peacetime loss of ship in British waters since the sinking of SS *Norge* off Rockall in 1904.

However, for the generation who lost their men, the memory of the sinking of the *Iolaire* was a silent yet powerful presence throughout their lives, and the impact of that enduring grief still reverberates around our island today.

Acknowledgements

In our research for the supplement we acknowledge the invaluable information gained from the website *Faces from the War Memorial* and its author Guido Blokland. In recent weeks, *The Darkest Dawn - The Story of the Iolaire Tragedy* has provided what will be perhaps the definitive and final word on the disaster. An extract from the book appears in the survivors' accounts.

Many of the servicemen's photographs first appeared in *Loyal Lewis Roll of Honour 1914–1918* and were reproduced in the *Stornoway Gazette*. The front cover's photograph is courtesy of Magz Macleod, Impact Imagz, Gress. The photograph on the back cover was taken by Chris Murray, Stornoway.

The verse on the back cover is from *Raoir Reubadh an Iolaire*, one of Murdo MacFarlane's compositions which were recorded many years ago in *An Toinneamh Diomhair*. As a young man he was profoundly affected by the sight of the bodies of *Iolaire* sailors being washed up on the shore close to his Melbost home. Latterly, Murdo was cared for by his relative Mary Flora Campbell (*Bean Dholaidh 'an Omhairlidh*) at her home in Tong, where he passed away in 1982.

The Lost

Donald MacDonald, 11 Back

Dòmhnall Mhurchaidh Portair— an Cùbair, the son of Murdo and Catherine MacDonald, served with the Royal Naval Reserve during the closing months of World War 1. Aged 19 years, he was the youngest of the district's nine fatalities of the *Iolaire* Disaster and is the only WW1 casualty from Back village to be interred in Gress cemetery. His two older brothers also served: John (Seaforths) and Roderick (RNR), the latter being one of just two survivors from SS *Caithness*, which was torpedoed in the Bay of Biscay in 1917.



In the years that followed Donald's loss, locals observing the New Year would leave his family in peace to allow them to mark the painful anniversary privately and with dignity. The last member of the family, his sister Christina (*am Portag*) died in 1979. His cousin *Dòmhnall Mhurdo*, who was named after Donald, also lived at this address together with his sister Morag until they passed away in the 1980s. His niece Cathie (*nighean Ruairidh Mhurchaidh Portair*), formerly of 27 Gress, lives in Stornoway.

Donald Campbell, 3 Vatisker



Donald, known locally as *Am Pad*, was a fisherman who, in earlier years, had sailed on Lake Superior. He served with the RNR through the 1914–18 war and was a Leading Seaman, latterly based at the naval depot at Chatham, Kent, known as HMS *Pembroke*. He was one of two sons of Norman Campbell, 8 Vatisker, who answered the call and tragically both he and his half-brother Alexander lost their lives in the disaster. Of the two brothers only

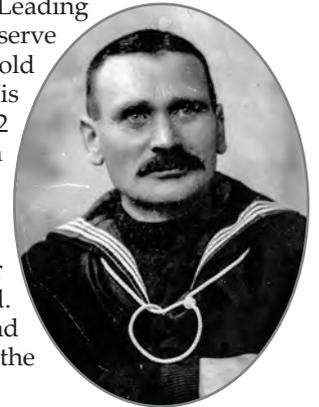
Donald's body was recovered and was interred at Gress.

The Campbell family was one of nine households across the Loch a' Tuath district that suffered a double bereavement during the war; it is of course of added poignancy that both deaths happened on the same night and just a matter of yards from their home soil. Donald, who was aged 48 years, was married to Catherine Macrae, 3 Vatisker, and moved to this address following his marriage.

At the time of his death his daughter Jane (*Sine Bheag*) was aged 11. Also living in the family home were two young cousins: Jane MacDonald (*Sine Mhòr—Bean Tàisein*), later of 10 Vatisker, and her brother William, later of Harthill, Lanarkshire. These two siblings were bereaved of both parents by 1915—their mother Christina was a sister of Catherine Macrae. *Sine Bheag* later married John Macaskill, 8 Vatisker (*Lèid*)—their son Donald (*Teenie*), Murray Place, Stornoway, and daughter Cathy Morag Macleod, Broadbay View, are Donald Campbell's closest relations today.

Alexander Campbell, 8 Vatisker

Alexander (*mac Òrd*) served as a Leading Seaman with the Royal Naval Reserve during WW1. He was 42 years old and his body was never found. His widow Jessie (nee Graham, 22 Vatisker) received a letter from his former captain shortly after his death: '...You know you have my deepest sympathy, for you have lost a good man; no better ever sailed under my command. He was several years with me, and I always knew when he was on the helm the ship was safe...'



Jessie passed away on New Year's Day 1943, the anniversary of her husband's death. They had a family of one daughter and two sons: Peggy later married George Graham, 36 Vatisker (*Seòras a' Chran*), Norman (*Tucsaidh*) married Catherine Macleod, 1 New Park (*Catriona Pheidear*) and inherited the family croft, and Alexander (an Gander) married Christina Stewart, 17 Back (*Ciorstag Sheoidhein*).

Sadly, Alexander junior, who was born shortly after his father's death, also died prematurely aged 37 years in an accident at Kyle in 1956. Alexander's grand-daughters Alexina and Peggy (*clann-nighean Sheòrais a' Chran*), and surviving grandsons Alasdair and Alex Norman (*balaich Tucsaidh*) are the closest family members today.

John Macaskill, 68 Lighthill



Murdo Macaskill (*Braoididh*) and his wife Annie had a family of three daughters and two sons who survived to adulthood; both sons went to war but tragically neither was to return. The younger of the two, Alexander, served with the Gordon Highlanders and died of wounds he received in battle on 7 May 1915 aged 19 years. The older son, John, who was aged 26 years served with the Royal Naval Reserve through WW1, latterly as a seaman on HMS *Redoubtable* and was

drowned aboard the *Iolaire*. His body was recovered and interred at Gress. Their sister Annie, the last of the family, passed away in 1996 aged 100 years.

The brothers' first cousin, George Macaskill (*Seòras a' Bhideanaich*), was one of several local men who were held prisoner of war in Germany for almost all of WW1. George was also at the quay at Kyle on Hogmanay 1918 but became separated from his cousin and came home on the *Sheila*. His son Alex John, who lives in England, was named after the two boys who were lost; he is one of just four living male WW2 veterans from the Back district. Catriona Macleod (Stornoway) and Màiread Anna MacTaggart (Islay) are the other surviving members of *teaghlach Sheòrais a' Bhideanaich*.

Teaghlach Bhraoididh was one of the nine households in the Loch a' Tuath district to suffer a double bereavement in WW1: both the families in Vatisker who bore this providence did so on New Year's Day 1919.

William John Murray, Well Cottage, 66 Lighthill



Rob Aonghais Duinn was one of six sons of Angus Murray and Agnes (nee Burns) who served King and Country during WW1. A neighbour of the aforementioned John Macaskill, he was one of the four men from Vatisker who were drowned in the disaster. Aged 21 years, Rob served with the Royal Naval Reserve aboard HMS *Pactolus*. His body was recovered and interred at Gress.

Although named William John, he was known from childhood as Robert, probably due to the family connection with Scotland's national bard. The name would carry through to the next generation—the late Robert Mackenzie (*Rob Choinnich Thormoid*) was born just after the war ended and was named after his uncle.

Most of the aforementioned brothers in *teaghlach Aonghais Duinn* emigrated to the American West, settling in Montana and Idaho. Their sister, Mrs Mary Mackenzie (*Bean Choinnich Thormoid*), lived at 51 Vatisker, where her daughter Kenina Graham resides today. There are also several great-nephews and great-nieces. Mary Flora Mackenzie (*nighean Dhòmhmaill Choinnich Thormoid*) is the present occupant of Well Cottage.

William Macleod, 8 Coll

William, known locally as *Uilleam 'an a' Pileag*, was the elder of two sons of Angus Macleod, 29 Vatisker, and Margaret (nee Macrae, 46 Vatisker); his brother John, who later emigrated to Australia, served with the RNR. William also served with the RNR, latterly based at the auxiliary patrol base at Falmouth known as HMS *Dreel Castle*. Aged 19 years, he was one of four men from Coll who were drowned on the *Iolaire*. His body was not recovered.



William's mother was widowed when he was an infant. She later remarried John Macleod, 8 Coll; their family was Angus and Malcolm, who were unmarried, and Matilda, who married Angus Maciver, 23 Upper Coll (*Peidear Bochain*). Their family of four—Peggy (Oceanview, Coll), Murdo (North Tolsta), Calum Iain (Tong) and Agnes Joan (Inverness)—are the closest family members today.

John Morrison, 10 Coll



Iain 'an Nis was a fisherman who answered the call in 1914 and served with the RNR. He was a survivor from the sinking of SS *Norwood* in the North Sea in 1917. Less than two years later he lost his life on his journey home. His body was recovered and was buried at Gress.

Aged 44 years, John had been married to Catherine Finlayson, 12 Aird Tong, for almost 20 years and he left a large family of eight: Margaret, 87 Coll (*Bean Chaluim Mhic*

Cudaidh), Jessie, 13 Upper Coll (*Bean Bhruce*), Murdo, 10 Coll (*Miogstan*), Joan, 9 Coll (*Bean Iain Dhòmhmaill*), Donald, 1 Upper Coll (*Dòmhnall Iain 'an Nis*), Annie, 2 Upper Coll (*Bean Chuimhnidh*), Katie Bell, 10 Coll (*Katie Bell Iain 'an Nis*) and John, 18 Broadbay View (*Eòna*).

A little over 20 years later the family endured further grief when John's son Murdo (*Miogstan*) was lost on active service in 1940. Murdo's daughter Catriona Macleod lives at 10 Coll today.

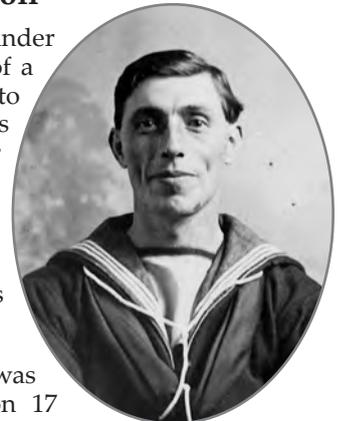
Murdo Macleod, 30 Coll

Murdo (*mac Mhurchaidh Tàilleir*), the son of Murdo and Catherine Macleod, served with the Royal Naval Reserve. His body was not recovered from the tragic scene. Aged 37 years, he was the widower of Annie Macleod, 33 Aird Tong, who predeceased him in 1915, aged 30 years. Their only daughter Angusina was brought up by her grandmother in Tong who received compensation of just ten shillings 'allotment and separation allowance' a week by the Admiralty. Angusina later married Kenneth Maciver, 10 Upper Coll (*Tòmas Dharais*), and moved to Grimsby.

Murdo's brother Donald served with the Canadians and survived the war. His sister Mary married Hugh MacLennan, 15 Coll; their son Alexander (*Ailig Uisdein*) is his closest local relation. *Ailig* is the only surviving male veteran from WW2 residing in the Loch a' Tuath district. Murdo was a first cousin of Mary Maclean (*Bean Ruairidh 'an Dhòmhmaill*), whose grand-daughter Mary Macintosh (*Màiri Jessie*) lives at 30 Coll today.

Alexander Beaton, 40 Coll

The loss of 27 year old Alexander Beaton was the culmination of a series of personal tragedies to befall the household of James and Isabella Beaton. Their aforementioned son served with the Mercantile Marine Reserve aboard HM *Drifter Rose III*. His body was recovered from the scene and was buried at Gress.



Alexander's brother James was killed in action in France on 17 April 1917 aged 22 years. Their father was lost in *Bàthadh Chuil* in 1893, an accidental drowning in Broad Bay that claimed the lives of seven fishermen from the *Pollan Ruadh* community of mid-Coll. The brothers' uncles Allan Maciver (father of *Murchadh Ailein*, 31 Coll) and Murdo Maciver (father of *Sgaoisidh*, 15 Gress) were also lost in this tragedy. Their widowed mother and an older brother George predeceased the brothers. Their brother, Murdo (*Rankan*), served with the RNR and later moved to 18 Upper Coll with his wife Margaret MacDonald, 53 Back; her brother Evander (*Iomhar an Diùc*) was lost on active service in January 1917.

In the years that followed, the surviving Beaton siblings would all move from 40 Coll. The oldest brother Kenneth, who was a respected elder in Back Free Church, lived at 37 Coll with his wife Christina and their family of seven. Angusina, the last of *teaghlach Choinnich Sheumais* passed away in 2011. Alexina Cumming (*Alexina Rankain*), who was married at 18 Upper Coll, and who then moved to Stornoway, passed away in 2017. Another niece was the late Isabella Macinnes (*Iseabail Choinnich Sheumais—Bean Dhòmhmaill Tais*), who lived in Tong.

The Survivors

Alex John Macleod, 63 Coll



Alex John in naval uniform

At the time of the disaster the only local survivor was Ailig John Dhòmhnaiill Dholaidh. His granddaughter Karina Macleod, 62 Coll, contacted Loch a Tuath News following an appeal for information to commemorate the Iolaire Centenary. We are most grateful to Karina for the following account of her grandfather's experiences that night and his subsequent years spent at Ceann a' Muigh Chuil.

Alex John Macleod (*mac Dhòmhnaiill Dholaidh*, 63 Outend Coll) served on various types of vessel after enlisting in 1916, aged 18. Initially based at HMS *Pembroke*, he later served aboard HMT *Rushcoe* and HMD *Scotsman*. He was 20 years old when he was granted New Year's leave towards the close of 1918; and on Hogmanay, he was amongst the 280

men aboard HMY *Iolaire*, travelling from Kyle to Stornoway. Awaiting him with eager anticipation in Lewis were his parents, Donald and Annie, and his younger brother, Donald. (Two other brothers, Murdo and Malcolm, had died young.) Donald senior served with the RNR in WW1 but was invalided home. By the time of the Armistice, Annie had suffered the bereavement of two brothers in the war: Murdo was lost on the first day of The Battle of the Somme in 1916 and Kenneth died aboard his ship *Braeglen*, which sank in Liverpool Bay in 1918. The brothers were late of 65 Back.

As we know, the servicemen and crew on the *Iolaire* expected a straightforward journey into Stornoway harbour, despite the gale blowing. When disaster struck, apparently Alex John had thoughts of trying to get a line to shore, being a strong swimmer. However, while he was still removing his boots and jacket, John Finlay Macleod from Ness dropped over the ship's side with a heaving line which, amazingly, he got to shore using the third high wave. Nearly 40 men got over on the rope before Alex John's turn came. It is said that he was the second last to make it ashore before the rope broke.

What happened to him next is recounted in *The Darkest Dawn* (p. 101):

Alex John Macleod of Coll reached Stoneyfield Farm, after dragging himself up the rocks from the wreck. The Young family gave him a hot drink, then he and three others were taken into town by farmer Anderson in his horse and cart. Feeling weak, in wet clothes and 'with feet full of thistles', Alex walked out of the town to an aunt in Laxdale. He knocked the family up and, believing him to be drunk, they took him in and gave him oatmeal and treacle [plus dry clothes]. Exhausted by the fight for survival, he slept for hours before he was woken by the mother of a boy looking for her own son, who had been lost on the *Iolaire*. He then walked home to Coll, unaware that his brother had already searched for him at his digs on Kenneth Street and his father was looking for him with just the same desperate anxiety – he was the only survivor from the Back district.

For all involved in the tragedy and trauma, life could never be the same again. One can only try to imagine the enormous emotional impact of it all. And Alex John, like other survivors and bereaved, was scarcely able to speak of it. There was also a physical legacy for him, as his health was never the same. He did, however, complete his naval service, being demobilised in February 1919 from HMS *Pactolus*. And throughout his life, he was known as a diligent worker, despite indifferent health.

He married Kate Stewart (*Catriona Sheòrais Dhòmhnaiill Ruaidh*), 53 Outend Coll, in 1920. They had a son, George, and three daughters, Katie Ann, Mary Ann and Dolly. A capable joiner, he furnished many local homes with items of furniture. After a short spell as a coachbuilder on the railways in Chicago, he worked for many years in Coll building the wooden bodies for pre-manufactured bus chassis. His brother Donald (*Pickwick*) painted the finished articles. The stone walls of their workshop/garage are still standing.

In 1951, ill health prevented Alex John from attending George's wedding to Catherine MacLennan (*Catriona Dhòmhnaiill Sheogaidh*, 23 Gress) in Inverness. His letter to the newlyweds, written from the County Hospital, survives. It begins, 'My Dear Children, It is with gladness I...write to you, thanking the Lord for all His kindness and wonders in our journey... Although the path was rough and hard to walk we have many sweet remembrances in our diary.' We have an inkling of some of the hard things he refers to. Throughout the letter there is warm affection, prayer for the couple's future, pride in his family and firm approval of his son's choice of a life partner. It was definitely a letter to keep, treasured by the newlyweds.

Those who know something of the history of Back Free Church may be aware that Alex John was one of 18 who were made deacons in 1944. In 1957, shortly after Rev. Murdo Macaulay became minister, 12 new elders, including Alex John, were ordained. He and Mr Macaulay enjoyed a close friendship throughout the latter's ministry. Many enjoyed fellowship at 63 Coll; and friendships in island congregations were further nurtured through the various Communion weekends.

His son, George, served in the Navy in World War 2, during which he had rheumatic fever, leaving him with serious heart damage. He subsequently worked in Ross-shire as a headmaster. Having inherited Alex John's carpentry skills, he built a wooden chalet at 62 Coll in the mid-60s for family holidays, thinking of later building something more permanent for retirement. His father



Alex John in later life

enjoyed giving a hand with chalet construction and then having George, Catherine and their six children nearby during summer holidays. However, in May 1969, Alex John and Kate received the devastating news that their son had passed away in Ross-shire. George's family moved to 62 Coll and so there was mutual support between the two homes.

Alex John himself passed away on 8 January 1973, aged 74. A tribute written at the time speaks of his personable, upright character and love for his Saviour. The tribute recalls: 'Everybody



George, Catherine with Alasdair, Alex John, Kate, 1953

spoke of him as "a good man"... In the face of almost insurmountable difficulties of personal affliction, he served his Church faithfully.' His life had been spared in the *Iolaire* Disaster and he had wanted to make it count, in every sense. His name lives on in his first two grandsons—Katie Ann's son, Alex John, and George's oldest son, Alasdair Iain.

Down the generations, Alex John's family have been immensely grateful and deeply humbled that he survived the awful *Iolaire* shipwreck. And I am proud to sign off as,

Karina, *nighean Sheòrais Ailig John*.

John Macinnes, 4 Gress

The following article was sent to Loch a Tuath News in September 2018 by Mrs Chirsty Bell Fisher (nee Ferguson, nighean Dholaidh 'an Sìne), formerly of School Road, Vatisker. It is an account of the life of her grandfather John Macinnes (Iain a' Bhroga) who was one of three survivors from the Iolaire who later resided in the Loch a' Tuath district. Chirsty Bell's article inspired the Loch a Tuath News to formally mark the Iolaire Centenary and we are most grateful for her reminisces of her grandfather.

John Macinnes was born in North Tolsta on 21 November 1884 to Murdo Macinnes (*Am Broga*) and Margaret Maclean (Bragar), the eldest of eight children, with three brothers and four sisters.

Two of his brothers were called Donald, *Dòmhnall Mòr* (born 1886) and *Dòmhnall Beag* (born 1888). There is little information on the two brothers other than they are believed to have emigrated to Canada around 1909 and died some time before WW1, having consumed contaminated water. Unfortunately, there is no record of place of death or burial.

The third brother, Norman, died when HM *Conqueror II*, a 526-ton admiralty yacht, sank north of Fair Isle. It was on 26 September 1916 when *Conqueror II*, together with HM Trawler *Sarah Alice*, were in



John, Lily, Donald Senior and Seonag

the process of investigating an unidentified merchant steamer that they were attacked by German submarine *U-52*. Both naval boats were sunk and 19 minutes later the merchant steamer was sunk—this turned out to be the 2788-ton *St Gothard*. Seventeen lives were lost on the *Conqueror II* and 16 on the *Sarah Alice*. The crew of the *St Gothard* were saved. Norman A. Macinnes, 5476 Leading Seaman Royal Naval Reserve, was 25. He is commemorated on the Chatham Naval Memorial.



John Macinnes

John had four sisters: Catriona (*Bean a' Glasaich*), Christina (*Bean a' Bhilidh*), Isabella (*Bean an Dràgoin*) and Peggy, who was known as *Peigi an Fhaochag*. He married Lily Mackay on 19 December 1911. They had six children: Donald (*Nùllag*), Johanna (*Bean Dholaidh 'an Sìne*—my dear mother), Norman (*Stogaidh*), Jessie, Donald (*am Bread*) and Bella.

During WW1 he served with the RNR aboard HMS *Slains Castle* and was Mentioned in Despatches in recognition of his distinguished service and gallantry. On Hogmany, 31 December 1918, John, along with many other servicemen, was waiting on the pier at Kyle of Lochalsh to return home from the war. The mailboat *Sheila* was full to capacity. The servicemen were left waiting on the pier. It was a huge relief when the men heard that HMY *Iolaire* was on the way from Stornoway to take them home. They were ordered on board, all 256 island servicemen, notwithstanding that the lifeboat maximum capacity was for only 100 men.

As they crossed the Minch the weather deteriorated as they approached Stornoway. They could see the lights in the distance. Stornoway harbour was considered to be a fine harbour, deep and sheltered. On entering, vessels are encouraged to stay close to the western side of the channel. A late, fatal decision on the approach and passage of the vessel was made. Many theories were explored during the subsequent inquiry, among which were the crew's unfamiliarity with tides and currents and the yacht following a course too far east of the correct one.

The *Iolaire* hit the rocks and, with a despairing lack of leadership from the bridge and no orders from either officers or crew, she foundered on the reefs known as the Beasts of Holm. John recounted the panic and confusion together with the horror and darkness of that night. Flares and rockets were fired, but the ship was foundering with no chance of sea rescue. After watching the huge breakers coming towards the ship, he threw off his big heavy coat and made the brave decision to plunge over the side as a huge wave came in, hoping it would carry him to shore. He managed

to cling to a piece of wreckage once he surfaced but then lost contact with it and was submerged many times over as he strived to reach the shore.

There were countless men in the raging sea clamouring and reaching for floating wreckage fighting for their lives. He was completely exhausted and disoriented when he surfaced again but clung to floating wreckage which carried him and dashed him against the rocks. By some miracle he managed to crawl up the cliffs and could see distant lights, which turned out to be Stoneyfield Farm. He crawled towards the light and was rescued by women from the farm looking for survivors. They attended to his wounds, which were described as though his skin had been ripped in ribbons from his body. He was unrecognisable.

His account of his near drowning, horror and distress, together with overwhelming fear and confusion, was heartbreaking. It brought tears to his eyes when asked about that night and he would talk a little about it with a broken faltering voice, questioning the mystery of his survival. A roll of black twist from the little zipped purse (*sploochan*) would be retrieved from his pocket, sliced with the sharp knife, packed into the pipe, lit and a long satisfying puff pulled in an attempt to control his emotions. It was not a subject he chose to talk about often.

He was a very humble, kind-hearted man. He found it easy to show his love to his family and his sense of humour combined with mischief endeared him to all his family and friends. John was hard working and was reputed to have the strength of two men when engaged in physical work.

On his return from WW1 he expected to be granted a share of crofting land, a 'land fit for heroes' as promised. It would be theirs to live and work upon, but a great disappointment awaited him. Lord Leverhulme had bought the island.

This situation was a massive blow and setback for the returning servicemen and their struggle and perseverance is well documented. By 1922 John built a house on the croft at 4 Gress and moved his family from North Tolsta.

He often spoke of *Bodach an t-Siabann*. As a young child I was convinced he made up the stories purely for my entertainment. His delivery was good, with long exaggerated pauses and great emphasis on the humorous aspects. This humour was like a coping mechanism used in conversations with all the local bodachs, despite the callous way Lord Leverhulme and the Board of Agriculture had clumsily dealt with the plight of the returning servicemen.

There were stories about fishing for haddock in Broad Bay and the job as a ghillie for Gress Lodge when the toffs came to stay and fish the Gress river. At the beginning of every story he would start with '*Well a bhròdain*' and end with '*Sin ma'n a bha.*'

His favourite seat was by the kitchen window or at the front of the house, baiting lines with mussels for yet another sea fishing trip to Broad Bay.

The North Tolsta bus stopped at the end of the road at the entrance of the Camach. I have memories of reaching the top of the road at *Taigh Mhurchaidh a' Ghreusaich'* and waving to signal my arrival. He would spot me from the window or from his seat outside and I would hurry in anticipation of the wonderful warm welcome that always awaited me. His collie dog, Sharp, was never far from his side and would run to meet me.

The neighbours occupied *taigh Roddy, taigh Mhurchaidh Seònaid, taigh Aligean, taigh Eachainn, taigh Dolina* and *taigh Mhurchaidh a' Ghreusaich'*.

He had such pride when he harvested the first early potatoes, usually Duke of York and then Kerr's Pink from the sandy soil of his croft that stretched from the Camach road to Gress river. Bragging about the success of your potatoes was good sport with neighbours. The bodachs would tease each other mercilessly. Dry, fluffy potatoes were considered the best, boiled carefully in their skins. Accompanied by herring, haddock, *leòbags* or any white fish, the potato was king.

John Murray, 43 Vatisker

Born in South Dell in 1886, John served with the RNR during WW1 and saw action in the Dardanelles. He was one of six sons in the family of Norman and Catherine Murray who answered the call. All of the brothers survived the conflict.

On the night of the sinking, John was the first man ashore by John Finlay Macleod's lifeline and he helped his rescuer take the strain on the hawser, enabling several others to escape the stricken vessel. Coming home on leave he had brought a present of some tobacco for his father. As he struggled towards the shore he grasped the tobacco in his teeth and thus his gift was duly delivered.

Known locally as *'an Help*, John moved to 43 Vatisker following his marriage to Catherine Stewart (*Catriona Choinnich Dhòmhnail Ruaidh*), 50 Vatisker. There they brought up their three sons and two daughters: Norman died in infancy; Iain, a sea captain, lived in Glasgow; Catriona moved to Borve; Peggy lived in the family home; and Norman, who married Nan Maciver (*Nan Chaluim Dhool*), 70 Coll, lived at Heatherlea, Gress.

John was one of several local men who saw action in both world wars, serving with the Merchant Navy in 1939. In his working life he was employed as a fisherman pre-WW1 and, in later years, as a road labourer. He was also a diligent crofter and was one of a handful of local worthies

Grace was said with deep thankfulness and at times his voice would break with emotion, possibly reflecting on the hardships suffered in the past. He would put his tweed bonnet over his knee and, placing his hands on his head, he would praise God for all his blessings, deliverance and protection. Grandad and Granny's house was a joy to visit with an abundance of generosity, warmth, food and above all welcome.

John would experience further heartache in later life. His eldest son Donald served with the Merchant Navy in WW2 but, in 1940, he contracted an illness while sailing off the African coast and died in a Liverpool hospital aged 27. In July 1953 his grand-daughters and my sisters, Bella and Jean Ferguson, were both drowned at the Chair Pool on Gress River aged 12 and 7 years respectively. These providences were, borne with acceptance and with grace.

He died on 26 April 1964 aged 79, one month after the passing of his wife Lily.

Sin m'an a bha.

Chirsty Bell Fisher



John Finlay Macleod and John Murray

who villagers would consult for their knowledge of sheep's earmarks (*comharran*).

In an iconic photograph from 1965, he is pictured with John Finlay Macleod, revisiting the scene of the disaster for the first time, both men absorbed in thought with their memories of their darkest night almost half a century earlier.

John died on 23 January 1966 aged 79.

The Bereaved



Catherine Morrison, 10 Coll

The sheer scale of loss incurred in the *Iolaire* Disaster evoked a communal sense of sympathy far beyond the confines of the island. In the weeks and months that followed, donations to support the bereaved families flowed in and a Disaster Committee was established to administer The Fund. The following letter from Mrs Catherine Morrison exemplifies the economic hardship that many households, deprived of their main source of financial support, experienced in the aftermath of WW1. We are grateful to the Morrison family for permission to publish their grandmother's letter and the accompanying photograph.

Catherine Morrison never recovered from the loss of her husband and died in 1926 aged 48 years. The responsibility of looking after their younger siblings fell upon the shoulders of the eldest daughters Margaret (*Bean Chaluim Mhic Cudaidh*) and Jessie (*Bean Bhruce*). Another daughter, Katie Bell, became one of the last recipients of the Disaster Fund; she received the sum of £6 in 1936 to help her train as a children's nurse. Sadly she also died prematurely, from TB, in 1947 aged 31.

10 Coll, Back
Stornoway

Sir,

I beg to apply for a grant from the Iolaire Disaster Fund.

My husband John Morrison was drowned in the Iolaire Disaster. He was at the time in the Royal Naval Reserve. Before the war he was a fisherman.

My family numbers nine persons, including myself. Their ages vary from 18 years to 1 year. I myself have been under medical treatment by Dr Mackenzie for the last three years and for the past eight months have been practically confined to bed. I am thus quite unable to do any house work. The result of this is that my two eldest daughters, aged 18 and 16, respectively, have to be always at home to look after the house and the younger children.

We have a small croft but, owing to our having to pay for the ploughing and other heavy work done on it, it is a great expense. In the same way our peat-cutting costs a considerable amount, owing to there being no man at home to look after it. In fact I have had to borrow money for the working of the croft and peat-cutting this year.

While my husband was in the navy we were receiving the sum of 52/6 per week but lately this has been reduced to 43/4 by the Ministry of Pensions. My two eldest daughters who are both over 16, are deemed to be capable of supporting themselves, so are not allowed anything, although as I have pointed out, owing to the state of my health & the claims of my young family, they are both needed at home and are thus unable to go out to work for themselves.

Dr Mackenzie will, I am sure, give confirmation of my ill-health if such is thought necessary. Rev. R. Mackenzie will also give any other information necessary in support of my statements.

I should be obliged by your bringing my case before the Trustees as soon as possible.

Yours faithfully

Mrs John Morrison

The Descendants

There are several family members of *Iolaire* passengers living in the Loch a' Tuath district today. In addition to the relations previously mentioned the writer knows of four other returning servicemen who have close connections with our community:

John MacDonald, 1 North Tolsta (drowned)

John's grand-daughter Mrs Catherine Maciver (*Catriona an t-Suainnich*) lives at 31 Back, and his grandson John MacDonald (*Lòbo*) lives at 46 Back. In what seems to have been a distressingly common occurrence, John was

a widower at the time of his death; he was predeceased by his wife Catherine in 1915. His son and two daughters were brought up by their grandparents in Tolsta.

Evander Murray, 45 North Tolsta (drowned)

Iomhar 'an Sheòrais 'an Òig was the grandfather of the late Murdo Mackay (*Murd a' Ghrogalaidh*), Gearraidh Ghuirm, and of his late sister Mrs Lilian Maciver (*Bean Dhòmhnail Iain Chaluim Dhool*), Shorehill, Coll. He was a cousin of *Ailig Ruairidh*—his grandfather came from 9 Back. Such was the prevalence of funerals in January

1919 that Evander's interment was one of three to be conducted in North Tolsta cemetery during the hours of darkness. On his death, his only daughter Catherine (*Bean a' Ghrogalaidh*) was bereaved of both of her parents.

Donald Macritchie, 46 Keith Street, Stornoway (drowned)

A native of Leurbost, Donald was the husband of Jane Maciver, 57 Coll (a sister of *Seonaidh 'an Alasdair, Bean Phòisein* and *Alasdair Chuil*). In common with many other islanders, he was based at HMS *Pembroke* at Chatham, Kent. Following his death, Jane and their daughter Dina moved back to Coll. Donald's grandson Donald Macritchie (*Dollan Phòisein*) lives at 7 Upper Coll today.

Donald Murray, 37 North Tolsta (survived)

Dòmhnall Brus was one of five Tolsta men who survived the disaster. Having escaped from one of the lifeboats that sank, he eventually made his way to safety via the lifeline rope. Just moments after reaching the shore the *Iolaire* slipped off the rocks, an explosion ensued and she rapidly went under. Donald died, aged 96, on 3 May 1992, one month before the last *Iolaire* survivor Neil Nicolson, Lemreway, passed away. His son Iain Angie lives at 57 Coll.

Iain Angie Murray, commemorating the 90th anniversary on 1 January 2009. He was one of several individuals who were taken by Stornoway lifeboat to the Beasts of



Holm where they cast wreaths into the sea.

The Sheila

Alongside the *Iolaire* on the quay at Kyle was the SS *Sheila*, the regular mail steamer on the Stornoway–Kyle run. Built in 1904 she was on this route for 20 years. As the servicemen congregated on the pier, life-changing decisions took place as to which boat would carry the men home.

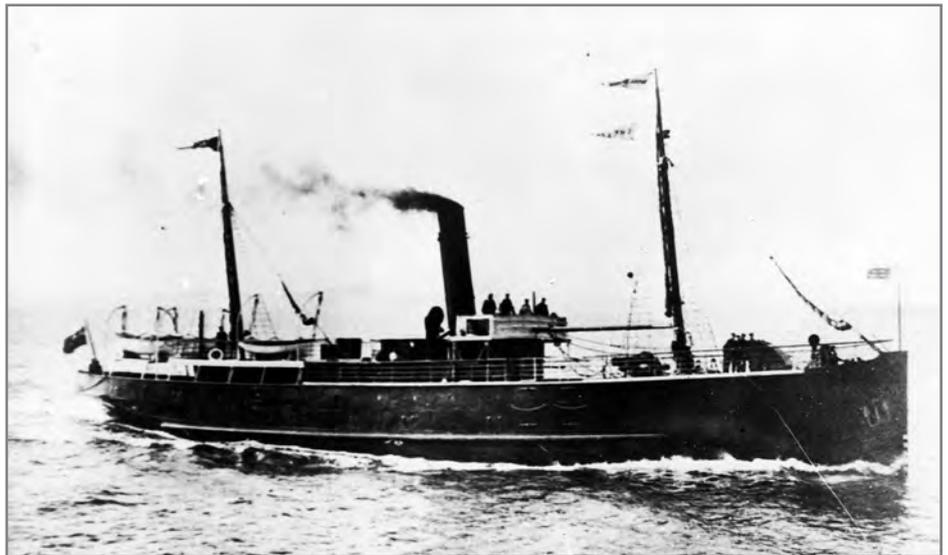
Perceived to be the faster of the two vessels, the *Iolaire* was the preferred choice for most of the returning sailors. John Macleod, Garrabost (father of *Bean a' Chlàrc, 75 Coll*), attempted on three occasions to board the *Iolaire*, where his brother-in-law, Murdo Mackenzie of Sheshader, had been allocated, but he was refused permission each time and he came home on the *Sheila* instead. Murdo was one of the 39 residents of the Point district who lost their lives later that night.

Boarding one boat before changing to the other was a common event at Kyle on the evening of 31 December 1918. Given the reluctance of our forefathers to talk of the events of that night, it has been hard to establish the identities of those who took the alternative passage to Stornoway. The writer is fairly sure, however, that the following Loch a' Tuath residents were among those who came home without mishap on the *Sheila*:

Angus Macleod (*Aonghas Cheanaidh*), 44 Back and later of 12 Gress

William Munro (*Tuileaban*), 40 Back and later of 14 Gress

John Campbell (*Iain Beag Mhic Mhurchaidh*), 12 Coll and later of 9 Upper Coll



SS Sheila

Alex Graham (*Ailig Sgurd*), 7 New Street, Back, who later emigrated to USA

John Mackenzie (*am Borbair*), 36 Back and later of 29 Upper Coll

Donald Stewart (*Dòmhnall a' Charagain*), 26 Coll and later of 29 Coll

George Macaskill (*Seòras a' Bhideanaich*), Lighthill

Neil MacDonald (*Neillan Mòr*), 2 Vatisker and later of 13 Vatisker

Norman MacDonald (*an Tòban*), 2 Vatisker and later of 2 Tong Park

In a chilling coincidence the *Sheila* ran aground at Cuaig Bay, inward bound to Kyle on New Year's Day 1927 and was a total loss. No one was hurt. It was eight years—almost to the hour—after the loss of the *Iolaire*.

A Closing Thought

The contrasting fortunes of war are perhaps best exemplified by the providence of two childhood friends and neighbours: Donald MacDonald, 11 Back (*Dòmhnall Mhurchaidh Portair—an Cùbair*), and Donald Stewart, 10 Back (*Dòmhnall Dhòmhmaill Ruaidh—an Cuibhlear*). Both these young men served with the Royal Naval Reserve during the final months of WW1 and, after the war ended, they planned their respective journeys home to be with their families for the New Year.



Donald Stewart and Donald MacDonald

At first, they intended to return together on the same boat but, in the closing days of December, this arrangement changed and it was decided they should instead come home separately. While Donald (10) arrived safely back after Christmas, Donald (11) was one of the scores of Lewismen who arrived at Kyle that fateful New Year's Eve to board the *Iolaire*.

Aged just 19 years, Donald MacDonald was our district's youngest fatality of the disaster. Aged 93 years, Donald Stewart was our oldest and last WW1 veteran. He passed away on 11 November 1993, a poignant and symbolic date which marked the 75th anniversary of the Armistice and which brought closure to Back's involvement in The War to End All Wars.



*Ri 'g èirigh tha 'n latha 's ri tuiteam tha dòchas.....
Cluinn cruaidh-fhead na gaoithe a' caoidh, a' caoidh.*