

Deuchainn Ghleus

The Piper's House

Even now I see it when I close my eyes, that clear Hebridean sky, vast and flooded with morning light, no sound of screaming or fighting or slamming doors, just the sea breeze and the waves lapping at the Raasay shoreline.

A new day dawning at my father's house in Eyre.

Of course, the sun wasn't always shining; that's my mind playing tricks. Many a day would begin with me and my siblings out feeding the animals in the sleet and the rain, milking the cows with frozen fingers, arguing for the right to tend the fire, fixing breakfast with the wind whipping in where it could. Never will I forget that smell of porridge, peat, and cattle, nor the chill of the winter months in our bones. But aye, when I cast my thoughts back, to that other lifetime, that clear morning sky is always what first appears to me.

All of that is a long way from here, this plain cell in which I'm kept. A yellow light is growing around the edge of the shutters, heralding my own day, staving off the gloom just enough for me to write. I believe it's October. This must be one of my "lucid" moments.

In an hour or so a uniform will enter, an attendant. He'll open the shutters if I've not yet opened them; the younger attendant or the old one, I don't know. After all this time I have seen no established order. The younger one is mouse-like, twitchy, with sallow skin that is almost

translucent. I think sometimes he needs free of this place more than I do. Whenever he comes in, he eyes me like I'm something wild, and if I move a muscle in his presence – even if just to yawn – he shrieks out for one of the guards in the corridor to come and pin me to the floorboards. The older one, him I remember from the last time I was here. He is a walking piece of driftwood, warped and twisted by the world. Gray hangs over him – everything about him lacks color – with eyes sunk so deep they are almost invisible. He acts as though my cell is devoid of all other life, paying more attention to the state of the floor and the furniture than to the human being for which it is all intended. I get the impression he will continue to tend this place long after I'm gone. Chan eil dragh orm.

Last week Dr. Hood informed me that this stay has now stretched for over a year. When he told me this I was not affected. It's strange, but nowadays it can take weeks and months before I'm able to properly react to what's around me, before I can absorb the meaning of things. Before I know what is a dream. I do not sleep, each day blends into the next – and the boredom! the pounding, relentless, maddening boredom! – all of it means that sometimes I can be disoriented, sometimes I find myself off my guard. I saw little reason to contest Hood, is what I'm saying. I stood to leave, and matter-of-factly he said the words, not even looking my way. Then I stared at him for a moment as he started writing his report, the pen scratching the paper, before I felt a hand on my shoulder, escorting me back to my cell. Now, a full week later, I understand what he said. A year is a long time. When I think of how I have filled my years before, how I packed life into them, aye, I realize that a year is a very long time indeed to spend in such a place. I have forgotten why freedom mattered to me.

But what does hell look like? There's the cot bed, this table, this chair, a wee bookshelf, a slop pail, a battered pewter candlestick I took from the London house. No candle. A patch of black mold is growing on the

ceiling, always wet but never dripping. I suppose you could say the view from the window is agreeable on a good day, looking out over St. George's Fields, and I am fortunate to have a view of the sky, the only thing in my life that still changes. But it's hard not to notice how the scene is divided by the metal bars, and with the window glazing thin and partly missing, the chill in winter can rival any Raasay morning.

I am grateful that I was allowed paper and ink for my tunes, so at least I have something to distract me, take me away from my delusions, as they insist on calling them. It's still impossible for me to completely trust these claims of theirs, but when you're told you've gone mad enough times you begin to believe it. I will say that there are things rattling around in my head that confuse and frighten me, but that does not make them false. I know for a fact that others in Her Majesty's service would sooner have me in here than out there, and I am not so naïve as to think that they would not use their influence against me.

I say "the others" as though I am still one of them, though if the note Mary provided earlier this year is truly authentic, which by now I do believe it is, then after over a decade of service I have now been officially relieved of my duties as Her Majesty's piper. If it is true that Her Majesty has seen fit to do this, I hold nothing against her. Her safety is paramount, and she needs to ensure those around her are those she can trust. But to be removed from the royal household staff altogether, and locked up under these pretenses, here I sense something more malevolent at work, an evil that will endanger the Empire itself, something that places Her Majesty in even greater peril than—

No. These are the very suspicions they implore me not to dwell on. I will keep them at the back of my mind for when they are needed, but right now there is no use for them. Oighre. Aye, it will do me good to write about Eyre, and my long journey here, all these hundreds of miles away. That'll help me clear my thoughts. Perhaps one day I'll read these

pages to my children, showing them the man I used to be. Or more likely they'll be scattered to the wind.

Ratharsair was a long time ago. I was born in 1812 to John Mackay and Margaret MacLean, and for this I'm thankful every day. My father was a good man, a true family man. More so than I have been. He was piper to John MacLeod, laird of Raasay, which to our family felt like a significant position, providing us with our land and home, our means to live. Our house was known as Taigh a' Phìobaire, or The Piper's House, and it was my mother who kept it in such fine order. She was kind, intelligent, protective of her children – to a fault, perhaps – and in every way the perfect match for my father. I really could not have asked for more from them.

That house was the center of our world. The roof was heavily thatched, and the walls made of thick island stone, a good sixteen paces in length. There was a central doorway with a window on each side, and the top of the outside wall was less than a man's height. It seems peculiar now, with the grand places I've played, but at the time seeing an adult crouching to get through the door was just the way of things. That door led directly into the lower end of the house where the cows were kept, while the higher end was where our family lived, with only a small partition between the two, just enough of a wall to keep the cows out of the kitchen. Cattle and people under the one roof! Now I'm writing it down here that seems strange to me as well, and yet it still smelled a damn sight better than this place. I remember there wasn't really the space for us bairns to be inside much until it came time to sleep or eat. Maybe I should be happy with my lot now. A cell all to myself ...

My memories from the very early days are as shifty as they are from the past couple of years, but as an islander I've learnt how to stitch a tale together. For most of my life, the strongest connections I've formed

with people have come through recounting our own unique stories, and whenever I was asked for mine, I'd always begin in the same place. It was the day I knew for certain that music would be the pursuit of my life. Ah, yes. Let's see how the pen remembers it.

I was about eight years old. It was springtime, and there were a couple of pipers staying at Taigh a' Phìobaire with us; there was always a flow of them coming and going from the island, keen to learn from my father. In my eyes and those of many others, he was the greatest piper in Scotland, and that was taking into consideration some very fine pipers indeed.

A watery light crept into the room. My brother John and I rose silently, carefully clambering over the sleeping bodies so as to get to our chores as early as we could. The hardened clay that made up the floor was ideal for moving without a sound, and already we knew our roles. I'd be taking the ashes outside; John would be collecting the eggs. It was important we got on Mother's good side, as the previous night we'd made the dreaded mistake of falling asleep before the adults had finished their conversation. All those who came to the island brought with them new tales, providing us with the scripts for the next day's play, and so if we drifted off too early, the only way to salvage the situation was if we persuaded Mother the next day to relay the best of the talk.

It hadn't been our fault, mind, us falling asleep. The evening before had been incredibly mild and clear, and while the adults began singing tunes, the older children had taken us wee ones up on the grassy hill nearby to play a game in the dying light, lying on our backs and finding the patterns of the stars. The lot of us made a full house: Donald, Mary, Margaret, Cursty, Katherine Òg, Roderick, John and me. Donald was 19 at this time and had recently left to become piper to MacDonald of Clanranald, and there was often much talk about who my sisters would marry, though at that stage they were still all with us. I was the youngest besides John. There was also Katherine Mòr, but I have no real memory

of her. She died an infant and was not much spoken of on account of my mother, who grieved her deeply. But the rest of us, we'd spent the whole day taking the cows to the grazing and then, happily exhausted, we lay there listening to Cursty tell us about each of the constellations we spotted. According to her, she'd memorized all the Greek stories from the book at Raasay House, but she was a sharp thing, Cursty, and I now suspect she must have done some improvising from time to time. I vaguely recall she had my favorite – the huntsman Orion – battling with the Picts on one of his adventures, which now seems rather unlikely.

Around when we would normally all start wandering towards the house to join the adults by the fire – it was now just about pitch dark – Cursty made the bold claim she could point to each of the constellations with her eyes shut. Margaret decided to take her up on it.

“But we'll be blindfolding you,” she said. “We know you can't be trusted.”

“That's fine.”

“And we'll be spinning you round,” Margaret decided after a moment's thought, which we all roundly approved. “Someone go and fetch one of the lamps so we can tell if she's cheating.”

Cursty did remarkably well, despite being so dizzy she could hardly stay on her feet. We all had a go for the next hour or so, but it was having fun playing this game that meant as soon as John and I got back inside the house and felt the warmth of the fire, sleep immediately overcame us. We hardly even stirred when Father shifted us over to our sleeping spots on the straw, but when morning came, we knew what to do.

By the time John had found all the eggs and I'd scooped up the ashes and spent wood to take to the ash heap, everyone was up and moving about. We found our mother in the byre end of the house, adding fresh hay. She looked quite tired, and just in case she was short on patience, I decided to let John take the lead.

“A mhàthair, we know we missed something worth hearing,” he said, his voice squeaky and not yet broken.

Our mother didn’t look at us. “Well, you should’ve stayed up then, shouldn’t you?”

John persisted. “We’ve finished out morning chores, but we’re not doing another thing until you tell us what it was.”

“Oh, really?” At this, she raised her eyebrow, and a mischievous smile passed over her lips.

John looked to me for support, and I nodded. “Aye,” he said.

“Well, I guess I’d better tell you then, hadn’t I?” And here she pretended to mull over our request, as though it was something meriting serious consideration. “You know, I remember John Ban was talking a fair bit about a particular mouse on the mainland.”

“A mouse?” I asked. Already I was on the alert. John Ban was one of the pipers staying with us to learn from Father. He was an older lad, closer to Donald’s age than mine, and I always greatly looked forward to his stays, admiring him enormously for his wit and piping talents. That said, I knew how fond he was of spinning tales; more than once he’d fooled me by sending me off to find his glass chanter or his bottomless cup.

“A mouse, aye, everyone’s talking about it over there,” nodded my mother. “He said it tended to get more meal when not seen or heard, I think that was it. Not seen or heard, aye.”

Seeing from our perplexed faces that she had said enough to keep us occupied for a while, she smiled and gave each of our manes a ruffle. “Now, I don’t have much else for you to do today, but the two of you are looking like you could do with a wee haircut. How does that sound?”

Gun taing, we thought! This was all she needed to say to get us out of the way for the rest of the day. Even though we’d not got quite the gossip we were after, John and I bounded off to do what we loved best: roaming

about the island. What adventures we'd have! One day we could be playing in the rugged hills around Dùn Cana, next we would be tracking ships along the coastline, and then crashing through the woodland the day after that. Sometimes – if we had our older siblings with us – we'd be allowed to tramp all day to the far end of the island and find somewhere to spend the night. Though in truth we knew nothing else, even as children we could tell that our home in Eyre was unlike anywhere on Earth, sat there high above the water with its stunning view of Skye. Everyone who came to stay with us would marvel; there was just no getting away from the magic of the place. From our house you could watch the mist come low on the mountains, eventually hiding the view altogether before it rose again, unveiling the color and beauty of the Cuillins on the far side of the water. Oh, I can almost reach out and touch them now, believe me. So off we went. John took some oatcakes and cheese for lunch while I fetched one of our father's empty bottles to fill in a spring, and with that we knew we could be out until dark.

Over the years we fought many battles, the pair of us. We were at the Rout of Moy, leaping behind rocks and peat stacks, making musket sounds with sticks for rifles. We bowed our heads in silence at the death of MacCrimmon, who would return no more. In our minds, we were the Jacobite army on the march, a mighty Highland force to sweep all foes from the land. Jacobite sympathies were in the past on Raasay, but to tell the truth, it was a cherished and quite recent past. My father heard first-hand stories from those who were out in '45, and people still talked about the destruction of An Taigh Mòr and many other Raasay homes after the Jacobite's crushing loss at Culloden. Father himself also had some stories of his own to tell, having served in the armed forces to defend the Napoleonic threat from the continent. That spring morning, however, I decided that rather than a battle, it was best that we just go on a scouting mission to conserve our energy. John Ban was staying for just one more

evening, and I didn't want us to make the same mistake as the night before.

"Government troops!" John whispered as we lay on our bellies at our vantage point, looking out at the boats on the water. It was choppy, and white spray flew every time a wave crashed into the rocks in the shallows.

"Come to take further revenge on the MacLeods for harboring Prince Charlie, no doubt," I replied gravely. "We should leave now, and warn them on our return."

"Or we could stand and fight?"

"No, brother," I said, smiling and staying his arm. "That's too many for us."

John looked put out by this. He gloomily put his finger through a hole in his sleeve and began picking at it.

"You know Mother will put a hole in you if you make that any worse, John."

"I'd like to see her try," John retorted, trying not to smile when he saw the amusement on my face. He stopped picking at it pretty soon though, I noticed.

It was the gloaming by the time we made it back to Taigh a' Phìobaire, and the singing had already begun. Island life came with ups and downs depending on the season and the state of the crops – even at eight years of age I had noticed it was becoming steadily more difficult to grow what we needed to see us through each year – but there was one constant in our family, and that was music. Father taught all my brothers tunes using canntaireachd, singing them to us and having us echo them back to him, offering us extra praise if we managed to throw in some improvisation of our own. He was crafty about it though, not giving us the same tunes, so we would all swap and inevitably this would result in scrapping between us about who had more and how they went. More than once, Roderick and I would get into it about how we thought a tune was to be played,

and we'd end up wrestling in the long grass until Father came to prise us apart.

“It can be played either way, you idiots,” he'd say, always laughing as he did so. “Now, you sing it his way, and you sing it his way, and we'll all decide which one we like best.”

When John and I returned on this night, however, there was a concerted effort amongst us bairns to get along, as not only did we have the company of the pipers but some of our neighbors had also come by to spend the evening. With this in mind, we made like John Ban's mouse and kept quiet!

Everyone was crammed into the house and conversation was bubbling. Women perched on the narrow benches and stools, the men mostly stood, while us children were scattered around the floor like so many discarded dolls. Our table was spread with food and drink for all, and when the temperature dropped, the fire was banked with fresh peat, until everything was glowing orange and reeking wonderfully of smoke.

For a couple of hours everything was as it always was on nights like these: eating, laughing, listening to the fanciful tales that our neighbors had come by. But a little later on, I noticed that an unfamiliar quiet had broken out, as one-by-one, everyone hushed to listen to young John Ban. Usually on his final nights with us, he'd offer his thanks to my mother and father for their hospitality, but it soon enough became obvious he'd prepared something a little more special this time.

In his low resonant voice, set against the warm crackling of the fire, he had started singing a tune, and though the melody was of his own creation, as we listened to the words we recognized the beginning of “Ruidhle an t-sithein,” a tale of two farmers waylaid by fairies on the way home from the market. But the ever-sly John Ban had done some tweaking. He had shifted the story to follow a plot well-loved by all of us, the tale in which my father took a week coming home from a wedding on

Skye, after he and his friend Fionnlagh stopped to empty cups at every croft on the journey home.

As people realized they knew the story, the crowd's interest grew, until each new rhyming line, bringing my father into an even more precarious position than the last, drew howls from us all. My father was shaking his head with a wide smile, his eyes cast to the heavens. By the end, a neighbor had picked up the melody on the fiddle, and the rest of us joined in the singing. I'm sorry to say I can't remember all the lyrics, but there was one refrain it kept coming back to. I watched, utterly enraptured, as everyone in the house danced about together, shrieking and whooping in the firelight, the men swinging the women and children by the arms, yelling out in full voice:

*Then MacKay stood up, emptied his cup
And bade Fionnlagh goodbye,
He kissed the bride and went outside
And made to leave bonnie auld Skye,
But he woke the next day wi' his heid in the hay
And asked himself, "Where am I?"
The fairies said "You're no in yer bed"
Which told him his plan'd gone awry!*

It was brilliant, it really was. I cherish that moment, and can still see the mirth on everyone's faces as they sang. It was one of the first times I felt that strong sense of something deep and unifying, warmth we could feel even as children. The music, the stories, the songs: these were the shared wealth of our community, and still they remain the greatest wealth I know. They sustained us when nights were cold and food scarce, through the seasons that came and went like the tides, providing the rhythm that influenced everything on our island.

But now my guts are aching terribly. It's as though they're expanding

beyond their size. I'm starting to wonder if this new medicine they give me is of any benefit at all. Iodide of Potassium, they call it. I don't understand what it's meant to do, or how it differs from the mercury. All I know is that the slop pail beckons, and then I will try and get a few minutes rest before the attendants arrive. The noises are growing louder already. The hospital is coming alive. Seems there's a rhythm in every place, even here at St Mary's, a constant drumming that must be fought or ignored. I just need rest. And a drink, though they've now even stopped allowing me that; just a mug of beer once in a while. I'll come back to this when I can. So long as I'm confined to this place, with no purpose or employment, what else am I meant to do?

Ùrlar

Raasay House

I realize that in writing all of this here, I had best keep my wits about me. One day soon Mary must be due another visit, and if she spies these pages, I imagine she will make the staff put a stop to it. I do not trust that she would want me to write down any of what is happening – what I suspect to be happening, she'd say – but if I'm careful and keep these sheets between my music, I'm sure no one will come across them. I can't have the staff finding these, though. There's no telling how far the enemy has infiltrated our nation.

She's changed, has Mary. She was a good woman once, a good mother. I imagine she continues to be a good mother, though I've not been permitted to see my children for an age. Jessie and Margaret will be asking after me, John too. The youngest one, Angus; I've no doubt he'd be a stranger.

Exactly when Mary was last here I could not say. Her last visit did not go well; I remember that much. I had been in bed for most of the previous few days. Under the weather, you might say. My thighs had scabbed over and swollen to such an agonizing size I felt they were ready to burst, not that I knew what might erupt from them, and from the moment I saw her I could tell that she was in one of her moods. As we walked slowly along one of the endless galleries linking the cells, she lamented first our finances and then our tattered reputation, each – as she bitterly pointed out – greatly worsened by my dismissal. The echo carried her voice Lord

knows how far, and I knew everyone was listening. By the time we had walked around the garden we were cursing one another in full voice. All I can picture after that is a struggle and the faces of the men I took down, my fists flying and often landing on skin and bone, the tortured screams of Mary as they dragged me away. I woke the next morning restrained, my body bruised, my face swollen, my thighs oozing, here in my all too familiar cell.

It's the very same one I was discharged from the first time I was committed. I lay on my side in a straitjacket, half on the cot and half off, spitting out the blood that had pooled in my cheek overnight. When my head stopped spinning, I began calling out in Gaelic, screaming until my voice deserted me. In the end I gave up with sentences, resorting simply to list everything I had lost: my brothers, my father, my livelihood, my health, mo bhràithrean, m'athair, m'obair, mo shlàinte. Hours went by but no one came. It would have sounded like nonsense to them anyway. These people can barely understand my English, let alone Gaelic.

I regret my actions that day, but only because they lost me my garden privileges. I used to enjoy the garden. It's surprisingly large and well-kept, all things considered. Boredom never seemed to rear its head so high when I was out there. There's the courtyard where the linens are hung and dried; the small beds of flowers and vegetable patches amid trimmed grass; the smell of yeast being carried on the wind from the kitchen. Beer and bread are in constant production. It's a scent I once found delightful, now nauseating; it has mixed itself too completely with the abominable odors of vomit and shit that are overpowering in St Mary's. Yeast, vomit, and shit. I'd never have thought these would become the signature aromas of my life.

In my early days here, I would not speak to those I'd pass in the garden, lying on the grass or wandering around, unshaven and deformed and wild-eyed. Each and every one of them was in decrepit condition,

and I admit I was frightened of what they might do. Recently, however – I mean before I was prohibited from going out there – there were instances when I would find myself inclined to offer a courteous nod, even a word of encouragement. It was clear that everyone had now learned who I was by then, where I had come from and who I’d represented, and so during those moments it almost felt like a civic duty, interacting with them in some way. I would bless them, commend them for doing well enough that they’d been allowed out into the garden, and tell them if they needed anything then they need only offer my name to the staff and the message would be passed on. Then I’d inform the guard on the way in how they seemed, if that inmate required extra attention that week or not, if the guards would perhaps be a little softer with him, which the guard would in turn report to the doctors.

But now Hood has refused my help, and has decided that until I show signs of improvement, I am not to be permitted into the garden any longer. What is the saying? “The world is but a great Bedlam, where those that are more mad, lock up those who are less.

I think before I attempt to recount my own story, I should go back to the start of my father’s. His beginnings in life were not easy. He was an orphan and a herd boy for MacLeod, looking after the cattle and moving them as needed. Never did he mention how my grandparents died, only that the MacLeods took him in. I found out later from my mother that his family had been impoverished, with too many mouths to feed and too little income from a struggling croft. He was lifted from his family and brought to Raasay by Captain Malcolm MacLeod – the tacksman and eccentric old cousin of the laird – who even in those early years must have sensed a sharpness worth nurturing.

The MacLeods had ruled Raasay since the fifteenth century, and the laird’s house was a focus for everyone there, in my father’s day and in

mine. It was the place that most visitors would head to first upon arrival, and was the source of many an islander's livelihood, be it working with the fish, cattle, oats, barley, or just the maintenance of the place. Generally speaking, if the big house was successful, the rest of the island would also prosper. The Scottish lairds are not merely landowners with Crown connections: they are chieftains who think themselves fathers to their people. MacLeod was no exception. In any case, with the thirteen children John MacLeod raised with his wife Flora, he was the birth father to more than his share of folk on Raasay as well!

Of these thirteen children, three were boys and ten were girls. My father, with him being what he was and them being destined for higher things, did not much socialize with them. Mostly they were stuck being schooled in Raasay House, the magnificent new structure that had replaced An Taigh Mòr. The boys had a tutor who provided regular teaching and discipline, while Flora MacLeod oversaw the education of the girls. While my father could only speak Gaelic and a little bit of English, the MacLeod children could read English, French, and Italian, and there was Gaelic both spoken and read. As well as this, the girls' education also involved a lot of music. They learned to play the pianoforte and sing, including many Gaelic songs. This was how fresh music was always finding its way to Raasay, either from new study books or simply brought in the memories of visitors who knew the latest trends in the drawing rooms of Edinburgh.

One day, when my father was seven years old and had just finished bringing in the cows with the other two herd boys, he told us he heard the voice of Captain MacLeod calling him in from the byre.

"With me, MacKay," he said, and without another word he turned and began striding towards his house, muttering away to himself as he always did. The three herd boys looked at one another, each assuming that my father was for it in some way.

“MacKay!” the captain bellowed, and at that my petrified father scurried after him.

He had to run to keep up, and by the time they’d arrived at the captain’s house my father could hardly speak. He thought he knew what it was about. He’d heard the captain teaching pipes to a lad in the big house, and a few times had hidden close to the window to eavesdrop on the music. Inside, when the captain told him to sit down on the chair at the table, my father was almost in tears.

“But the mud,” my father said, gesturing to his legs which were still splattered from his day in the fields. He didn’t have any shoes, and the mud used to cake every one of his toes.

“Never mind the mud,” the captain said, and he left and went into another room. My father heard him telling his housekeeper to make tea. When he came back, still muttering, he lifted the chair my father sat on off the ground as though my father wasn’t in it, before planting it in the center of the room.

“I’m sorry, sir,” my father said. “I didn’t mean it.”

The captain stopped muttering and looked at him. “Didn’t mean what?”

“I ... I listened to you at the big house. I hid in the bushes by the window.” My father looked helplessly at the floor, sniffing.

The captain narrowed his eyes. “Yes, that is indeed why you’re here, MacKay.”

He then grumbled and again left the room, with my father now in utter despair. But a few minutes later, he returned with a feadan: the wee elder branch chanter used to learn the notes for the pipes. An older woman followed, carrying a tray laden with tea and buttered bread.

“You’re here because you clearly have an ear for tunes, so I thought I’d spend my time teaching you rather than those dim-witted lads up there.” Spilling most of it, the captain set his tea on the table and then

put the feadan into my father's hands. "You have to handle it carefully, mind. They break easily and the reeds take time to make."

My father looked down at it, still struggling to understand that he wasn't in some sort of trouble.

"You've hardly been subtle about it, lad," the captain said, eyes widening. "I've heard you singing away with the herds, playing on that wee chanter you've made. And it's no wonder. You're a MacKay! There's music in your blood. Now let me show you what to do. Unless you want to go back to clearing the cow shit, of course ..."

And so that's how my father told us he came to learn his first notes. It was not long before he'd been taught all there was to be taught by those on the island, and he was said to make a great impression when he played. MacLeod hospitality was renowned, and my father would often be called upon to entertain the laird's guests. Of course, he did like to remind my siblings and me at every opportunity of what he termed the greatest injustice, when he was deemed too young to perform for the writers James Boswell and Samuel Johnson, who famously visited the island in 1773. If he'd enjoyed a few drinks and we managed to hound him into it, we could get Father to recite by heart the passage Johnson wrote about his stay. Never have I met someone with a memory as impressive as my father's. This recital was made all the more hilarious given his loose grasp of English; hearing his unique pronunciation of such extravagant language was enough to make us near weep with laughter.

"Our reception exceeded our expectations," he'd begin, starting quiet and slow as the room hushed. "We found nothing but civility, elegance, and plenty. After the usual refreshments, and the usual conversation, the evening came upon us." Here he paused, and then sped up the tempo and crescendoed, encouraging the children to start clapping along. "The carpet was then rolled off the floor; the musician was called, and the whole company was invited to dance." Then he did a little jig, before

seeking out my protesting mother and taking her up in a twirl, crying, “Nor did ever fairies trip with greater alacrity!” which was then the cue for everyone to leap up with them.

And so the passage ran on, something about the “mansions of pleasure” and full of other phrases we didn’t fully understand, but still, not a little pride was taken from these writings on the island. My mother, though, she was always more eager to remind us of another of Johnson’s observations from his time on Raasay, whenever me and my brothers were reenacting the night before a little too boisterously: “More gentleness of manners, or a more pleasing appearance of domestick society, is not found in the most polished countries.” I suspect perhaps the locals were on their best behavior during the writers’ stay.

But it was in that sort of atmosphere that Father grew up. I see now that had my father not been an orphan, but say had been born a MacLeod, he would never have learned music as a craft. Recently I have found myself doing this more: speculating on how this all came to pass, seeing the links that have made up the chain. Had Father been a MacLeod and not an orphan then he would have lived like the three boys, studying literature and mathematics and politics, and listening to the faint sound of his ten sisters singing from another wing of the house. As it was, though, being a low-born lad served him well. As time went on, so wonderfully did he entertain the guests at Raasay House that the MacLeods eventually arranged for him to travel to Gairloch for piping tuition with his distant MacKay relatives, and with the last of the MacCrimmons on Skye. This was hugely generous on their part. It was this that really allowed him to become the man he did, the man who would then shape my brothers and I into serious musicians as well.

I was a bairn myself when I started showing that same skill for the pipes, and in my own days as the most famous piper in Scotland, much was made of my piping lineage from the MacCrimmons through my

father. I suppose it was offered as some sort of explanation. Even sitting here in this chair, this still frustrates me. Of course, it is a great point of pride to know I descend from such a line, but anyone who lifts a pipe and plays a good tune knows that lineage is but a thread or two to the past, and a few threads do not make a sturdy garment. My father and I were great pipers firstly because of the luck of our situation, and then because we worked at it our entire lives. Were I able-bodied and they allowed me pipes, I would be practicing now, and tomorrow, and the day after that. Perhaps through my father I inherited a sense for music, a natural inclination for it, but not squandering that gift, working diligently – that is real talent.

That will do for now, I think. Tomorrow I shall start my journey anew.

Journey from Skye, Summer 1823

The day we found out we were leaving Raasay is scored across my memory like a notch gouged into this desk. For a long time, my parents had been trying to hide from us the dismal state of the laird's health and the threat of emigration, though we had guessed as much, and were afraid. Mother's pained expression when she weighed our meager portions was not so well hidden; she and Father would bicker at night when they thought us asleep. We couldn't always make out the words exactly, but the fact they had started arguing at all was enough to alert us that the winds were changing. At the age of ten, I didn't fully comprehend why this might be, but now I know all too well: Britain was evolving. Railways, roads, harbors, the agricultural revolution and the Clearances, the structural improvements across the cities. One visiting piper had told us that Glasgow now had several thousand gas lights illuminating the city streets. We struggled to believe that. How would anyone be able to sleep if it was still light outside?