

THE LAXAY POACHERS

Alex MacIver's father was from the village of Laxay, his mother was from Achmore. Even today (2014) Alex is known by many Lewis folk of a certain age as the Laxay Poacher!



A Contemporary Scottish landscape painting of Laxay, Isle of Lewis. Laxay (*Gael*: Lacasaigh or Lacasaidh) is a village of the Lochs district on the east coast of the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides), lying on the north side of Loch Erisort, some 9 miles (15 km) southwest of Stornoway.



This excellent image of Laxay was provided for us by Donnie MacLeod of The Kinloch Historical Society and we are pleased to acknowledge copyright to him. The photo is taken from Nabhar and shows the MacIver house at No.3 on the left.



THE RIVER LAXAY

The village of Laxay takes its name from the Norse language and a rough translation is Lag a' Bhradain, possibly because the village is situated between two good salmon rivers. Abhainn Lacasaigh lies to the west and Abhainn Eallaidh to the east. At one time the Laxay River was recognised as the second best Salmon River on the island, the best river being Grimersta.

Maggie Smith, musician, writer, broadcaster and resident of Achmore provided us with the following poaching commentary from her late father's notebook. She knew the MacIvers and had visited them at Danes drive.

“Before the advent of the sea green and latterly the monofilament net, all the salmon poaching done in the Lochs area was in the estuary of the Laxay River, people came from all the villages on either side of the Loch Erisort to get one for the pot. Indeed the “Laxay Poacher” (Alex M. MacIver) often travelled from Danes Drive in Glasgow to partake in the spoils!

During the war years and even up to the mid-1950s it was quite common to meet people from Cromore, Leurbost, Balallan or Kershader in the boats beside you. However as people became better off and could afford the new sea green nets they discovered that they could catch the salmon, in their own bays on the way in to the Laxay River.

Many good stories can be told about poaching but a good poacher would never spill the beans until the following year and even then there were never any names mentioned.

One story could be told about my grandfather Murdo Nicolson who lived at 26 Laxay in a thatched cottage next to the harbour. He was never without salmon in the summer months as he knew their movement at every stage of the tide.

One day he was in the middle of the river having landed a salmon with the short crook he always carried under his jacket, when he saw the gamekeeper John MacIver, Seonaidh Shobhal coming along the river bank. He promptly took his jacket off and covered the salmon lying in the seaweed. He then dropped his trousers and pretended he was doing his toilet and the gamekeeper walked on.

Another day my grandfather was having his usual dinner of salmon when John MacMillan, Iain Teach from Glebe Keose came in to light his cigarette from Murdo's peat fire. Iain was sure Murdo was having his dinner although he couldn't see anything on the table. Iain being as fly as himself went out through the door and turned back immediately, with the excuse that his cigarette had extinguished as soon as he went outside. He caught Murdo eating salmon from a plate in the drawer in the side of the table! Whenever Murdo was eating salmon and he heard someone at the door he would just close the drawer.

Another house where salmon was the staple diet all the year round was at No 30 Laxay at Taigh Eoghainn Dhomhnaill Ruaidh, where there was a family of six boys and four girls. One Communion Friday their mother and father went to church and left the young family to look after the preparation of the dinner. Mrs. Ferguson had put a whole salmon on the boil leaving instructions to let it boil for twenty minutes and then to let it cool in its own juice and it was not to be touched till she came home.

However as the sermons then, especially at Communion Time, were much longer than they are today, the family were getting hungry and one after another took a wee taste of the salmon out of the pan, until eventually there was hardly any salmon left. So the balaich Eoghain went down to the river, 300 yards away and caught another salmon, put it in the pan and brought it to the boil, thinking their mother would be none the wiser. When Mrs. Ferguson came home from church and started dishing out the dinner, she discovered that there were two heads on the salmon she had put in the pan in the morning!"



It's himself! The Laxay Poacher!

THE LADY POACHERS

REEL

ALEX. M. MACKEEVER.

Handwritten musical score for a reel titled "THE LADY POACHERS" by Alex. M. MacKeever. The score is written on six staves of music paper. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The music consists of eighth and sixteenth notes. There are four first-time and second-time endings marked with "1ST TIME" and "2ND TIME" respectively. The date "21-9-59" is written in the bottom right corner of the page.

The original of Alex's music dated 21-9-59



MacKeever's tea!