

150th Anniversary

OF THE MACRAE KEEPERS OF EISHKEN

Guest writer **Alastair McIntosh** on a remarkable family story.



Above: Murdo Macrae (1857-1944) & wife Catherine Mackenzie from Brora.

Four generations of head keepers! Five generations of stalkers! And six generations, when you count the kiddies that ran around Stornoway's Cabarfeidh hotel on 9th May, as people gathered to celebrate 150 years of the Macrae family on the Eishken Estate.

As seasoned SGA members will know, keepering often runs in families. These are folk who understand the multi-levelled nature of a place.

They bridge between natural and human ecology. They mediate between the worlds of owners, the wider community of place, and

political shifts, with the joined-up aim of keeping the estate in good heart.

It can be a lonely task, this balancing of complexity alongside early mornings and late finishes. To city folk they can seem a breed apart with their Land Rovers and search lights.

But if you're ever stuck and need a hand, you'll see their qualities. And as an old stalker told me, and he'd been told it by an older stalker yet: "I never once went to the hill but the deer didn't send me to university."

The sporting historian David Jones tells that it was Murdo Macrae that began the Eishken lineage.

In service to the 3rd Duke of Sutherland, he damaged his lungs fighting a savage moorland fire.

Hoping it might better suit his health, he was sent across the Minch in 1876, Lewis being then under the Mathesons. As Eishken began to move from lease to ownership by a family of English ironmasters, he was promoted to head keeper by Joseph and Jessie Platt and made responsible for 6 stalkers, a trapper and their piper.

I've heard a family member say the Platts helped modernise the fledgling Harris Tweed industry.

Certainly, at the New Lanark world heritage site, light Hattersley equipment

(of Harris Tweed fame) stands alongside heavy weaving gear by "Platt Brothers & Co Ltd, Oldham", once the largest machine-making firm in the world.

According to King Edward's physician, Murdo was "a handsome giant, over six feet high and straight as a fir tree." To the 7th Earl of Dunmore, he was "one of the finest stalkers who ever went out on the hill."

Murdo died in 1944. He was succeeded as Head Keeper by his son, Duncan Macrae, whose bravery earned him the Military Medal with Bar in the Lovat Scouts during WW1.

I remember Duncan when I was a child in the 1960s. Duncan was another giant like Murdo, "straight as a fir". In old age, he'd pace

slowly outside the house, gazing across the moor as if towards eternity. It was said: "He was the master of all he could see, and he had seen everything."

Duncan died in 1977 at 87, the same age as Murdo before him. He had been succeeded by his son, Tommy Macrae, who started work aged 14 in the 1940s on £1 a week.

Tommy was a mentor, a gentle giant, from whom I never heard a cross word, though he could be stiff with poachers. He had a powerful ethic of animal welfare that would never leave a wounded beast to suffer.

Tommy died at the age of 82 in 2009. His wife Sophie

Below: Duncan Macrae (1890-1977) & wife Margaret Bain from Evanton.





Above: Thomas Macrae (1927-2009) & wife Sophie Macleod from Balallan.

followed in 2015, leaving Duncan, Gordon, Ruairidh, Christopher and Ann.

In my Eishken days, Chris Macrae who succeeded him as Head Keeper was just

a shy wee boy. Later, with his wife Donna, they became my good friends. Their children, Duncan and Heather Macrae, both now work on the estate in stalking and hospitality management, and Duncan's children Tommy (8), Peggy (7), Danny (4) and Fearnie Macrae (2) now make up the 6th generation.

At the 150th celebration, Chris welcomed guests, passed over to me to share some memories, and I passed to the present proprietor who raised a cheerful toast to the generations.

In a moving grace, the Rev Paul Murray of Kinloch Free Church spoke to Psalm 42,

where the wild deer pants for water much as the soul pants for God. Old Sophie would have found it music to her ears, for once when I asked her if she prayed, she answered: "All the time."

The Macraes of Eishken stand like a drystane dyke, one that remains upright because, to borrow from a Uist bard: "As long as it's true to itself it will not fall down."

Chris was awarded an SGA long service award in 2022. Such depth of keeping comes from the land and ripples through the whole community. Moving down the generations, it walks us all back home. ●

Below: Christopher Macrae (1966-) with children Heather (1994-) & Duncan (1989-).



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About 100 guests gathered in the Cabarfeidh on 09 May to mark the 150th anniversary of the Macrae keepers of the deer and salmon at Eishken.

It all began in 1876, when Murdo Macrae came over from Sutherland, soon promoted to Head Keeper under the Platt family.

The 7th Earl of Dunmore called him, *“one of the finest stalkers who ever went out on the hill.”* He died in 1944, his son Duncan Macrae having taken over, and he a holder of the Military Medal with Bar for bravery in WW1 with the Lovat Scouts. It was said, *“He was the master of all he could see, and he had seen everything.”*

Duncan died in 1977, succeeded by Tommy Macrae, a mentor to many on the hill and loch. A gentle giant, he could be stiff enough with the poachers, though they all turned up to pay their last respects at his funeral in 2009.



Thomas Macrae (1927-2009) & wife Sophie Macleod from Balallan

Tommy's wife Sophie, (née Macleod, of Balallan), died in 2015, leaving their children Duncan, Gordon, Ruairidh, Christopher and Ann.

Christopher Macrae is now Head Keeper, married to Donna (née Macpherson, of Stornoway). Both their children, Duncan and Heather, work in the estate's stalking and hospitality. Duncan's children are Eishken's sixth generation: Tommy (8), Peggy (7), Danny (4) and Fearne (2).



Head gamekeeper, Christopher Macrae out on the moors

The 150th celebration was opened by Chris, then an appreciation of the family by Alastair McIntosh (an Eishken ghillie under Tommy), and a toast by proprietor Nick Oppenheim.

In blessing the meal, the Rev Paul Murray of FC Kinloch spoke to Psalm 42, how the soul pants for God as the wild deer pants for water.

All were magnificently fed and watered at the Cabarfeidh, and we wish the Macraes of Eishken many, many, future years on the hill, the loch, and as much-loved members of the community.



Christopher and Donna Macrae with children Heather & Duncan and his children, 150th anniversary celebration, 9 May 2026

written by Alastair McIntosh

Growing Heritage Futures



Growing Heritage Futures, is the Isle of Lewis's contribution to Rural Health Equity-which aims to maximise the use of existing community assets in rural communities in Highland. One of the aims of the local project is to introduce new people to the existing community facilities in the Lochs area, by offering growing themed events.

The Growing aspect - This project aims to share local knowledge as regards growing herbs and vegetables.

The Heritage aspect - Recording crofters who learned tips from previous generations on how to make the best of the soil. The interviews, recorded in Gaelic, will be contributed to local archives but also the key points will be transcribed and translated and available in a leaflet or similar.

The Futures aspect - There is a Lets Grow Lochs WhatsApp group which welcomes those already growing crop or those aspiring to grow. A great way to meet likeminded people swap knowledge, tools, seeds etc. A step towards food resilience while supporting rural health.

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