

Reprint from an article by John MacLennan. Date and newspaper unknown.

### Historic 'Family Curse'

It was to have been a friendly little social occasion, this dinner party, given at their own home in Dingwall by a bank manager and his wife to welcome a young man of rank, new to the district but of ancient descent, with family roots deeply embedded in the history of the surrounding countryside.

The young man who was guest of honour on that fateful night of January 1856 was Lewis Mark MacKenzie, who had entered into his inheritance as laird of Findon on the Black Isle. He was residing temporarily at Balavil, near Conon Bridge, while his future home Mountgerald, a few miles east of Dingwall, was being prepared for his occupation.

Lewis Mark was a man of culture, educated at Oxford, with refined musical and literary tastes, and a deep interest in the genealogy of his family and of the Clan MacKenzie, of which it was a leading branch.

His host and hostess at the dinner were Mr and Mrs John McIver. Mr McIver was manager of the Bank of Scotland. There was one other woman at the party. The other guests were a man who was staying at a local hotel, and two Roman Catholic priests. Lewis Mark had, since his Oxford days, been a convert to the Church of Rome.

#### COLLAPSE

The meal took its leisurely course — the main dish was roast beef with the usual accompaniments, and the atmosphere seems to have been so cordial that the diners lingered long at table. They had been sitting there for about an hour, after eating, when one of the priests was suddenly taken violently ill.

A doctor was called and, soon after his arrival, the other priest and the young laird also became ill. The first priest had been carried to a bed, and the second had collapsed on the floor. Lewis Mark MacKenzie lay, very sick, upon a sofa.

The doctor did all he could for them and he soon had his hands full, for the bank manager and the other male guest were also struck down.

Within an hour, Lewis Mark MacKenzie and the two priests were dead. The other two men recovered, no doubt because they had been able to vomit and keep moving about.

All five male members of the party had helped themselves to the side dish of horseradish sauce, which was offered with the roast beef. The two women had not taken any of the sauce, and had suffered no ill effects.

So it looked very much as if there was something wrong with the sauce — and this suspicion was later confirmed.

What was wrong with the sauce was that it was not what it seemed to be. The main ingredient was not horseradish but monkshood (aconite), which is a deadly poison. It had got into the sauce through the tragic error of a young manservant, who had been sent into the garden to get the wherewithal for the sauce. He had dug up aconite, thinking it was horseradish, which it is easily mistaken for, as the roots of the two plants closely resemble each other.

#### FOLKLORE

Three men were dead because of an innocent blunder. It was a very long time before the people of Dingwall — and for many miles around — got over the disastrous events of that January evening. The story passed into local folklore. In the immediate aftermath there were wild rumours that the three men were victims of a Protestant plot. This was soon shown to be nonsense — both the cook and the manservant were Roman Catholics and could never have been involved in a plot to kill their co-religionists.

The evidence pointed to only one conclusion — all three had died through a tragic accident. There were no sinister implications — unless what became known among some of the MacKenzies as the "Family Curse" is taken seriously.

Had he lived, Lewis Mark MacKenzie would have succeeded his father's cousin, Sir James John Randall MacKenzie as seventh baronet of Scatwell, head of one of the main branches of the Clan MacKenzie, who possessed great power and property in Ross-shire during preceding centuries. Lewis Mark had inherited Findon from his father. Major Lewis MacKenzie, who had bought the estate from Sir James for £6000.

This transaction exemplified the parlous state of Sir James's finances. He was heavily in debt and eventually had to sell all his estates. He went to live in France with his wife, Lady Anne. The couple were

childless, and on Sir James's death in 1884, James Dixon Mackenzie, younger brother of the ill-fated Lewis Mark, succeeded to the title as seventh baronet of Scatwell.

In an unpublished manuscript Miss Evelyn Mackenzie, a daughter of Sir James Dixon Mackenzie, tells the extraordinary story in which legend and fact are intertwined — her account of what was called “by a later and more frivolous generation the ‘family curse’,” which was “to rest on the tragic death of Lewis Mark.”

The manuscript, running to more than 100 typed pages and entitled “Times Deceased — a chronicle of the Mackenzies of Scatwell and Suddie”, names Nancy Dixon, grandmother of Lewis Mark Mackenzie, as the innocent bearer of the “family curse” upon her descendants.

The legend had its origins in Bengal where Nancy's father, Joseph Dixon spent most of his life in the service of the Hon. East India Company. While there he saved the life of a Hindu lady of high caste who, according to the cruel rite of “Suttee”, was to have been burnt alive upon her husband's funeral pyre. “Suttee” was eventually abolished by the British in 1833, but in the late 18th century, when Joseph Dixon was in Bengal, it was still practised.

#### PROTECTION

Joseph Dixon took the lady under his protection and provided for her but, according to the legend, wrathful relatives invoked evil upon the family — the sons would die young, the daughters be widowed or unmarried, and ill fortune would fall on those who survived.

The legend relates that the Hindu woman and her son were murdered, presumably by angry relatives. Joseph Dixon brought his daughter Nancy, then aged six, back to London to live with him. He died in 1786 and, in his will, placed Nancy in the guardianship of his brother, the Rev Fletcher Dixon, vicar of Staveley, Derbyshire.

It was at Staveley in 1798. when she was 20, that Nancy was married to Samuel Bancroft, aged 23, a promising young man educated at Cambridge, who had been training for the Bar. But, says the manuscript, “Nancy had brought the curse upon her family and their descendants”. One year after the marriage, Samuel was thrown from his horse while riding in Hyde Park, and died from his injuries.

Left a widow at 21, with a baby girl — another Nancy, who was eventually to marry Lewis Mark Mackenzie's father — Mrs Bancroft then married a clergyman, the Rev. Denny Ashburnham. It was a happy marriage for both mother and daughter.

When young Nancy was about 19 she and her mother were staying at a cottage at Eltham, Kent. When legend again intervened to “add colour to fact”, says the manuscript.

“One day mother and daughter were in the garden and the daughter went indoors for a short time. When she returned, she found her mother murdered — stabbed to death.”

#### VENGEANCE

Strange dark men had been seen in the district. “Vengeance and the curse had overtaken her at last. No-one can say now what really happened, but the ‘Times’ notice says simply that she died ‘suddenly’ in her 40th year.”

The younger Nancy — Nancy Bancroft — was to become the wife of Major Lewis Mackenzie, the father of the victim of the poisoning tragedy at the Dingwall dinner party, the young man on whom, as Evelyn Mackenzie wrote, “the curse was to rest”. And she added “So ended Lewis Mark's life at the age of 34”.

The manuscript continues: “No sensational tragedies followed in the family, but the curse fulfilled itself in other ways, bringing persistent misfortune.” Lewis Mark's brother, Sir James Dixon Mackenzie, Evelyn's father, “met the fate of many 19th century lairds.”

Two years after he had inherited the title, the holders of the mortgages on the estates of Findon and Mountgerald foreclosed, after the failure of a Scottish bank. It was the end of a vast land-owning inheritance which at one time embraced several of the finest estates in Ross-shire, including Scatwell, Suddie. Rosehaugh. Findon and Mountgerald.

The manuscript ends: “Sir James Dixon (Mackenzie) was left landless and penniless. The last acre of the Mackenzies of Scatwell had gone”.

FOOTNOTE: the title of the manuscript “Times Deceased” is taken from Shakespeare's Henry IV part 2 Act III Scene 1: “There is a history in all men's lives, figuring the nature of the times deceased.”

We are indebted to Mrs Margery Macintyre of Findon for the loan of this document.