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The Sutors of Cromarty

On the 26th of September in 1838, a large crowd came to see the vessel leave Scotland. The departure of an emigrant boat from Cromarty on the Black Isle was a significant event. The folk on the shore of the Moray Firth were fishers from Cromarty, Rosemarkie, Fortrose and Avoch and there were people from inland too. There were some families from Caithness and Nairn and even from as far away as Leith! They said goodbye to their loved ones, followed them to the water's edge, watched them mount the gangplank and ached as they disappeared from view. The grand lairds arrived in their carriages and observed from the hilltop, nodding with satisfaction. With more peasants sailing to the colonies it was so much easier to get hold of their land for their own sheep.

Among the children playing on the pink-pebbled beach, little Hughina Sutherland and the McIntosh laddie, Sandy, dug little holes and constructed dams and rivers and tiny piers of sticks and shells. Their parents stood nearby.

Shipmaster Hector Sutherland with his wife, Jean, watched the ship's preparations closely and looked beyond the headlands, wondering how rough the waters were that evening. Hector knew how perilous the enormous billows of the North Sea could be.

The McIntoshes (Hugh and Elspet) stood along the beach a little way, Elspet jiggling the baby on her hip, Hugh silent beside her, pipe between teeth. Elspet fixed her gaze on the enormous *Lady McNaughton* moored there in the firth, being loaded for its long journey. She raised her eyes to Cromarty's Sutors.

The ancient tale of the Sutors of Cromarty is quaint indeed. The story goes that there were two giant shoemakers (called in the Latin tongue *sutors*) one living on that north headland and one on the south. They shared their tools by throwing them to each other across the waters of the firth. No one was sure how the cliffs themselves came to be called “The Sutors” or how long they’d resolutely stood there. No one knew how old the legend was either but the wise, elderly people said they’d always known it and that the cliffs were even older than the story.

The Sutors changed colour with the shifting light, the late sun lay full on them and below their orange glow, the waters darkened. Over the years, the giant shoemakers had watched industrious fishermen and many hopeful travellers. They’d witnessed numerous mishaps; the firth could be rough when the wind blew hard. Boats were grounded and damaged, countless fishing nets tangled and lines lost. Many a man was thrown overboard, never to be seen again.

A light breeze crept over the hill and crossed the pink pebbled shore, skimmed across the water and brushed the *Lady McNaughton* gently. It carried the voices of those looking on, playfully tossing the sounds so they were just a vague murmur by the time they reached the ship. The murmur mingled with the busier noises of loading: excited talk, grunts of exertion while crates and barrels were scraped, hauled and dropped. It was lost amongst crying children, mothers imploring to be careful, fathers cursing or calling out encouragement. Chickens squawked and pigs squealed. The *Lady McNaughton* added groans and creaks as she tugged at her moorings. She was eager to get on her way.

The wind also collected the spectators’ sobs. These little choking sounds escaped from relatives and friends desperately trying to contain them by covering their mouths with their hands. The tears were allowed to stream unchecked down their cheeks. The little sobs, carried by the capricious breeze, were so distorted by the time they reached the rocking boat, they

were unrecognisable. They continued to escape from behind trembling hands. Everyone was used to large fishing boats but this ship filled them with awe. For many, the departure of the *Lady McNaughton* was a dreadful event.

Elspet McIntosh was conscious of a feeling of expectation around her but the added sense of distress was tangible. Now the strengthening breeze tried to wrap her in sorrow, flapping at her face and tousling her hair. It flung the occasional spot of rain at her hands, puffed at her skirt, threw sand at her eyes. She imagined with a shudder what it would feel like, to have a son or daughter setting off for New South Wales. Pulling her shawl more tightly round her shoulders, she whispered into the wind: 'Dearest Lord, keep us all safe in Avoch. Look after my bairns, dear Lord. Keep them content here.'

She held her baby close and tried to wrench her thoughts from her fears. There were good friends on that boat, driven by desperation to leave Scotland. Some had only recently come to Avoch to try their luck at fishing. They hadn't been successful. They'd come to the coast of the Black Isle after eviction from their pastures, driven off by the greedy lairds intent on stocking the Highlands with their own flocks. The poor souls had told Elspet how ferocious bands of men with great clubs drove them out and how, as they ran from their very own land, they'd looked back and seen their homes burning.

Little Hughina and Sandy played on, oblivious of the anxiety surrounding them. Black clouds passed over the setting sun. The huge boat began to rock slowly, ominously, back and forward, stern to bow. Elspet McIntosh bowed her head, closed her eyes and covered her face with her hands. The wind became colder and chilled her to the bone.

The knowledgeable Shipmaster Sutherland filled his wife in with the boat's statistics.

'She's 558 tons,' he said.

Jean Sutherland nodded absently. Her mind was really on the departure of her brother, Dr Skinner, the *Lady McNaughton's* surgeon. She wondered when, or if, she would see him again.

‘Built in Calcutta,’ her husband continued.

Along the beach, Elspet McIntosh listened to the information too. She found the concepts quite bewildering. She’d heard of Calcutta and of New South Wales but wasn’t sure whether those places were close to each other. They seemed to be in the same direction from Cromarty. Elspet was satisfied to live on the Black Isle. The thought of setting off for an unknown place was terrifying. That was not going to be, not for Elspet and *her* family!

A sailor clambered to the top of the highest mast, readying the ropes to raise the sails to the full. The *Lady McNaughton* loomed dark and foreboding. The crowd caught its breath and watched intently but some of them were distracted by a squabble amongst the children. Sandy’s big sister, who was five, was trying to persuade him to leave the pebbles where they lay. At a belligerent yet unsure three years of age, Sandy McIntosh gathered them in his hand. His play with Hughina Sutherland had turned into the inevitable battle.

‘I will get an orange frae Faether Christmas, Hughina Sutherland,’ he challenged. ‘See if I dinnae!’

Hughina draw herself up to her full height. Being also three, and even more determined, she tossed her head and scathingly answered her companion. ‘Och, why would Faether Christmas come tae ye, Sandy McIntosh? Ye fight and ye smell o’ fish.’

Hughina had heard one of the lairds say the villagers always smelled of fish. She wondered why the laird wrinkled his nose when he said it. She thought it must be a sort of bad thing to smell of fish, even though her family lived for fish, with fish, for fishing and to smoke fish, it still seemed a good insult to throw at Sandy. She had heard tell that the laird didn’t go out fishing! She wondered what the laird did all day.

‘Mither!’ Hughina’s big sister ran shrieking to her mother crying, ‘Sandy McIntosh says he’ll throw pebbles at Hughina! He says he’ll push her in the water! He says he’ll push her onto the big boat and she’ll go tae New South Wales!’

At this, Hugh McIntosh removed his pipe from his mouth

and took a step forward. There was a speedy change in his little son's attitude. The lad ran to dive behind his mother's skirts. His father asked him, 'Can ye no' just watch the boat, Sandy? Can ye no' try tae see Hughina's uncle, Doctor Skinner, up there on board? He'll no' be back for Christmas, him and his dear new wife and the dear Lord knows if we'll ever see him again.'

At that, Sandy stopped swinging on his mother's skirt. Perplexed, he stood in front of her and looked up asking, 'Why will he no' be here for Christmas, Mither? Why would I no' see him again? Will he be getting an orange, Mither?'

'Och, wee Sandy,' said Elspet, looking down at the little freckled face. 'He'll be back. Ye'll see him again, but no' for Christmas. They say it's awfu' far tae New South Wales. *We'll* never ever go such a way.'

Now the wind strengthened and the ship got underway. The hum of excitement and sobbing turned to a terrible silence. Some people again sank to their knees to pray that their loved ones would indeed reach New South Wales and that they might even see them again. Then from the silence the sobbing grew again, muffled at first, then more insistent and with obvious choking tears. All the children were quiet. What was this huge dark vessel that could rob the grownups of all their confidence? Why was it suddenly colder and the night falling much too quickly on the waters of the Moray Firth?

The calls from the beach were meant to offer encouragement to the travellers but the now strong, traitorous wind tossed them till they sounded like long, agonised moans.

Huzzah... Huzzah... Huzzah...

The reverend gentlemen, having blessed the vessel and its passengers and wished them Godspeed, moved among those on the shore, offering comfort. The ship ran smoothly toward the mouth of the harbour where the two great Sutors guarded the passage to open sea.

Hughina Sutherland danced on the beach, her rosy little face eager, her blue eyes shining, her auburn curls bobbing. 'Will Uncle Alexander Skinner be back on the morrow? I can see him, I can see him,' she sang. 'Will the *Lady Naughton* come back in a wee while? Why cannae we all go on the *Lady Naughton*? Can we no' go to see the new south whales? Can we no' go tae Inverness in the *Lady Naughton*? Can we hae scones for supper?'

The little lass began to really look forward to the following day's journey which would probably take her all the way to see the new south whales. She watched earnestly as the *Lady McNaughton* continued on its way.

From the far side of the firth drifted the heartrending tune of an ancient Scottish lament. The vessel sailed between the great headland Sutors, was silhouetted against the waning sky and merged with the horizon. She slipped from sight, her passage unknown, her destination frightening and her passengers swallowed forever.

All that remained was memory and the wind-driven wisps of music from the lone piper on board. There was silence amongst those who had watched and waited. Silence, save for the buffeting of water against the wharf and the sides of idle fishing boats. There was the occasional windswept wail of a baby with no sense of occasion. Even the folk up on the green hill could see only the gaping distance between the Sutors. Stunned by the feeling of loss, everyone began to wend their hushed way to the path along the shore. The lairds breathed a collective sigh of relief, climbed into their carriages and set off for their mansions, each looking forward to a blazing hearth and a good whisky.

The grim prediction of the Seer of Brahan¹ was being realised:

The sheep shall eat the men.

1 Kenneth MacKenzie, predictor of the future (17th century).

As Hughina and her family stepped into one of her father's boats to go down the coast to Avoch, the child was filled with curiosity. 'Will the *Lady Naughton* and Uncle Alexander Skinner turn round and come back soon?' she asked. 'Because if he doesnae, how will Faether Christmas find him?'

'Och, lassie, I'm sure Faether Christmas will find him,' said her father, fixing the sail.

'What do the new south whales look like?' Hughina asked. 'Are there really animals hopping on big tails where the new south whales live, as Uncle Alexander said?'

'Hush, Hughina, sit quietly the now. I'm sure Uncle Alexander knows well what is in New South Wales. Hush ye the now, hen.'

But Hughina was intrigued and her thoughts kept racing. Were there a lot of new south whales? She thought there must be. Why were they new? Would she ever go to where the new south whales live? She sat upright, with her little hands folded on her lap as her mother had taught her but she strained her eyes toward the Sutors for another glimpse of the boat with Uncle Alexander Skinner on board.

Little Sandy McIntosh and his family climbed into their row boat and his mother trembled. She prayed for strength for the moment they would pass the Chanonry Point.