

THESE PEOPLE ARE FURIOUS ABOUT SOMETHING¹

Garry Wood

These words were spoken by Susan Walker in *Great Northern?*, when she realized the seriousness of the mess the crew of the *Sea Bear* had got themselves into in their forage ashore on one of the Outer Hebridean Islands. Nancy Blackett's grand plan to help Dick and mislead their opponents was rapidly turning into a disaster for all who had taken part.

As a novel *Great Northern?* differs from most of the others of Arthur Ransome's canon. Here an outside character is the feature both in the introductory paragraph, and in the final illustration at the end. The character is of course Ian McGinty, son of the Scottish Laird of the area. The *Great Northern?* book is also unusual because it has two separate stories within the one. The first story involves Dick Callum, his Divers and their eggs, and his battle with the egg collector, Mr Jemmerling. The other story involves the McGintys, the Gaels, and their conflict with the interlopers disturbing their deer. As seen through the eyes of Ian McGinty, we look at how the McGintys and Gaels viewed the situation, not knowing what their antagonists were really up to.

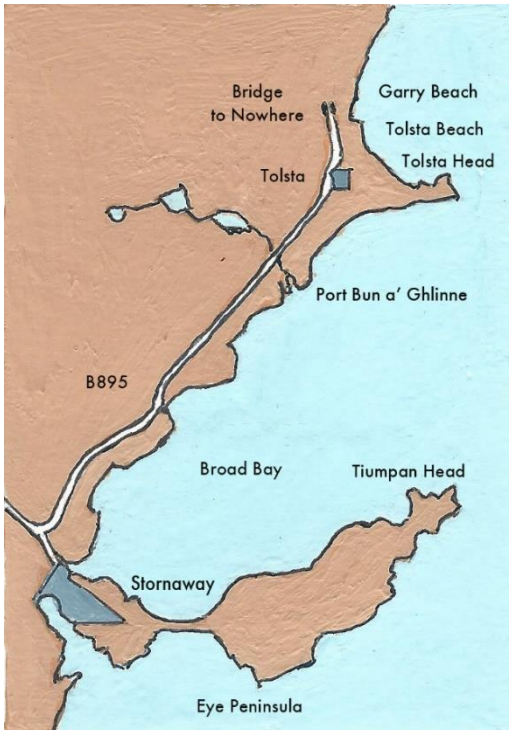
In this article, we also note the similarities between the Uig Lodge building and Ian's house. We speculate on the origin and use of the McGinty name. Further, there is a look at some of the Hebridean locations which AR may have visited with the aim of establishing a geographical and historical background for his *Great Northern?* story.

In the novel, as the cutter *Sea Bear* approaches the Outer Hebrides from the Scottish mainland she runs into a thick fog, and with the use of one of owner Mac's small charts, under power manages to creep quietly into a sheltered cove on one of the islands. AR does not disclose in the text or map exactly

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where this is. However, readers with knowledge of the Hebrides soon identified it as being on the north-east coast of the main island of Lewis, though a convincing location for Scrubber's Cove has not been pointed out with any degree of certainty. It is suggested the Gaelic Port Bun a'Ghlinne with its small double inlets could have inspired it (Wardale, 2000 p 150). Maps show a number of small lochs similar to those Dick Callum found, inland from the sea inlets. In a straight line, the cove's position would be about 15 kilometres north of the town of Stornoway, but by sea it is much further because of the rounding of the Eye Peninsula.



At the start of the story, Ian McGinty is standing on the curious grass covered mound on the top of a hill high above the sea, and watching on the landward side a valley where deer were feeding. Turning for a minute he saw a sail on the sea, a long way off. A while later he heard the sound of bagpipes calling him home. He had another look over the sea and saw the vessel under sail was closer, and wondered where it was heading for. It was now becoming misty, so he packed up what he had brought with him and set off carefully picking his way through rocks and heather to his home.

Map, north eastern Lewis

On board the *Sea Bear*, Mac's chart at the top had a small sketch of the land ahead as seen from sea level, and on this land were several buildings clustered on the hillside, and among them a note of a 'conspicuous house'. This was Ian's home. On his return there Ian was greeted by his father, the Laird. Surprisingly, AR makes no mention of Ian's mother, or any siblings in the story.

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The conspicuous house, Ian's home

The grey coloured house was probably built of stone, with a roof of green slate. The house is somewhat like the lodge AR frequently stayed in at Uig Sands which is on the western, Atlantic coast of Lewis (Fait, 2017 p 104). The Uig Lodge is still there, and now painted white overlooks the magnificent Uig Sands bay. It is now a five star hotel. When a comparison is made of the Uig building and the novel's sketches of the conspicuous house, the similarities can clearly be seen. Both are about the same size, with three stories including the tower, steep roofs, and a number of chimneys and chimney pots. In the novel, AR has changed the top of the tower from a steep roof with a central finial to a battlemented one more like that of a medieval castle. He has also added a stone terrace to the lower side of the house so that occupants and visitors could walk out and admire the spectacular view of the bay below and the sea.

On the other side of the house there could have been a long driveway leading up to a road which ran parallel to the coastline from Stornoway to the village of Tolsta further to the north. This road is known to have been there in the 1920s, if not before, and is now road B895. It had once been planned to carry the road on from Tolsta to the northern-most tip of Lewis, but this section was never completed (Rowe, 2017 p 76). In the *Great Northern?* story,

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set in the 1930s AR deleted the road as it would have cut across the area of land where the most extensive action of the novel was to take place.

In the afternoon of the day following his return to the house, Ian was at one of his favourite places, the lookout position on the house's tower. Looking to the south, he suddenly saw a group of young people disappearing from the cart track gap and head off up the valley beyond. Ian went down and spoke to his father about what he had seen and his father suggested he go with leading hand Angus, and shepherd Roderick and his dogs to see what the intruders were up to. Using their deer stalking skills to stay unobserved, the three of them followed the three from the *Sea Bear* up the valley until it became obvious that the deer feeding below were becoming alarmed at the intruders' noisy presence. The three pursuers then split up, made themselves visible and, with a series of whistles and a short charge by Roderick's dogs, sent the three from the *Sea Bear* fleeing back down the valley to their boat.

When Ian returned and reported what had happened, his father was very angry. The area where the intruders were is called a deer forest, though as Roger Walker said, there were no trees. The 'forest' term dates from medieval times and the Latin word *foris* denoting a waste area of poor quality land used as a hunting area. The Highlands red deer in those forests tend to stay in the one area and not need fences. However an unscrupulous neighbour, by disturbing the deer could cause them to shift, all or partly to his own forest. This is why the McGinty was so angry. 'More shame' he had said, 'to them who set the bairns to such work'. The next morning Angus reported to the house breakfast table that the *Sea Bear* had left, perhaps frightened off.

The following day Ian thought he would have another look at his observation post, the mound on the hill top, or broch as he called it. The archaeologist Fiona Haughey, writing in the *Despatches* newsletter of Spring 1998 suggested that the structure, rather than being a former Gaelic hillfort, was a passage grave (because of its tunnel) or monument dating back to the Neolithic period of 4000-2500 BC, and probably originally for internments. On passing through the cart track, Ian was startled to see the *Sea Bear* back in the nearer cove. So the intruders had not gone for good, after all. Reaching his broch and looking northwards towards Tolsta Head, he saw a white motor yacht nosing in along the coast. Re-enforcements, he thought, looking for the others. Hearing a slight sound from above, he cautiously looked over the rim of the broch and found Roger asleep there. With too good a chance

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to miss he left his 'Sleeping Beauty' notice there, and slipped off back to his home.

That night in the conspicuous house, Ian, his father and Angus planned their moves for the next day, should the intruders try to disturb the deer again. They decided to have the ghillies from the croft cottages assist in rounding up the intruders. This all went to plan with the capture of the deer disturbers, John and Nancy, and Dick returning from his bird photography, and also Captain Flint as the unwanted rescuer. Eventually the McGinty decided to attend to the captives who were being held in an old barn. So he, Ian, Angus, the bagpiper and a number of ghillies opened the door and confronted them. A rather heated discussion followed in which the McGinty was interested but unbelieving of the bird story. Ian, however, had his doubts of the guilt of the captives as they did not seem to be the type of people who could be involved in nefarious deer disturbing activities. For him, perhaps, the bird story was true. He knew of various types of birds frequenting the valley lochs, but as they were not one of his interests had not paid them much attention.

The situation suddenly changed with the sound of gunshots from the valley beyond. As Dick bitterly stated that the egg collector would probably have killed his Divers, the McGinty turned, and muttering 'murderous villains' and 'my loch', strode angrily toward the gap in the ridge. Ian found himself talking to John and Nancy who now had suddenly turned from being enemies to friends. Leaving the others he raced off after Roderick and his dogs and around the far side of the loch just in time to stop the egg collector escaping with the Divers' eggs. There he attended the confrontation of the McGinty and the egg collector, with the story finishing with Dick's victory in replacing the eggs safely in the Divers' nest.

Here AR ended the text of the story rather abruptly, except for a sketch of Ian watching through his stalking glasses the departure of the Sea Bear across the Minch. After the excitement of the preceding four days, he would have found watching the deer rather tame. We have not been given much in the way of details of his outside life. As well as English, he was also fluent in Gaelic. In term time it is speculated he would either attend school in Stornoway or go to a private school on the Scottish mainland. Both of the McGintys favoured Highland dress, which suggests they were very proud of their Scottish heritage.

As AR has noted on page 296 of *Great Northern?*, the McGinty name was borrowed (for the purpose of the novel) from Mrs McGinty the widow of an

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Irishman, but of Scottish decent herself, and whom Dick and Dorothea had met on the Norfolk Broads. It is curious that AR chose this surname as, although the McGinty family members originated in mainland Scotland, from about 1640 onwards they emigrated from there to what is now Northern Ireland (McGinty, 2017). The McGintys subsequently spread across Eire and then throughout the English speaking world. They are thus now regarded as basically an Irish kinship group, distinct from those belonging to the formalised Scottish Clan system. It has elsewhere been noted McGinty is actually an Irish surname (MacKinnon, 2013). AR, in choosing an Irish surname for the Laird of a locality in the Western Isles of Scotland, has left the reader rather baffled!

The McGinty of the story would very likely have had a car so as to attend to the business of his estate in Stornoway. If he did not drive himself, one of the ghillies on the staff with driving experience could have acted as a chauffeur for the purpose. Further, the McGinty would need the car to meet the mail-boat from the mainland so as to welcome visitors to his estate, and also just for touring around the island. Some of these excursions from the McGintys' home would have taken the B895 road a short distance north to the village of Tolsta. The village name is of Old Norse language dating from the early ninth century when their *Dragon* ships first arrived there from Norway (Anon. 2005). In the present day, MacIver is a common surname of those living there. Although the Clan MacIver occurs elsewhere in Scotland (Bain, 1982 p 186), the MacIver surname in northern Lewis is thought to have originated from the Gaelic personal name *Iombar*, which is derived from the Old Norse *Ivarr* (Anon. 2018). A large number of place names in northern Lewis are still directly Old Norse, while others are Gaelic translations from Old Norse. An example is the Gaelic name for the town of Stornoway *Steornabhagh*, being originally the Old Norse *Stjornavagr* (Tait, 2017 p 72).

The coast near Tolsta village has some of the most beautiful coastal scenery in the Isles. The beach nearby to Tolsta (*Traigh Mhor*, translation from Old Norse to Gaelic) is renowned for its golden-white sand resulting from the highest shell content of beaches in Scotland. When the sun is shining on the shallow shore-line seawater, it sometimes appears purple, mauve or turquoise in colour (Anon. 2014). The south-eastern part of this beach ends at Tolsta Head, which is suggested to be the 'great cape jutting out', as seen from its opposite side by the land party from the *Sea Bear* when they first climbed the Pict-house hill.

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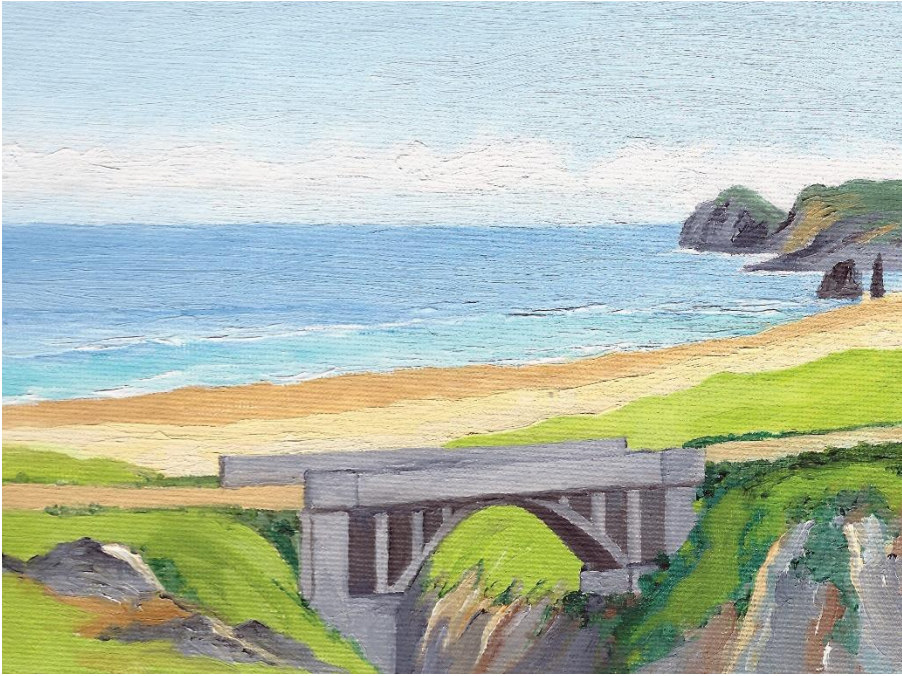


Tolsta's colourful beach

Today, Tolsta's Beach (over two kilometres long), has become popular with board riding surfers. Modern lightweight surf boards were not developed until several decades after the 1930s, but had they been available, then Ian McGinty might have been tempted to try surfing and join the surfing fraternity. In these far northern latitudes, in mid-summer the long days make it possible to surf till midnight as there is still some light in the sky.

North of Tolsta the B895 road formerly ends at the Bridge to Nowhere, an elegant concrete structure over a deep gorge (Tait, 2017 p 81). Here the road continues as a rough track for about two kilometres before petering out. Just past the Bridge to Nowhere, a path leads down to the smaller but beautiful Garry Beach (*Traigh Ghearadha* in Old Norse) which is popular with locals and visitors alike. If Ian enjoyed swimming, in the summer he probably did so there, as despite its northerly latitude the water of the sea is warmed to some extent by the Atlantic Gulf Stream ocean current. On the southern end of Garry Beach, there is a group of five rock pinnacles, the largest of which has the remains of an ancient fort. These are the remains of *Caisteal a'Mborair* or *Mormaer's Castle* (Anon, 2005). Perhaps AR had seen this, or a similar ruin, and had it in mind when in the story he had Dot say of the McGinty house, 'I told you it must be a castle'.

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An artistic impression of the Bridge to Nowhere spanning the steep ravine which leads down to Garry beach

As AR did not mention any siblings to Ian in the story, it would seem likely he would be the new Laird after his father had retired or passed on. If so, whether he would have retained his father's deer population as it was is hard to say, or try other farming such as sheep or cattle. There are still three deer forests listed on the island today, though two of them are on the southern Harris part. With the McGinty land being on the scenic coastline and in the vicinity of the beautiful beaches, by now some of it could have become valuable real estate and sold for subdivision.

In a review of *Great Northern?* (Thomson, 2003) refers to the presence of the McGinty and the Gaels as a sub-plot, over-ridden by the main Great Northern diver plot. He suggested that AR alternatively might have liked the feud to dominate the story, and looking at it from the McGinty point of view it is clear that here is a story on its own. There is no doubt the McGintys took the invasion and disturbing of their deer very seriously. Susan, after being apprehended, seems to have sensed this the most ominously, when she

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said ‘These people are furious about something and I don’t know what’. So it is no wonder they were enraged by the intruders until the true purpose of their presence was explained. Fortunately although there was probably some lingering annoyance, a peaceful resolution resulted from the explanation.

The crofters in the area, some of whom probably worked for the McGintys on their estate and deer forest, and who lived in the stone-walled, straw-thatched-roof cottages would also have been concerned about the presence of intruders. This was not the first time their way of life had been threatened. After the First World War, industrialist and philanthropist Lord Leverhulme, famed for his manufacture of Sunlight Soap and who had purchased Lewis Isle in 1918, introduced a plan to abolish the crofts and replace them in the more fertile areas with dairy farms (Hutchinson, 2017 p 130; Rowe, 2017 p 76). These in turn would support a fishing industry which would be established. It was he who commissioned the Bridge to Nowhere to be built. However, agreement between him and the croft parties could not be reached primarily because of the post-World War One desire for land ownership by returning soldiers (Rowe, 2017 p 176). In 1923, the Stornoway Trust which had been formed, accepted Lord Leverhulme’s offer of ownership and administration, on behalf of the people there, of all crofts, farms, castle grounds and policies within a seven-mile radius from the centre of Stornoway (Hutchinson, 2017 p 203).

In *Great Northern?* the McGinty speaks of ‘my loch’, both to Captain Flint and Mr Jemmerling. Whether the McGinty actually owned the land at the time of the 1930s is uncertain, and he may have just leased it from land owners. The same for the crofter’s land and buildings in the area. In the present day there is an active real estate industry on the Isle. The local economy has benefited from the Land Reform Act (Scotland) 2003, which has allowed such communities to buy up estates for their own uses.

AR in his visits to the Hebrides, primarily for recreational fishing, would have learned a lot about the Gaels and their part-Norse ancestry. It is possible that he asked them for their advice for a location he could use for the novel he was writing, and they made the suggestion of the north-eastern coast of Lewis. This then became the ideal place for the whole of the *Great Northern?* story.

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Diver postscript:

As for how the Divers have fared into the 21st Century, both the Red-throated and Black-throated are still nesting on some of the larger and more remote lochs of the Isles. The Great Northern over-winters in the Isles for feeding, though occasionally breeding on the northern Scottish mainland. They have apparently not done so on the Isles.

Another species of Diver, the White (or pale yellow)-billed, slightly larger than the Great Northern, now occurs in the Isles as a winter visitor, particularly on the north-eastern part of Lewis. The White-billed Diver (*Gavia adamsii*) is known to have occurred in Britain near the time AR had *Great Northern?* published (Fitter; Richardson, 1952), reporting it as a rare bird. Because of its rarity, AR may not have been aware of it. The White-billed which sometimes gather in small groups seem to prefer the open sea, particularly where steep cliffs drop sharply into tidal streams of deep water. After arrival in the Hebrides for their winter visit they gradually moult, losing their black and white plumage and replacing it with light brown coloured feathers (Scott; Shaw, 2008).

Observations in recent years have shown that the White-billed Diver also occurs on the northwest coast of mainland Scotland, and southwest and Arctic coast of Norway. However, the largest population is on the Alaskan Coast, where it is referred to as the Yellow-Billed Loon. During the breeding season they are easily distinguished from the Common Loon or Great Northern Diver (*Gavia immer*) by their distinctive more sharply up-angled and large pale yellow to ivory-white bill (Swem, 2014). Those of this species in the Pacific seem to show more yellow on their bills than those in Scottish waters. In the northern Pacific they are most frequently seen in north-western Canada and Alaskan coastal areas, the Aleutian Islands, coastal Eastern Russia, and sometimes Korea and Japan.

A fifth species of Diver, the Pacific Loon (*Gavia pacifica*), is confined to the northern Pacific, breeding mainly in Northern Canada and Eastern Siberia.

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*A pair of White (or pale yellow)-billed Divers on the Minch,
where Captain Flint indicated deep water occurred (P. 106 of GN?),
below an imaginary Pict-house hill and cliff face.*

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