

A SEAFARING TALE

by Dr Ian MacKichen

My uncle William was the elder son of the first marriage of my grandfather. He was born in 1866, and died at sea at the age of 17. That was all I knew of him until the arrival one morning of a large envelope from Australia, containing his death certificate from the "Marine Register of Deaths" at Melbourne, and the report of the arrival of a three-masted clipper, fully described in the Melbourne *Argus* of Saturday 7th July 1883.

William was an apprentice on the ship *Loch Vennacher*, learning seamanship and navigation with the intention of becoming a ship's officer. The ship had sailed out of Glasgow and had reached only the Tail-of-the-Bank, where the river Clyde meets the open sea, when William was taken ill with "Gastric Fever". Six weeks later he died. The ship had reached a position in the southern Atlantic Ocean, just to the north of the island of Tristan da Cunha, and well to the west of the Cape of Good Hope. He was buried at sea on June 1st 1883.

The *Loch Vennacher* arrived at Melbourne on July 5th, after a voyage that had taken nearly three months from leaving Glasgow, and probably William's uncle and aunt would have been waiting at the quayside to meet him, only to learn the sad news from the captain. The report of the voyage of the *Loch Vennacher* which appeared in the Melbourne *Argus* two days after she berthed, is fascinating in the detail that is given.

"The *Loch Vennacher*, one of the well-known Clyde clippers which was built specially for the Melbourne trade, arrived last night after another of her usual successful passages. She has brought out some 50 saloon and between deck passengers, and a full general cargo. The latter is of the usual Clyde character, namely, pig-iron and pipes, with lines of heavy hardware, and there is also a large shipment of boards. The ship is well down to her Plimsoll mark, and notwithstanding the quantity of deadweight freight on board she has accomplished a very good run of 79 days from Greenock, or 77 days from Tory Island. During the voyage John Gray, the engineer, fell overboard and was drowned. Effort was made to save him, but he sank before the boat reached him. One of the apprentices, William Mackichen, died on May 31st from gastric fever, one of the passengers during the voyage disclosed symptoms of insanity, and has been carefully looked after since. His mania, however, has not developed any dangerous tendencies. Captain Ozanne is again in command and he reports leaving the Tail-of-the-Bank on April 16. A course was shaped through St George's Channel, but on the morning of April 17, when off the Calf of Man, the wind came away strong from SW.

This led to a change of front, the helm was put up, and the ship made for the North Channel. At noon on April 18, Torr Island was passed, and the wind continued from the SW quarter until April 20. Light northerly and easterly winds followed until getting into the latitude of the NE trades. The winds were steady but without any great force, and the equator was crossed on May 12. The SE trades were much worse, light battling airs being experienced to latitude 10 deg S, where there was a marked falling-away, and for three days the ship had little else save calms and light variable airs. On reaching lat. 25 deg. S, the first of the welcome westerly winds were found and taking full advantage of these, the *Vennachar* came out in her best sailing trim, and some excellent running was accomplished to the meridian of the Cape of Good Hope, which was crossed on June 6. Captain Ozanne made his casting between the parallels of 45 deg. and 46 deg. S, with the winds moderate in force, but singularly unsteady in direction. They blew seldom from the same point for more than a few hours at a stretch, and on one occasion only did the wind freshen to gale which lasted for about six hours. The meridian of Cape Leuwin was crossed on June 27, and Cape Otway was passed on the evening of the 3rd inst. Light northerly winds were afterwards met with. She will discharge her cargo at the railway pier, Williamstown."

The *Loch Vennachar* was built at Thomson's Yard, Clydebank, in 1973, for the Glasgow Shipping Company. She had an iron hull, was 250 feet in length and weighed 1,552 tons gross. The crew numbered 26. This magnificent three-masted sailing ship was wrecked in September 1905, at Kangaroo Island, south west of Adelaide, 32 years after her launch.

Note: Tory Island or Torr Island, mentioned in the newspaper report, lies off the Donegal coast of north west Ireland and has the distinction of having a 'King'. The grandfather of Dr Ian MacKichan was Minister of Lochgilphead Parish Church in 1866.