

Frank Lockwood's Island

by Lake Falconer, Oban

This little island, lying off the south coast of the larger island of Mull just east of the mouth of Lochbuie, is of no great significance, except for its name. It stands out conspicuously as the only English name in an area where every other geographical feature has a Gaelic name, or certainly one which is Anglicised Gaelic. Why, I wondered, and who was this Frank Lockwood anyway?

I decided to find out. Local enquiries drew a complete blank. No-one seemed to have any idea of the origin of the name. As a last resort I wrote to the Scots Magazine, which usually has a page of queries of that sort. Perhaps, I speculated, Mr. Lockwood was a member of the Ordnance Survey team which was mapping the area, and finding an island without any name, decided to perpetuate his own memory by attaching his name to it. It would make a much better memorial than a moss-grown tombstone in a forgotten corner of an overgrown graveyard.

My letter drew a swift response. I had little notes from two senior members of my own office staff. These were very interesting, because they were completely different and, as it later turned out, were both wrong. Much more valuable was a slightly indignant letter which I had from the officer in charge of the Edinburgh office of the Ordnance Survey. It was indignant because of my scurrilous suggestion that any member of the Ordnance Survey would demean himself in the way I had suggested. But my correspondent told me that he had consulted what he called The Name Book, which records the source of every name on the maps. Apparently the system in use was to put the question of a name first of all to the owner of the feature. Failing him, the parish minister would be asked, then the local dominie, and failing all else, the local peasantry would be consulted. In this case, the source of the name was the owner himself, MacLaine of Lochbuie.

So, who then was Frank Lockwood ? The ever helpful Google provided the answer. He was born in 1846 in Doncaster, where his father and grandfather had both been Mayor. He was a clever lad, for he was sent to Manchester

Grammar School, and thence to Gonville and Caius college in Cambridge, where he read law. He was called to the English bar in 1872, and took silk 10 years later. He became Liberal MP for York in 1884, and was appointed Solicitor General in 1894. Two famous cases figured Lockwood. He defended the murderer Charlie Peace (unsuccessfully, obviously) and he led for the Crown in the trial of Oscar Wilde, when the poet was found guilty of homosexuality, and sentenced to two years hard labour. He served this sentence in Reading Gaol, and the sentence broke him.

So, what has all this to do with a little island off Mull, you may ask. Let me explain. In 1874 Lockwood married Miss Julia Schwabe. So ? Well, the connection is that Miss Schwabe's sister had previously married the MacLaine of Lochbuie. The brothers-in-law became good friends, and the Lockwoods spent many happy holidays at Lochbuie.

The MacLaines of Lochbuie being landowners in the County of Argyll, were members of that august body, The Argyllshire Gathering. So that the Lockwood might become a landowner in the county and thus eligible for membership too, MacLaine gifted the small island to him. At least that was one version of the story I got from my staff. It was bunkum, of course.

The truth is that Frank Lockwood greatly enjoyed visiting the small island, quite often on his own, where he would study the bird life, and perhaps just enjoy the peace and quiet. He visited it so often that it became known in the family as Frank's Island. In fact, it did have a Gaelic name already, which was Eilean Srathaid Eun, which I learned meant "island of the birds' walk" and it is a very appropriate name, as the shags walk about on it. I have seen them on the occasions when I have visited the island. In his letter, the Ordnance Survey Officer suggested that an alternative name for it might be "An t-eilean mun robh an t-seabhagair a feorachadh". Translation of this defeated me, so I asked a local expert to help me. One word - seabhagair - puzzled him, but he undertook to look it up. He telephoned me in great excitement to tell me that the word was the Gaelic word for a man who looks after birds of prey, in other words, a falconer. So the OS suggestion for the name was "The Island about which the Falconer is enquiring." The joke was on me.

So that's the story of Frank Lockwood's island. It's certainly a better memorial than a tombstone. But it isn't the only English place name in the area. Nearby, on the south shore of Lochbuie, is Lord Lovat's Cave. But that's another story.