

Over the Sea to Skye

By Cathy Lawson

She remembered sitting cross legged on the cold, polished wooden floors of her grade 1 classroom and tucking the hem of her dress over her school shoes to stop them digging into her skinny little legs. They would sit around the teacher at the piano and sing all the old songs; “McNamara’s Band”, “If you’re Irish come into the parlour”, “Loch Lomond”, but her favourite of them all was, “The Skye Boat Song”.

Speed, bonnie boat, like a bird on the wing.

Onward, the sailors cry!

Carry the lad that’s born to be King

Over the sea to Skye.....

She couldn’t know why this song fired her imagination. How it woke elements of her soul. She didn’t know about Bonnie Prince Charlie and Flora McDonald, and the Jacobite Uprising and what it had meant for her ancestors far away in the Highlands.

Many’s the lad that fought on the day

Well the claymore did wield,

When the night came, silently lay,

Dead on Culloden’s field.....

Two brothers had come from Skye. That’s what Dad said, but she loved the rhythm and the melody. One day she would go there and take the ferry and sing “Over the sea to Skye”.

She and her father shared a love of all things Scottish. There seemed to be at least one history keeper in each generation that had an inexplicable tie to a place they had never been. They watched the Edinburgh Tattoo on grainy black and white television, and as much as they loved the massed bands, there was something about the Lone Piper up there on the Parapet that made them emotional and nostalgic. It hit her every time. Few other members of the family understood it. It was a bond she and her father would always share.

As the years rolled by and her father passed away, the desire to trace her ancestry grew stronger. She found out that the two brothers hadn’t come from Skye but a small island in the Inner Hebrides she’d never heard of. She knew she was third generation Australian, and her

Great- Great- Grandmother had come to Australia with 6 children, but she needed to know more. And under it all was the 6-year-old waiting to sing “over the sea to Skye”.

So, here she sat, drumming her fingers on the steering wheel of the rental car. They had missed the ferry. She’d asked him to hurry up, that this was important, but he didn’t. ‘We can drive over the bridge. What’s the big deal?’

She was too angry to speak. Anger that startled even herself. It seemed petty. Good Lord, she was 35. Surely, she should be able to handle her disappointment better than this. But the 6-year-old wanted to sing the song etched into her soul, and now she couldn’t, not for the first time anyway, and after that it wouldn’t feel the same.

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