

A Hebridean romance

Torosay Castle, Isle of Mull

Mary Miers tells the story of a Victorian shooting lodge owned by the same family for 147 years and we publish here, for the first time, photographs taken by COUNTRY LIFE shortly before the house and its contents were sold

Photographs by Simon Jauncey





Fig 1 preceding pages: The south front, with its terraced gardens attributed to Lorimer.
Fig 2 above: The entrance lobby, with stairs leading up to the main hall on the *piano nobile*

On August 24, 1912, 600 Macleans gathered on a grassy promontory on the Sound of Mull to celebrate the return of their 14th-century clan seat into Maclean ownership. Several generations of chiefs had dreamt of regaining their ancestral heartland, but only the previous year had the dream been—in part, at least—realised when the elderly Col Sir Fitzroy Donald Maclean, 10th Baronet and 26th Chief, bought the ruin of Duart Castle with a sliver of ground (later extended) from its then owner, Walter Murray Guthrie, a week before his death.

Now, as Sir Fitzroy hosted the first ever modern clan gathering, he read out a letter from Guthrie's widow: 'As the day draws near for you to formally hoist your banner on the Castle of Duart, so long the property of your ancestors, I feel strongly that I ought to

change the name of my house and estate to what I believe it was formerly called, ie Torosay [after the parish—Torr rasach, meaning shrub-clad hill]. I wish to leave the name of Duart to you alone, who have certainly the senior right to it. I shall be glad if you will announce this desire on my part to your clansmen.'

Old Duart (Fig 5) is a *leitmotif* in the story of Torosay Castle, the Victorian mansion built across the bay in 1856–58, which adopted the name of Duart in the 1860s, and which Mrs Guthrie now renamed. Following the forfeiture of Maclean lands to the Earls of Argyll in the late 17th century, the old castle had been relegated to a military garrison and later a cowshed. Simultaneously, under the influence of Picturesque taste, it acquired a new role as a romantic eye catcher pivotal to the relandscaping of the estate.



Fig 3: The dining room, furnished with a set of Edinburgh Regency chairs and a sideboard original to the room. The paintings are by Sir John Leslie: a portrait of his daughter Olive and *A Sermon, a monk preaching in the Roman campagna*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1853

Restored by the Glasgow architect Sir J. J. Burnet in 1911–16 (initially the intention had been just to consolidate it), the castle became again a clan rallying point and the home of a Maclean chief, while continuing to play a vital part in the architectural ensemble of Torosay, whose relationship to its gardens and wider landscape is its most memorable feature.

The story of Torosay exemplifies that of many Hebridean and West Highland estates colonised by incomers in the 19th century. It is bound up with the sweeping changes that transformed the pattern of landownership at a time of economic crisis, when many families were forced to sell their hereditary lands. In Mull in the 1820s, there was a 'dance of estates' as properties changed hands, initially between interconnected local families.

Duart, including the farms of Torgormaig, Achnacraig and Achnacroish, was the jewel

in the crown of the Argylls' lands on Mull, which the profligate 6th Duke became obliged to sell. In 1821, Charles Macquarrie bought it for £35,000 with the intention of selling it on at a profit so he could buy back his ancestral island of Ulva. This he did in 1825, when Duart passed to the first non-Gaelic speaker to own land in Mull.

Col Alexander Campbell was the son of a Glasgow sugar merchant descended from a cadet branch of the Campbells of Argyll. Having served in wars all over the Empire and inherited the Possil estate in Lanarkshire, he threw himself into the role of improving landlord. At Duart, he introduced new agricultural methods, created the wooded landscape setting of what was then the main resi-

dence—pretty Achnacroish House—and employed a gamekeeper.

Unlike many other merchants and speculators attracted by the relatively low cost of land—who then evicted their multiple tenantry and introduced profitable large-scale sheep farmers—Campbell endeared himself to the local community. He and his wife supported the kirk and, with their five daughters, did much to help the islanders at a time of unremitting poverty and oppression.

Having weathered the economic storms of the 1830s, Campbell died in 1846, leaving his property to his only son. John Campbell—'the Dragoon'—set about developing the deer forest and replacing the Georgian house on his Mull estate. With the Stevensons'

pier at Craignure newly built, he was able to import suitable materials to build a smart new mansion by the fashionable Edinburgh architect David Bryce. Achnacroish House, as it was then known, functioned as a seasonal residence and shooting lodge.

Bryce, a former pupil and partner of William Burn, had built up a successful practice best known for designing or remodelling country houses and castles in the style later dubbed the 'Scotch Baronial'—an inventive reinterpretation of late-medieval buildings that has become synonymous with his name.

Few sites lend themselves more dramatically to this architecture of romantic revival and Bryce responded by raising the house up over a full basement and orientating it to



Fig 4: The drawing room, redecorated in the 1980s, with a Louis XV-style chimneypiece and Whiting's *The Guthrie Children*, about 1914

make the most of superb views down the Firth of Lorn and, eastwards, to the castle ruin backed by the Glencoe hills.

Torosay's boldly massed yet compact design is mature Bryce working in his baronial mansion/villa, rather than full-scale castle, mode. It adopts one of three standard plans developed by this master of Victorian country-house planning: to the north is the entrance within a projecting crenellated tower; to the east, a lower service range; the main public rooms—dining room (Fig 3), library, drawing room—are south-facing, ranged along a semi-symmetrical garden front that breaks out into full-height gabled bays fenestrated with big plate-glass windows (Fig 1); the private family wing is set back beyond the drawing room.

Notable among the repertoire of baronial detail is Bryce's trademark two-storey canted bay corbelled up into a crow-stepped gable on the garden front, along with another bold Bryce trick: the drawing room's panoramic double bay window, with corner bows bulging out as conical roofed towers.

The principal rooms are quite modestly scaled and typical of many Bryce interiors in having Classical plasterwork and chimneypieces; there is little attempt to create any stylistic continuity with the exterior. Only the taxidermy hints at Torosay's principal *raison d'être*. Sporting trophies in Highland shooting lodges were traditionally displayed in the public circulation

spaces and male quarters, such as the entrance lobby, billiards, smoking and sometimes dining rooms. At Torosay, they are confined to the entrance lobby, where, beneath a cornice of antlers, stag heads preside over a staircase leading up to the main hall on the *piano nobile* (Fig 2). The latter was furnished as a living hall, but also functioned as a billiard room.

In 1865, with his sugar trade afflicted by the American Civil War and further debts mounting, John Campbell sold the estate to Arbutnot Charles Guthrie, whose father had co-founded the merchant bank Chalmers Guthrie of Dundee and London.

The Guthries typified a new breed of incoming landowner—financiers and industrialists for whom a Highland sporting estate represented the ultimate status symbol. A. C. Guthrie had no children, so, on his death in 1897, his wife retired to London with all the contents and Duart, as he'd renamed it, passed to his favourite nephew.

Walter Murray Guthrie MP, a partner in the family bank, was married to Olive Leslie, daughter of Sir John Leslie of Glaslough, an Irish baronet and artist who mixed in a fashionable literary and artistic circle that included Dickens, Marochetti, Leighton, Landseer and Thackeray. With a smart London residence (Stratford House, now the Oriental Club), Guthrie had little interest in an empty mansion on 25,000 windswept Hebridean acres and

promptly put the estate on the market. Then, he made his first visit to Mull and was seduced. Immediately, he withdrew it from sale.

The early 1900s were Torosay's heyday. The house functioned—as did virtually every big house in the Highlands at this time—as a family holiday home and a shooting lodge big enough to accommodate parties of guests invited up for the Highland Season. The Guthries spent a lot redecorating, improving the plumbing and installing electricity, but their lasting and most impressive legacy is the terraced garden, almost certainly designed in collaboration with Sir Robert Lorimer.

Adding greatly to the drama of the site, it links the house to its 18th-century walled garden with three flights of terraces ornamented with balustraded steps, a pair of dovecote summer houses, a fountain and marble lions. Guthrie also created the Statue Walk, a parade of 18th-century figures in the style of Antonio Bonazza that he had acquired in Italy and imported as ship's ballast.

A painting of the four Guthrie children by Frederic Whiting (Fig 4) captures those golden summers: the exhilaration of days spent out on the hill with ponies, dogs and guns; the bracing climate and glorious scenery as sunlight and clouds scud over Loch Linnhe. A hint of darker times to come is discernable in the expression of the older boy, Patrick, who would later die of drink in Paris, and

in the imperious pose of his brother David, who would also succumb to drink and debt despite marrying an American heiress.

Paradoxically, Whiting's painting dates from 1914, after the idyll had ended. In 1906, the bank had been plunged into crisis—notably through a disastrous exposure in Chile—and, by 1911, Guthrie was dead.

His widow, Olive, was a tough old bird, a great character and a good shot. She chaired the family bank, which suffered further financial disasters, and lost much of the rest of her fortune in 1917, having been persuaded by Count Benckendorff, the last Imperial Russian Ambassador, to invest in Russian Railways.

Patrick, the model for Mike Campbell in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, died in 1932, leaving debts of £30,000 and, shortly afterwards, the bank took a further tumble.

Soon, Torosay was being rented out for the Season and 8,000 acres were sold off to the Forestry Commission, precipitating the slow but steady erosion that would continue throughout the century. Olive divided the estate between her two daughters and kept the house and garden, which, on her death in 1945, passed (without any funds) to her grandson.

This was before the era of the time-share country club and remote piles hosting celebrity weddings. The Tangle of the Isles Hotel, as

Torosay became in the late 1940s, was at the *Faulty Towers* end of the spectrum. Drinks were liberally dispensed free of charge and meals concocted by the cook from tinned food; fake advertising attracted golfing enthusiasts to a non-existent golf course and family friends would call by for tea and then sit about talking in loud, upper-class voices, much to the chagrin of the guests. By 1950, the hotel had closed.

The house now belonged to David Guthrie-James, son of the older Guthrie daughter, Bridget (who had inherited the main part of the estate), and her first husband, Sir Archibald James. After an adventurous war, David had become a writer/publisher and MP and he and his wife, Jaquetta (*née* Digby, sister of Pamela Harriman), would come to Torosay with their six children for holidays and during breaks in his London career.

Meanwhile, in 1953, Bridget and her second husband, the dashing Australian colonel Geoffrey Miller, converted the kitchen wing and moved in. A big sale helped to raise funds and she and Miller struggled to keep the place going. They opened the house to the public in the mid 1970s, rescued the neglected grounds and laid out the Japanese Garden.

In 1983, having retired from politics, David and Jaquetta moved permanently to Mull and devoted themselves to redecorating, upgrading the services and developing

Torosay's tourism. After David's death in 1986, their son Christopher took over and, with his wife, Sarah, ran the place for 25 years. Then, in 2012, they sold Torosay with just 300 acres.

Little has been seen of the new owner, Madame von Speyr, whose charity, the Dew Cross Centre for Moral Technology, is said to be based here.

COUNTRY LIFE's photographs were taken in 2011, a year before the contents were auctioned off by Christies. They show the interiors well pruned, yet still with their air of Victorian grandeur and a collection ranging from a pair of 10,000BC Irish elk antlers, carved William and Mary armchairs, fine Regency furniture and an array of sporting trophies, to portraits by Raeburn, Poynter and Sargent, a collection of Australian landscapes and a bust by the Guthries' relation and neighbour Lionel Leslie of his cousin Winston Churchill, who shot his first stag on Torosay.

The photographs convey the unpretentious and eclectic atmosphere of a Highland shooting lodge passed down through five generations of the same family. They provide a fascinating visual record of a world at Torosay that has since vanished.

Mary Miers's new book, *'Highland Retreats: The Architecture and Interiors of Scotland's Romantic North'*, will be published next month

Fig 5: A view across Duart Bay to the medieval castle of the Macleans, with one of Lorimer's garden pavilion/dovecotes in the foreground

