

The following letter was likely written by Major Joseph MacLean to his cousin A. D. MacLean. Joseph probably visited Barra when he was stationed in England during World War II. He was a member of the Cape Breton Highlanders and served from 1939 to 1946.

Editor, Sydney Post Record, Sir:

-- The following letter was received from Major Joseph MacLean, native of Washabuck, Victoria County several weeks ago, and may be interesting to a number in this country.

*Dear A.D.:*

*Yesterday I received your air-graph message for which and your interest shown I thank you. You asked me to give you news of Barra if and after I visited. Well here goes for what it is worth.*

*I spent three days there and very enjoyable ones at that. I first went to the hotel and met the proprietor, Allan MacLeod, one of the finest men you could ever meet. He made it his business to make me right at home, made inquiries and several contacts for me. Through his efforts (after I remarked that I would like to visit John MacLean of Vatersay) and yours, I was agreeably surprised to be hailed by Roderick MacNeil when I started out for a walk in the evening to see about Castle Bay. Roderick (married to John MacLean's daughter) told me of his being in Sydney, Nova Scotia several years ago which made me feel closer to home to begin with. Later when his brother Michael was brought into the conversation, I was carried home and dropped into the Bras d'Or Lakes when he asked me if I know Francis Hector MacNeil from New Waterford and other questions relating to Christmas Island and MacKinnons Harbour. This man claims to be a second cousin of Mr. John A. MacDougall of Glace Bay. That would I presume give him the same relationship to Allan Austin MacNeil, - ex-councilor of Washabuck, Victoria County. He said the relationship was figured out by Francis Hector, and "Mor Mhorr" big Sarah MacNeil. It seems he met some Waterford boys in Western Canada and went East with them and worked on the mines at New Waterford for a time.*

*Now A.D., you may know more about these people than I do, but I am going to give you their names as far as I can remember them. Roderick McNeil is "MacNeil, Dhomhnuil, Ruairi, Fhionlaigh, Mhurchaidh." My meeting this man paved my way for the visit to Vatersay. He and Malcolm MacKinnon, Gilleasbuig, Iain, Mhurchaidh, Fhionlaigh," whose sister is married to John MacLean's son Michael, came after me the following morning and took me to "Caolas" by sailboat. Vatersay is a very interesting part of Barra. We spent some hours walking about the place though we did not visit the village. I cannot begin to describe the hospitality and the feeling of homeness I received at John MacLean's. The only regret I had was that I could not pitch head-long into Gaelic conversation with Mr. MacLean. He seemed to have been forewarned of my lack of the language which helped the situation. But as is the case with most of these elderly people, Mr. Maclean was not without his good share of English so we were not "silent" by any means. When it came time for "eats" I was once more brought close to home for it is a startling fact that there is a marked resemblance in flavor and kind between the food in*

*Barra and that which we prepare at home. I actually felt as though I was once again sitting down to an honest-to-goodness meal in Cape Breton. I shall not go into detail in these matters, but I will say that when you visit one of these places, you can really see where the famed "Highland hospitality" originated.*

*Late in the evening I went back to Castle Bay and made plans for the next day. Here again Allan MacLeod came into the picture. He asked if I should wish to go in his auto which was going around the Island next day. It couldn't be better for me. So the first gentleman I contacted on this day was Allan MacLean, (84 years) "Allan Sheumais, Iain, Gogha". This man had suffered a slight shock recently and told me his memory was affected. He lives in Eoligarry with his son Archie who has a daughter serving the W.A.A.F.S. The farm on which he lives was formerly occupied by MacGillivrays about whom you may have heard. This old gentleman is a smith by trade and told me many interesting stories about his early work and the goings-on in Barra many years ago. Later on in the day I visited a cousin of his near North Bay, John MacLean, "Iain, Niall, Iain Gobha" about sixty years of age. Most of these MacLeans were, or are, smiths, and on account of that word "Gobha" there seems to be an inability to say the name in Gaelic beyond the Gobha. None seem to know the name of any relatives who went to Canada in bygone years, and because I didn't know the names of any relatives Lauchlin MacLean left behind in Barra we could not arrive at any relationship between us.*

*I visited while in that section of the county, two notables in Barra. One was Compton MacKenzie, the writer, in the "Book of Barra" he wrote the first part "Catholic Barra". My visit there was short but very interesting. He was pleased that I called to see him. The next notable was a character they called "Coddie" and incidently he himself wishes to be so-called. His name is MacPherson. He is a very jolly blustering fellow and was rather put out that I couldn't stay with him longer. Before I left he took my name in full with the idea of doing some detective work on his own, and told me to be sure to visit the Coddie when I again came to Barra.*

*Barra fairly gushes with Gaelic, for instance, we called at the school at North Bay to take the cooking teacher to Castle Bay, there were about thirty or forty children at the school, all quite young, you wouldn't hear a word of English. I spoke to a few in English, I don't think a fifth-columnist would get a colder reception. However, some of them knew English well and after I threw in a few Gaelic expressions at them the atmosphere cleared up. In Castle Bay I asked a three or four year old girl what her name was. She answered in Gaelic, "Catriona Ealasaid." That more or less took the wind from my sails so I said good day."*

*In Castle Bay I called on an old man of 90. He had a marvelous memory for a man his age. His name is Donald MacNeil. "Domhnul, Ruairi, Alasdair, Ian, Ic-Dhomhnuil," One of his son's John, is a priest in Arisaig (Mainland). By the way he and several others inquired about John A. MacDougall, and Father John Hugh Gillis who visited Barra some years ago. He told me that a granduncle of his, Donald MacKinnon (Domhnul Mor Mac-Fhionlaigh) moved to Canada many years ago.*

*The only MacLean I contacted in Castle Bay was Neil, a son of "Eoin, Alasdair, Mhicheil, Alasdair Gobha." This last named Alasdair went to Canada with all of his sons except Michael*

*who was sailing at the time and came back to Barra to find the others gone. Hence the family of MacLeans in Castle Bay. This Neil is about forty.*

*To go back to this John MacLean (Iain, Niall, Iain, Ghobha) for a moment, he told me that Michael, a brother of John Gobha, a smith, also went to Baddeck and was acquainted with MacNeil and Maclean of the Grand Narrows Hotel. I checked back on the MacNeil and MacLean of the hotel as I was of the impression that MacDougall was connected with the G.N. Hotel, but he seemed sure that it was MacNeil and MacLean.*

*I just wonder now if that MacLean could be Michael Charlie's relative. All the Gobha's here are related, and it is very likely that all of our Gobha's in Nova Scotia are of the same family. That would include my wife's people. John MacLean of Vatersay could give his name just three generations back, "Iain, Chalum, MacIain Ghobha."*

*Should you get around to answering this letter, I would like to get some information which I utterly lack, namely the names of relatives left in Barra by Lauchlin MacLean, the exact place in Barra from which our people came. Number and names of the different families of our name who went to Canada at the same time, and in short, any information which you might be. I had a short talk with father MacKellaig of North Bay. Had a couple of hours talk with Father John MacMillan of Borve. He went to Canada twice in connection with immigrants, about 1926 or so. He went through the church records to see if he could get any dope on this relationship business. We did find names that "could" be our definite relatives but one couldn't be sure. The whole thing failed because as I said before, we did not know enough about the subject.*

*With this I shall close this letter which I'm afraid is not very informative. All you friends serving over here are well. I shall tell them about hearing from you.*

*So long for now,*

*Joseph MacLean, Maj. 5 C. I. R. U. (A.D.)*

*Can. Army Overseas*