

REASSURING MUM: A LETTER OF MCLAREN'S FROM SZECHUAN

The Stirling-born filmmaker Norman McLaren won an Oscar in 1953 for his animated film *Neighbours*. The University of Stirling Library holds a series of letters written by him to his family in Scotland, which provide a remarkable eyewitness account of major historical events.

In 1949 McLaren was invited by UNESCO to travel to China to teach young Chinese artists how to make animated films as part of a project to improve the health of China's rural population. As McLaren noted in a letter to his parents, the project would help the Chinese to "start making films themselves in order to help educate the people in the backward villages there, who can't read or write and who need films made to teach them how to have a healthy village".

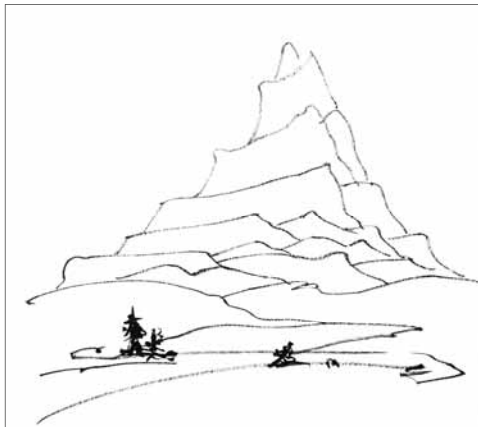
McLaren's adventure started pleasantly enough, as he travelled from his home in Ottawa, Canada, west across the Pacific. He stopped off at Honolulu, which he described as "utterly bewitching, no place for a Scot with a buried Presbyterian conscience to remain!" From the tropical paradise of Hawaii he continued on to Tokyo, a city still struggling to rebuild itself in the aftermath of the Second World War. He kept a detailed journal of his trip and noted the poverty and destruction still clearly visible in Japan's capital. From the dust and rubble of Tokyo McLaren continued onwards to the heat and humidity of Hong Kong, where he noted that "despite the harbour stuffed full of warships, and the accents, moustaches and hairy pinkness of the Britishers, and the stores bulging with American goods, and the air-conditioning, I couldn't help feeling I was in a basically Chinese city that had in no way absorbed the west, but on which the west was living".

In August 1949 McLaren left the hustle and bustle of Hong Kong and travelled into China to the small town of Pehpei in Szechuan province. Unfortunately for him he arrived in China as the conflict between the Nationalists and Communists swept through the country. For several months life continued as normal in the sleepy rural town of Pehpei, where he got on with his job of educating his Chinese pupils. He saw at first hand the poverty which existed outside the town in the surrounding countryside, where the peasants were being cruelly exploited by the landowners.

In December 1949 the Communist revolution arrived on Pehpei's doorstep. In an article he wrote for a Canadian magazine on his return McLaren recounted the efforts made by the town's mayor to prevent the retreating Nationalist forces from ransacking the town by welcoming them, feeding them and providing them with transport to help them on their way. With the Nationalists gone the town prepared a big welcoming show for the advancing Communist troops - which had to be quickly cancelled when a further group of Nationalist soldiers appeared on the horizon! After entertaining thousands of retreating Nationalist troops the town put up its bunting and held its breath for the victorious Communist army.

However, the expected Red Army didn't appear and the town was entered by a single truck of slightly bemused soldiers. The arrival of the Communists made

McLaren's departure difficult. As he noted in his magazine article, "the Communist authorities had put the problems of foreigners pretty low on their list. Even as a UN employee I got not special consideration. With Red China and the UN not recognising each other, officially, I did not exist". With no way home McLaren was forced to remain in Pehpei and extend the educational project. After the initial upheaval of the Communist takeover life in Pehpei appears to have returned to quiet normality. In a letter written on 22 January 1950 he noted, "life here is very quiet and simple, with little to do, little to read, and no radio. The Chinese people are very charming and pleasant. It is very interesting to be here at this time and see the changes take



Chinese mountain - a painting by McLaren

place. Coming last autumn I was able to experience a few months of life as it was under the old regime and now I may have the opportunity of having a few months under the new. The new Communist rulers are very well trained and disciplined and lead exemplary lives of self-sacrifice and hard work."

A new regime brought new bureaucracy, and it took McLaren five months to get a travel permit to leave. In March 1950 he received an official invitation from the Ministry of Culture to visit them in Peking. It was to be his ticket out of China. He left Pehpei and travelled across the country by train. On the way to the capital he witnessed "many evidences of the battlefields of the past twenty years of war", but also saw "great activity in rebuilding and reconstructing towns, villages, bridges and countryside". In May 1950 he finally reached Hong Kong and the outside world.

Despite the conflict he witnessed and the virtual imprisonment he suffered McLaren appears to have enjoyed his time in China and gained a great respect for its people. Reflecting on his experiences, he wrote in a letter from Hong Kong, "Chinese civilisation in many ways is superior to our recent western civilisation. I am sorry in many ways to be leaving it. It is not in its plumbing or mechanical gadgets that China is superior, but in its simple human attitudes."

A small display of these fascinating documents will be on display at the entrance to Stirling University Library until the end of July. A profile of Norman McLaren appeared in the December 2006 edition of the Bridge of Allan Times.

Karl Magee

HOW WOULD YOU SPEND £405,000?

So the Museum Hall had finally been sold. What then do we do with the proceeds?

This was the question faced by Stirling Council, and the matter was No. 13 (out of 36!) on the agenda for the last meeting of the current Council held last March.

The Times felt that it should be present to find out how Bridge of Allan's own money would be spent in the village, so your correspondent was to be found on the public benches of the Council chambers in Old Viewforth, notebook at the ready.

First impressions were of an airy yet impressive setting, with the 21st century radio microphone system sensitively incorporated into the august, well-ordered debating chamber.

Copies of the agenda and subsidiary reports - as thick as a telephone directory at some 365 pages - were available as Provost O'Brien called the meeting to order. The elected councillors and full-time officials were ranged in ordered ranks before him.

As he proceeded to lead the councillors through each successive item, it was striking to see the range of topics to be covered, and by the extraordinary minutiae to be considered: just how do you manage the provision and collection of recycling bins for multi-use by a variety of organisations in a village hall?

The atmosphere was generally very positive and businesslike, though occasionally a frisson of inter-personal feeling could be detected between members of the opposing political parties. Nor was there any of the contrived hostility on show at Holyrood or Westminster.

Perhaps this was because it was the final meeting of the former Council, and an end-of-term air marked some of the exchanges. One councillor's proposal for future action was greeted by the jocular, "Will you still be here?"

There was an interesting contrast too between the attitudes of the council officials and those of the elected members. The focus of the former seemed to be on the efficient running of services, while the impact of any proposals on their constituents was the main concern of the latter.

Suddenly - and after only one hour - Item 13 had been reached. The documentation before us called for the £405 thousand to be "remitted" to the Provost's Panel "to manage and administer the Bridge of Allan Common Good Fund" with the recommendation that the panel must contain one elected representative representing the Bridge of Allan ward.

Local Councillor John Holliday drew attention to the absence of consultation on the issue, and complained of the short notice of the inclusion of the item on the agenda.

He argued that, in accordance with Lord Penrose's judgement on the sale of the Museum Hall, that the Community Council be consulted on any Council decision. It would make sense to allow the people of Bridge of Allan to have their say on how the sum would be spent.

Mr PJ Broadfield, Solicitor to the Council, pointed out the legal position that there were statutory requirements as to how the Council dealt with the matter.

Councillor Holliday, seconded by Councillor Greenhill, then proposed that the subject be deferred until there had been a full opportunity for the Community Council to express its views on how the £405K be spent in Bridge of Allan.

Councillor Nelson supported this view, pointing out that in the new multi-member constituencies, the Bridge of Allan representative on the Council might not even live in the village. Provost O'Brien then indicated that he himself had asked for the local representation on the Panel to administer the Common Good Fund for Bridge of Allan.

It was then agreed to carry the matter forward to allow fuller discussions with the Community Council, with the issue then to be resolved with the new Council after the elections in May.

And so, the Council moved on to consider the remaining 23 items on the agenda. The 305 pages of documents were beginning to lose focus as a grey mist descended over the eyes, so your correspondent slipped out into the bracing air outside.

He had been impressed by watching the mechanics of local democracy in action, and was left in some awe at the stamina and application of our often much-maligned councillors and their officials.

Now, as to the question of how to spend £405,000 in Bridge of Allan, how about.....?

Postscript

Imagine Developments are hoping that there will be action on the Museum Hall site within 6 weeks. There has been a great deal of consultation by engineers about the site owing to the problems associated with the area - subsidence and building a strong retaining wall. There are now detailed drawings with the Council and the contractors are awaiting their approval. A spokesman for Imagine Developments said they are anxious to get the right contractor as it is such an exciting building.

A Century Ago in Bridge of Allan

Cricket - Ladies v. Boys (July 27)

An interesting match was played on Wednesday (July 24) on the Bridge of Allan cricket ground between a number of young ladies from Stirling and Bridge of Allan and a scratch eleven of boys.

The knowledge of the game shown by some of the very young ladies gave evidence of their having been under professional instruction, both bowling and batting being wonderfully good. Their fielding, as was to be expected, was their weak point. The boys played left-handed, but all the same managed to top the ladies' score of 78, and came off victors. During the interval the players were entertained to tea, which they thoroughly appreciated.

Band Performance (June 1)

The first of the (weekly) series of these popular entertainments for the season will be given at Cleopatra Place on Wednesday evening, 5th June, between 7 and 9 o'clock, by the Alloa Instrumental Band, under the conductorship of Mr F.J.Mellor. It is hoped that the performance will be well patronised by the general public, as the efforts of the Town Council to provide first-class entertainments deserve to be encouraged and thoroughly appreciated.

Sanitary Condition (July 13)

The number of inhabited houses in the valuation roll for 1906-7 is 648, as against 637 in 1905-6. The number of persons per occupied house in the census year (1901), having been 5.225, the estimated population at the middle of 1906 is 3365. The births during the year numbered 59, and the deaths 52. The number of deaths under one year per 1000 births was 118.

Su Doku Answers

March's competition

1	7	6	5	8	9	2	3	4
5	8	3	4	6	2	7	1	9
9	4	2	7	1	3	8	5	6
3	6	4	8	2	1	9	7	5
7	2	9	6	4	5	1	8	3
8	5	1	3	9	7	4	6	2
6	9	8	1	3	4	5	2	7
2	3	7	9	5	8	6	4	1
4	1	5	2	7	6	3	9	8

Puzzle 1 on page 3

9	1	5	4	8	7	2	3	6
3	2	6	1	9	5	7	8	4
7	4	8	2	3	6	9	1	5
5	8	7	6	4	3	1	2	9
2	6	4	9	1	8	5	7	3
1	3	9	5	7	2	4	6	8
6	5	3	7	2	4	8	9	1
4	9	2	8	6	1	3	5	7
8	7	1	3	5	9	6	4	2

Puzzle 2 on page 3

4	3	7	2	1	6	8	5	9
5	9	2	3	4	8	6	7	1
1	6	8	5	7	9	2	3	4
9	2	3	6	8	4	7	1	5
8	5	4	7	3	1	9	2	6
7	1	6	9	2	5	4	8	3
2	7	1	4	9	3	5	6	8
3	4	5	8	6	7	1	9	2
6	8	9	1	5	2	3	4	7