

The Rev. J. M. McWilliam, Bute's great ornithologist

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Introduction

On a cold November day in 1916 a bird-watcher crouched behind a rock out on St. Ninian's Point, his eyes watering as he squinted into the wind and saw two small, portly waders combing the seaweed. They were almost certainly Purple Sandpipers.

Lifting a shotgun, the bird-watcher took aim and . . . BANG!

Waves of Curlew, Lapwing and Golden Plover rose noisily above the cockle shore. Oystercatchers scattered, their shrill sirens sounding over the bay. As one of the Purple Sandpipers also made a frantic escape, the other lay dead near the water's edge.

To reach it, the Rev. John Morell McWilliam negotiated his way across the slippery rocks. A tall, gangling Irishman with sandy red hair, he was one of that now-extinct breed of sportsman-naturalist, and in his first year as minister at St. Brendan's Church, Craigmore. The wader he shot that day would eventually be stuffed and put on display at Bute Museum, joined by many other birds he killed during a decade spent on Bute.

If that were his only legacy, he might have been forgotten. But "Jack" McWilliam went on to write *The Birds of the Island of Bute*, considered the best such guide to any Scottish island and still in regular use, following it with the book that gave him a national reputation, *The Birds of the Firth of Clyde*.

Yet he is largely an enigma, except to those few people who still remember the eccentric, witty, compulsive talker who came to be known as "Scotland's Minister for Ornithology."

Early life in Ireland

He was born on 19th November, 1883, into a middle class Protestant family in County Monaghan, an area of hills, lakes and bogs just south of today's Northern Ireland border. Both his parents were children of Presbyterian ministers.

His father, William McWilliam, built up a large solicitors' practice in Monaghan. But the young lives of Jack, his elder sister Anna, brothers Russell, William and Herbert, and younger sister Nina were shattered in 1887 when their mother died a week before Christmas. From then on, the family was brought up by his mother's older sister, Marion.

Around 1896, when their father was appointed Clerk of the Crown and Peace – administering the county's court system – they moved to a large though neglected Georgian house called Corlatt a mile or so outside Monaghan. Then aged 13, Jack spent much time in spring and summer hunting for nests in its 60 acres of land. There was a lake with Great-crested Grebes and Water Rails, a river with Kingfishers and Dippers, and a bog with Corncrakes and Reed Buntings. Notebooks he kept at the time show him not content to raid a nest, but also record variations of egg markings or nest construction. Spotted Flycatchers were seen "carrying cobwebs from the barn". A Mistle Thrush had "one of its eggs with the spots on the wrong end". And on the art of finding a Meadow Pipit's nest he wrote: "The easiest way is to walk round the field late in the evening, mark the place where each bird rose, and then come back in the morning. If a bird rose from the marked spots, there was pretty sure to be a nest."

Holidays were spent on the Donegal coast at a family house in Bundoran. At nearby Castlegal Jack went bird-nesting with one of his brothers, and climbed over the headland to collect Guillemot eggs. Once, he saw a Black Guillemot emerge from a hole just out of reach. Not to be beaten, next day he returned with a fishing rod and shrimp net and later noted: "After half an hour's work I was able to get one egg down. The other rolled out of sight."

He was already an experienced shot, and although there were plenty of game birds around Corlatt to blast for the pot the young McWilliam was more interested in the life of a collector-naturalist. The accepted way to study bird life well into the 20th century was to shoot it. The attitude of the day was typified by Elliot Coues in *Field and General Ornithology* 1890: "The true ornithologist goes out to study birds alive and destroys some of them simply because that is the only way of learning." Thus McWilliam's earliest notebooks record him killing birds like Sparrowhawks, Whinchats and Bramblings to carefully check their dimensions and plumage.

The McWilliams had grapes, peaches, apples and pears growing at Corlatt, and a staff of four domestics to run the house. But as his wife would later say, it had "all the luxuries of life, but none of the conveniences . . . almost no plumbing indoors, but outside they had shooting rights as far as the eye could see." However, there was certainly enough money left to spend on education – Jack going to the highly-regarded Campbell College in Belfast before joining his three elder brothers at Trinity College Dublin in 1901.



Fig. 1: MacWilliam in his early teens, after a fishing trip with his sister Nina in County Monaghan.

The Move to Scotland

With a history of Presbyterian ministry in the family, it was perhaps inevitable that one of the four McWilliam brothers would take that path. So, in 1906 he began a two-year course in Divinity at Edinburgh University.

He played hockey and billiards for the university teams, but in spring and summer a whole new bird-nesting world opened up and his notebooks are full of expeditions to the Pentlands, Aberlady Bay and the Bass Rock – where he obtained the first eggs of what would become his favourite bird, the Gannet. In one visit alone he "took a couple of dozen eggs."

In Edinburgh he formed a close friendship with a young medical student from Gloucestershire who was aptly named Oliver Wild. (One of McWilliam's many hilarious anecdotes was the story of Wild once taking a train north from the Cotswolds with a brood of young Reed Warblers in his pocket, and getting up at dawn every day to feed them until they were fully fledged).

The two students travelled far in search of birds' nests. To the McWilliam collection were soon added the eggs of Peregrines, Shelduck, Pintails and a seemingly endless number of Razorbills.

Puffins and Kittiwakes. When, in May 1908, McWilliam was licensed for the ministry and made an assistant in the Fife village of Markinch, he was within a short bicycle ride of Loch Leven – one of the best wildfowl sites in Scotland. Markinch also brought within reach the coastal village of Anstruther, embarkation point for the Isle of May. On one occasion he and Wild hired a small yacht and were towed three miles by a steam fishing boat “to get a more favourable wind.” A holiday on the island of Eigg in 1910 saw them digging up the nesting burrows of a Manx Shearwater colony.

Before his period as an assistant at Linlithgow (1911-13), McWilliam's notebooks were still largely a chronicle of egg-collecting and bird-shooting. But now came more serious bird study. In November 1913 he recorded: “Went to Linlithgow Loch to settle the question of how ducks retain their position on water while sleeping in a breeze.” Not the most momentous ornithological question of the day, but it was a start.

A move to another assistantship at Govan in early 1914 was followed by marriage to Alice Mitchell Mackenzie, whom he had known since his Edinburgh days. The daughter of a Moffat lawyer, Alice not only had a keen interest in birds herself but could boast a distinguished family history in the subject. Her great-grandfather, Sir Archibald Campbell, led the campaign which forced the surrender of Burma to the British Army at Ava in 1826, and whilst there he had discovered for science a new species of pheasant which he named the Lady Amherst after the wife of the then Governor-general of India.

Perhaps encouraged by Alice, the newly married McWilliam took a first step to gain recognition for his own work. The earliest known paper, published by the *Zoologist* in 1915, drew on his modest claim to fame as discoverer of a Tree Sparrow colony in Donegal a full eight years earlier. Now McWilliam revisited the site and found that the colony had increased. His resulting paper was a classic of its kind, full of rich detail and erudite analysis.

McWilliam the ornithologist was born.

McWilliam and Bute

A vacancy in Rothesay brought his first full ministry, and he was inducted into the charge of Craigmare St. Brendan's Church on 8th December, 1915, on a stipend of £200 per annum.

Now McWilliam settled into the lifestyle of clergyman-naturalist not unlike that of Gilbert White, the 18th century Vicar of Selborne in Hampshire known as the “father of English natural history”. Like White, he built up a network of regular correspondents who would report their bird observations.

Around the island's roads McWilliam must have been a familiar sight on his bicycle – dog collar always worn under his tweed jacket, telescope and shotgun strapped to his back – as he visited favourite birding haunts like Scalpsie, St. Ninian's, Ettrick, Lochs Fad and Quen and the moors surrounding the Dhu Loch. He quickly established himself as a frequent house-guest at Mount Stuart where he received the freedom of the grounds, and acquired useful bird observers in the Bute Estate's gamekeepers.

Evidently he found nothing remarkable about Bute's bird-life in those first months on the island, or decided to learn more before committing anything to print, because his next contributions to the *Zoologist* came from material in his old notebooks. His study of sleeping ducks on Linlithgow Loch formed the centrepiece of a delightful paper, while another on Irish birds was wrought from observations he had made up to ten years earlier. It was 1917 before he published his first significant record of Bute birds – a long letter to the *Scottish Naturalist* in which he claimed the island's first sighting of dark-breasted Brent Geese, after coming across a flock of eight at St. Ninian's Bay. (He shot two of them to be absolutely sure!)

Increasingly, McWilliam's thoughts were elsewhere – the Great War was into its third year in Europe. In March 1917, "to the dismay of the congregation" according to St. Brendan's parish records, he requested leave-of-absence to take up a chaplaincy with the 8th Argylls. In June he was commissioned and sent to Catterick Camp in Yorkshire where, he later wrote, "I quickly and completely got rid of the feeling of discontent with myself at not being in the War when everyone else was." His wife Alice soon joined him, and they spent the gloriously hot summer of 1917 in a small cottage in the village of Arrathorne, a few miles from camp.

But now his thoughts returned to Bute. As the regiment packed up for France that October he scoured his notebooks to write a paper on the island's ornithology, darkly mindful that he might never again have a chance to make his observations public. The resulting work – clearly the embryo from which grew his book on Bute birds – appeared in the *Scottish Naturalist* in early 1918.

By then, McWilliam was chaplain to the large military hospital in Le Havre, where he conducted regular services in the wards. He arrived in France, he later joked to friends, knowing only one local measure of liquid – "a litre". He soon learned that a litre of cider was a formidable thirst quencher.



Fig. 2: McWilliam during his ministry at Craigmore St Brendan's.

Injuries suffered by the many casualties brought by long hospital trains from the front-line were horrendous, and to those in despair he gave comfort. To those barely clinging to life he gave anaesthetics, helping overworked medical staff in the operating theatres. But he still found time for birds, giving lectures in a Y.M.C.A. hut, and indulged his passion for collecting bird books and pictures by making forays through Le Harve's shops. He even sought out the old French bird artist, Arcade Noury, at his home in nearby Montvilliers and bought several of his prints. One showed the Yellow Wagtail, a bird McWilliam had under special observation that final summer of the Great War. The Kaiser's artillery may have brought Europe to its knees and – on McWilliam's travels – occasionally come within his own earshot, but when time allowed he studied Yellow Wagtail distribution. His findings would soon appear in the leading journal of ornithology, *British Birds*.

His only child, a daughter named Hester, was born on 14th April 1918, but it would be some time before he saw her. The war looked like dragging on, causing officers in his mess to bet gloomily on its conclusion being far off. McWilliam was more optimistic and wagered 20 francs to 100 that the war would end that year. When the armistice came in November he used his winnings – roughly £4 – to buy a special dinner for the mess.

There was no quick homecoming to Bute. He remained in Le Havre as the task of clearing up after the war got under way, and was made chaplain to the labour corps billeted at the port. But in March 1919 he picked up mustard gas contamination, which developed into iritis and nearly cost him his eyesight. Sent back with bandaged eyes to Yorkhill Hospital, Glasgow, a doctor declared him unfit for further military service.

Returning to the island that spring, he was Mentioned in Despatches by Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig and made President of Bute Royal British Legion. Living again at Craigmore with Alice and their baby daughter, he was slow to resume his life as an ornithologist, and parish records suggest he was still not in the best of health. In the whole of 1919, a gamekeeper's report of a Capercaillie on the island was the only record he sent to the *Scottish Naturalist*.

The following year he was well enough to visit Pladda, off the south end of Arran, where the lighthouse seemed to cause high mortality among migrating birds. McWilliam formed a friendship with one of the keepers, John Budge, and began to receive regular packages of dead birds to confirm their identification. The postmen would soon bring to McWilliam a Whinchat, Corncrake, Sedge Warbler, Cuckoo, Blackcap, Water Rail, Fieldfare, Redshank, Snow Bunting, Ring Ouzel and Storm Petrel.

In the early 1920s, amidst the Irish troubles that would lead to Civil War and partition, his father William – still Clerk of the Crown and Peace and, as such, senior British legal officer in County Monaghan – was threatened with death by Sinn Fein. He took refuge in Craigmore with his son for four months until it was judged safe to return to Ireland.

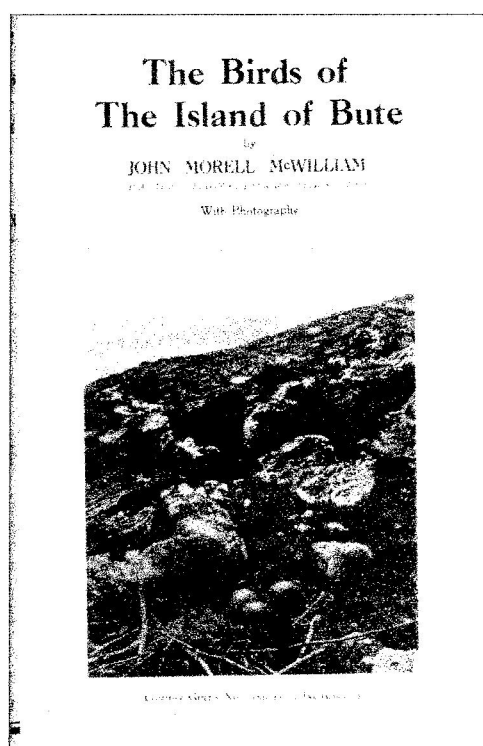


Figure 3: Dust jacket of *The Birds of the Island of Bute*.

By 1923 McWilliam's health had recovered, and he entered his most productive period as an ornithologist. An outpouring of work on Bute and Clyde birds included a paper on the movement of Rooks each day in winter between Argyll and their evening roost at Loch Ascog. This would later be expanded to 1300 words for *Birds of the Island of Bute* and form his most exquisite piece of writing. And in 1924 he confirmed that Eider Ducks were now breeding in the Clyde, on the Little Sgat Island at the entrance to Loch Fyne.

As he planned his book on Bute birds McWilliam made two key contacts. John Robertson, a white-collar worker from Glasgow who wrote an important paper on Bute birds in 1903 and co-authored *The Birds of Renfrewshire*, visited him in May, 1923, and near Ettrick Bay they saw an Arctic Skua. The other was John Paterson, also a Glasgow clerk, who contributed a much-quoted paper on Clyde birds to a handbook published for the British Association's Glasgow meeting in 1901. Paterson visited McWilliam several times, and they went searching for Wood Warblers at Mount Stuart and Tree Pipits at Kilmichael. When McWilliam started writing the book, the Glasgow men's 30 years of Bute bird records were put at his disposal.

Other correspondents included a Greenock shipbuilder, a Surgeon Rear-Admiral, lighthouse keepers on Pladda and Ailsa Craig, and the Earl of Dumfries (later 5th Marquess of Bute) as well as gamekeepers around the island. To search previously published records on Bute birds, he went through old books and journals with a stack of blank index cards. When a reference was found he would make notes then throw the index card on the floor. At the end, he would collate cards for each species and tie them with an elastic band.

Clearly, McWilliam had not intended the book to run to so many pages and the original typed manuscript has the Introduction beginning "My original aim in writing this small book . . ." But he crossed out the word "small", and in a letter to a friend at the time admitted the book had "grown in my hand."

Before sending it to Witherby's, then principal publishers of bird books in the UK, he had it checked by Robertson and Paterson. Robertson answered with 10 pages of elegant handwriting,

and Paterson then commented on Robertson's observations using the back of a flattened-out cigarette packet! Paterson also wrote further comments directly onto McWilliam's double-spaced typescript.

The Birds of the Island of Bute was published in September 1927, with a print-run of 400 plus 20 copies for the author, and sold for 7/6d. McWilliam later complained that too many friends expected a free copy and did not buy it. As with his later Clyde book, he appears to have made little money from it, but his lasting reward was to be author of a book that has largely stood the test of time. For example, when he records a Grey Plover at St. Ninian's Bay there is a sense of ornithological tradition – it is still the best place on Bute for finding the species. Also, vignettes of birds' habits abound, like his keen observations on Gannets diving or Cormorants displaying. And there is humour too. On hearing that a pure white gull was shot at Port Bannatyne, McWilliam

went to investigate only to find it had been eaten. He was left pondering glumly that he might have missed being the official recorder of an extremely rare Ivory Gull.

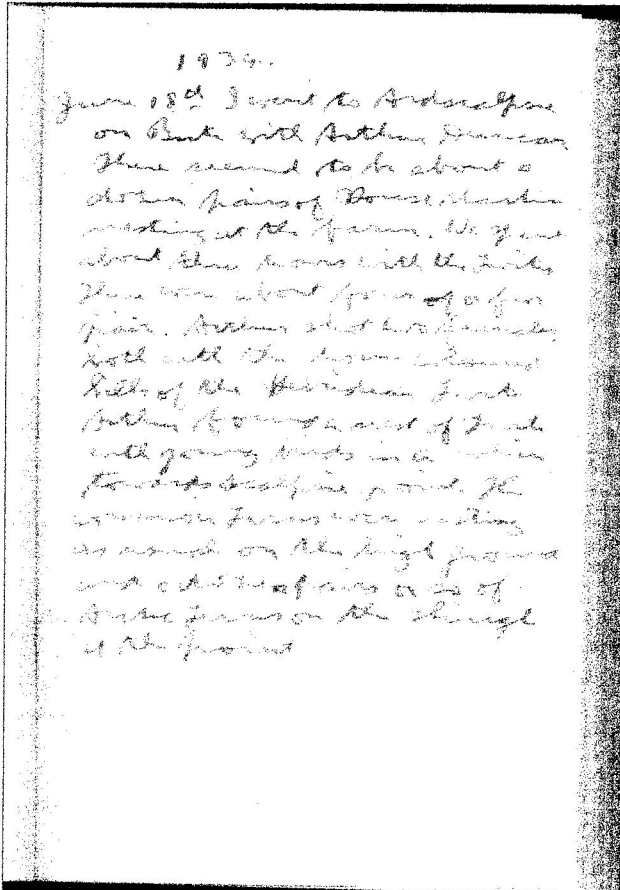


Figure 4: A page from McWilliam's notebook.

records that while awaiting the boat to Inchmarnock with a BNHS outing, he raided an oystercatcher's nest containing four eggs. He also spent some time on Arran.

As a 44-year-old Church of Scotland Minister, too, he seems to have wanted a greater challenge. So McWilliam applied for a move, and his new parish could not have been more of a contrast to Craigmore's genteel villas. In May, 1928, he was inducted to Dean Park Church, in the shadow of Govan's shipyard cranes.

Although all who knew him believe his calling inspired the change, it is clear that close proximity to kindred bird-watching spirits in Glasgow was a bonus. Work on *The Birds of the Firth of Clyde* was well advanced, and his new home – a red sandstone house overlooking Bellahouston Park – was convenient for making new contacts at both the Andersonian and Glasgow Natural History Societies. And it afforded greater opportunities for collecting bird books, which McWilliam did with great regularity at the city's famous barrows or at his particularly favourite hunting ground of Glen's in Parliamentary Road. He frequented auction rooms where, a friend later recalled, "his

The Move to Glasgow and "Clyde" Birds

Bute's bird-life could not satisfy an inquiring mind like McWilliam's forever. He began modestly to extend his horizons in western Scotland, making trips to Islay and Iona. It was in Islay that he made another close friend, a colourful character named J. Talbot Clifton, wealthy owner of Kildalton Castle near Port Ellen.

Clifton was a fellow bird-watcher, but straight out of a John Buchan novel – a war correspondent in South Africa, an Arctic explorer, horseman, travel writer and dedicated orchid-grower. McWilliam stayed with him at Kildalton, acquiring stories that would keep his friends in fits of laughter for the next forty years, especially one about Clifton's trek across the Gobi desert, where he claimed to be the only living man to eat mammoth steak.

McWilliam made several visits to Bute's satellite isle, Inchmarnock. His notebook

whispered remarks reverberated to the edification, amusement and occasionally embarrassment of his companions”.

Furthermore, he could take his venerable telescope and 12x prism binoculars to the Gorbals Waterworks reservoirs at Balgray and Waulkmill near Barrhead, some of the best wader sites in the area, or pop down river to Langbank. Ring Ouzel nests were sought by him along the Gogo Water above Largs, and with so many steamers plying the Firth in those days it was easy to sail from the Broomielaw to Tarbert and search for nesting Black-throated and Red-throated Divers in the hill lochans of North Kintyre.

What took shape was a unique guidebook for the unique Clyde drainage area. Other such books adhered to county boundaries, but the threads which drew *The Birds of the Firth of Clyde* together were the rivers and burns running into its sea and the steamer routes that made even the remotest parts accessible.

His trawl of Victorian books was exhaustive. From them he found Kites scavenging for kipper refuse at Inveraray, White-tailed Eagles nesting at Catacol Glen on Arran, and a large Rookery

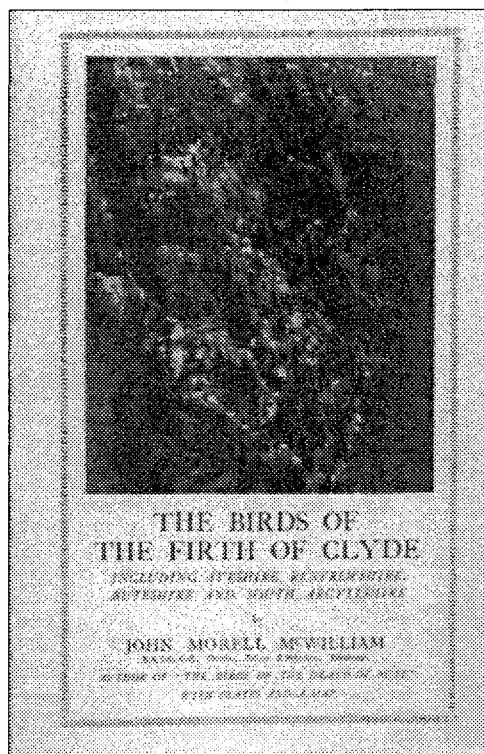


Figure 5: Dust jacket of *The Birds of the Firth of Clyde*.

where Glasgow's Queen Street Station now stands. Countless journals were also scoured, from the mighty *Zoologist* and *British Birds* to valuable local publications like the *Annals of Kilmarnock Glenfield Ramblers' Society*. What McWilliam eventually produced was a synthesis of bird knowledge on the Clyde going back more than a century, balancing references from literature with recent observations which he went to some pains to test, and written in his entertaining – often witty – style.

Although he was considered by the ageing John Paterson and John Robertson as their “heir” to Clyde birds, they never lived to see his book when it appeared in March, 1936. Paterson had died a month after McWilliam's arrival in Glasgow, Robertson on 17th May, 1931. But they may well have been disappointed. It had been greatly shortened by its publisher, H. F. Witherby.

Harry Witherby had become a friend of McWilliam's. He was one of the most eminent ornithologists, launching *British Birds* magazine and editing the soon-to-be-published five volume *Handbook of British Birds*, which became the standard reference. But McWilliam's original manuscript was twice as long as the book which eventually appeared, and Witherby – donning his businessman's hat – saw it as

an uneconomic proposition. Since McWilliam could not subsidize it from his modest means, radical cuts were required to give the book an attractive cover-price. Out went many bird records already included in his Bute volume, as well as references from *The Birds of Ayrshire* (Paton & Pike, 1929) also published by Witherby. Out went introduced species like the Wild Turkey and Canada Goose. And out went much of McWilliam's neatly turned writing and dry humour. He later revealed that Witherby and the great field ornithologist Francis Jourdain (co-editor of *British Birds*) had a “fairly heated dispute” about the cuts. Jourdain, who was also a clergyman, sided with McWilliam, and wrote to him saying that the original manuscript would have made a “classic” book.

Still, the result was a priceless anthology of Clyde bird records, garnished with many of McWilliam's own ornithological meditations. He highlighted the mystery of how specific parasites are passed down through generations of Cuckoo when they don't brood their own young, and went down the long cul-de-sac of the age – suggesting that there were enough subtle differences between

British Song Thrushes, Twites and Stonechats and those "Hebridean" forms found in the west of Scotland to merit full sub-species recognition.

The print-run was 400, plus 20 for the author, and it sold for 12/6d. By now, McWilliam was compiling a valuable paper on the birds of Inchmarnock for the *Transactions of the B.N.H.S.* – he was an Honorary Vice-President of the Society. But perhaps dispirited by the wholesale slashing of his work, he would never write another book by himself.

McWilliam the "Minister for Ornithology"

It was his Bute volume which ultimately provided him with a new direction. One of its mainland purchasers had written in praise, and invited McWilliam to join him for a sailing-birding trip to Loch Fyne. When they met for the first time aboard the *Dalga* at Rothesay harbour, McWilliam found that his admiring correspondent was – in fact – a schoolboy, shortly to take up a place at Cambridge. His name was Arthur Duncan.

The Duncans were wealthy Dumfriesshire farmers, and owned tea gardens in Assam. The youthful Arthur was an eager naturalist and found a mentor in McWilliam. Despite a 26-year age difference the two became close friends. When Duncan was down from Cambridge – where he established the University's Ornithological Society with future bird luminaries David Lack and Peter Scott – they would set off together from Govan. In this period McWilliam often went back to Bute with Duncan, shooting Twites and Sedge Warblers and trapping small mammals.

When Duncan returned from Cambridge to run the family farm at Gilchristland, Dumfriesshire, he heard of a vacancy for a minister at the tiny village of Tynron, set in the beautiful valley of the Shinnel Water west of Thornhill. Relishing the idea of his friend living nearby, Duncan persuaded McWilliam to seek a transfer. However, many in the congregation desired someone younger and there are stories of Duncan driving to remote corners of the parish to collect bedridden old ladies who would vote for McWilliam.

As their daughter, Hester, went off to St. Andrews to study chemistry the McWilliams moved south to the large Georgian manse at Tynron – a world away from Govan, where the yards were furiously building battleships to counter the threat from Nazi Germany.

It was in this period that the Scottish Ornithologists' Club was set up, Duncan being one of the instigators and appointed inaugural chairman at the age of 27. McWilliam was one of the founding members, and made first Honorary President. At one of the earliest S.O.C. meetings he gave a lecture on St. Kilda birds, an account of a 1934 trip to the remote Scottish island with the Earl of Dumfries and other members of the Bute family. It is said that it was McWilliam who persuaded the Butes to purchase St. Kilda in the 1930s. The island group was gifted by them to the National Trust for Scotland in 1957.

McWilliam had still to make one final contribution to British ornithology. In the summer of 1939 he visited the Scar Rocks off Wigtonshire, where Gannets had not bred since 1883, and found a Gannet's nest with a

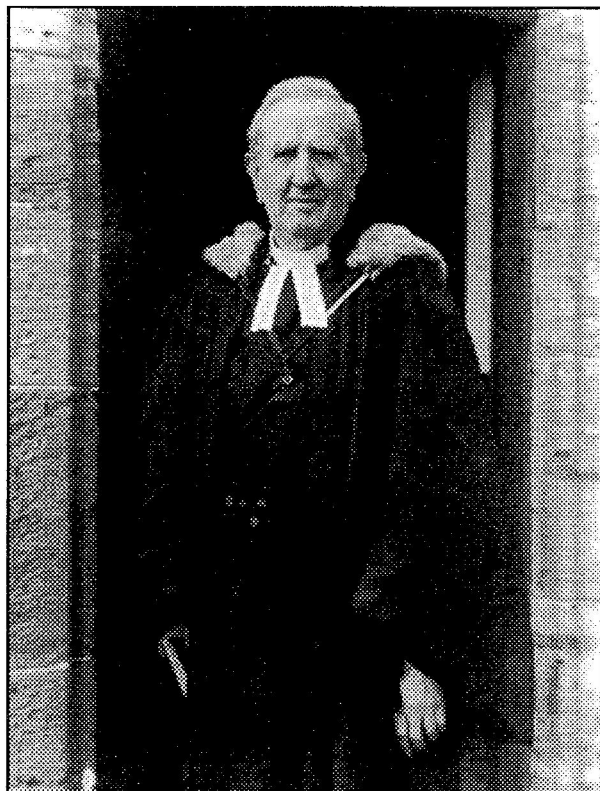


Figure 6: McWilliam at Tynron.

young bird. He announced with great pride that he had discovered the 21st gannetry in the world. By 1942 he realised it was a growing colony, counting 20 to 25 nests. The revelation of a new gannetry in Britain was greeted with delight by many in the country's bird establishment, and helped lighten the wartime gloom. But it almost ended in tragedy. Although careful to inform the RAF Station at Stranraer of his visits, on one trip with Arthur Duncan a passing plane machine-gunned them. It is not known if it was 'friendly' or a German returning from an air raid.

Among senior figures who visited McWilliam at Tynron to hear about "his" Gannets were W. B. Alexander, Director of the Edward Grey Institute for Field Ornithology at Oxford, and James Fisher, secretary of the British Trust for Ornithology. After announcing the gannetry in a short paper for *British Birds*, he wrote a fuller account for the *B.N.H.S. Transactions* and expanded it for a talk to the Society on 14 March, 1944 – his last known visit to Bute.

Slipping into old-age, he and Alice seem to have lived independent lives in the huge grey stone manse, often eating meals separately unless they had guests. When the Duncan family once came for dinner they found Alice plucking a chicken in the kitchen and apologising that the meal would be rather late. A neighbour, Mrs. Sarah Thompson, recalls: "The minister was a wonderful preacher, and his wife was such a dear person. If anyone fell ill she'd be first at the door to help out."

His protege, Arthur Duncan, soon rose to eminence as chairman of the Nature Conservancy in

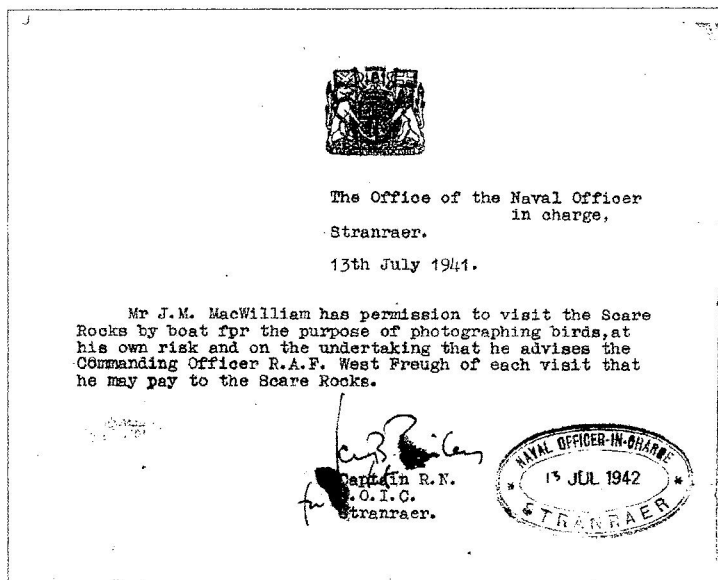


Figure 7: Permit allowing McWilliam to visit Scar Rocks in wartime.

1953-61, for which he received a knighthood. As the S.O.C. grew in membership McWilliam was considered one of the old guard who, said Duncan, "gave the club that aura of respectability from which it has really never fully recovered." It was around this time that Duncan coined the description of McWilliam as "Scotland's Minister for Ornithology."

Meanwhile, two more young men came under his spell. Donald Watson, now the leading Scottish bird artist, met McWilliam through Duncan. He later wrote: "I have unforgettable memories of fascinating and often hilarious evenings when Arthur Duncan and 'The Minister' argued, reminisced and planned the future of Scottish ornithology."

McWilliam often took centre stage with his long anecdotal stories about Talbot Clifton and others. "They depended greatly on the manner of the telling in his rich throaty Irish accent, and on his own hilarious enjoyment of them", Watson recalled. On one stay at the manse they sat talking long into the night, then McWilliam got up in mid-sentence and went to bed. Next morning, he reappeared and continued the conversation at exactly the same point in the sentence. "He was a great eccentric," remembers Watson, "and lurking underneath his elephantine frame there was always a twinkle."

A medical student also became a frequent caller. J. A. (Jack) Gibson, later a Renfrewshire country doctor and hard-working field naturalist, had begun the counts of breeding birds on the Clyde islands and south Argyll for which he is famous today, and had written to McWilliam. A letter came back saying Gibson had solved some questions he'd always wanted to answer himself, and asking him to pay a visit.

It was the first of many over 20-odd years, and they too talked into the night. Dr. Gibson now recalls: "I would take him a bottle of malt whisky, which he used to hide behind a favourite book in his library. He smoked these enormous roll-ups but they took so long to make that, as a doctor, I never felt it necessary to warn him against tobacco. He was great company, and you always knew when there was something coming that amused him. He would let out a funny high-pitched chuckle, and lean closer."

Gibson says McWilliam "bullied" him into starting the *Glasgow and West of Scotland Bird Bulletin*, and this subscription journal became the outlet for his final work. With Gibson he contributed many items, including important notes on the birds of the Sgats on Loch Fyne, and birds of the Burnt Islands in the Kyles of Bute. His last ornithological work was an update of the Clyde book with Gibson in 1959, 200 copies for subscribers to the *Bird Bulletin*, and 300 for general sale.

Having sold his by now impressive bird library through a Sotheby's auction, he had money to buy a retirement bungalow and in 1966 he and Alice moved to Invergowrie, near Dundee. Hester had married Patrick Henderson, Professor of Philosophy at Dundee University, and proved to be a talented lexicographer by contributing to the *Scots National Dictionary*.

His health had deteriorated, and Donald Watson – visiting on his way back from a painting trip to the Isle of May – found him a "somewhat melancholy figure." In a short note to his old S.O.C. colleague, George Waterston, McWilliam requested that no-one visit him again. He did not have the strength to receive visitors. But he often saw Jack Gibson.

After a mild stroke McWilliam was taken into the Royal Victoria Hospital, Dundee. Gibson brought him photographs of his beloved Scar Rocks gannetry, which seemed to comfort him. But he died a week later on 3rd February, 1968, aged 84, and was buried in the nearby Longforgan Cemetery.

His friend of 40 years, Sir Arthur Duncan, later said of him: "In life, as in art, there are many copies and few originals. John Morell McWilliam was an original."

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