

John MacLennan's

The Laird o' Cockpen, he's
proud an' he's great,
His mind is ta'en up wi' the
things o' the State,
He wanted a wife, his brow
house to keep,
But favour wi' wooin' was
fashious to seek.

Of course you know the song. It is familiar to every man and woman of Scottish upbringing and has been sung by exiles in great foreign cities and in remote outlandish places all over the world.

But who was the laird who succumbed to the charms of the lady who lived "doun by the dykeside" hard by his estate? And where is Cockpen?

There are some who will tell you there is no such place. Others will give you a vague location in Aberdeenshire or Berwickshire—anywhere but in Midlothian, which is the right answer.

Let me confess that it was only the other day that I discovered that Cockpen is a rural parish not eight miles from Edinburgh.

It lies in the sheltered valley of the Esk, a sylvan oasis, between the industrial towns of Bonnyrigg and Newtongrange. I must have driven along the main Edinburgh-Galashiels road scores of times without realising that I had passed within a mile of the scenes immortalised in Lady Nairne's delightful verses.

But now I was really going to Cockpen. I left the main road in the shadow of a great pit bing, dipped into a wooded valley where a great red castle towered over the river, and saw on the opposite bank a church and manse. I questioned a roadman.

"Aye," he told me, "that's Cockpen Kirk."

But of the village there was no sign. Of the mansion of Cockpen only a few stones remained at Old Cockpen Farm. The substantial church draws its worshippers largely from neighbouring Bonnyrigg. For the valley hereabout is almost totally depopulated.

And the kirk of the laird's time is an ivy-smothered ruin



LOG

It's rather quiet
around Cockpen

on the other side of the valley surrounded by the graves of the Ramsays of Dalhousie, whose massive castle stands empty in the woods below.

So this was Cockpen. But what of the laird and his lady? There is a local tradition that Mark Carse, Laird of Cockpen in the reign of Charles II, was the character of the song.

Mark fought in the defeated Scots army at Worcester in 1651. He followed King Charles into exile and helped to entertain him with his music at The Hague.

After the Restoration, Mark returned to Scotland to find his lands in the hands of his enemies. He went to London, but was foiled in his attempts to see the King. But his chance came with an engagement to play the organ in the Chapel Royal. He struck up "Brose and Butter," the old Scots air which had delighted Charles during his exile.

The King demanded to see the organist. When Carse was brought before him he recognised the loyal Scot. "Carse," said the King, "your old music made my heart dance."

"Your majesty," said Mark, "my heart would dance too if I had my lands back. . . ."

He told his tale and the King directed that Mark Carse should be granted the house and lands of Cockpen.

By 1677, Mark Carse was an elder of Cockpen Kirk. And on July 20, 1679, the banns of his marriage were read out in the kirk. The bride was Mistress Marion Linton, who lived in the neighbouring mansion of Barondale, near Newbattle.

Now the story goes that Mark Carse and his lady were the couple of the song. Names have been changed. Mistress Marion is Mistress Jean in the song, and Barondale House is Claversha' Lea. But certain topographical details—notably the dykeside and the kirk on the green—have been held to confirm the tradition.

It is a pretty tale. But is it the true one?

leaves one with this picture of the Lady of Cockpen:—

Now she sits in the ha' like a weel tappit hen,
But as yet there's no chickens appeared at Cockpen.

"This barnyard stuff is certainly not the work of Lady Nairne," he said. "It lacks the clean and wholesome character of the rest of the song. It is something which has been added."

Nevertheless the last verse—if it can be relied on at all—seems to dispose of the theory that Mark Carse was the Laird of the song. For it suggests that the Laird and his Lady were childless. And the parish records of Cockpen contains an entry which makes it almost certain that Mark Carse had a son. For Mark Carse, younger of Cockpen, was "publicly rebooked" before the congregation in the kirk on May 6, 1710.

So I am none the wiser about the true identity of the Laird of Cockpen. But, at least, I have visited his haunts. I have spoken to Kenneth Moffatt in his spotless byre below the kirk—Kenneth, who is almost a native, having lived in Cockpen for 59 of his 60 years

And deep in the valley amid the ruins of the old hamlet of Prestonholm is the last thing I expected to find at Cockpen—a sabot-shaped sign which reads "Dutchman's Creek."

Here in an idyllic setting a retired Dutch sailor, Captain Jan Visser, and his Scots wife have made their home. One feels Mark Carse would have been happy about this. For he owed so much to Holland. But for the Royal friendship he struck up in exile there it is unlikely he would ever have become Laird o' Cockpen.