

Scotland

John MacLennan's birth certificate gives his time and date of birth as thirty minutes past midnight on the morning of 3 October 1950, and places the event at Wester Rarichie, Nigg, where his father worked as a griever or farm overseer.¹ Wester Rarichie is a village in Easter Ross in the Highlands of Scotland, two-thirds of the way up Scotland's east coast. It is a settlement so small, merely a farm and a group of six single-storey cottages, that it does not appear at all on some road maps. Nigg, the district's administrative centre, sits on the Fearn Peninsula that juts out into the Cromarty Firth. It is scarcely a town, a straggle of farms and houses along one of two minor roads that reach down to the mouth of the firth. This is a big, rolling, and still empty country, where life in 1950 consisted of farming, fishing, and weaving; simple, innocent even, but hard.

John's father Joseph (known in the family as Joe) had married John's mother, Katherine Mary Munro (who to everyone was simply Katie), in nearby Tarbat, Portmahomack, in 1944. There were many Munros in the Fearn peninsula; Nigg was the home of Colour-Sergeant James Munro of the Sutherland Highlanders

who won the Victoria Cross at Lucknow during the Indian Mutiny in 1857. The families were part of the landscape. Joe had farmed there, always for other owners, since before the birth of his first child, Ron. John was their second child. Eight years later, he was followed by a sister, Anne.²

To everyone who knew him, John was always just Johnny, a sweet, charming child, the favourite of a very close-knit family. Wester Rarichie was not a place to find friends easily, for there were few who lived close by, but in his last year in primary school in Pitcalnie, Johnny found a soulmate in Robin Sutherland, with whom he became so close that both their families labelled them “the two ugly sisters”. They would run and cycle together, often with Robin’s brothers William and John (so to avoid confusion, they called Johnny MacLennan “Wee John”), riding fifteen or twenty miles through the countryside but always getting home before nightfall. At the level crossing at Arabella or at the nearest station at Hill of Fearn, they would watch trains steaming up and down the Far North Line, and occasionally, but luckily not to any dire effect, place a few objects on the line. This and a few other minor indiscretions gave Johnny a reputation in the village as a bit of a prankster.

Johnny did quite well at school for he loved reading, a good thing in the dark, cold winter months that the Highlands usually threw at the hardy people who farmed there. In better weather, he would help his father on the farm or go fishing with him. He was close to Joe, a big man who towered over him and usually took his side in any quarrels with his elder brother, Ron. Johnny doted on his sister. When Anne was only three, he started to take her on his bicycle to Sunday school at their local kirk in Nigg, a church that boasts a memory of pagan days, an eighth-century Pictish slab, the Nigg Stone. Johnny taught Anne her alphabet and numbers.

The farm in Wester Rarichie was a marvellous place in which to grow up, with trees old and large enough for tree houses,

of which Johnny always had to build the biggest and the best in the neighbourhood. There, he would spend hours watching birds, alone as his mother would never allow Anne to climb up to join him. Their farmhouse had plenty of space, and Johnny had a whole room full of the usual boy's collections of stamps and a train set, for which Katie's father spoiled him with gifts of engines, carriages, and track. Alone in the family, his grandfather liked to call him Jake.

Johnny loved to play tricks on the old man and his father. One night when both men came back from the pub in Dingwall past nine o'clock, they went to sleep in the armchairs in front of the fire. Johnny was awake as he was babysitting Anne, and he gently removed the fob watches they were both wearing and put them forward to 3 a.m. He then woke them up to complain about how tired he was because they had kept him up so late. Mortified, his father and grandfather made him promise not to tell his mother or she would "murder them" and tiptoed off to go to bed, only to meet Katie coming out of the kitchen. Johnny loved life, his mother always said.

Later, the family moved to another farm where Joe was again employed as the overseer. Torgorm Farm was near Conon Bridge, south of Dingwall at the foot of the Black Isle peninsula, less isolated than Wester Rarichie, although still fairly remote. Their new home, a bungalow cottage rather than a large farmhouse, looked out north towards the Cromarty Firth and northwest towards the often snow-capped line of Ben Wyvis. In the winter, the land could be bleak, but in the summer, the barley, grown for local whisky, spread golden as far as the eye could see. Joe grew some of this and kept beef cattle on the farm's pasture.

Johnny wore his first kilt at the age of fourteen or fifteen and was tremendously proud of it. He was by now at the Dingwall Academy, the largest secondary school in the Highlands. He lost his appendix while studying there, but he was otherwise a healthy boy. As far as the family knew, he never had any girlfriends in

his teens, which was not uncommon for boys of their area, for courtship there was a serious matter, sex before marriage was anathema, and marriage was usually entered into late. In the Highlands, especially on the farms, men were often in their mid-thirties before they wed. “Mum and Anne were his girlfriends”, the family later recounted.

Whatever feelings of sexual attraction he felt at puberty, Johnny kept them to himself. He remained friends with Robin Sutherland throughout his teens, and Sutherland, who was a young man known to like the lassies, later said that he “saw no sign of Johnny being gay”. At the time, and certainly in that place, there was no public discussion of homosexuality, which was not at all understood by almost the entire country, let alone by a regular churchgoing family like the MacLennans, and was rather regarded as a perversion, a sickness, and a sin. The only role models available to a young man growing up who felt he might be drawn to those of his own sex were drag artists like Danny La Rue and actors like Charles Hawtrey. Few could have conceived of growing up to become like Kenneth Williams and Hugh Paddick’s flamboyant “Round the Horne” characters Julian and Sandy, whom they would have heard on the radio. Nor, had they even understood that these two Polari-speaking “deviants” were gay, would many have wished to emulate them. John MacLennan’s conservative character would have recoiled at the idea that he was like any of those. It was best, and all too easy, to put any unwelcome sexual thoughts to the back of the mind and to seal the door firmly upon them.

After Johnny finished local schooling, the family decided to send him to board at the gleaming Falkirk Technical College, which had opened in Stirlingshire in 1963. The college aimed to prepare boys for industrial careers and although it had over 2,500 pupils, it took only 160 boarders.³

Falkirk was in central Scotland, not far from the Firth of Forth, just south of Stirling and almost equidistant between Glasgow and

Edinburgh. It was a long way away from his home and worlds away from the rural quiet of Easter Ross or even the slightly larger world of Dingwall, and it was Johnny's first exposure to industry, big populations, and urbanization. It could have been quite a shock to a country boy, but from his subsequent career it can be guessed that it was a wider world that John MacLennan found that he liked.

Study at the college did not, however, lead to a technical career, for Johnny was interested in neither academic nor technical studies. Yet he wanted more from life than the farming that employed his father and by then his elder brother. The Highlands did not offer a great deal of choice to a young man setting out at the start of life, and it was common for many to join a police force or the army. Many families had traditionally sent their sons out into the wider realms of the British Empire, which still offered the opportunity of colonial service in places like Hong Kong, although the MacLennans had not been amongst these.

They did, however, bless Johnny's desire to join a local police force. It was good employment for a young man from an honest, Christian, and traditional family. It held the romance of a disciplined, manly life in uniform, and it could lead to promotion and a place in society which was unobtainable through farming. It was also the type of career that would appeal to a young man who, like Johnny, had developed views of life and character traits that were strongly conservative. Peter Whyte, who was Johnny's fellow police cadet in Stirling and who became a lifelong friend, described him at this time: "Socially, he was the centre of the party and a bit loud. Some thought him arrogant. He played to the gallery a bit. He was a man's man, a strong character, a disciplinarian and very honest."⁴ These were traits that would mark Johnny's personality for the rest of his life.

So Johnny applied to become a cadet in the Stirlingshire and Clackmannanshire Police. Evidently he did not wish to join the Ross and Sutherland Constabulary, the force that covered his

home region; he had clearly come to prefer the brighter lights he had grown accustomed to in Stirling. He was still a bit small for his age and, as the days for his application drew near, he pestered Ron and Anne to measure him against a doorpost in the house. When the local constable measured him, he was still a quarter of an inch short of the 5 feet 8 inches he was required to reach by the age of eighteen and a half; the police officer knew him, of course, and between the two of them they made sure he met the requisite standard. He was accepted and joined the Force Training School in Stirling in May 1968.⁵

The police force in Stirling was a small one with well under a thousand officers covering the cities of Stirling and Falkirk as well as the farming country in rural Clackmannanshire north of the Forth. It trained its cadets in Stirling, so for a second time Johnny lived away from home. The police were not encouraged to fraternize too closely with the community; they had their own club, bar, and sports facilities and deliberately did not mix much in the city, so there was little chance to socialize. The work did not pay very much, so when he had a spare day at home Johnny would work for a little cash on his father's farm.

After passing out of training in October 1969, Johnny was posted in Stirling town as a cadet and he remained there after he made the rank of constable in 1972.⁶ Yet, although Stirling was a city that offered far more than he had ever dreamed of in Easter Ross, it was still a small town without a great deal to excite or challenge him. Johnny was perhaps beginning to feel that life had more to offer than he could find there. At some point, perhaps through colleagues or advertisements in police journals, he became aware that the Royal Hong Kong Police (RHKP) were looking for recruits to fill their expanding force. They wanted trained and experienced young police officers like Johnny. This was a chance to experience the glamour of colonial policing in the Far East and maybe to earn a bit more pay. It is unlikely that he was aware of much about Hong Kong or its police force, or

that he had heard anything of the vice or corruption that were then just beginning to give it a bad reputation. Even if he had, the lure of the Orient proved irresistible, and on 3 October 1973, he handed in his warrant card and uniform and left Stirling for the last time. By the twentieth of the month he was in Hong Kong.⁷

Hong Kong

He would not have known it when he landed at Kai Tak Airport, but John MacLennan was arriving in a Hong Kong that was beginning to emerge from its colonial chrysalis and transform into the city it is today. But as the police coach drove MacLennan and his fellow police recruits out of the crowded airport and through the congested Kowloon streets, change was not the first impression the colony would have made upon him. To a newcomer, Hong Kong was, and still is, an awesome shock to the senses. Landing was itself an experience that always staggered new arrivals: as aircraft came in to land, they rocked and roared mere feet above and between the buildings of the city, then banked sharply right, swooping down to land suddenly on the single runway that jutted out into the harbour. After disembarkation came the noise and smells of the crowded arrivals hall, where crowds jostled and shouted in raucous Cantonese. It was a sensory tsunami for a young man from a quiet Highland village.

Quiet and order were restored as the coach was carried by ferry across the majestic harbour to enter the different world of Hong Kong Island, which still bore touches of Edwardian elegance.¹

Their destination, the Police Training School in Aberdeen, was on the south side of the island in a secluded corner where recruits could be kept isolated from the moment they debussed.

The school was run on rigidly formal, old-fashioned lines and aimed to fit the four intakes of recruits it trained simultaneously into their place in the hierarchical society of Hong Kong. Not much had changed yet in the way the colony was run. Its structures of political and social control were in many ways living fossils that had survived from the old imperial ways of doing things, well after most of the rest of the British Empire had faded into history. The police were far more numerous and visible on the streets in the colony than they were back in Scotland, but when John MacLennan joined the force in 1973 its structures and methods were little different from those with which he had been familiar.² In the colonies, however, there had to be greater emphasis on the maintenance of control. In the Hong Kong of the time, it was generally accepted that there was a good deal of “slapping about” of suspects, both by expatriate and local officers, the latter in part motivated by the old Chinese idea that a person had to be brought to kowtow before authority to indicate remorse.³

Methods of detection that are nowadays commonplace either did not exist at the time or were unavailable in Hong Kong, where the government was notoriously unwilling to spend money and kept the force badly under-equipped. There were as yet no radios or scenes of crime equipment, so, for instance, there were no paper bags issued to preserve residues of gunpowder and thereby provide evidence for the firing of a weapon. The government even refused to provide the police with typewriters. Very few cars were available and transport was often by ancient Land Rover or long-nosed Bedford J3 truck.⁴ The revolvers issued to the force fired .38 rounds of a very low power, partly to avoid casualties on the street. So weakly powered were these weapons that police officers firing them could not be sure of downing an