

# Miss Catherine McKinnon's 'Russian Fortune'

JOHN W. SHEETS

'I quite agree with you that steps must be taken now to recover this "Russian fortune" that I have heard spoken of since my infancy or let the matter be forever buried in oblivion.'

(8 April 1876, Archibald McKinnon, Guelph, Ontario,  
to his cousin Donald McKinnon, Edinburgh)

Miss Catherine McKinnon left Edinburgh bound for Russia in the company of 'two English ladies'.<sup>1</sup> She eventually became a nursery governess in the Imperial household of the Czars Alexander I and Nicholas I of Russia, with specific charge of young Alexander II, the future Czar-Liberator of the serfs. The Imperial family held fond memories of their Highland nurse. Alexander II credited his fluency in English to her<sup>2</sup> and in 1892 his son Alexander III ordered a tweed suit spun at her native village on the Ross of Mull. Before the Crimean War, Catherine McKinnon left Russia with a princess of the Imperial family. The princess had borrowed money from Catherine, but promised to repay her with interest plus give her another sum equal to the original loan. After the Crimean War Catherine McKinnon wrote to her Scottish relatives promising they would receive some money. But this never happened: her money was in the hands of a bankrupt Russian colonel when she died in Florence, Italy, in 1858. After false heirs made claims to it, her Scottish descendants (including the future Celtic Professor at Edinburgh University, Donald Mackinnon) contacted their Canadian kin to make a joint claim. Years later, on 29 August 1885, the *Oban Times* published the story of Catherine McKinnon and her 'Russian fortune'.<sup>3</sup> The article concluded: 'There it has been for many a day; and how much longer it is to remain there is a question some would like answered.' Now a private collection of McKinnon papers from Toronto elucidates the story of 'Grand-aunt' Catherine's legacy, her descendants' efforts to recover it, and why they could not succeed.<sup>4</sup>

## FROM MULL TO RUSSIA AND TO ITALY

Catherine McKinnon, *Catriona Bheag* or Little Catherine, was born *circa* 1778 in Uisken on the Ross of Mull in Argyll. Her mother was 'a MacDonald' and her

father, John McKinnon, was called *Gobha fada*, the 'tall smith', a cattle dealer and blacksmith in the Gribun area of Mull. She was the oldest of four known children, followed by her brother Colin and sisters Janet and Ann. Professor Mackinnon, born in 1839 on Colonsay and a grandson of Janet, 'as a boy had seen several letters written by Catherine which displayed that she had had a good education'.<sup>5</sup> Through her relative Malcolm MacDonald, the tacksman in Ulva, Catherine went to Edinburgh and lived with a McKinnon aunt from Gribun, 'Mrs Smith'. There she met an English 'lady of rank' whose husband held an official appointment in St Petersburg. This lady persuaded Catherine to return to Russia with her as the family's governess. When 26-year-old Catherine left her aunt's Edinburgh house in May 1804, a divinity student from Morvern lodging with Mrs Smith 'helped to pack the girl's box on the occasion'.<sup>6</sup> He was the future Dr Norman Macleod of St Columba Church, Glasgow, known to Highlanders as *Caraid nan Gaidheal*.

Catherine came to a Russia only three years ruled by Czar Alexander I. It was a nation at war—with Persia then Turkey over the annexation of Georgia, with Sweden over Finnish annexation, and with France in 1805 as a prelude to Napoleon's invasion in 1812. Her diplomatic employer introduced her to the Czar's family; later she entered the Imperial household as a 'governess to the younger branches of the family'.<sup>7</sup> She served from the last part of Alexander I's reign (1801-25) into the first part of Nicholas I's reign (1825-55), with years of duty to the young Alexander II, born in 1818.<sup>8</sup>

Catherine McKinnon accrued a substantial savings during her loyal service to the Imperial household. In a will dated 24 June 1836 from Odessa, the Princess Natalie Akazatoff Corsine granted Catherine an annual annuity of 2,000 roubles, should Catherine survive her. Five years later, on 15 November 1841, the Princess borrowed 20,000 roubles at 6 per cent interest from Catherine and guaranteed her a second and equal amount, should Catherine survive the Princess. Colonel Michael Kiriakoff, of the Emperor's Guard at St Petersburg and a landowner near Odessa, received the money from the Princess and became her sole heir and legatee; Catherine McKinnon received two Bills of Exchange of 20,000 roubles each in his name. Catherine left Russia around 1847 with the Princess. On 18 April 1848 Catherine gave power-of-attorney in Russia to collect the debt owed her by Colonel Kiriakoff.<sup>9</sup> However, Russia had changed from when she arrived over forty years earlier. The Russian population had increased and moved into the cities near the factories and trades. The landowners and gentry in the countryside declined in wealth and power. The revolutions of 1848 engulfed Europe; Russia was drifting towards the Crimean War.

Near the end of her life Catherine McKinnon lived in Florence with a 'Madame Stianti', the lady Elena Maybanury who was the widow of Mr Francis Stianti.<sup>10</sup> In October 1856, Catherine wrote from Italy to her grand-nephew John McCormick in Iona about Kiriakoff's debt: 'Now that the [Crimean] war is finished & that my law

suit of long 12 years is settled in my favour with all the loss and disasters that the war has made there may be a delay in the payment of it but no danger.'<sup>11</sup> After the war Kiriakoff's estate near Odessa and his assets were mortgaged to the Rural Bank there. When she died in Florence in February 1858, 80-year-old Catherine McKinnon had not received the Russian money owed to her by a legatee of the Czarist family. Upon her death, the two Bills of Exchange against Colonel Kiriakoff were transmitted to the Italian Consul General in Odessa.

### TRUE AND FALSE HEIRS

On 21 December 1860 the fisherman Malcolm Mackinnon in Colonsay, the oldest brother of Professor Mackinnon, wrote to his uncle Lachlan McKinnon in Wellington County, Ontario, Canada; Malcolm was Catherine's grand-nephew and Lachlan was her nephew, both through her sister Janet. After describing his new wife of just one week, brother Donald in his first teaching position at Lochinver in Sutherland, and the Baptist revivals on Islay,<sup>12</sup> he ended the letter: 'I don't hear any thing now at all about the Russian affairs. I do not think that people will ever recover a penny of it.' But others laid claim to it. Madame Sianti produced a codicil to any will, neither signed nor attested by Catherine McKinnon, leaving all to her. She notified Catherine's executors in Mull, including Archibald McKinnon from Torrans. He sent papers to the solicitors Martin & McLean, WS, in Edinburgh, then promptly 'sent a claim to Russia that he was the sole inheritor'.<sup>13</sup>

In 1865 the British government investigated the Russian estate of the late Catherine McKinnon. They discovered that Colonel Kiriakoff was living beyond his means: the Rural Bank 'undertook the gradual liquidation of his debts but as he failed in some engagement to it a commission was named to administer the property for the benefit of the creditors who are numerous'.<sup>14</sup> One family heir of Catherine McKinnon in Scotland who followed these events was her grand-nephew John McCormick from Iona. They had corresponded in the mid-1850s when he married, started a family, and worked as a merchant in the Ross of Mull. After Archibald McKinnon in Mull made his claim, McCormick suspected that 'Martin W.S. was acting in concert with McKinnon and his heirs'. Hence, he sought Edinburgh counsel but with a personal touch: 'I called on Arch[ibald] McNeill W.S. of Colonsay & gave him the documents to proceed with [and] he was to recover it at once.' Five years passed with no results: McNeill died on 2 June 1870.<sup>15</sup> On 8 March 1871 John McCormick wrote to his Canadian cousin John Munn of Orangeville in Wellington County. He summarised the facts about their grand-aunt's Russian estate and his efforts to recover it, then complained that Archibald McNeill 'never made anything of it . . . I would advise you to have little to do with lawyers as they are a cursed set of men although they must be employed'. He wrote again on 6 July 1871, saying Colonel Kiriakoff would not consider any payment until Archibald

McKinnon's heirs withdrew their claim and true heirs were confirmed; he urged his Canadian cousins 'to act with me—on your getting the cash collected advise me at once how to act and send the mandate'.

John Munn shared John McCormick's letters with another cousin, Angus McKinnon of Osprings in Wellington County. Ten years earlier, Angus's father Lachlan had received letters from Malcolm and Donald Mackinnon in Colonsay. During the mid-1860s their sister Janet, with her husband and family, had left Colonsay for Bruce County, Ontario, approximately 75 miles north-west of Angus and the other McKinnons. Angus obtained Donald's Edinburgh address from Janet and wrote to him on 7 July 1871. About cousin Donald, Angus 'heard very pleasing news regarding your success at College'. Indeed, in 1869 Donald Mackinnon received the MA with First Class Honours in Mental Philosophy from Edinburgh University and 'won the Hamilton Fellowship in that subject—one of the highest distinctions the University has to offer'.<sup>16</sup> Based upon John McCormick's information ('... of his letters one would infer that only an effort was required to recover the whole ...'), Angus assumed that Donald Mackinnon in Edinburgh would 'no doubt be quite familiar with the full details' of their grand-aunt's Russian estate. 'I cannot think of asking anything more than a reply to this hasty letter,' concluded Angus McKinnon to his cousin Donald.

In the summer of 1871 Donald Mackinnon worked as the Clerk to the Church of Scotland's Educational System at 22 Queen Street, Edinburgh. He received Angus McKinnon's letter 'while away in a distant part of the country inspecting schools'.<sup>17</sup> When he returned to Edinburgh in September he 'made various efforts to secure the information'<sup>18</sup> without success until 20 November when John McCormick came to Edinburgh. They went to the nearby office of McNeill & Sime at 8 Hill Street where they met the surviving partner, Mr Sime. Donald Mackinnon was confident that another Colonsay man like Archibald McNeill would 'exert himself in the matter more than one unknown to any of the beneficiaries'.<sup>19</sup> He confessed to Angus McKinnon on 22 November that: 'Mr Sime knew nothing at all of the matter till we saw him and when he turned up the papers he found no enquiry was made by Mr McNeill. The matter rests therefore as it was in 1865.' Nevertheless, to his cousin Angus in Canada Donald Mackinnon summarised the evidence about Catherine McKinnon's estate—an estimate of the debt owed by Kiriakoff, the unsigned will or codicil, and the claims from Mull and Florence—and remained optimistic that Mr Sime, 'a thoroughly respectable agent and an energetic man', could lead them to the money. Mr Sime recommended that a foreign solicitor be hired to investigate Kiriakoff's finances; this required a cash advance, which Donald paid, and Sime would represent them *gratis* until the extended family of Scottish and Canadian heirs could raise funds. Donald Mackinnon believes that '... if the debtor is worth pursuing ... I do not see what prevents the recovery of the money'.

Angus McKinnon's youngest brother, Archibald, was a third-year law student

then 'articled to a Law-firm in Guelph'.<sup>30</sup> After Angus wrote to Edinburgh in July, on 23 August 1871 Archibald wrote to the British Consulate General in Odessa about Catherine McKinnon's estate. The Consulate replied on 30 September with detailed information. They verified Kiriakoff's mismanagement of his debts (despite obvious under-mortgaging of his land), his usual residence in St Petersburg (where any claim should be made), the tenuous state of Russian courts ('tedious tribunals'), and the complicated Russian laws of descent (e.g. 1/14 to each daughter, 1/7 to the widow, the remainder among sons). Of utmost importance, the Consulate confirmed that documents critical to any claim were at the Chancery of the Italian Consulate in Odessa: Princess Natalie's acknowledgments in 1841 of her loan from and guarantee to Catherine McKinnon, Catherine's 1848 power-of-attorney, and the Bills of Exchange against Kiriakoff. The Consulate also advised Archibald McKinnon that his grand-aunt's money was expressed in roubles *assignat*, which 'is not the present rouble of Russia' but one-fourth the value of the silver rouble. Archibald wrote a summary memorandum about the estate then, as advised, wrote the British Consulate in St Petersburg on 4 December 1871. He admitted 'the claim is much less than I expected'. He still asked if Colonel Kiriakoff 'would be likely to recognise the claim if formally made and whether that Gentleman understood English or not'.

#### MORE TIME AND MORE EFFORT

On 22 November 1875, exactly four years after Donald Mackinnon wrote a confident letter from Edinburgh to his Canadian cousins, McNeill & Sime wrote G. E. Stanley, HMB Consul General at Odessa. Mr Stanley replied on 10 February 1876 with both old and new information. He had 'at last seen Mr Kiriakoff who still states his perfect willingness to pay the money due to the estate of the late Miss Catherine McKinnon'. Kiriakoff wanted some consideration because his 'man of business' received Madame Stianti who showed him Catherine's codicil in her favour, then his agent promptly 'paid Mrs Stianti a few thousand roubles'. Stanley asked the colonel 'why Mrs Stianti if legatee under a will did not produce it before a Court and claim the whole' but Kiriakoff 'did not answer'. Stanley also noted 'that action in the matter has been taken at different times in 1864, 1867, 1871, and communicated to Mr Kiriakoff'; as a diplomat, he could 'not understand why it should have been dropped'. Stanley would write to the Consulate in Florence about any will by Catherine McKinnon and he advised Mr Sime about 'preparing all the proofs of heirship and obtaining the legal opinion of a Russian lawyer'.

In Edinburgh Sime gave the Consul's letter to Donald Mackinnon, now the Secretary to the Edinburgh School Board, author and reviewer for a new journal, *An Gaidheal*, husband of a Colonsay woman, and father of two children. He wrote to John Munn in Ontario on 1 March 1876, quoted from Stanley's letter, estimated

Catherine's estate at £10,000, and thought it 'a pity if an effort will not be made by you and other beneficiaries of means in Canada'. In Glasgow, John McCormick also read Stanley's letter; on 9 March he too wrote John Munn imploring their Canadian cousins to send Mr Sime at least £100 'without any delay as they want to bring the matter to a close'. For his part, McCormick had 'written to Mull to get all the proof that is required and have left with their [McNeill & Sime's] agents two letters from the deceased to me date [18]54 & [18]56 to send out to the Consul to overthrow any thing that Madame Stianti may put forward in the case'.

Their cousin Archibald McKinnon, a Guelph solicitor of two years, responded to Donald Mackinnon on 8 April. He explained 'about thee years ago I wrote to the British Consular Agent at Odessa and also to the British Consular Agent at St Petersburg . . . I at that time came to the conclusion that the money could be obtained but that a considerable sum of money would have to be expended in obtaining the same and that the share of each of the heirs would not amount to much . . . The great difficulty in this case will be to serve the different heirs of whom I think it will be hard to find . . .' Despite this sober assessment, he asked Donald Mackinnon to have Mr Sime send him 'a synopsis of the information they have', while he promised 'to remit the necessary funds without much further delay'. To raise this money in Canada, on 10 May nine grandsons of Catherine McKinnon's sister Janet met at Orangeville. They had collected pledges of £170 under eighteen signatures, payable to the elected treasurer 'on or before 1 June 1876'.

The exact number of Catherine McKinnon's heirs in Scotland and in Canada posed a problem as difficult as Kiriakoff's debts, the Stianti claim, or Russian and Italian laws. By 1876 only Janet McKinnon's descendants comprised the trans-Atlantic alliance in pursuit of her sister Catherine's money. Bound by law and by conscience, they searched for the other branches of the family. In Scotland Sime hired a Glasgow solicitor to compile a limited 'Table of Representatives and Next of Kin of Miss McKinnon' based upon a list of 'Miss Catherine McKinnons Heirs'. In Ontario the extended family compiled a genealogy of 'Representatives of Catherine McKinnon residing in Canada' but it only listed descendants of her sister Janet, approximately thirty-five people with known addresses. John Munn and his cousin Donald C. McKinnon, also of Orangeville, ran this advertisement in the *Toronto Globe*.

Personal—All parties interested in the estate of the late Catherine McKinnon who died in Florence, Italy, in the year 1858 possibly may hear of something to their advantage by communicating with John Munn or D. McKinnon, Box 53, Orangeville.<sup>21</sup>

The Orangeville cousins quickly heard from other descendants who sent all kinds of advice, which they passed on to Archibald McKinnon in Guelph. These comments ranged from personal ('let me know if there is anything in favour of

me<sup>22</sup>), the insistent ('send any information you may possess'<sup>23</sup>), and the supportive ('We will do what is right and fair to assist you'<sup>24</sup>), to the more impoverished ('I cannot subscribe at present owing to the scarcity of funds'<sup>25</sup>) or the detached ('nothing ventured nothing gained'<sup>26</sup>). Some writers revived the name of an Edinburgh solicitor: 'The first I heard of it was from my brother when he came over here three years ago . . . at the time he left the will was in the hands of a solicitor named Martin, Edinburgh.'<sup>27</sup> When John Munn invited John Beaton, Catherine's sister Ann's son, to Orangeville for the 10 May meeting, he declined because 'I have established my claim sometime ago'.<sup>28</sup> After the meeting he informed John Munn that he had given 'power of attorney to Mr Martin in Edinburgh' who 'would send me all the papers belonging to the estate . . . I expect an answer soon'.<sup>29</sup>

Some relatives were more contentious, but forgivable. On 29 May an Ontario friend of Hugh McKinnon of Prince Edward Island sent him a copy of the *Globe's* notice. The next day Hugh wrote John Munn to declare 'it is useless for me to remind you that I am one who is deeply concerned'. When Archibald McKinnon replied to him on 12 July, Hugh McKinnon 'sent his letter away with a gentleman to Scotland' who would call on McNeill & Sime; he would not contribute any money 'until I hear from Scotland' nor divulge his family's history because 'it is not customary to engage a man and perform the work oneself'. Very patiently, Archibald wrote again on 11 August to which a contrite Hugh McKinnon furnished 'the required information' and was 'much obliged to you for entering so fully into all particulars about the case'. Hugh McKinnon was not a descendant of Catherine McKinnon; his deceased wife Catherine was the daughter of Colin McKinnon, Catherine's brother from Mull. He was 'getting advanced in years'. His belligerence came from his location, his vocation, and his commitments: '. . . money with the farmer is very scarce especially in this island where we are for so many months shut up from the outside world . . . I have a large family to support . . . This winter so far has been very severe.'<sup>30</sup>

#### ADVERSE OPINION, WAR AND PERSEVERANCE

During the months from April 1876 to August 1877 Archibald McKinnon served as secretary, solicitor, and *de facto* leader of Catherine McKinnon's heirs in Canada. He wrote, received, and responded to letters, notes, memoranda and other documents from siblings, cousins, distant relatives, diplomats, and other solicitors. Within this mass and maze of paper, his correspondence with McNeill & Sime determined a climax to the quest for Catherine McKinnon's 'Russian fortune'. By May 1876 Archibald had not heard from cousin Donald Mackinnon or Mr Sime in Edinburgh. He had a copy of the 10 February letter from Consul Stanley in Odessa to Mr Sime and compared it to his 30 September 1871 letter from a previous Consul in Odessa. He wrote to Sime on 26 May for clarification and communication. He judged the

two letters 'much to the same effect' yet insisted 'that the money can be recovered . . . by suit' despite the exaggerated value of the estate. He asked Sime if 'the English or the Russian Law of descent [will] govern this case'. If the English law applied, the number of heirs would be required and Archibald shared with Sime his information about Catherine's descendants through her three siblings.

On 22 June Sime replied with copies of letters and other documents; one item was a translation of the 20 August 1857 codicil to Catherine's will in favour of Madame Stianti. According to Sime, 'the English nor Russian Law of Succession will govern this case, but the law of the country where the deceased was domiciled at the date of death', either Italy or Scotland. About the heirs, Sime sent a copy of the 'Table of Representatives' to correct and expand Archibald's information. He further requested 'the precise date of death of each of Miss McKinnon's nephews and nieces as are in Canada or Prince Edward Isle, and the names of the surviving'. About the codicil, on 19 May Sime had corresponded with D. E. Colnaghi, British Consul at Florence, posing two questions about Catherine McKinnon's estate: (1) 'Whether the document [Codicil] you sent us . . . is a valid document according to the Law of Italy' and (2) 'If valid and competent to carry property, what is the amount thereby conveyed?' Sime feared the codicil 'might appear capable of the constructing contended for by Madame Stianti that by it the 40,000 roubles which appear to comprehend the estate of the deceased are all made over to her'. Through the Consul in Florence, he also requested the opinion of an Italian solicitor about the codicil.

Nearly six months later, on 6 November, Sime transmitted a copy of the lengthy legal 'Opinion by Advocate T. Corsi, Florence, as to M. McKinnon's Estate'. The opinion was adverse to the hopes of Catherine's heirs: 'I) . . . the laws that regulate the efficiency of her Disposition are those that were in force in Tuscany then an Independent state [at her death in 1858] . . . the validity of a Codicil is independent of the existence of any Will preceding or subsequent . . . The Codicil therefore of M. McKinnon is in this respect valid . . . II) By the original two distinct legacies are left to the Signora Stianti . . .' Sime argued 'that there would be claimable by the heirs one sum of 20,000 roubles . . . and also the interest at legal rates upon the other sum of 20,000 roubles'. The Edinburgh solicitor also included his bill for £100 to the Canadians.

On 16 February 1877 Sime wrote Archibald McKinnon 'to remind you of our letter to you of 6th November last, and shall be glad to have a reply'. On 12 May Archibald replied; he had 'commenced soliciting subscriptions from those in this country interested in the estate . . . Now however since Russia has declared war against Turkey [on 24 April] some of those who have contributed think that it would be useless to pursue the investigation any further.' Again, as in the Crimea twenty years earlier, international politics and war interrupted the pursuit of the money. Archibald McKinnon wrote Sime on 29 June, to which Sime promised on 1



August to consult 'with Her Majesty's Consul at Florence regarding the advisability in consequence of the war'. Apparently, Archibald McKinnon in Canada lost his enthusiasm for Grand-aunt Catherine's 'Russian fortune'.

Other descendants maintained the quest, though without success. In 1880 John McCormick and Donald Mackinnon went to a Glasgow solicitor and 'spent a good deal of money in connection with the case'.<sup>31</sup> In 1881 a representative of John Beaton in Ontario demanded from Archibald McKinnon the return of 'a copy of [the] will of the late Catherine McKinnon of Florence, Italy, which Mr John Munn says is in your possession . . .'.<sup>32</sup> On 7 March 1885 another group of six Canadian heirs signed a subscription statement 'for the purpose of forming a fund to defray necessary expenses in endeavouring to recover the estate of the late Catherine McKinnon'. One of the last attempts came from the United States. Czar Alexander III received world headlines in 1892 when he ordered tweed spun for a suit at Uisken on the Ross of Mull, in honour of his father's Highland nurse.<sup>33</sup> In Pendleton, Oregon, Mr Robert Bruce, husband of John McCormick's sister Catherine, read this in the newspapers; on 29 July he sent a letter to the Czar through his 'US Senator J. H. Mitchell'. He thought 'the Czar would see justice done to his father's old nurse'. On 13 August Bruce wrote his wife's cousin, Professor Donald Mackinnon of Edinburgh University, to 'put yourself in communication with me in case the Czar's reply is encouraging for I will have to refer the matter to you having more knowledge of the matter than any body'. We may never know the Czar's or the professor's reply, if any, to Mr Bruce of America.

## DISCOURSE AND CONCLUSION

The 'Russian fortune' of Miss Catherine McKinnon from Mull shows how an inheritance can generate both co-operation and conflict among the hopeful inheritors. During five decades of the nineteenth century Miss McKinnon's heirs in Scotland and in Canada expected some return for their efforts. True to the prophecy of Colonsay's Malcolm Mackinnon in 1860, they received no money. Was there ever a chance to realise this legacy, or were the obstacles truly insurmountable? A crucial point is the problematic existence of a valid will by Catherine. On 8 March 1871 her Scottish grand-nephew John McCormick told his Canadian cousins 'there was no will'; on 22 November he and his cousin Donald Mackinnon assumed 'a copy of Miss McKinnon's will was sent to this country after her death in 1859 (*sic*) but being unsigned is of no value'. In late 1875 or early 1876 Colonel Kiriakoff stated to Consul Stanley at Odessa 'that some years ago Madame Stianti claimed under a will to inherit from the late Miss McKinnon' but 'he admitted he had never seen the Will'.<sup>34</sup> In April 1876 an alleged heir in Canada claimed his brother knew the will was with the solicitor Martin in Edinburgh. The

solicitors of McNeill & Sime could have asked their Edinburgh colleague about any will. This may be a moot point because the Florentine solicitor Corsi judged the codicil to any will in favour of Madame Stianti.

Two inseparable issues were the actual value of Catherine McKinnon's estate and the actual number of heirs in Scotland and in Canada. In March 1876 Donald Mackinnon of Edinburgh insisted 'by my calculations it cannot be now much short of £10,000'.<sup>35</sup> His Canadian cousin and solicitor Archibald McKinnon had learned five years earlier 'the claim is much less than I expected',<sup>36</sup> just over £2,000. The Canadian relatives identified at least forty claimants to a part of the estate. The number of potential heirs, including those in Scotland, exceeded fifty people, and many of them would divide their portion with extended kin. After the legal fees from Canada, Scotland, Italy, or Russia, a successful heir to an equal share of Catherine McKinnon's 'Russian fortune' might have received the equal to his or her original subscription.

The exertions by Catherine's heirs constituted an international drama with action in Canada, Scotland, Italy, and Russia. Then, as now, legal claims across national borders are affected by the climate of diplomacy between rival states; or, the fates of mere individuals exist in sheer coincidence with international events. In this regard, Catherine McKinnon and her heirs were very unlucky. One biographer of Alexander II contends that 'from the time of the Crimean War until 1874 . . . England remained hostile to Russia'.<sup>37</sup> One must add that Russia returned this spirit in kind and 1874 was only a pause before another war started. In 1854 and in 1856 Catherine McKinnon believed her estate would be settled 'in her favour'. In those few years, though, Russia changed its leadership and lost its power. During the Crimean War 37-year-old Alexander II succeeded to the throne when his father Nicholas I died on 2 March 1855. The war for Russia ended on 30 March 1856 with the Treaty of Paris and anglophobia spread throughout Russia.<sup>38</sup>

John McCormick revived the question of his grand-aunt's estate in 1865 after the British government had criticised the Czar's suppression of the 1863 Polish revolt; moreover, Russia was four years into the liberation of the serfs. When McCormick and Donald Mackinnon recruited their Canadian cousins to a joint claim in 1871, Russia had supported Bismarck in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. On 23 January 1874, at the Winter Palace in St Petersburg, Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh and second son of Queen Victoria, married Czar Alexander's only daughter, Princess Marie; in May Alexander visited her and Queen Victoria at Windsor. For the moment, England and Russia exuded the spirit of their inter-married royalty.<sup>39</sup> But it would not last in the face of a chronic 'Eastern Question'. Balkan insurrections against the Turks commenced in 1875, then Orthodox Christians in Serbia and Montenegro declared war in June 1876. The English expected the Czar's neutrality in compliance with the Treaty of Paris. Under these conditions, a professional soldier like Colonel Kiriakoff might not have been receptive to a British claim on his

mortgaged estate near Odessa. On 24 April 1877 Russia, with Austria-Hungary, declared war on Turkey, a fact immediately understood by the solicitors McKinnon in Guelph and Sime in Edinburgh as calamitous to their common cause of inheritance. The sincere and sustained efforts by Catherine McKinnon's heirs in 1876-77 coincided with a renewed hostility between England and Russia.

The concatenation of dubious documents, an overvalued estate, too many heirs, and international conflict doomed any success for the heirs of Miss Catherine McKinnon. Her descendants discovered one another during their 'fortune hunt' and used this information over their next generations.<sup>10</sup> Rather than identify with an heir's empty pocket, perhaps we should picture the Catherine McKinnon, *Catriona Bheag*, who never returned to her native Mull. One of the family letters of 1876 draws a picture of her dream, her patience, and her generosity: 'During her life time she wrote to my father stating [that] she was about to retire from Russia and come home to Britain but on account of the unsettled state of the Russian war and as some of her money was in the hands of the Emperor of Russia she was detained. She mentioned in the letter that she would not forget him in her will.'<sup>11</sup>

The research was supported by Grant FE-25439-91 from the National Endowment of the Humanities and by Central Missouri State University (College of Arts and Sciences Research Professorship in 1990 and Faculty Research grants in 1990 and 1991). I appreciated the comments by, and encouragement from, Professor Gillies, Dr Margaret Mackay, Dr Mairi MacArthur, Mr Kevin Byrne, Mrs Kathleen Cory, Mr David Dykes, and Mrs Berniece Craig.

#### NOTES

- 1 *Oban Times*, 29 August 1885. 2. I thank Murdo MacDonald, Archivist of the Argyll and Bute District Council, for this reference.
- 2 '... it was stated in the *Times* that he owed the good acquaintance which it was known he possessed with the language and traditions of Scotland to the early instructions of "an old Scotch nurse"; *Ibid*; '... he sometimes surprised Scotsmen by addressing them in the language and accent of an "auld nurse"', to whom he had been much attached in his childhood ...' C. Lowe, *Alexander III of Russia*, 1895: 17-8.
- 3 Catherine McKinnon's story also appeared in the *Oban Times*, 17 Nov. 1894; Rev. D. D. MacKinnon, *Memoirs of Clan Fingon*, 1899: 184-5; *Gairm* 30, 1959; *Scotsman*, 8 August 1987 by Ronald Black. I thank Iain Thornber, Morvern, for the *Oban Times*, *Gairm* and *Scotsman* references.
- 4 Unless otherwise noted, the dated information about Catherine McKinnon and her heirs derives from the private papers of Mr Robert McKinnon, Toronto; I acknowledge his co-operation and courtesy in this research.
- 5 Professor Donald Mackinnon (1839-1914) quoted in 'Descendants of John McKinnon of Gribun, Mull ...' by Robert Lachlan McKinnon (1872-1954) of Guelph, Ontario.

- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Oban Times*, 1885, *op cit.*
- 8 Catherine McKinnon was not the first Scotswoman to work for the Imperial family of Russia. Catherine the Great provided her grandson Nicholas with Miss Jane Lyon, 'the daughter of a Scottish artist'; Czar Nicholas I mourned the death of 'his lioness' in 1842, W. B. Lincoln, *Nicolas I*, 1978, 50-2. Two problems plague the historiography of Alexander II: '. . . his governesses left no written record' and '. . . soon after his succession [in 1881], the Emperor Alexander III ordered most of his father's private papers to be destroyed . . .'. M. E. Almedingen, *The Emperor Alexander II*, 1962: 8, 10.
- 9 30 September 1871, Britain Consulate General, Odessa, to Archibald McKinnon, Guelph; Memo re Estate of Catherine McKinnon Deceased by Archibald McKinnon.
- 10 22 June 1876, Translation of Codicil, by Madam McKinnon.
- 11 8 March and 6 July 1871, John McCormick, Iona, Scotland, to John Munn, Orangeville, Ontario.
- 12 'She is not a tall woman but she is good looking . . . There is a great change in him since he began teaching . . . where there is a great deal of good done by the Lord pouring down of his spirit among the people . . .'
- 13 8 March 1871, *op cit.*
- 14 30 September 1871, British Consulate General at Odessa, *op vit.*
- 15 8 March 1871, *op cit.*; Register of Deaths, St Andrew District, Edinburgh, 6852/330, 1870, New Register House, Edinburgh.
- 16 L. Mackinnon, *Prose Writings of Donald Mackinnon*, 1956: xiv; 28 Nov. 1871, John McCormick described his cousin Donald Mackinnon as 'a young man of high standing in Scotland, being one of the greatest scholars of the day . . .'
- 17 22 Nov. 1871, Donald Mackinnon, Edinburgh, to Angus McKinnon, Osprings, Ontario.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 7 July 1871, Angus McKinnon, Osprings, Ontario, to Donald Mackinnon, Edinburgh.
- 21 *Toronto Globe* quoted in 30 May 1876, Hugh McKinnon, Prince Edward Island, to John Munn, Orangeville, Ontario.
- 22 5 May 1876, Mary McKillop, Chester, Ontario, to John Munn, Orangeville, Ontario.
- 23 8 May 1876, Ann McLean, Manitoulin Island, Ontario, to Donald C. McKinnon, Orangeville, Ontario.
- 24 15 May 1876, Margaret Smith, Paisley, Ontario to Donald McKinnon, Orangeville, Ontario.
- 25 18 May 1876, Ann (?)Ewing, Strutsville, Ontario, to Ann McKinnon, Guelph, Ontario.
- 26 15 May 1876, *op cit.*
- 27 29 April 1876, Alexander McKinnon, Lindsay, Ontario, to John Munn, Orangeville, Ontario.
- 28 27 April 1876, John Beaton, Hopeville, Ontario, to John Munn, Orangeville, Ontario.
- 29 13 May 1876, John Beaton, Hopeville, Ontario, to John Munn, Orangeville, Ontario.
- 30 23 January 1877, Hugh McKinnon, Prince Edward Island, to Archibald McKinnon, Guelph, Ontario.
- 31 15 March 1898, Duncan Mackinnon, Glasgow, who also stated 'it's an impossibility to get anything out of the hands of the Russian Gov't.' (from a copy-letter by 'A. J. McLean, 1936').
- 32 7 Feb. 1881, A. G. Hunter, Dundalk, Ontario, to Archibald McKinnon, Guelph, Ontario.
- 33 '. . . The order, we understand, had been received by a Mull gentleman through the Duke of Edinburgh, and has been executed by James Lamont, weaver, Ardtun, near Bunessan. The cloth is of the usual Highland kind—a homely-looking tartan, in which the prevailing colours are lichen and indigo. The old gentleman, a good specimen of the modern Highlander, does not seem to take the least pride in the Royal patronage. In any case, whether or not he knows who or what the "Czar of Russia" is, he thinks so little of the matter that he does not take the trouble of mentioning it to his friends.' *Oban Times*, 9 April 1892: 3.
- 34 10 February 1876, G. E. Stanley, HM Britannic Consulate General, Odessa, to McNeill & Sime, WS, Edinburgh.
- 35 1 March 1876, Donald Mackinnon, Edinburgh, to John Munn, Orangeville, Ontario.
- 36 4 December 1871, Archibald McKinnon, Guelph, Ontario, to the British Consul, St Petersburg (draft-copy).

- 37 S. Graham, *A Life of Alexander II*, 1935: 161.
- 38 *Ibid.* Chapter Eleven—Russia and England, 161-78.
- 39 The City of Edinburgh was an exception. 'Several English towns returned Crimean guns to Russia as a token that all enmity had disappeared . . . Edinburgh itself did not do that. The Duke of Edinburgh might marry a Russian, but Edinburgh would not relinquish its war trophies and the captured Crimean guns remain on the Calton Hill to this day . . .' *Ibid.* 169.
- 40 Professor Donald Mackinnon and his family maintained a correspondence with Canadian relatives into World War I; his daughters Katherine and Mary revived these contacts in the 1930s, then corresponded to Canada through World War II.
- 41 29 April 1876, *op cit.* *Catriona Bheag* remains in the oral traditions of Mull: '. . . about the woman who went to Russia . . . Catherine McKinnon, she did not come back, no, she was buried there. They sang a Gaelic song . . . that is what they sang at her graveside . . . she was in Russia at the time of the Crimea and she said the only thing she feared was that they would take Scots prisoners and treat them badly . . .'. Translated from a Gaelic conversation with John Campbell, Taoslan, Ross of Mull, February 1992, courtesy of Dr Mairi MacArthur, Iona/Inverness.