

# **‘The Scots Tradition, the McArthurs’ 180 years at *Meningoort***

**Robert Burns Festival, Camperdown, Victoria  
Saturday 6 July 2019**

Peter McArthur was born four years after Wellington defeated Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815. He was the fourth son of 11 children and left Scotland as a 19-year-old in 1838, already having been to the USA on two occasions.

What were the characteristics and personal traits that enabled the McArthur family to remain on *Meningoort* for 180 years, often by a very slender thread? Was it the driven Scotch heritage of Calvinism, the Presbyterianism of Knox and the Scots’ educational system that gave the Scots a big start in the new world?

The Island of Islay west of Glasgow is a far cry from the *Australia Felix* of Western Victoria.

Peter McArthur’s home was Ballivicar Farm, which is about 10 kilometers north-west of Port Ellen on Islay, which is better known for its high-quality whisky and bleak weather. In 2016 I visited Islay to see for myself where the family hero, pioneer ancestor Peter McArthur, lived. I wanted to learn what sparked his entrepreneurial spirit to come to Australia in 1838. When I asked the locals what the annual rainfall of Islay was, the response to that important question was, “We don’t know but it’s only you Australians who ever ask.”

Ballyvicar Farmhouse remains the solid stone dwelling that has existed since the 1770s, when another famous Brit also made a voyage to Australia.

What enticed Peter McArthur to undertake such a huge venture and make such a success of it all? He had the pale skin and blue eyes of many Scots immigrants to the Camperdown district, and also had a burning ambition to make good. However it was very tough going in those early days with his partner Nicholas Cole, beginning in November 1839. Peter McArthur talked about those early times in a letter to the Camperdown Chronicle in 1885.

*“It would take volumes to give an adequate idea of what the squatters had to suffer, what with blacks stealing our sheep, wild dogs killing them, scab and footrot reducing them to skeletons, and to crown all the depreciation in value of stock in the course of a year or two. For instance, sheep that were worth two pound a head in 1839 were only worth two shillings and sixpence, in 1841, with the run given in. Add to these troubles the want of police protection, want of roads and bridges, scarcity of labour, working hard from sunrise to sunset, living on the commonest of food, such as mutton and damper one day and on the other day damper and mutton, washed own with a pannikin or two of ‘post and rail’ or ‘Jack the painter’. The life of a squatter in those days was not altogether a bed of roses.*

In 1842 McArthur and Cole split the partnership amicably. Cole being the older partner divided the run into two equal portions with regard to rainfall, soil type and vegetation. Cole made it absolutely fair as McArthur, the younger partner, had the choice. He picked 13,000 acres which is now *Meningoort* and the 21,000-acre run became Cloven Hills.

As the author of *More Great Properties of Country Victoria*, Richard Allen, wrote recently, the partners amicably settled a land division conundrum that would have perplexed many.

Both families remain on the original runs and are friends 180 years later. When the most recent Nicholas Cole was asked why the families never intermarried, he replied simply that the McArthurs were ‘not up to scratch’!

Peter McArthur became a very successful pastoralist and accumulated a number of properties in the Camperdown district, including 10,000 acres at Leechfield near Cobden and Glenample station at Port Campbell, which was the scene of the Loch Ard shipwreck in 1878, and later he was a partner with his brother Gilbert at Lawrenny station, Caramut. Peter McArthur married Margaret McLean, the sister of the well-known sea captain known as Hellfire Jack. They had ten children, including four sons who attended the fledgling Melbourne University which

started in 1857. Doubtless, McArthur called on many Scottish traits to get his sons into this establishment of higher learning after only one generation.

There is a saying in England, rags to rags in three generations – it takes three generations for a family to build a fortune and then lose it. At *Meningoort* it nearly took only two, as John Neil McArthur, who as the eldest son inherited 6,000 acres in 1897, was not a good manager, and was more interested in the Sport of Kings. He set up a thoroughbred stud and built stables and a racing track. It is said that slow horses and fast women brought about the demise of many pastoralists. In JN's case it was slow horses, and too many of them at that...

When he died in 1917, he left an eye-wateringly large debt. JN was a highly-respected man of the turf, a member of the Warrnambool Racing Club committee and the Camperdown Turf Club. He served the people as a member of the Victorian Parliament from 1896 to 1900. He had no children.

Fortunately for the McArthur family, JN's brother Stewart McArthur took over the reins of *Meningoort* in 1918. He sold the horses and some land and set about the long haul of managing *Meningoort* back to prosperity. He survived the Depression and as a judge had another income to help with the task. He was the first enrolled student at the Presbyterian Ormond College at Melbourne University. Importantly, the Scots virtues of frugality, good sense, breeding better sheep, and a capacity to live within his means ensured that *Meningoort* improved and passed to the next generation.

*Meningoort* has a significant link to Australia's most popular song. In 1894 Christina Macpherson, the sister-in-law of Sir Stewart McArthur, visited *Meningoort* and heard a whimsical Scottish tune while attending the Warrnambool races. She had an ear for music and that evening played the tune on the *Meningoort* piano. She returned to Queensland and collaborated on a ballad with poet Banjo Paterson at *Dagworth* Station near Winton, a ballad which generations of Australians would sing with gusto – *Waltzing Matilda*.

In 1936 *Meningoort* was inherited by Gordon McArthur following the death of his father. He fought in World War one, lost a leg at Ypres in Belgium in 1917, was an engineer and barrister and became a member of the Legislative Council in 1931,

serving the people of Victoria for 34 years. He was a minister in the Bolte Government and he became the President of the Legislative Council in 1958. He was knighted in the same year. Sir Gordon was a character in his own right, and lived every day as a good day having survived the horrors of war. His prudent ways ensured that *Meningoort* passed to the next generation.

In an ironic twist of inter-generational interest in racehorses, Gordon McArthur bred a champion mare, Chicquita, which came second in the 1950 Melbourne Cup. She was raised among *Meningoort's* sheep and cattle, surrounded by barbed wire – not the pampered surroundings of JN's thoroughbreds – and her 16 victories including the Oaks and the Alister Clark Stakes did much to turn around the family's fortunes.

I became the custodian of *Meningoort* in 1965. The immediate challenges were probate payments, the 1967-68 drought, the collapse of the wool industry in 1970-71, which thankfully was followed by the wool boom of 1972-74. Cattle prices plummeted a catastrophic low in 1975 so there was no choice for many farmers but to shoot cattle and bury them.

Footrot was eradicated after more than 100 years, the Corriedale sheep and cattle improved, however the collapse of the reserve price scheme for wool in 1991, along with record interest rates of 17% made life difficult for *Meningoort* to say the least.

Having discussed politics with my father from the age of ten, I was persuaded to stand for the seat of Corangamite in Federal Parliament in 1984. Following the family's political tradition, it was a great privilege to be a member of the Federal Parliament for 23 years and participate in the big debates facing Australia during that time. I won nine elections, but along with Prime Minister John Howard, lost my seat in 2007 when the political tide turned against the Liberal Party. The Australian parliament descends from the Westminster System. It largely depends on the goodwill of the people and the Christian traditions centred around the Ten Commandments, and including fairness, equality of opportunity and better life for all Australians.

The Scots had an important influence on the development of the Commonwealth of Australia. Malcolm Fraser had strong Scottish connections, a remarkable capacity for work and was Prime Minister of Australia from 1975 to 1983. Sir Robert Menzies encapsulated the Scottish values from his earliest days. His father, a storekeeper in Jeparit in the Mallee, had very strong Scots family values which prized hard work, self-discipline, integrity, private morality and public duty. These values formed the basis of Menzies' famous radio broadcast about 'The Forgotten People' in 1943 which later became the philosophic basis of the Liberal Party, which Sir Robert helped create the following year.

In 2019 *Meningoort's* operations and management would have been beyond Peter McArthur's wildest dreams and imagination. The introduction of new grass species – rye grass and clover – in the 1930s, with new varieties of phalaris, cocksfoot and fescue post-war, along with the application of superphosphate, increased pasture production by at least 400%. The Angus cattle herd, consisting of 3,000 head, is well-bred, fertile and very productive.

Tractors and motor bikes have replaced horses. Poly pipe has replaced galvanised steel pipe, electric fences keep the cattle in, and the laneways enable cattle to be moved easily and quietly. Peter McArthur would have been amazed with the steel cattle yards, which have a roof over them to keep them dry in the winter and cool in the summer.

In the Scottish tradition our children worked hard at school and university, in both the classroom and on the sporting fields. Today, Sarah is a lawyer with Gilbert and Tobin and James is a senior executive with GenesisCare in London, and both are totally committed to the preservation of *Meningoort*. Andrew, who tragically died in a cycling accident in Sydney last year, was totally of the same view. We are currently planting an avenue of oaks at *Meningoort* in his honour. And you may have heard that in the family tradition, Beverley McArthur was recently elected to the Legislative Council as the member for Western Victoria Region. It is good to know that her strong views are shaking the corridors of power.

Peter McArthur, the pioneer Scot from Islay, is the foundation stone beneath the family's 180 years at *Meningoort*, and the embodiment of what the Scottish tradition means through the ages.

The McArthur family motto *fide et opera* ('by faith and by work') symbolises his Scottish background and our family's ongoing commitment to his legacy.

**Stewart McArthur AM**

**Fourth-generation custodian of *Meningoort***



Peter McArthur



Margaret McArthur



John Neil McArthur



Sir William Gilbert Stewart  
McArthur. K.B.



Hon. Sir Gordon Stewart McArthur  
M.L.C.



Fergus Stewart McArthur A.M



Left to right: James, Beverley, Stewart, Sarah and Andrew McArthur in 2014 at *Meningoort*, marking the 175th year of pioneer Peter McArthur's ownership



The Meningoort Run was established by Peter McArthur, 20, and Nicholas Cole, 28, in November 1839.

In 1842 the partnership was dissolved. Peter McArthur selected the southern portion of 13,160 acres. Nicholas Cole took 21,000 acres which created West Cloven Hills.

Pioneer settler Peter McArthur was born in Islay, Scotland and died in 1897 at 78 years of age.

**MENINGOORT**

Peter McArthur 1839 – 1897	13,160 acres
John Neil McArthur 1897 – 1917	6,500 acres
Sir William Gilbert Stewart McArthur 1917 – 1936	5,760 acres
Sir Gordon Stewart McArthur 1936 – 1965	5,760 acres
Fergus Stewart McArthur AM 1965 – present	5,760 acres

This plaque was unveiled on November 2<sup>nd</sup> 2014 to mark the occasion of the McArthur family's ownership of Meningoort for 175 years. The Cole family have retained the ownership of West Cloven Hills for the same period.