

Men of the Isles

In Western Isles they tell a tale,
Of neighbors wha' fought tooth and nail,
The laird of the MacQuarrie clan
MacLean of Mull, a crafty man,

when nights are chill with rain,
MacQuarrie and MacLean;
on Ulva Isle held sway,
lived just across the bay.

MacLean had wed a local lass
And many days it came to pass
Alan, with his yellow hair
But bided with his mother there

wha' had a bairn in tow,
they'd both receive a blow;
was never a MacLean,
so she'd nae be alane.

(Mandolin plays only on chorus. Quick uppy-downy fiddly like on first line. Then 1 quick down-strum only where indicated by * below. Then at end, 2 quick strums)

Chorus: **F** **C** **F** **B-flat**
 It might, it might, it might, you never know;

B-flat **F** **C** **F**
 It might, it may, it may, it might, it could, it might be so.
 * * ** **

MacQuarrie gave a little boat
As much to spite the Old Goat
But Alan thought the laird was kind
For no one knew he had in mind

to Alan for a toy,
as cheer the little boy,
and thanked him hand and heart,
to learn the sailor's art.

Time went on, and Alan grew
He signed aboard a ship as crew--
Soon pirate ships were pillaging
And of them all, the pirate king

too big and strong to clout
MacLean had kicked him out;
beyond the reach of laws,
was Alan of the Straws. CH

Alan's mother breathed her last,
MacLean caught sight of Alan's mast
The pirate was as good as had,
And MacLean knew how the bastard lad

and word was sent to sea;
and plotted treachery.
his neck was in the noose--
could finally be of use.

"Lad, ye were yer mother's pride,
Rid me of MacQuarrie's hide,
Ye'd have a harbor and a home
Ye'd no more have to ride the foam

so let us here join hands;
and take his goods and lands.
when a' the deed was done,
and I'd have back me son." CH

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Word came to MacQuarrie's ear
A raiding by the buccaneer
His men called for an armed defense,
The canny laird had better sense;

MacQuarrie sighted Alan's fleet
He called for ale and called for meat
"I've meat and drink for all yer mates,
Ye're welcome to me puir estates

Alan said, "Ye ought to ken
I canna harm yer beasts nor men
I need a harbor for me keels,
'Tis weary watch amang the seals

"Laddie," old MacQuarrie said,
"There's better lands to have instead
Old MacLean wha' beat yer Mam
Why not leave me as I am—

The grandest plan may swim or sink
You canna kick the pup and think
'Tis said the man will have the gain
So Alan's burning Old MacLean

of peril from the west--
at Old MacLean's behest.
to counter Alan's threat,
"We are nae burning yet!"

come racing with the tide;
and threw his portals wide.
and merry fires withal;
as when ye were but small." CH

you've ruined me design,
when I hae shared yer wine.
a shelter and a quay;
forever on the sea."

and gave a wink and smile,
than my bare little isle.
has harbors just as fine;
burn HIS house and nae mine." CH

by actions guid or ill;
the dog will do yer will.
who wears the truer face,
and not MacQuarrie's place! CH

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How precarious was the life of an island chief is well illustrated by a traditional story of how MacQuarrie saved his life and possessions by his presence of mind and timely hospitality. Among the roving pirates who covered the seas in these times none was more feared and famous than Ailean nan Sop, 'Alan of the Straws'. One version of the story goes that Alan was a natural son of MacLean of Duart, and his mother had married a near neighbour of MacQuarrie's, the laird of Torloisk. Alan had in his early days been shown kindness by the chief of Ulva, but falling foul of his stepfather had taken to a roving life.

In the course of time, Alan became the commander of a small flotilla, with which he sailed round the Isles and collected considerable plunder. But the thought of his mother brought him back to the Isle of Mull, and one morning he anchored his galley in front of Torloisk and in full view of Ulva. His mother had been long dead, but his stepfather hastened to the shore and welcomed him with apparent kindness. The crafty laird had a feud with MacQuarrie of Ulva, and saw a chance of revenging himself on his old enemy and at the same time directing his stepson's energies into other channels.

With this object, Torloisk suggested to Alan that it was time he should settle down on land. He could easily get possession of the Isle of Ulva, which he would find a convenient home while his galleys rode at anchor in Loch Tuath. All that was required was the removal of the laird, 'a useless old carle, who had cumbered the earth long enough'. Alan agreed to the proposal, and just before noon the next day MacQuarrie saw the dreaded pirate's galleys appear off Ulva. Since he could not resist them, he resolved to receive their commander hospitably, in the hope that good treatment would induce him to go away without plundering his house or doing him any injury.

MacQuarrie caused a splendid feast to be prepared, and welcomed Alan to Ulva with every appearance of sincerity. After feasting together the whole day, in the evening the pirate chief, when about to retire to his galley for the night, thanked the chief for his entertainment, at the same time remarking that it had cost him dear. 'How so,' asked MacQuarrie, 'when I bestowed this entertainment on you in free goodwill?' 'That is true,' said Alan, 'but your friendly reception has deranged all my plans. I came here to put you to death and to seize your house and lands, which would just suit me, and to settle here in your stead. But now I must be a wanderer on the seas for some time longer.'

MacQuarrie replied that he was sure such an idea had not originated with Alan, but must have come from old Torloisk. He reminded Alan that his enemy had made an indifferent husband to his mother and a cruel stepfather to himself, adding: 'Consider the matter again, Alan, and you will see that the estate and harbour of Torloisk lie as conveniently for you as those of Ulva; and if you must make a settlement by force, it is better to do so at the expense of a man who never showed you any kindness, rather than at that of a friend like me, who always loved and honoured you.' Alan took this excellent advice, the story concludes; and so MacQuarrie won himself a grateful neighbour in place of an enemy at Torloisk.⁴⁴

44. Ailean nan Sop was a historical personage and brother of Hector Maclean of Duart, RSS ii, 3098, iii, 2361; TA, vii, 73, 256; D.Gregory in *Archaeologica Scotica*, iii, 251 note; Steer & Bannerman, *Sculpture*, 147. Traditional accounts are gathered in A.M.Sinclair *Clan Gillean* 424-31, & this version is based on Sir Walter Scott, *Tales of a Grand father*, chap 38 (18931-vol edn 157-8).

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Ailean Maclean (flourished 16th century) was the second son of Lachlan Cattanach Maclean, but better known as Ailean nan Sop, or Allan o' the Wisp, because he set fire to buildings with straw, was a very noted character. He appears in Tales of a Grandfather by Sir Walter Scott.[1]