

SECRETS of the  1
SHETLANDS

The Inheritance

M I C H A E L
P H I L L I P S



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2016 by Michael Phillips

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Phillips, Michael R., author.

Title: The inheritance / Michael Phillips.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016. | Series: Secrets of the Shetlands ; Book 1

Identifiers: LCCN 2015043709 | ISBN 9780764217548 (cloth : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780764217487 (pbk.)

Subjects: | GSAFD: Christian fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3566.H492 I54 2016 | DDC 813/.54—dc23 LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015043709>

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

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Cover design by LOOK Design Studio

Cover photography by Aimee Christensen

Author is represented by Alive Communications, Inc.

16 17 18 19 20 21 22 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This is a series about generational legacies, those that extend in both directions. As I have written these stories, my thoughts have been filled with influences that have come down to me from my own parents and grandparents and ancestors even further back, including their Quaker heritage. And I am constantly reminded of those who have followed, namely Judy's and my sons and grandchildren, and whatever my life has been and will be capable of passing on to them.

More than two decades ago I dedicated books of a series to our three sons. They were young, and my father's heart was filled with visions of the years ahead we would share together. Now they are grown men. Whatever legacy a father is able to pass on to his sons looks much different to me at today's more mature vantage point from which to assess life's unfolding and progressive journey—both mine and theirs.

Therefore, to our three sons and the men of spiritual stature they have each become, I gratefully and lovingly dedicate the volumes of this series.

The Inheritance

to

Patrick Jeremy Phillips

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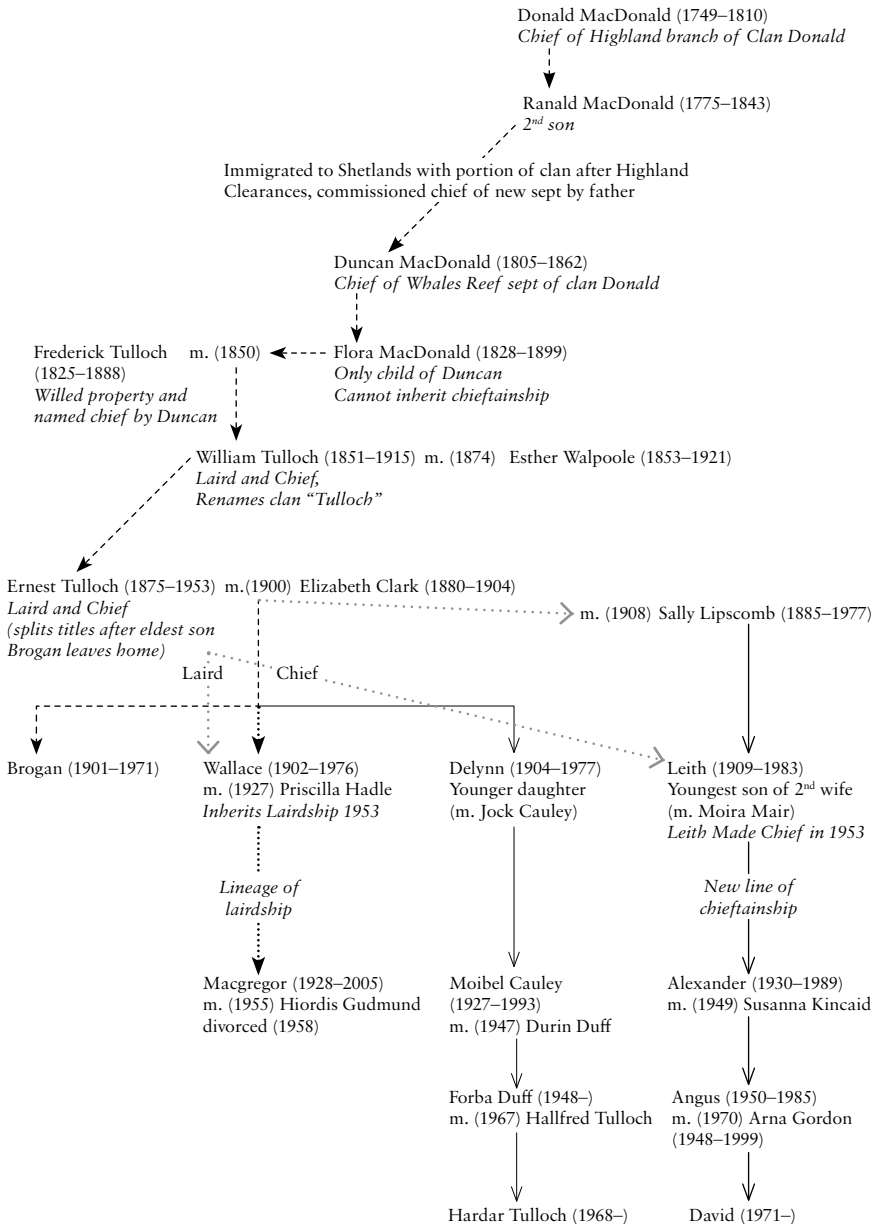
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Whales Reef Tulloch Clan Family Tree (Descended from Highland Clan Donald)



PART 1

June 1924



A Boy and a Bird

WHALES REEF, SHETLAND ISLANDS

On a late afternoon of a surprisingly warm day, a small lad sat on a large stone with the blue of sky and water spreading out before him. The air was full of motion, but for this one of Shetland's minor islands the wind was relatively light. The chair-rock of his perch jutted out of the ground near a high bluff overlooking the sea.

The boy lifted his face to the fragrant breeze as he watched the birds soaring above. He loved the birds, and he loved the sea. But today that love was tinged with sadness.

He looked beside him. On a tuft of sea grass lay a tiny bird with a broken wing.

The boy was only seven, but the music of the angels stirred within him. He valued life in all its forms. From almost the moment he was born he possessed an uncanny connection to the animal kingdom. It was not merely that he loved animals. This boy *understood* them far beyond the usual capacity of humans to comprehend their winged and four-footed brethren of creation.

By the time he was three, his father and mother avowed that he

knew what every dog around him was thinking. With searching eyes he looked at the infinitely fascinating nonhuman faces of the creatures around him. By age four he walked among the sheep and cows and ponies his father tended for the laird as if he were one of them. He talked to them too. His strange communications, however, came in whispers, gestures, and otherworldly noises whose subtleties were known only to the animals. A word or sign from the boy brought instant obedience from any of the laird's half-dozen sheepdogs, as well as their own Shep, the boy's constant companion now resting at his feet.

A brief gust blew up from the cliff face in front of him, ruffling the tiny bird's feathers and sending the boy's carroty thatch into a momentary flurry. He steadied himself on the stone and breathed deeply.

Those living beings most at home here—who had been here the longest and doubtless the first to settle in this place—were those who had made peace with this land of wind. The continuous currents were sometimes their ally, often a stimulus, occasionally a friend . . . but never an enemy. Wind was necessary to their survival, whether generated by the earth spinning on its axis or by their own powerfully created musculature.

These wind-lovers were the birds.

The winged species of the Shetlands, at once exceptional yet commonplace, were majestic and colorful in their diversity. For sheer quantity they seemed numerous as the sands surrounding these isolated islands in the middle of the North Atlantic. If the ancient parable was true that two were once sold for less than a penny, no one would now pay a penny for even a thousand of the gulls, thrushes, swifts, swallows, sparrows, finches, and bramblings that swarmed these moors, inlets, and rocky coastlines.

But earthly eyes do not always perceive eternal merit. Even the tiniest of these had worth for those who saw them as creatures imagined into being out of God's fathering heart. The most insignificant of creatures—both birds and boys—had stories to tell.

Young Sandy Innes, son of the laird's gamekeeper, had come upon the bird lying helpless and alone beside the rock. A pang seized his heart, for the tiny life was precious to him. That life, however, looked fragile and was ebbing away.

He knew the bird was dying.

With a single gesture to Shep behind him, he sat down on the rock. The dog had made no move since. The first impulse of Sandy's boyish love was to stroke the feathery back. But he knew that doing so would frighten the poor tiny thing. He did not want it to die in fear, but in peace.

So he sat.

And waited.

A tear crept into his eyes as he gazed on the tiny creature beside him.

When he heard footsteps moments later, the boy turned. A tall figure was walking toward him.

The man saw the bird on the ground. He sat down on the thick grass with the bird between himself and the boy, the black-and-white form of his gamekeeper's sheepdog motionless behind them.

No word was spoken for several minutes. Neither felt compelled to disturb the tranquility of the moor behind them and the sea before them.

"What are ye about, Sandy?" said the man at length.

"The wee birdie is dyin'," replied the boy. His high voice was soft, tender, and unsteady.

"Yes . . . I see."

"I wanted tae sit wi' him so he wouldna be alone. I didna want him tae die wi'oot a body wi' him."

The man pondered the words. The only sounds were the breeze, which rose into an occasional swirl about their faces, and the gently splashing waves against the rocky shoreline below.