

THE MYSTERY OF RENASAY LODGE

“Uncle Thomas...is coming up to Scotland to finish off some research work he is doing in peace and quiet, and so he has taken Renasay Lodge—”

“*Renasay Lodge!*” exclaimed Sara, impressed. “But that’s always let to lords and marquesses and stockbroker and things for the shooting!”

“Well, this time it’s let to Uncle Thomas, and kind Uncle Thomas says it is far too big for him and has suggested we should all go and help him fill it...” (Highland Holiday, p. 36)

A reader who has visited the Isle of Arran, wrote and asked me where Renasay Lodge was, in or near Blackwaterfoot, as the location for the Jane Shaw teen novel, *Highland Holiday*. This was a very good question, since almost every other place in the book is described in explicit and accurate detail matching the reality of the island that Jane Shaw knew so well. In the story, on the family’s drive from Brodick Harbour to Renasay Lodge, even the farm the family usually stayed at, is described as “Farthinglands.” It is High Feorline in real life and was where Jane Shaw’s family stayed every summer for many years—as you might guess, a feorline is a farthing. So where is Renasay Lodge supposed to be? That’s a very good question.

From the description of how the family drove to the Lodge, the basic location is clear:

They were now on a rough farm-road, between the sea and the golf course...The road wound up across the golf course. Rufus got out and opened a big iron gate. Renasay Lodge lay in a fold of the moors and looked over the golf course to the sea. To the left as the car approached lay Drumadoon Point, with the cliffs of the Doon rising behind it; down in a hollow on the right, hidden from the house, was the clubhouse.”

Now I have walked many times down that very road, next to the sea, with the golf course on the right and a sign saying ‘FARM TRAFFIC ONLY’, and then gingerly crossed the golf course and come to the farm gate, but being a private home, I’ve never opened the gate and gone in. There is a sign showing the path a walker can take to Drumadoon, over the cliff tops. Here is a photo (not one of mine) showing the start of the road just below the clubhouse, with Drumadoon in the distance.



So, does this road lead to a lodge? Definitely not. It leads to Drumadoon Farm.

When I have visited Arran in the past, Drumadoon Farm was an active, more or less going concern, however according to various records that is no longer so. Here is an item from a Glasgow newspaper (The Herald, 26th February 1990):

THE farm of Drumadoon, at Blackwaterfoot, Arran, which has been in the family of the late Rev. James Currie for 120 years, has been sold for £190,000. The family was forced to part with it because of rising debts and urgent need for repairs to the farmhouse. The new owner, son of a Cumbrian farmer, takes possession early next month. Mr Charles Currie, 38, who farmed the land until 1988, and his family are moving to a cottage in Blackwaterfoot. He said yesterday: "We are sad at leaving the farm which my great-grandfather took over in the 1870s, but there was no option. Improvements we would like to have carried out on the house would have cost about £50,000 -- reroofing alone would be £20,000 -- and I have an overdraft well into five figures. "The financial burden became insuperable after the disastrous winter in 1985. Since then it has been impossible to make the farm a going concern, and efforts to establish alternative uses for the land have been quashed." On the salary of tourism manager for the Isle of Arran he could not reduce his overdraft far less pay for repairs to the property. The late James Currie, who was a minister at St James, Pollok, Glasgow, and Laigh Kirk, Dunlop, bought the farm in 1966. He described the decision as "one of the heart", and said Drumadoon had proved to be a millstone. His widow, Peggy, said: "James loved the farm. He was always chasing time so he could get to Arran. Soon after her husband's death she sold 75 of Drumadoon's 675 acres to meet urgent debts. The family have retained some of the land. Charles Currie said: "That was a decision of the heart. We are keeping four acres. As a boy, I helped my father to plough the soil after hauling out whin bushes. So a little bit of Drumadoon will always belong to the Currie family."

There is no doubt that Jane Shaw described the location of Renasay Lodge as precisely that of Drumadoon Farm, which in 1942 she would have known well. It was a handy location because it is a reasonable short walk both to the Doon itself, where Sara spent some time, and down to the clubhouse, where they all spent a lot of time, and to the village shops of Blackwaterfoot itself. So that made all subsequent descriptions of location familiar and plausible.

What then might have been the inspiration for turning a farmhouse into “Renasay Lodge”? There are two rather obvious contenders, both of which are shooting lodges, part of the Duke of Hamilton’s estate, and certainly places where well-to-do people, aristocrats and doubtless some stockbrokers, but mostly wealthy visitors from Europe, came for the shooting season.

The most likely place that Jane Shaw had in mind is Dougarie Lodge:



This certainly was what Alison Lindsay¹ concluded, based on two good pieces of evidence. One is that Sara’s mother described Renasay Lodge as “bedecked with the antlers of defunct stags”. This was entirely true of Dougarie Lodge being a hunting lodge—it even had antlers decorating the outside walls—and one can still see all the stags’ heads up and down the staircases of Brodick Castle, to which Dougarie Lodge belonged. The second giveaway is that in *Highland Holiday* it was mentioned that there was a ‘Renasay pew’ in the small ‘Red Church’ (St. Molio’s in real life), reserved for the owners, and such a pew once existed in St. Molio’s.

I have, with my family or with my parents, driven past Dougarie Lodge many times. It is not far from Blackwaterfoot, but further along the coast road, past Machrie golf course. The house is quite distinctive, set back beautifully against the hills, and at the roadside has--or had—an elegant Victorian boathouse that was part of the property. There is a possible landing point here and my mother explained in vivid, heart-pounding detail, how when they came down to

¹ Lindsay, A. (2002). *Susan and friends: The Jane Shaw companion*. London, UK: Bettany Press (p. 126).

Arran and she had just obtained her drivers license, she was the one who had to drive the Patrick family car off the ferry onto land via two hastily laid wooden planks.

Dougarie Lodge is now part of Dougarie Estate and is described thus in its very glossy website:

Dougarie Estate is situated in the north west corner of the Isle of Arran. It is a traditional Scottish sporting estate and has several holiday homes for rent, along with a 9 hole golf course, tennis, fishing and shooting...The lodge was built in 1864/65 as a shooting lodge for William Hamilton the 11th Duke of Hamilton...The Duke married Princess Marie of Baden and it is thought that her European connections and perhaps the strong influences from Bavaria and Hungary gave rise to many of the unique features such as deerskins on the passage walls, antler door handles and a window over the main fireplace.

I am fairly confident that this is the place that Jane Shaw had in mind, however there is one other very good contender, and possibly a little more likely to have been available to Uncle Thomas. This is the House of Machrie, located on the Machrie Moor road and quite a lot closer to where Jane Shaw lived in retirement. In the website it is described as:

“The House of Machrie is a Victorian mansion set in beautiful surroundings with fabulous coastal views towards the Mull of Kintyre, a stone-walled front garden and tall mature trees. The house belongs to and is part of the Dougarie Estate. At one time it was owned by the Dukes of Hamilton and belonged to the principle farm on the island. There was even a brush with royalty in 1904, when it is recorded that King Edward VII, accompanied by the Duke and Duchess of Hamilton, ‘took tea’ here after a days deer stalking on Machrie Moor. The building is very typical of 16th century domestic Scottish architecture with crow stepped roof gables and a circular tower with turret, which houses the grand staircase...The house can sleep up to 14 in 2 double bedrooms and 5 twin rooms...”



Jane Shaw would most probably have known more about this house, in that it was not quite so posh as Dougarie Lodge, and indeed, later in her life, her good friend Marilyn and Dave Dee were caretakers at Machrie House for a while.

But where did the name Renasay come from? There is apparently no place on the island with that name and I had never heard my parents use the name in any other context—in fact it is quite an awkward name, not one that trips easily off the tongue. A basic Google search for the name, together with either Scotland or the Isle of Arran, produced absolutely no results.

Eventually, after some digging, I did find a reference! In Ed Munro's *Western Isles of Scotland and Genealogies of the Clans: 1549*.

[3. 3.] Benorth or north-east fra this Isle 24 miles of sea lyes *Aran* a great Isle full of great mountains and forrests good for hunting, with part of woods; extending **in** length fra the Kyle of Aran to Castle-Donan southwart to 24 mile, and fra Drum donin to the West Kilbreid 16 mile braid, inhabite only at the sea-coasts. Herein are 3 Castles: ane callit Braizay pertaining to the Earle of Aran; ane other auld house called the Castle of heid of Loch Ranesay pertaining to the said Earle; and the third called Castle Donan pertaining first to ane of the Stewarts of Buit his bluid called Mr James, quha and his bluid are the best men **in** the countrey. **In** Aran is an Loch callit Loch-Renasay with three or four small Lochis ⁴ and twa paroch-kirks, the ane callit Kilbreid, the other called Kilmure. Forenent this Isle lyes the coast of Kyle **in** the east and south-west be 10 or 12 ⁵ mile of sea, **in** the north Buit be 8 mile of sea, **in** the west Scibbenes pertaining to my Lord of Argile.⁶

[4. 4.] Upon the shore of the Isle lyes *Flada* ane little Isle full of Conyngis with ane other Isle called the Isle of

Although Renasay is spelled once that way, and once Ranesay, it is absolutely clear from the passage that Munro was referring to what is now known as ('callit'!) *Lochranza*, a small village at the north end of the island with a ruined castle of the same name. A quick search of Loch Ranza revealed that its Scots Gaelic name was Loch Raonasa. From that clue I was able to go to James Brown Johnston's 1934 book *Place-names of Scotland*. There, we are told, Loch Ranza was called Lochransay in 1433, and Loch Renasay, as we have seen, in 1549. It further explained that "Rans-ay" was Old Norse for "Isle of Ran". **Ran** ("*sea*") is the **Goddess of storms and the drowned dead. She is wife to ægir, god of the ocean and king of the sea creatures. She has a net with which she tries to capture men who ventured out on the sea. The sea was also referred to as "Rán's road"**.

One presumes, but I haven't looked this up, that the name Arran itself (or Aran, in 1549) also is derived from this giant goddess, the queen of the sea!²

So finally we know exactly where Jane Shaw got the name: an early 16th century form of Loch Ranza! However the mystery remains as to how she knew the ancient name and how she came upon it and decided to use it. I do have a detailed book that belonged to my father on the history of Arran, geological, political, and social, but the name Renasay is nowhere listed. I have a map of Arran from 1838 and it clearly shows the loch as Loch Ranza. Jane Shaw was well read and knew a great deal about the Isle of Arran, but how she lit upon this ancient Norse/Gaelic name, will, I fear, remain a mystery!

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² Since writing that wild speculation, I have had further correspondence on the matter from an old family friend, Professor Colin Aitken. He wrote, quoting a friend of his who is a classics scholar:

"Older books explain 'Lochranza' as 'the loch of Arran's isle', with the final '-a' being one form of the Old Norse word for 'island' (cf Pladda, Jura, Bernera, etc). Old spellings such as 'Locheraynsay' (1432) and 'Locharanesay' (1528) would seem to confirm this. However, Ian Fraser in his highly scholarly monograph on 'The Place Names of Arran' (1999) doesn't mention this derivation at all, and instead derives '-ranza' from the Old Norse 'Reynis-a', meaning 'rowan-tree river' (while '-a' more usually refers to an island, it can also be used of a river, cf lorsa)."

All I can add to this is that if my mother thought that Renasay Lodge had anything to do with rowan trees, she would have loved that! She was especially fond of rowan trees as they keep witches away, and shortly after they moved into their *wee but 'n ben* she made me go down the String Road with a spade and quietly dig up two rowan saplings growing in the ditch, which we then planted in front of the house for that express purpose!