Castle's mystery buyer is revealed

Locals resent being 'played for fools' by Canadian billionaire using a frontman

By Amelia Hill

A CANADIAN billionaire spun a bizarre web of confusion over a Highland community, wrecking its bid to keep a ruined fairytale castle in local hands, an investigation by Scotland on Sunday has discovered.

For the last 18 months, locals have deliberately been led to believe that Alex Brown, an Ayrshire-born millionaire, bought Castle Tioram and the rocky island of Eilean Tioram in Moidart because of his love for Scotland.

But Scotland on Sunday has discovered that Brown is simply a middleman for Bronson Conrad, chief executive of a Canadian company that mines diamonds and gold in Sierra Leone and the brain behind some of the most innovative recent developments on the internet.

Conrad's Glasgow-based lawyer, Jack Norton, of James Gildea solicitors, has admitted that Bronson intentionally duped the community. Official documents relating to the sale frequently refer to Brown as the owner of the castle.

"We deliberately kept things as oblique as we legally could," said Norton, a close childhood friend of Brown. "The community always thought Brown was the buyer and we didn't disillusion them.

"Conrad outbid the local community because he felt what they wanted to do to the castle was inappropriate," he added. "We allowed the public to think Brown was the buyer because it gave the less sensible elements of the local society something to grab onto, thereby leaving us free to concentrate on the real focus: preserving and conserving the castle."

The 14th-century Castle Tioram is one of Scotland's most important landmarks. As the seat of the Macdonalds of Clanranald, it was the principal stronghold of the Kingdom of the Isles for over 500 years and a hub of Highland culture.

It has been a ruin since Clanranald set fire to it during the 1715 Jacobite uprising rather than see it fall into enemy hands.

The sale of the island has been marred by arguments over opposing visions of the castle's future.

The majority of the local community, led by Highland councillor Michael Foxley, want Castle Tioram preserved in its current ruined state as a tourist attraction and a testimony to its colourful past.

But those acting on behalf of Conrad are determined to make the castle habitable for the first time in 300 years, restrict public access and install a live-in curator.

Norton maintains that Conrad's bid is a genuinely altruistic action which will create no profits.

He maintains that Brown suggested that Conrad put forward the money to buy the castle and fund its future upkeep on the understanding that Brown would handle all day-to-day issues concerning the castle.

The conservation of the castle is being undertaken by the Highland Stronghold Trust, a charitable body that owns the limited company Anta Estates.

Conrad's team are also planning to create a body called the Garmoran Trust, which will comprise seven members, four from the local community, a representative of the owner and a nominee from two recognised bodies such as Highland Council and the National Trust for Scotland.

They maintain this body will ensure the close participation of the local community in the island's future.

"This is practically a Biblical action," Norton said. "Conrad is a genuinely altruistic person. It's a very, very advanced view of ownership in Scotland."

But locals say they are unaware of any plans for a body to put their views forward to the castle owner.

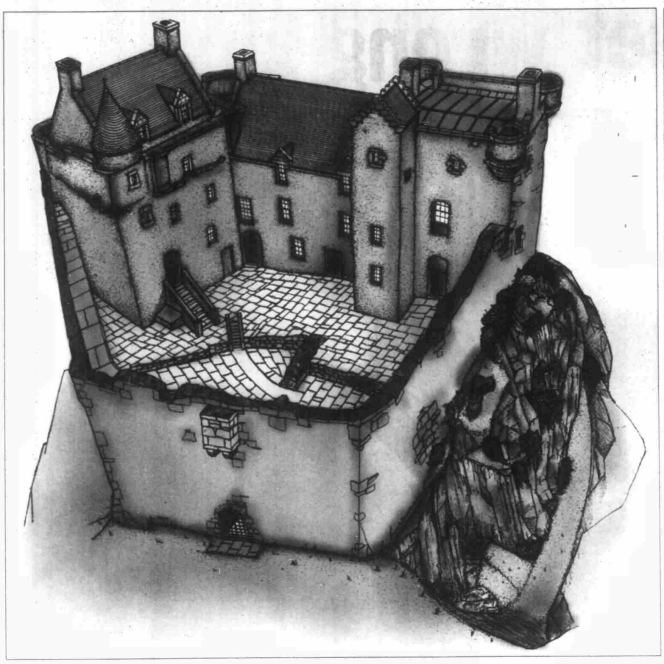
"They've deliberately deceived us all and played us for fools. It's utterly bizarre," said Foxley. "The community has been explicitly told all the way along that Brown is the buyer. He's been sold to us as a military hero with a deep personal attachment to the area.

"This is a very substantial subterfuge. They're acting just like the worst kind of laird by imposing these trusts on us with no negotiation at all. How can they just say that this is how it will work? Community groups need to come together through discussion and negotiation – there has to be trust within trusts. This isn't how we do business in the Highlands in 1999."

Iain Crawford, an adviser to Anta Estates, says the subterfuge was necessary because so much of the money used to fund the castle's sale was earned overseas.

"It had to be kept opaque for tax reasons," he said. "We wanted to make as much money available to Tioram as possible without bringing it all in a large, lump sum that would be hammered by taxation."

Crawford denies that the castle will be lost to the local community. "Conrad will have responsibility to make sure the money is always there but the money will be in the hands of the community," he said. "I certainly hope that the community doesn't feel that it has been duped. That wasn't the intention."



Restored to glory: an artist's impression of how Castle Tioram, a key Jacobite stronghold destroyed in 1715, will look after the costly renovation funded by its new owner, Canadian billionaire Bronson Conrad. *Illustration: ARP Lorimer*



Ruin with a view: Castle Tioram as it is today. Many think it should be preserved in its present state as a tourist attraction and in tribute to its historical importance as a key base of the Kingdom of the Isles. *Photograph: Michael Macgregor*

Strange stories from Maxwell's animal house

By Alastair Dalton

HE may have loved otters, but he also had a lesser-known penchant for driving drunk and play-acting with guns.

The bizarre lifestyle of Gavin Maxwell, one of Scotland's best-known authors, is to be highlighted in a documentary broadcast this week to mark the 30th anniversary of his death.

The programme, which includes previously unseen archive footage of the writer playing with his beloved otters, shows a very different side of Maxwell to his portrayal in the film version of his most celebrated book, *Ring of Bright Water*.

Friends remember him as an accident-prone loner who increasingly cut himself off from the world.

Maxwell's biographer, Douglas Botting, recalls a hair-raising journey accompanying the former rally driver in his Bentley roadster as he drove flat out, the car's tyres squealing round corners.

Maxwell would stop off to see a series of friends en route, having a dram for the road with each. "He said he was normally much better in fast cars if he was drunk," Botting said.

The writer's other eccentric behaviour included phoning people up in the middle of the night and threatening to kill himself if they did not come over and see him.

But when they arrived at his house, they would find him "as cheerful as a cricket".

Maxwell also once held a revolver to Botting's head and pulled the trigger. "You did not blink once – obviously you are not a trained killer," he told him.

The programme, to be shown on Wednesday, suggests Maxwell's otters may have provided the friendship that he failed to find in humans.

It uses the rediscovered film to draw a contrast between his difficult relationships with people and his remarkable interaction with animals.

The footage, which was shot by his brother Eustace, includes scenes of a kilted Maxwell playing with an otter, showing the same intimacy with which he might tussle with a pet dog.

Others show the animals beside him on the beach and climbing on to his boat. The film, which was thought to have been destroyed when Maxwell's home at Sandaig, near Glenelg, burnt down a year before his death from cancer in 1969, also shows geese feeding on bread which Maxwell held in his mouth.

After the fire, in which Maxwell lost everything, he spent the £100 given to him by a friend on a memorial to an otter who died in the blaze.



Pet project: otters replaced humans for Gavin Maxwell

In Maxwell's autobiography of his childhood, he described himself as "an incurable romantic with a tinge of melancholy".

Lady Brigit McEwen, a friend of Maxwell's, tells the BBC Scotland programme: "Perhaps he transferred his unsatisfactory relationships with human beings to the animal world."

He was known to be homosexual, but had several relationships with women and was briefly married.

Maxwell, born at Elrig in Galloway in 1914 of minor aristocratic stock, attempted several careers, including painter, Arctic explorer, and Special Operations Executive training officer, before finding success as a writer.

He told of his Hebridean shark fishing expeditions in *Harpoon at a Venture*, while his exploration of the Iraqi marshes in *A Reed Shaken by the Wind* is regarded as a travel classic.

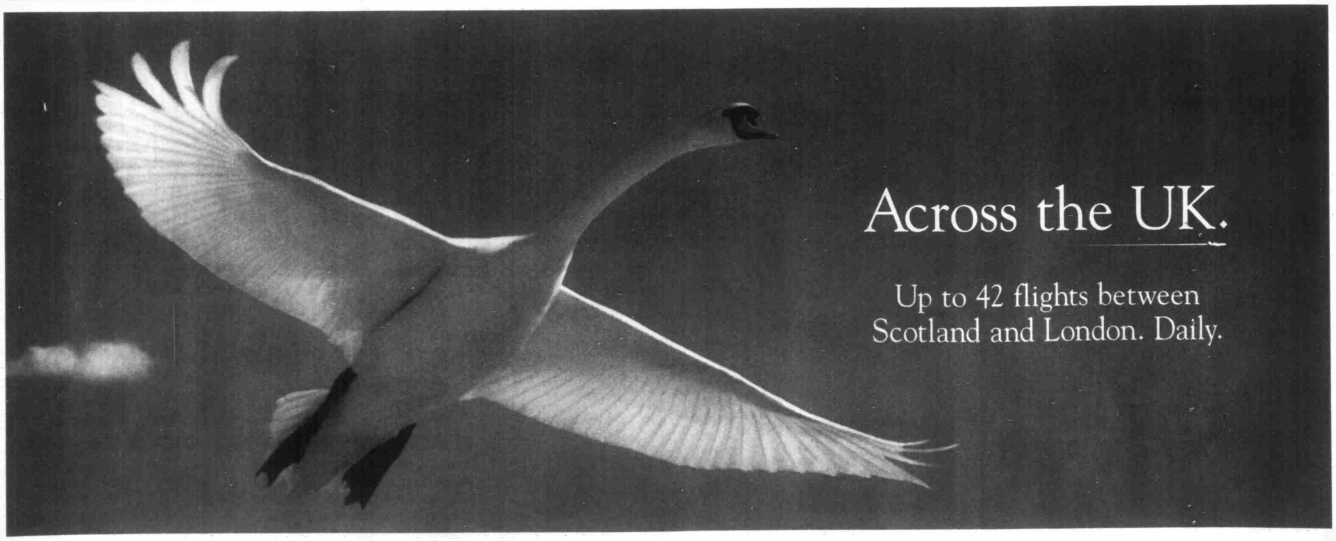
Ring of Bright Water, which was published in 1960, sold more than 1.5 million copies, overtaking *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in the bestseller lists and earning Maxwell £500,000 in two years.

Maxwell moved to the tiny island of Eilean Ban, which is now overshadowed by the Skye Bridge. Despite his wealth, he died bankrupt after squandering the money he made on fast cars and boats.

Sir John Lister Kaye, another friend, said Maxwell would sit outside his cottage, eyeing the world through a telescope like a predatory bird. "He was very happy to observe the world, but on his terms and from a distance," he said.

His cottage will be reopened this summer as a museum after restoration by the Eilean Ban Trust, which bought the six-acre island from the Scottish Office. It had originally been acquired for the bridge project.

Members of the trust include Virginia McKenna, who starred in the 1969 film version of *Ring of Bright Water* with her late husband Bill Travers as Maxwell.



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