

The Clan in Scotland

Clan Donnachaidh History

by **James E. Fargo, FSA Scot.**

Who are the Donnachaidhs, the "Children of Duncan"? Their ancestors were known to the Romans as the Kaledonioi, one of the eleven tribes of the northern Pictish nation. The Kaledonioi inhabited that part of Scotland now known as Atholl in Perthshire. One of the first recorded entries on this people occurred in the year 84 A.D., when they fought in the great battle known as Mons Graupius against the Romans.

The Clan Donnachaidh descends from King Malcolm II who reigned from 1005 to 1034 and was the last king in the direct male line to descend from Kenneth MacAlpine, who united the Scots and Picts in 843 A.D. and is considered the founder of Scotland. One of Malcolm's three daughters, Bethoc, married Crinan, the secular hereditary Abbot of Dunkeld. Through her, the Abbot's son, Duncan, was installed by Malcolm as the King of Cumbria in 1018.

After Malcolm II's murder by his nobles at Glamis, Duncan killed his opponents and seized the throne as King Duncan I. His first cousins, Macbeth (of Shakespearian fame) and Thorfinn the Raven Feeder, Norwegian Earl of Orkney, united to advance MacBeth's claim to the throne through his mother, another daughter of Malcolm II. Duncan reigned from 1034 until he was defeated in battle by their combined armies and killed by MacBeth in August 14, 1040 near Elgin.

Scotland was then ruled by Thorfinn in the northern districts and MacBeth in the southern districts. Malcolm, Duncan's eldest son, rebelled twice against MacBeth in an effort to gain the throne. His grandfather, Crinan, was slain in 1045 near Dunkeld "with nine times twenty heroes" as he led an aborted attempt to put his grandson on the throne. The second attempt was more successful as Malcolm, at the head of an English Saxon army defeated and killed MacBeth while his Norwegian allies were engaged elsewhere and Malcolm ascended the throne in 1057 as King Malcolm III Ceann Mor (Canmore).

In 1068, Malcolm took as his second wife, Margaret, later known and revered as St. Margaret of Scotland. She had fled England with her brother Edgar Aetheling after the Norman Conquest. During Malcolm's 37 year reign, the first events now known as Highland Games were held on the Braes of Mar to choose the best available men to serve as his servants and soldiers. His death in battle in December 1093 and the death of his wife, several days later brought on a turbulent time which saw Malcolm's eldest son, King Duncan II murdered by Malcolm's brother Donald Bane, Lord of the Isles, in order to become king.

Another son, Edgar, finally secured the throne in 1097 with the help of another English army of Saxons and Normans led by his mother's brother, Edgar Aetheling. King Malcolm III's hereditary possessions devolved on his youngest brother, Maelmare, the first celtic Earl of Atholl and on his death, the earldom passed to Malcolm III's namesake, the second son of his first marriage.

This Malcolm, the younger brother of the slain King Duncan II, is the recognized progenitor of the Clan.

As stated by the eminent historian, William F. Skene in 1837, "the Robertsons of Struan are unquestionably the oldest family in Scotland, being the sole remaining branch of that Royal House of Atholl which occupied the throne of Scotland during the 11th and 12th centuries." The male line of this royal house ended in 1286 with the untimely death of Alexander III when he fell from his horse.

On the death of Alexander III's daughter Margaret, the "Maid of Norway", Scotland was plunged into the famous wars of succession to determine who would be the next King of the Scots. The claimants to the throne, the houses of Balliol and Bruce, who in turn became rulers of Scotland, were of Norman origin in the male line, though they descended on the female side from the ancient Atholl dynasty. England, led by King Edward I, supported John Balliol. By 1306, Robert the Bruce had been crowned King of Scots at Scone and the War of Independence from the English continued while at the same time he continued to consolidate his hold on the throne among rival Scots claimants.

The Clan's first recognized Chief was Donnachadh Reamhair, or "Stout Duncan", who led the clan and supported Bruce during the wars of Scottish independence which culminated in Bruce's famous victory at Bannockburn on June 24, 1314 over Edward II's army.

The most precious clan relic, the celebrated rock crystal charm stone of the clan, the "Clach na Brataich" or "ensign stone", was unearthed when the chief's standard pole was pulled from the ground while on the march to Bannockburn. It has been carried by all chiefs since then when leading the clan to battle.

Stout Duncan had four sons. The three younger sons: Patrick, Thomas and Gibbon, were outlawed by King Robert III for their part in leading the daring "Raid of Angus" in 1392 which garnered 3,000 head of fat Angus cattle, laid waste the district of Angus and resulted in the death of the Sheriff of Angus and a host of his followers who had pursued the clan back to Atholl.

The eldest son, Robert, became the second Chief in 1355 and died sometime after 1392.

Duncan, his eldest son and third Chief, spend some time as a hostage in England for the ransom of King James I and died sometime before 1432. He was known as the Lord of Rannoch, as all the other lands in Rannoch were then in the hands of the Crown.

His eldest son, Robert Ruabh Duncanson, our fourth Chief, was a strong supporter of King James I and was incensed by his murder. He tracked down and captured several of the regicides, Sir Robert Graham and the Master of Atholl hiding in a small glen and turned them over to the Crown. They were drawn and quartered at Sterling Castle. The Robertson crest badge of a right hand holding an imperial crown was awarded by King James II to our fourth Chief, on August 15, 1451 as a reward for capturing the assassins of King James I in 1437.

It is from this Chief that his descendants and many of his clanfolk took the name "Robert's sons" or Robertson. His lands were erected into the free feudal barony of Struan at this time and he was given the Clan motto "Virtutis Gloria Merces" which means "Glory is the Reward of Valour". Prior to this Crown charter, the clan lands were held as vassals of the Earls of Atholl. Struan is one of only two highland chiefs that are addressed and called by the name of their territorial estates. The other is Cluny Macpherson.

The Clan plant badges are the bracken fern and fine leafed heath, which are common in the clan territory on the southern side of Loch Rannoch.

The Clan war cry "Garg'n Uair Dhuisgear" is gaelic for "Fierce when Roused". This war cry relates back to the Chief's coat of arms which contain three silver wolf heads on a blood red shield supported by a serpent and a dove. These supporters identify the origin of the clan as being descendants of Saint Columba since in Scots heraldry, the dove or columba signifies descent from this Saint. Crinan's, the Abbot of Dunkeld, descent from Saint Columba is recognized on the counter-seal of Dunkeld Cathedral, which shows Saint Columba enthroned on two wolves. King Alexander III's privy seal also contains the serpent and dove supporters with the proverb "be wise as the serpent and gentle as the dove."

Robert, the tenth chief, was a reckless and improvident leader of his clan. His estates were almost lost to him in 1597 and it was only through the generosity of an Edinburgh merchant and kinsman, John Robertson, that the estates were saved. This loyal Robertson purchased the estates and deeded them back to his chief in 1600.

Robert had four sons: Alexander who succeeded him as eleventh chief and then Donald, Duncan and James. On Alexander's death in 1636, his son Alexander succeeded him as the twelfth chief.

With the outbreak of the English Civil War in August 1642, the clan rallied to the cause of King Charles I against Cromwell. James Graham, the Marquis of Montrose, began his campaign by walking on foot in highland dress into Atholl and raised the Royal Standard at Blair in 1644. Montrose soon had a strong force of about 800 Athollmen led by his kinsman Patrick "Black Pate" Graham of Inchbrakie, who was also an uncle of our underaged 12th Chief, Alexander. Alexander's own Donnachaidh clansmen were led by another uncle, Donald Robertson, the Tutor of Struan. Throughout Montrose's campaign, the Athollmen played a predominant part and another uncle, Duncan Mor Robertson of Drumachuine, was instrumental in preventing the sack of Perth after its capture by the victorious Royalists after the battle of Tippermuir. This Duncan's descendants eventually became the chiefs of the clan when the direct line failed.

In England, King Charles I surrendered to Cromwell and ordered Montrose to disband his army. After Charles I's execution in 1649, Montrose again attempted a rising, but he was quickly defeated and was executed in 1650.

In practice, the Atholl clans usually acted together and fought as one. In 1653, under the Earl of Glencairn, one more attempt was made to put Charles II on the throne. The Earl of Atholl joined the rising and was quickly supported by the other Atholl clans. That year, an Englishman wrote: *"The considerable Barons of Atholl . . . if any be wronged, they all participate."*

Long supporters of the Stuart Kings, the Clan shared in the triumphs and defeats of the royalist cause. The 13th Chief, Alexander Robertson, "The Poet Chief", had the distinction of being "out" in the risings of 1689, 1715 and 1745. It is said that when Struan met Bonnie Prince Charlie at Perth he knelt before him and stated that "Sir, I devoted my youth to the service of your grandsire and my manhood to that of your father. Now I have come to devote my old age to the cause of your Royal Highness." After the battle of Prestonpans, he was prevailed upon due to his old age, to return home to Rannoch and he made the journey in General Cope's captured carriage. Over the last portion of the trip home, the carriage had to be carried by his clansmen over the rough terrain to his home at Carie on the southern side of Loch Rannoch.

Sharing in the misfortunes of that Royal House, Clan Donnachaidh lost much of its lands to other clans. As a result, many of the clan, although remaining loyal to Struan in any dispute, were part of the Duke of Atholl's armed following. A report by Duncan Forbes of Culloden in 1745, stated that ". . . on his own estate he (Struan) can raise about 200 men; there are 500 more Robertsons in Atholl who never follow their said Chief, being a part of the followers of the Duke of Atholl . . ." In the '45, the Robertsons were led by Donald Robertson of Woodsheal and were part of the Atholl Brigade under Lord George Murray. This relationship continues to this day with many Donnachaidh clansmen being members of the Duke of Atholl's private army, the Atholl Highlanders, the last remaining private army in Great Britain.

It was during this last rebellion (the '45) that the English courts declared the bagpipes to be instruments of war. James Reid, a piper in the Atholl Brigade, had been captured while leading his clan on the advance to Derby. At his subsequent trial, it was pleaded in his defense that he had not carried arms. The Court observed that the highland clans never marched to war without a piper and so he was executed at York as a rebel.

With the introduction of sheep in the late 18th century, the highlands changed forever. *While many clanfolk emigrated to other countries, none from Clan Donnachaidh were subjected to the "highland clearances" which began in 1782 and continued until 1854. Struan accepted the celtic moral obligation to provide relief to his kindred when needed and clan lands were mortgaged and sold off bit by bit to help support his clansmen during these times.* The 18th Chief had to sell his Struan estate in 1854 to pay debts. The last of the Clan lands, some nineteen thousand acres, were sold in 1926, after the 20th Chief's death in 1910, to pay off old debts and estate taxes. It is ironic that this last estate of the chiefs' family, known as the Rannoch Barracks, had been built by General Wade to house his soldiers while building his two roads through Atholl to watch the clans and deter further rebellion after the 1715 rising. It was the last home in the clan territory of the Chief of the Clan it was meant to overawe.

While the history of the clan of necessity had to be martial in order to fend off stronger and land hungry neighbors, the clan is well known for its love of music. The clarsach or harp was the ancient musical instrument of the Celtic people. One of the finest examples of a clarsach is preserved in the National Museum of Antiquaries in Edinburgh and is named after the Robertsons of Lude. The clan is also well known for two of the most famous fiddlers in Scotland, Neil Gow and his son Nathaniel Gow during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. They composed many strathspey and reel tunes that are still popular today. Several of these tunes were written for the clan such as "Robertson's Rant", "Robertson of Ladykirk" and "Robertson of Lude". General John Reid, the last Baron of Straloch, was a well known flutist and he wrote the music to "The Garb of Old Gaul", which is the regimental slow march of the Black Watch and the Scots Guards. He also founded the Chair of Music at Edinburgh University prior to his death in 1807. Another famous clan pipe tune is the "Laird of Struan's Salute", also known as the "Coming of the Robertsons" which legend has it was played as the clan marched to Bannockburn in 1314. The oldest surviving Robertson piobaireachd is the An Ribean Gorm, "the Blue Ribbon", also called "The Robertson March".

In 1967, the Clan Society purchased a site in the former clan territory to establish a museum and clan centre. Two years later, the Clan Museum was opened at Bruar Falls, a few miles northwest of Pitlochry in Perthshire. After the Clan's first Congress, held in 1985, the Clan began to look into the possibility of purchasing sites of historical interest to the Clan in order to restore some vestige of its ancient heritage to "the children of Duncan". In 1991, the burial ground of the Chiefs at Dunalastair, looking out westward over Loch Tummel, was purchased by members of the Society and added to the Clan's "heritage trail" in Perthshire. Three chiefs (18th, 19th and 20th) are buried there. The current (23rd) Chief is Alexander Gilbert Haldane Robertson of Struan. Struan and his wife Bridget have three children, two daughters Catriona and Ellena and one son, Alasdair Gilbert Robertson of Drumachuine, younger of Struan.