

CHAPTER 4

BLAR NA PAIRC. THE BATTLE OF THE PARK

After the forfeiture of the Macdonald lands the province of Ross came under perpetual invasion from the Isles. The islanders, most of whom were Macdonalds, together with their supporters, violated the province and exercised what they considered to be their right to exploit in a predatory manner, the chief's former possessions and reoccupy them. From the mainland their supporters included the Macdonalds of Moidart and clan Ian of Ardnamurchan. In addition the Lord of the Isles had quite a few scores to settle, not least with that upstart Kenneth Mackenzie, who had insulted his honour and dignity with impunity. With the help of his great steward, Maclean, Macdonald gathered an army of at least 1500 men and according to some sources, as many as 3000.

Macdonald advanced through Lochaber into Badenoch, where he was joined by Clan Chattan. This strong army made its way to the Highland capital, Inverness, where they captured the royal fortress replacing the garrison with their own men. Moving across the country they caused havoc and destruction, plundering the lands of the Sheriff of Cromarty, Sir Alexander Urquhart. Next to suffer were the Mackenzie lands of Strathconon. Many of the Mackenzie inhabitants were put to death as revenge for the humiliation of Lady Margaret. The lands of Strathconon had originally been in the hands of the earls of Ross until it became the property of the Mackenzies by royal charter from the king.

Macdonald's army gathered at Contin where the terrified population of old men, women and children fled into the church for refuge. All of the able-bodied men had already joined with Kenneth. Macdonald had the doors of the church closed and then set fire to the building burning the helpless people trapped inside. The story goes that while the church was burning, Glengarry's piper played on his pipes the tune now known as "Kilchrist". Curiously enough a similar tale is related by Samuel Johnson on his visit to the Western Highlands of Scotland in 1775. He was being entertained at the house of Sir Alexander Macdonald in Armidel, Isle of Skye:

As we sat at Sir Alexander's table, we were entertained, according to the ancient usage of the North, with the melody of the bagpipe. Everything in those countries has its history. As the bagpiper was playing, an elderly gentleman informed us, that in some remote time, the Macdonalds of Glengarry having been injured or offended by the inhabitants of Culloden and resolving to have justice or vengeance, came to Culloden on a Sunday, where finding their enemies at worship, they shut them up in the church, which they set on fire; and this, said he, is the tune that the piper played while they were burning.

This narrative undoubtedly relates to the church at Contin, unless the Macdonalds were in the habit of burning down churches with the worshippers still

inside!

Kenneth and his followers numbering six hundred, most of whom were Mackenzies, finally met up with Macdonald and his army on a large moor known as the Park, near Strathpeffer, and prepared to do battle. Although Kenneth was substantially outnumbered, he was on his own territory and he positioned his men strategically among the pits and bogs. He then sent his brother Duncan with a body of archers to provide an ambush. Kenneth's plan was to attack the front of the enemy and then fall back causing the Macdonalds to follow them into the bogs where they would become a target for Duncan's archers.

Macdonald's forces were led by his cousin Gillespoc, a brave and experienced general. Macdonald was amazed when he saw Mackenzies small force advancing towards his own much larger army and he pointed out to Gillespoc Kenneth's impudence with derision. Gillespoc advised his young chief that "such extraordinary boldness should be met by more extraordinary wariness in us, lest we fall into unexpected inconvenience." This response caused Alexander to fly into a rage and reply: "Go you also and join with them, and it will not need our care nor move the least fear in my followers; both of you will not be a breakfast to me and mine." Thus Macdonald spurned the wise advice of his cousin and suffered the consequences.

Maclean of Lochbuy led the van of the army charging Kenneth's forces with a fury one expected of Highlanders. Kenneth fell back allowing Maclean's men to pursue and become stuck in the bogs. They were immediately attacked by the archers. Total confusion arose within the enemy ranks and Duncan's men turned their attention on the main body of Macdonald's army who were unprepared by this development. Kenneth, seeing the impact this surprise attack had on his foe immediately led a charge before the enemy were able to form an order of battle and fell upon their right wing with such impetuosity that they fell back in great confusion.

Gillespoc, meanwhile, had been stung by Alexander's taunt and showed "that though he was wary in council, he was not fearful in action." He sought out Kenneth with the intention of engaging him in single combat. Kenneth in his turn hunted down Gillespoc and the two flew at each other prepared to fight to the death. Of these courageous men it was Kenneth who was the younger and stronger. Kenneth who "would brook no tedious debate, but pressed on with fearful eagerness, he at one blow cut off Gillespoc's arm and past very far into his body, so that he fell down dead."

Kenneth at this moment of victory, suddenly noticed that his standard-bearer, Donald, was fighting hand to hand close by without his colours. He angrily demanded to know what had become of his colours and received the cool reply that Macdonald's standard-bearer was carefully guarding them. Donald explained to his astonished chief that he and Macdonald's standard-bearer met in a conflict and Donald slew him. Since there was plenty of other good work to be done in the field he thrust the standard into the dead body and left some of his attendants to guard the

standard while he went off to aid his chief in the battle.

Another of Mackenzie's men, who became known as "Big Duncan of the Axe", made his name in the legends of the clan by ploughing his way through the enemy ranks with his rusty battle-axe. This huge, ungainly man caused fearful havoc among the Macdonalds until Maclean of Lochbuy, a redoubtable warrior and leader opposed Big Duncan and stopped him in his homicidal career. Maclean was a powerful man and was heavily "clad in mail and well versed in arms". Duncan was able to make little impression on Maclean but since he did not carry the weight of mail he was able to defend himself by retreating backwards until he reached a ditch. The two adversaries parried and Maclean plunged at Duncan with his weapon which stuck in the opposite bank of the ditch. In attempting to remove it Maclean bent his head forward exposing his neck. Big Duncan seized his opportunity, bringing down his heavy battle-axe with such force that he severed Maclean's head from his body.

This proved to be the turning point in this bloody battle "for the Macdonalds, seeing the brave leader of their van falling, at once retreated and gave all up for lost". The Macdonalds were completely routed and those who did not escape were slain as it was not common to give quarter in those days. Others who managed to escape rushed into the river Conon and were drowned.

The following morning Kenneth marched to Strathconon, where he found three hundred of Macdonald's followers who had escaped the slaughter at Blar na Pairc. They had rallied and were destroying everything in their path. As soon as they spotted Kenneth's men they fled, but were pursued by the relentless Kenneth who killed them or took them prisoner.

Since these events took place before the time of the written word, the stories have come to us down the ages from the narratives of fathers to sons. We may be forgiven if we find them exaggerated as they do fall into the realms of legend and tradition. Although we do know that this battle took place and had important consequences in the clan power struggles, nevertheless each clan was inclined to glorify its own people. From the Glengarry people comes a different story following the Battle of the Park. In this version, the Mackenzies, seeking revenge, overtook a party of Glengarry's men resting near a burn of Altsaigh. A fight broke out, but as the Macdonalds were outnumbered, they fled towards the burn. They missed the ford and were caught on the edge of a ravine, where the Mackenzies either slew them or sent them to their death in the abyss below. One gallant lad, called Alan MacRaonuill, made for a place where the stream rushed through a yawning chasm. It was a desperate leap; but life lay on the other side, and death was at his heels. The Macdonald giant took the jump and reached the other side. The Mackenzie, who was a smaller man, but with the fire of hate in his heart, leaped after him. He just missed the further bank, slithered down it and caught hold of a birch tree. There he hung suspended over the death cauldron. Then Alan MacRaonuill turned back, leaned over, saw his enemy hanging on the tree. With his eyes looking straight into the eyes of his foe, he hissed out these words:- "I have left too much behind me with you this day, so take this also." And with that he cut off the birch branch with his dirk. He

then ran to the loch and plunged in and was picked up by a boat from the other side.

Kenneth supposedly returned to Kinellan in triumph and to his aged father, Alexander, who embraced him warmly for his remarkable victory against the superior numbers of the enemy. If this is true, then Alexander Ionraic must have still been alive in 1491 and must therefore have died in the same year. Among Kenneth's prisoners were Alexander of the Isles and his heir apparent, Alexander of Lochalsh. Both were released within six months against an oath never to molest Kenneth or his kin and never to claim again any right to the earldom of Ross which Alexander had resigned to the king. The insurrection was also finally to cost Alexander the Lordship of the Isles.

Kenneth's men proceeded to ravage the lands of Ardmeanach because the Baron of Kilravoch, whose father was a governor of the district, had assisted Macdonald. Their spoils included 600 cows and oxen, 80 horses, 1000 sheep, 200 swine and 500 bolls of victual. They then picked upon the lands of William Munro of Foulis because they believed he secretly supported Alexander of Lochalsh. Because of these excesses by the Mackenzies, the Lieutenant of the North, the Earl of Huntly, was compelled to act against them as "oppressors of the lieges" despite the fact that their services in repelling the invasion of the Macdonalds had been greatly appreciated. It was not until 1499 that the earl granted a warrant to Duncan Mackintosh of Mackintosh, John Grant of Freuchie and others, with three thousand men, to pass against clan Mackenzie "the King's rebels", for the killing of Harold of Chisholm, dwelling in Strathglass, "and for divers other heirschips, slaughters, spuilzies, committed on the king's poor lieges and tenants in the lordship of Ardmeanoch." The late Kenneth's brother, Hector Roy and his men were able to defeat and disperse these avengers. In fact the battle of Blar na Pairc had earned great respect for the Mackenzies. King James III sought Kenneth's assistance against conspirators in the south, and James IV knighted Kenneth "for being highly instrumental in reducing his fierce countrymen to the blessings of a civilized life."

It is believed the battle of Blar na Pairc took place in 1491 but it is believed possible that it could have taken place as early as 1488. By 1492 Kenneth was dead.

Another major skirmish took place between the two rival clans shortly after Blar na Pairc at a place called Drumchatt. Once again the MacDonalds were completely routed and were driven out of Ross.

John of Killin. Chief 1492—1561

John Mackenzie of Kintail, otherwise known as John of Killin, succeeded his father Kenneth on his death in 1492. Since he was born around the year 1480, John was still a minor when his father died. John's uncle, Hector Roy Mackenzie, became his guardian, and exercised the full powers of the chief, demonstrating that he was a powerful and worthy leader of the clan. The role of acting—chief while the actual chief was still a minor was known as that of tutor. Hector was therefore the tutor of

Kintail, though he should not be confused with a later and more famous tutor of Kintail, Sir Roderick Mackenzie of Castle Leod, who led the clan at the beginning of the 17th century.

It is believed that Hector may have cast doubts on the legitimacy of John since his father was already legally married to Lady Margaret at the time of John's birth. He also attempted to replace his nephew as chief of the clan. The intervention of Lord Lovat ensured that his grandson John retained his rightful heritage. Quite apart from the various arguments put forth concerning John's legitimacy, Agnes Fraser's children had been earlier legitimised by the Pope and that was the end of that subject.

As may be expected, when John reached majority he was not pleased with his uncle's actions and they quarrelled bitterly. John lodged two separate complaints against Hector. As a result Hector was obliged to hand over to John certain properties which had improperly found their way into Hector's hands.

In 1493, the Lordship of the Isles was finally forfeited by the Macdonalds, largely as a result of the battle of Blar na Pairc. From then on the Mackenzies rapidly increased their influence and possessions with the help of the cadet families whose support was to make their chief and their clan so powerful in the Highlands of Scotland.

John of Killin proved to be an outstanding chief. According to Sheriff Macphail, "from the charters in his favour recorded in the Register of the Great Seal, it was he to whom the subsequent importance of the Mackenzies was largely due."

It also speaks well of John of Killin that despite the differences he had with Hector Roy, he was wise enough to patch these up and both of these strong willed men did much to strengthen the power of the clan. Nevertheless, Hector Roy had to be forced to give up Eilean Donan Castle—the Acts of the Lords of the Council in April 1511 so decreed. Despite that, Hector Roy still possessed vast estates of land in his own right, including the lands of Gairloch.

John's influence and prestige grew so much that in 1514 he and Munro of Foulis were chosen by James V as lieutenants to rule Ross in the west. Ross of Balnagown was selected to rule in the east.

In 1531 John was free of any summons against him because of his efforts in resisting the rebels in the Isles, being in the service of the king and his lieutenant, the Earl of Moray.

John of Killin, was very prudent in acquiring by purchase, or by way of legal conveyance, title to those lands seized by his predecessors. He helped secure his position by marrying Elizabeth Grant, the daughter of John Grant of Grant. His son Kenneth was later to marry a daughter of the Earl of Atholl. It probably goes without saying that this escalation of power was met with some envy and resistance among some of the other important Ross-Shire clans, in particular the Munros, the Dingwalls and the MacDonells of Glengary. On the other hand among the constant feuding factions the Mackenzies found loyal and dedicated supporters. In particular the MacRaes were redoubtable warriors and gave the Mackenzies such support that

they earned for themselves not only the longtime respect and friendship of the Mackenzies but the honourable title, "the Mackenzies' Shirt of Mail," in recognition of their military prowess. The MacRaes were a small clan from Kintail in Wester Ross and they had acted for generations as the chamberlains of Kintail and also as constables of the Mackenzie stronghold, Eilean Donan Castle.

Also among the early followers of the Mackenzies were the then powerful Mathesons, a major branch of which occupied much of Lochalsh. Like the Mackenzies, the Mathesons had numerous feuds with the MacDonells of Glengarry.

The clan MacLennan was another Kintail clan which gave centuries of support and service to the Mackenzies and they became the hereditary standard bearers to the Mackenzie lords of Kintail. In a similar way the Murchisons were long and trusted followers and became honoured standard bearers to the Mackenzies of Seaforth and were appointed governors of Eilean Donan Castle.

There seems little doubt that the quite remarkable rise to power of the clan Mackenzie over such a short period of time lies in the events of the 15th century. The problems for the king with the earls of Ross and the Lords of the Isles culminating in the Battle of Harlaw and the further troublesome rebellions of the mighty Macdonalds and their kin, combined with the huge success for the Mackenzies at the Battle of the Park, helped to sew the seeds of the Mackenzies' fortune. Land and power flowed from the king to the Mackenzies as a means of checking further problems.

Recognition of the growing importance of the Mackenzies was also evidenced when Kenneth Mackenzie of Kintail was knighted by King James IV. In 1508 Kintail was raised to the level of a barony for the Mackenzie chief, John of Killin. His coat of arms contained the stag's head from which he derived his Gaelic title of Cabarfeidh, (deer's antlers).

A Captain John Matheson of Bennetsfield adequately summed up the rapid escalation of power of the Mackenzies of Kintail in a manuscript written in the 19th century:

"We must observe here the rapid advance which the family of Kintail made on every side. The turbulent Macdonalds, crushed by the affair of the Park, Munro, sustained by his own Clan, and the neighbouring vassals of Ross humbled at their own door, when a century had not yet passed since the name of Mackenzie had become familiar to their ears; and it is gratifying to trace all this to the wise policy of the first James and his successors. The judicious education of Alexander Ionraic, and consequent cultivation of those habits which by identifying the people with the monarch through the laws, render a nation securely great, is equally discernible in John of Killin and his posterity. The successors of the earls of Ross were turbulent and tenacious of their rights, but they were irreclaimable. The youthful Lord of the Isles, at the instigation of his haughty mother, deserted the Court of James I, while young Kintail remained, sedulously improving himself at school in Perth, till he was called to display his gratitude to his Royal master in counteracting the evil arising from the

opposite conduct of Macdonald. Thus, by one happy circumstance, the attention of the King was called to a chieftain, who gave such early promise of steady attachment, and his future was secured. The family of Kintail was respectably recognised in the Calendar of the Scottish Court, while that of the once powerful Macdonalds frowned in disappointment and barbarous independence amidst their native wilds, while their territories, extending beyond the bounds of good government and protection, presented, gradually, such defenceless gaps as became inviting, and easily penetrable by the intelligence of Mackenzie, and Alexander Ionraic acquired a great portion of his estates by this legitimate advantage, afterwards secured by the intractable arrogance of Macdonald of Lochalsh and the valour and military capacity of Coinneach a Bhlair."

John of Killin lived in difficult times in Scotland but he was active in the famous events that took place in his lifetime. He fought at the Battles of Flodden (1513), and Pinkie (1547). Both battles were severe defeats for Scotland and John was lucky to escape with his life since these battles took the flower of Scottish aristocracy. Both John and his uncle Hector survived Flodden though John's brother Roderick and most of the chief's followers lost their lives in this calamity. John also led his clan at the Battle of Pinkie and was taken prisoner by the English. His clan willingly came up with the ransom to free their ageing and much honoured chief, despite the fact that the Highlands were desperately poor. According to the Letterfearn MS he was ransomed for cows "raised through all his lands."

Though John managed to add considerably to the estates of the clan, the incident which gives us an insight into his character and his sense of cunning was that which became known as the "affair of Dingwall Bridge". This remarkable story involves the powerful Earl of Huntly, who was quite friendly to John of Killin. The earl decided he would pay a visit to some of the Highland chiefs and if they received him kindly he would obtain for himself those parts of the earldom of Ross still in the hands of the Crown and live in those districts for part of the year. John of Killin had maintained friendship with the earl but had no particular wish he should acquire lands close to Mackenzie territory and overshadow them in power and influence.

The earl duly came to Dingwall castle and invited the chiefs to meet with him. John, who was by this time advanced in years, made a great show of friendship towards Huntly and declared that he hoped he would be prepared to help John from the violence of his son Kenneth, who was taking advantage of his frailty and great age by behaving in an unjust manner. He expressed a wish the Huntly would punish Kenneth for this unnatural and illegal behaviour. While they were having this conversation a messenger arrived with the news that three or four hundred armed men with banners flying and pipes playing had appeared in sight above Dingwall. Huntly was alarmed at this development, not knowing what was the cause of this military presence. John explained that it was his son Kenneth who had come to punish him for not seeking his permission to visit his lordship. John told the earl that he was too weak to resist this force and he advised Huntly to leave Dingwall and to

take him with him to protect him from his rebellious son. The Earl of Huntly duly took off with his supporters and as they were crossing Dingwall bridge they were attacked by son Kenneth's men and a number of Huntly's men were killed. John of Killin had cunningly achieved his object of frightening Huntly out of Ross-shire. He did not bother to return.

Another curious story is told of John of Killin by the Earl of Cromartie. John was said to be a great councillor and courtier to Mary Queen of Scots. At one time she sent a Chamberlain to Ross to find out the state and condition of the gentry there. John, on hearing of this visit, caused his servants to light a huge fire from newly cut wood. The fire made such smoke as to nearly blind their honoured guests and if it had not been night time they would surely have left as the smoke was making them ill. At this point a great bull was brought in which was brained on the floor by a fellow with a dirk who proceeded to cut steaks off it. Then came a big fellow with an axe and a cauldron and he too set about the bull with his axe chopping great pieces off the animal. The cauldron was put on the fire and more green wood was added. The astonished guests then saw a long table prepared on which were placed huge portions of beef while there were no plates provided. While they sat down for supper six or seven hounds were then released which immediately made first play at the meal provided. After this unusual and inelegant supper was over the guests were tired and ready for bed. So in came six women who laid straw and white plaids on the floor and forced the gentlemen down onto them in their clothes to sleep.

These gentlemen did not wait for any more hospitality and made off at daybreak where they were well received in great style and luxury by Ross of Balnagown, Munro of Foulis and other gentry. When they returned to Edinburgh, they were asked by the Queen who were the ablest men who lived there. They replied that all they met lived like princes except Her Majesty's great courtier and counsellor, Mackenzie. They then related how he lived, how he slept with the dogs and sat with the hounds, at which the Queen Mary laughed and said, "It were a pity of his poverty for he is the best and most honest man of them all." The Queen then called all of the gentry of Ross to hold their lands from the Crown in feu (freehold property) and John obtained the best terms, because of his presumed poverty.

In 1556, Mary de Guise, the Queen Regent acting for the young Mary Queen of Scots, issued a commission to the Earl of Sutherland to lay the country of the Mackays to waste, because of their refusal to answer charges of deprivations committed in Sutherlandshire. The earl explained the situation to John who had entered into a bond of manrent with the earl some years previously. John sent his son Kenneth with well armed clansmen to meet with Mackay of Farr. A fierce battle took place and the Mackays were beaten with the loss of many of their clansmen and one of their chief commanders, Angus Maclain Mhoir. The Earl of Sutherland appointed John and Kenneth deputies in the management of the vast property, placing them also in possession of Ardmeanach, or Redcastle. This property remained with the Mackenzies eventually becoming the property of Kenneth's third son, Roderick Mackenzie of Redcastle. This Roderick was also progenitor of the Mackenzies of

Kincraig.

John also became Privy Councillor to Queen Regent Mary and to her daughter, Mary Queen of Scots. He died in 1561 at the age of eighty and was buried at Beaulieu. (Fraser's "The Earls of Cromartie" says he died around 1556)
John of Killin and his wife Elizabeth Grant had one son and a daughter:

1. Kenneth Mackenzie of Kintail. (Coinneach na Cuirc)
2. Janet, who married Roderick MacLeod of Lewis (See Chapter 6)

John of Killin also had a natural son and daughter.