

CHAPTER 7

THE FIFE ADVENTURERS.

Despite the disposal of Torquil-Dubh, the Mackenzies still were unable to get possession of the Isle of Lewis. The reason was due to the appearance of the Fife Adventurers.

In 1598 an Act of Parliament was passed in Edinburgh which involved, among other things, the confiscation of certain properties in the Western Islands. Included among these lands was the Isle of Lewis which was declared forfeit and to be at the disposal of the Government.

Certain gentlemen and noblemen from Fife had cast their eyes on the potential prize of the Isle of Lewis. They had heard that Lewis had very fertile soil. They therefore approached the King with a plan. Since the Isle was without a legal owner, it was now available for the crown to dispose of as thought fit, so the argument went. Furthermore, they had big plans to civilize the inhabitants and thereby bring another part of his troublesome northern kingdom under proper and lawful control. It was certainly true that the Highlands and Islands had been a headache to the King for many years, and without a standing army there had not been much he had been able to do about it. The King was persuaded by the attractiveness of an argument which promised peace and prosperity. He duly gifted the Isle of Lewis to the adventurers from Fife!

The chief promoters of this enterprise included some illustrious gentlemen. Among these were; Patrick Leslie, commendator of Lindores and father of the, soon to be famous, covenanting general, David Leslie; the Duke of Lennox; Sir William Stewart of Houston, commendator of Pittenweem; Sir James Anstruther, younger of that ilk; Sir James Sandilands of Slamannan; James Learmont of Balconie; James Spens of Wormestoun; John Forret of Fingask; Sir George Hume of Wedderburn and his son David; and Captain William Murray.

In attempting to settle on their new territory the men from Fife ran into a little trouble. The inhabitants of Lewis under the leadership of Murthow Macleod killed some of the settlers and in one case they captured a wealthy gentleman and only agreed to release him on payment of a ransom.

The Fife settlers might have decided that Lewis was too uncomfortable for them to live in except for the outbreak of yet another family quarrel among the Macleods which was aiding them to their own self-destruction. Neill Macleod took offence that Murthow Macleod had been a protector and defender of the hated brieve, the man who had caused the murder of their leader Torquil Dubh. Neill, therefore, successfully carried out a military action against his half-brother in which many of Murthow's followers were killed. Murthow himself was taken prisoner. The Fife adventurers approached Neill and offered him a share in the Isle of Lewis if he would deliver up Murthow to them. Neill agreed to this scheme and duly

handed over Murthow and thereby obtained a complete pardon from the king for all his past offences. The hapless Murthow on the other hand was executed for the part he played in his action against the Fife adventurers.

Meanwhile, Kenneth Mackenzie of Kintail had been totally frustrated in his efforts to get Lewis and decided that his next course of action should be to try and encourage the men of Fife to quit Lewis. He reasoned that the Macleods needed a leader. One that they could follow as a lord and master. To that end Kenneth happened to hold in captivity Tormaid Macleod, the fourth legitimate son of Roderick Macleod of Lewis. He therefore concluded that it would be a smart move to release Tormaid, allow him to return to Lewis in the belief that the islanders would rise up and follow him and drive out the usurping settlers. This was not an unreasonable belief for as Sir Robert Gordon said:

...all those islanders (and lykways the Hielanders) are, by nature, most bent and prone to adventure themselves, their lyffs, and all they have, for their masters and lords, yea beyond all other people.

Unfortunately these deep laid schemes and plots got back to the ears of the King, who at once had Kenneth Mackenzie imprisoned in Edinburgh castle. No trial was ever held, however, because Kenneth managed to escape with the help, it was believed, of his friend, the Lord Chancellor of Scotland.

Neill Macleod had, meanwhile, fallen out with the Fife adventurers and they were soon fighting each other. Mackenzie of Kintail now decided to play his trump card. With promises of support he released Tormaid Macleod from his custody to drive out the unwanted settlers. Tormaid arrived in Lewis to a great welcome from his clan and all of the islanders, including his half-brother Neill, acknowledged him as their chief. Tormaid led his men in battle. His men were successful in capturing a ship at sea with James Learmont of Balconie, one of the Fife adventurers, on board. A high ransom was demanded for his release, but unfortunately Learmont died while still in captivity, before it could be paid. Tormaid killed many of the settlers' men and held their leaders, Spens of Wormistoun and Moneypenny of Pitmilley as hostages. These he eventually released against their promises never to return to Lewis and against their pledge to seek the King's pardon for Tormaid and his followers for any past offences they may have committed.

Torquil Connaldagh was subsequently captured and delivered to Tormaid who demanded the return of the title deeds of Lewis. Torquil could not, however, comply with the demand since he had previously turned them over to the Mackenzies of Kintail for safe keeping. Despite the recommendations of most of his advisers, Tormaid released his elder brother, though many thought he should have had him executed for all the miseries and troubles he had brought upon the clan.

The Fife settlers, meanwhile, had no intention of honouring their promises to Tormaid. The promises had been extracted under duress. They saw no reason

why they should give up their title to lands given to them by the King. After submitting their complaints to the King he willingly granted them a commission of fire and sword to proceed against Tormaid Macleod and his clan. The settlers, armed with the royal commission, gained the support of the Earl of Sutherland and landed with an army on the Isle of Lewis under the leadership of William MacWilliam, chief of the clan Gunn. A message was sent to Tormaid from the settlers inviting him to surrender peacefully. If he was prepared to do this, they would allow him to travel to London where he would obtain a pardon from the king for himself and his followers. Tormaid's brother Neill strongly advised against accepting this offer. However, Tormaid was not inclined to risk a battle against superior forces and he agreed to the settlers' ultimatum.

Tormaid duly made his way to London where he received an audience with the King. He immediately presented his case before the King and complained that it had been wrong to hand over to the Fife adventurers the lands which had belonged to his clan for generations. He let it be known that His Majesty had been deceived and misled by these men and that they had been the cause of much trouble, many injuries and, indeed, deaths. King James listened to Tormaid's cause and arguments with a growing sympathy and was inclined to restore to Tormaid his rights of inheritance. The adventurers, hearing of this alarming development which they had not anticipated, prevailed on some of their number who were close to the King to put in some stongly worded counter-arguments. So successful were they that the King was persuaded to send Tormaid back to Scotland as a prisoner! Poor Tormaid was duly imprisoned in Edinburgh castle. He was eventually released in 1615 when the crown granted him freedom by allowing him to go to Holland, where he remained until he died.

The Fife speculators were no more successful in peacefully enjoying their gains, even with Tormaid out of the way. Indeed, they began to tire of the struggle. The adventure had taken many years and had been excessively expensive. The speculation had proved to be so unprofitable that they reluctantly decided to abandon their luckless investment and return to their homes in Fife, weary of the effort.

Kenneth Mackenzie of Kintail found himself in a fortunate position. Some time earlier, in 1605, he had successfully purchased from Torquil Connaldagh the rights to his old claim to the inheritance of Lewis. The men of Fife had abandoned the Isle and Tormaid Macleod was in prison. Coincidentally he also held the charter deeds to Lewis, in `safe keeping'! Kenneth Mackenzie also happened to be a privy councillor. Therefore, using all of these advantages, especially his political clout, he no longer disguised his intentions. He had been patient for too long to lose the prize he had waited for for so many years. So it was that the Isle of Lewis was gifted to Kenneth Mackenzie of Kintail from the Lord High Chancellor of Scotland under the Great Seal!

But even now at this point of apparent victory, Mackenzie was once again

foiled. The Fife adventurers were proving to be sore losers. They complained in the bitterest terms to the King who became exceedingly displeased when he heard of Mackenzie's subterfuge. In fact so displeased was he that he forced Mackenzie to resign his 'rights' to the Isle of Lewis into His Majesty's hands who in turn vested them to Lord Balmerino, Secretary of Scotland, Sir George Hay and Sir James Spens, who gave an undertaking to colonize Lewis and subdue Neill Macleod who was now alone in defending the Isle.

It was at this point that Kenneth played a deep and deceitful part. First of all he openly assisted the proposed colonization of Lewis and sent his tough and uncompromising brother, Roderick Mackenzie, with a party of men to 'help'. He then promised to send a ship loaded with provisions for the colonists. But he secretly contacted Neill Macleod and advised him to intercept the ship so that the colonists would be deprived of these necessities. This scheme proved to be wholly successful. Neill Macleod seized the ship and evaded his would-be captors. The new colonists, deprived of adequate food, abandoned the island in disappointment, leaving only a handful of men to guard the fort.

Lord Balmerino, in the meantime, had been convicted of high treason and had lost his rights to Lewis. Sir George Hay and Sir James Spens had planned to send new colonists and fresh supplies, but Neill Macleod and his supporters burnt the fort and captured the guard, sending them back to their homes. The aspiring colonists abandoned their plans of going to such an inhospitable place and sold their rights to Lewis. And it was Kenneth who was the purchaser! At last, he now had full legal ownership to the Isle of Lewis.

The Mackenzies quickly took possession of the Isle of Lewis and the inhabitants submitted, except for Neill Macleod. He and a few of his followers fled to a small isle called Berrissay. For some years the Mackenzies had trouble trying to remove Neill Macleod from this nearby isle and he remained a source of annoyance to them.

In 1611, Kenneth died. His son and heir Colin, was still a minor and Kenneth's brother, Roderick, became the Tutor of Kintail. Colin's uncle Rorie was not one to brook trouble from the impudent Neill Macleod. Without any more ado he obtained a commission of fire and sword. This commission was issued to "Rorie Mackenzie of Coigach, Tutor of Kintail; Colin Mackenzie of Killin; Murdo Mackenzie his half brother; Alexander Mackenzie of Coul and Alexander Mackenzie of Davochmaluach."

Roderick thought up a devious plan and seizing some of the women and children from Berrissay he put them on a rock in the sea near Berrissay, which threatened them with drowning at high tide if Neill Macleod did not quit his stronghold. Faced with this predicament, Neill Macleod had no choice but to leave Berrissay. He fled to the Isle of Harris where his kinsman, Sir Roderick Macleod of Harris, took him in. Neill complained bitterly to Sir Roderick of the treatment he had received from the Mackenzies and requested Sir Roderick take him to the King

so he could bring these outrageous actions to his notice. Accordingly, Sir Roderick and Neill set off to London. When they reached Glasgow, they were stopped and Sir Roderick was surprised to receive a charge that under pain of treason he was to deliver Neill Macleod to the Privy Council. Sir Roderick Macleod saw no choice but to comply with the summons and Neill Macleod, together with his nephew Donald, were sent to Edinburgh to appear before the Privy Council.

In April 1613 Neill Macleod was executed at Edinburgh and his nephew Donald banished from Scotland. Two other troublesome relatives of Neill Macleod were apprehended by Roderick MacKenzie around 1614 and they too were executed.

Historians tend to be unkind to Sir Roderick Macleod of Harris for his part in surrendering his kinsman, Neill, over to the Privy Council. They have regarded it as an act of treachery. But Neill was not a character worthy of too much sympathy. He was a pirate and fearless outlaw though he is often seen as the one member of his clan who almost succeeded in resisting the loss of his family's Isle. When he was executed at Market Cross in Edinburgh he was said to have died "verie Christianlie".

In 1614, while these problems were taking place in Lewis, the Clan Cameron was divided in a dispute between the Marquis of Huntly and the Earl of Argyll. Violence resulted and Huntly obtained a commission from King James to put down the uprisings, and to this end all the king's loyal vassals were commanded to assist. The Mackenzies were exempted from this commission because of their problems in Lewis. The Privy Council issued the following declaration which is given in full because of its historic interest.

James Rex, - James, by the grace of God, King of Great Britain, France and Ireland, defender of the faith, to all and sundry our lieges, and subjects whom it effeirs to whose knowledge this our letter shall come, greeting. For as much as we have taken great pains and travails, and bestoun great charge and expense for reducing the Isles of our kingdom to our obedience: And the same Isles being now settled in a reasonable way of quietness, and the chieftains thereof having come in and rendered their obedience to us; there rest none of the Isles rebellious, but only the Lews, which being inhabited by a number of godless and lawless people, trained up from their youth in all kinds of ungodliness: They can hardly be reclaimed from their impurities and barbarities, and induced to embrace a quiet and peaceable form of living; so that we have been constrained from time to time to employ our cousin, the Lord Kintail, who rests with God, and since his decease the Tutor of Kintail his brother, and other friends of that House in our service against the rebels of the Lews, with ample commission and authority

to suppress their insolence and to reduce that island to our obedience, which service has been prosecuted and followed these divers years by power, friendship, and proper services of the House of Kintail, without any kind of trouble and charge or expense to us, or any support or relief from their neighbours; and in the prosecution of that service, they have had such good and happy success, as divers of the rebels have been apprehended and executed by justice: But seeing our said service is not yet fully accomplished, nor the Isle of Lews settled in a solid and perfect obedience, we have of late renewed our former commission to our cousin Colin, now Lord of Kintail, and to his Tutor and some other friends of his house, and they are to employ the hale power and service in the execution of the said commission, whilk being a service emporting highly our honour, and being so necessary and expedient for the peace and quiet of the whole islands, and for the good of our subjects, haunting the trade of fishing in the Isles, the same ought not to be interrupted upon any other intervening occasion, and our Commissioners and their friends ought not to be distracted therefrae for giving of their concurrence in our services: Therefore, we, with advice of the Lords of our Privy Council, have given and granted our licence to our said cousin Colin, Lord of Kintail, and to his friends, men, tenants, and servants to remain and bide at home frae all osts, reeds, wars, assemblings, and gaddings to be made by George, Marquis of Huntly, the Earl of Enzie, his son, or any other our Lieutenants, Justices, or Commissioners, by sea or land, either for the pursuit of Allan Cameron of Lochiel and his rebellious complices, or for any other cause or occasion whatsoever, during or within the time of our commission foresaid granted against the Lews, without pain or danger to be incurred by our said cousin the Lord of Kintail and his friends in their persons, lands or goods; notwithstanding whatsoever our proclamation made or to be made in the contrair whatever, and all pains contained in, we dispense be their pretts, discharging hereby our Justices, Justice Clerk, and all our Judges and Ministers of law, of all calling, accusing, or any way proceeding against them for the cause aforesaid, and of their officers in that part.

Given under our signet at Edinburgh, the 14th day of September 1614, and of our reign the 12th, and 48 years. Read, passed, and allowed in Council. All; Concr. Hamilton, Glasgow, Lothian, Binning.

(Signed) "Primerose"

So it was that over a period of several years the Mackenzies became the undisputed masters of the Isle of Lewis. Nor was that the end of the matter. Roderick Mackenzie, the Tutor of Kintail, had married Margaret Macleod, the heiress of Coigach, who later became the sole survivor and representative of the Macleods of Lewis, as the daughter of Torquil Connaldagh. Roderick himself was knighted and took the title, Sir Roderick Mackenzie of Castle Leod, Coigach and Tarbat. It was he who built Castle Leod, the present home of the Mackenzie chiefs in Strathpeffer and headquarters of the worldwide Mackenzie Clan..

Skirmishes in Raasay

While the proceedings were taking place in Lewis, the Mackenzies found themselves in another serious conflict over the matter of the lands of Gairloch.

Originally the Gairloch lands belonged to the clan Mhic-Ghille-Chalum the predecessors of the laird of Raasay. At the time the Mackenzies began their rise to power and prosperity, they managed to acquire a one-third interest in Gairloch by way of a wadset (or mortgage) given by Mhic-Ghille-Chalum. Over a period the Mackenzies obtained a legal right to the whole of these lands but they apparently made no attempt to take possession of the property until the death of Torquil Dubh Macleod of Lewis. The new laird of Gairloch now exercised his real or pretended rights of ownership and chased off the clan Mhic-Ghille-Chalum from the lands by fire and sword.

This clan took umbrage at the loss of their long held lands and decided to retaliate by invading Gairloch, plundering and destroying buildings and even killing some of the population.

Murdo Mackenzie, the laird of Gairloch, managed to capture one of the leaders, John MacAlain MacRory, and imprison him in Gairloch. He sent his son, also named Murdo Mackenzie, with Alexander Bane and others to seize John Holmoch MacRory, one of the chiefs whom they believed was in Skye. This small group set off by ship and landed on the Isle of Raasay which lies close to the Isle of Skye. Gille-Calum, the laird of Raasay, boarded the ship and immediately recognised Murdo Mackenzie as the son of the Gairloch laird. He attempted to seize Murdo as a hostage in return for his cousin, John MacAlain MacRory.

Mackenzie and his followers put up some resistance to this attempted capture and in the fierce and bloody skirmish which followed, Mackenzie, Bain and all of his men were slain, as was the laird of Raasay and a number of his supporters.

The ultimate result of this terrible battle was that the Mackenzie laird of Gairloch found himself the undisputed and peaceful master of Gairloch, since the laird of Raasay's people recognized the futility of pitting their limited numbers against such a powerful adversary.

Thus, the Mackenzies, under the Mackenzie lairds of Gairloch, controlled a

quarter of a million acres of land in Gairloch, supplementing the power of the Mackenzie Clan. The Mackenzies now owned territory from the Black Isle in Easter Ross through to the west coast and beyond to the Isle of Lewis. An area of territory greater than that of any other clan.