

**A HISTORY  
OF  
THE MACKENZIES**

*by*

**ALAN MCKENZIE**

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## CHAPTER 1

### Kinship of the Mackenzies

To what extent are persons of the name Mackenzie related to one another? Dr Jean Dunlop in her book *The Clan Mackenzie* published in 1953 made the following comment:

While the cadets were certainly, though often distantly, related to one another, it is obviously an exaggeration to suggest that all members of the clan are cousins even to the twentieth degree. There must be a great deal of inter-relationship, but in any case all Mackenzies, whether kinsmen or not, own a common heritage of loyalty as clansmen.

Can this be correct? Is there in fact only a modest chance of kinship between the Mackenzies? Before attempting an answer to that question we first have to consider a number of factors. In the first place it was not always common practice for every person to take a surname until the seventeenth century or in some cases even later. It is not inconceivable therefore that many Mackenzies adopted, or were given, their surname because they happened to be a tenant of a Mackenzie landowner. This practice, curiously enough, also occurred with black slaves in the American colonies when they took the names of their masters in many instances. In the case of the Highland clans, however, the people had always taken a great interest in their genealogies to a much greater degree than other peoples and they could frequently recite the family pedigrees going back several generations. In such circumstances then, their choice of surname would undoubtedly have been influenced by this genealogical knowledge of their forebears. In some cases surnames have been changed to that of the laird for a price. For instance, some poor members of the Bissett family changed their name to Fraser and to distinguish them from true Frasers they were sometimes known as "the Frasers of the boll of meal", being the price paid for them to change their name. However, it should be stated that the ancient Bissett family were close kin to the Frasers and the descendants of the first Fraser Lord of Lovat still quarter the Bissett arms.

In a book written about the history of the clan Ross in recent years the author complains that his clan was once, in fact, much more powerful in years past, as powerful indeed as the the Mackenzies. Following the growth of the Mackenzie clan and the acquisition of new lands in the region of the Rosses, many members of that clan became tenants of the Mackenzie chief or his cadets. They therefore changed their names and their allegiance to Mackenzie. Presumably the writer of this history has some evidence for this statement, but even so it is evident that surnames could be changed. Consider for instance the following extract from *The Account of the Parish of Tain* included in the *Statistical Account of Scotland*, 1845.

Most of the landowners and in truth most of the people bore the name of Ross or to speak more correctly almost everybody possessed two surnames, by one of which (in general, a patronymic beginning with Mac) he was universally known in conversation, though he deemed himself called upon to change it to Ross, or sometimes to Munro whenever he acquired any station in society or became able to write his name. (Easter Ross, it may be observed, was of old divided by these two clans . . . )

Thus it appears that one's possession of a surname does not necessarily mean that it was acquired by way of the expected father to son process. However, as a member of the Mackenzie clan his ancestors would have supported the chief and fought for him in his battles as one of his kinsmen and in most cases would have believed himself to have been directly related to the chief.

Nevertheless, the kinship issue can still be proven to some degree of satisfaction to Mackenzie genealogists who seek their roots. They often find through their searches of parish registers that they can not trace their ancestors much beyond 1750 because of inadequate records or lack of available time to do the research. Not all Mackenzies have the luxury of a family tree going back to the 13th century or so, such as the Earl of Cromartie, the present chief, or the many Mackenzie branches of the chief's family.

The key to proving kinship lies not in the possession of the name Mackenzie, even though that does indicate strong prima facie evidence of an historical clan relationship, but in something much simpler. It is provided in William F. Skene's volumes entitled *The Highlanders of Scotland* which were published in 1837. This accomplished historian goes to great lengths in his opening chapters to trace the origins of the Highlanders. In his summary to this learned treatise he states :

It has been shown, that from the earliest period down to the end of the 5th century, that part of Scotland which extends to the north of the Firths of Forth and Clyde, was at all times inhabited by a single nation termed by the Romans at first Caledonians and afterwards, Picts . . . We have proved that the northern Picts occupied the whole of the Highlands as late as the end of the 9th century; we have shown that they spoke the same language, and bore the same national name as the Highlanders did; and lastly, we have traced the Highlanders as in possession of the Highland districts, up to the very period in which we had previously found these districts inhabited by the northern Picts. These facts then supported as they are by evidence of no ordinary description, leads us to this simple result, that the Highlands of Scotland **have been inhabited by the same nation from the earliest period to the present day.**

This observation is of critical importance to the genealogist. Since there was no known immigration to the Highlands of Scotland of any consequence, anybody who is a Mackenzie and can trace his recent ancestors to the Highlands can reasonably be assured he (or she) is kin to not only other Mackenzies but probably of all Highlanders. Furthermore, that kinship is likely to be stronger with those clans who lived in or near Mackenzie territory such as the clans Matheson, MacLennan, MacRae, Fraser, Ross, Munro, Urquhart, etc.

Consider the following arithmetical calculation as a proof. Let us assume that a child is born when its parents are, on average, 28 years of age. Each child must, of course, have two parents, four grandparents, eight great grandparents, sixteen great great grandparents and so on doubling with each generation. By going back five generations (or 140 years) each child has thirty two ancestors. If, however, we go back thirty generations, i.e. to the year 1146 a.d. we each of us have the staggering total of 1,073,741,824 ancestors! How can we have had so many ancestors when such a number exceeds the population of the world for 1146!?! Furthermore it is unlikely that the population of the Highlands would have been as high as even 100,000 in 1146.

This means, of course, that each of our ancestors in that era must, at best, have been a common ancestor about 10,000 times on average (1 billion divided by 100,000). Therefore it is clear that if we take two random Highlanders they too are going to share common ancestors 10,000 times going back to 1146.

But let us go back not to 1146 for which we have few historical records and next to nothing on the clans. If we go back just 20 generations to the year 1426, the era of the early Mackenzies of Kintail, and if we take just two Highlanders at random currently living in the Highlands and of Highland parents, there is a 99.9972% chance that they share at least one pair of ancestors going back to the year 1426. Statistically these odds must be higher for two random Mackenzies being related since the Mackenzies come from the counties of Ross and Cromarty in Scotland which had a population of around 80,000 in 1870 and would probably have had a much tinier population in 1426.

Old Duncan Forbes of Culloden once wrote:

A Highland Clan is a set of men all bearing the same surname and believing themselves to be related the one to the other and to be descended from the same common stock. In each clan there are several subaltern tribes, who own their dependence on their own immediate chiefs but all agree in owing allegiance to the Supreme Chief of the Clan or Kindred and look upon it to be their duty to support him at all adventures.

This quote reinforces the relationship aspect of the Clan. Sir Iain Moncreiffe of that Ilk addresses the question of heredity in his interesting book, *The Highland Clans*, revised edition 1982:

The present writer doubts whether even one of the gallant clansmen who fought at Culloden could ever have been born to be there at all, had King Kenneth mac Alpin been strangled in his cradle. "Butcher" Cumberland might well have reflected that this would have been an excellent thing, were it not that His Royal Highness also descended many times over (through cousin-marriages within his own ancestry), from the same King Kenneth mac Alpin.

Descents link downwards in the social scale. Kings marry across oceans, nobles across the counties, but until modern times ordinary folk married near to home. So the likelihood, for example, of a particular Mackay clansman of today descending from a particular Clan Donnachaidh clansman of the fourteenth century is infinitely remote. But it is not at all unlikely that the same Mackay clansman should descend from King Robert Bruce. If he had any descent in the female line (with so much intermarriage in Strathnaver) from Niall 'of the Bass', Chief of Mackay in 1433, he would therefore also descend from Niall's mother Elisabeth of the Isles, daughter of Macdonald himself, and her mother was in turn a daughter of King Robert II, grandson of King Robert Bruce. Similarly, the likelihood of a particular Clan Donnachaidh (Robertson) clansman of today descending from a particular Mackay clansman of the fourteenth century is equally remote. But it is most improbable that the same Robertson clansman would not descend (through local intermarriage in Atholl) from the prolific Stewarts of Garth, whelps of the Wolf of Badenoch, himself a son of King Robert II, the grandson of King Robert Bruce. Indeed, it is most improbable that there is any Highland chief today who does not descend from King Robert Bruce, nor any other Highlander who does not descend from King Kenneth mac Alpin, who united the Picts and Scots.

Skene, in his volumes *The Highlanders of Scotland*, compares the Highland system of chieftanship with that of other feudal systems in Europe and also refers to the relationship aspect.

... Although most of the great nations which formed the original inhabitants of Europe

were divided into a number of tribes acknowledging the rule of an hereditary chief, and thus exhibiting an apparently similar constitution, yet it was community of origin which constituted the simple tie that united the Celtic tribes with its chief, while the tribes of the Goths and other European nations were associated together for the purposes of mutual protection or convenience alone; the Celtic chief was the hereditary lord of all who were descended of the same stock with himself, while the Gothic baron was the hereditary proprietor of a certain tract of land, and thence entitled to the service and obedience of all who dwelt upon that land.

Before we leave Skene it is of interest to refer to a passage, which he includes in his volumes, written in 1730 by an Officer of Engineers in a letter to his friend in London. Not only is the passage of unique value because of its historical context, written, as it was, by a visitor to the Highlands, but also because of the reference to the kinship issue, which the Englishman found particularly interesting:

The Highlanders are divided into tribes or clans, under chiefs or chieftans, and each clan again divided into branches of fifty or sixty men, who deduce their original from their particular chieftans, and rely upon them as their more immediate protectors and defenders. The ordinary Highlanders esteem it the most sublime degree of virtue to love their chief and pay him blind obedience, although it be in opposition to the government. Next to this love of their chief is that of the particular branch from whence they sprang; and in a third degree, to those of the whole clan or name, whom they will assist, right or wrong, against those of any other tribe with which they are at variance. They likewise owe good will to such clans as they esteem to be their particular well wishers. And, lastly, they have an adherence one to another as Highlanders in opposition to the people of the low country, whom they despise as inferior to them in courage, and believe they have a right to plunder them whenever it is in their power. This last arises from a tradition that the Lowlands in old times were the possessions of their ancestors.

The chief exercises an arbitrary authority over his vassals, determines all differences and disputes that happen among them, and levies taxes upon extraordinary occasions, such as the marriage of a daughter, building a house, or some pretence for his support or the honour of the name; and if any one should refuse to contribute to the best of his ability, he is sure of severe treatment, and if he persists in his obstinacy, he would be cast out of his tribe by general consent. This power of the chief is not supported by interest as they are landlords, but as lineally descended from the old patriarchs or fathers of the families, for they hold the same authority when they have lost their estates. On the other hand the chief, even against the laws, is to protect his followers, as they are sometimes called, be they never so criminal. He is their leader in clan quarrels, must free the necessitous from their arrears of rent, and maintain such who by accidents are fallen to total decay. Some of the chiefs have not only personal dislikes and enmity to each other, but there are also hereditary feuds between clan and clan which have been handed down from one generation to another for several ages. These quarrels descend to the meanest vassals, and thus sometimes an innocent person suffers for crimes committed by his tribe at a vast distance of time before his being began.

Not everyone believes in the close family connections of the Highland clans. Dame Ursula in Sir Walter Scott's novel, *The Fortunes of Nigel* probably speaks for a number of English people when she says:

I never knew a Scot of you but was descended, as ye call it, from some great house or

other; and a piteous descent it often is—and as for the distance you speak of, it is so great as to put you out of sight of each other.

In the same novel the rascal, Lord Dalgarno, also refers to the distant claims of kinship when talking about the hero of the story, the young Scottish Lord Glenvarloch:

Men think of you—talk of you—fix their eyes on you—ask each other, who is this young Scottish lord, who has stepped so far in a single day? They augur, in whispers to each other, how high and how far you may push your fortune—and all that you design to make of it, is, to return to Scotland, eat raw oatmeal cakes, baked upon a peat-fire, have your hand shaken by every loon of a blue-bonnet who chooses to dub you cousin, though your relationship comes from Noah; drink Scots twopenny ale, eat half-starved red-deer venison, when you can kill it, ride upon a galloway, and be called my right honourable and maist worthy lord.

However these are the views put forward by cynical English people, through the pen of Scott, though doubtless these views were, and are, prevalent by some. Perhaps Scott had read *Sketches of the Highlanders of Scotland* by Col. David Stewart published in 1822. Stewart also referred to the hand shaking aspect:

. . . It required much kindness and condescension on the part of the chief in order to maintain his influence with his clan, who all expected to be treated with the affability and courtesy due to gentlemen. And as the meanest among them pretended to be his relations by consanguinity (i.e. blood relationship), they insisted on the privilege of taking him by the hand wherever they met him. Concerning this last I once saw a number of very discontented countenances, when a certain Lord, one of the chiefs, endeavoured to evade this ceremony. It was in the presence of an English gentleman, of high station, from whom he would willingly have concealed the knowledge of such seeming familiarity with slaves of wretched appearance; and thinking it, I suppose, a kind of contradiction to what he had often boasted at other times, viz. his despotic power in his clan."

While on the subject of kinship it is appropriate to look at some interesting statistics produced from the censuses of Scotland over the years. For instance from the census of 1861 it can be shown that one quarter of the population of Scotland bore a name of one of the Highland clans.

The two most common names in Scotland at that time were Smith and MacDonald and these numbered 44,378 and 37,572 respectively. Mackenzie was the 11th most common name in Scotland with a total Scottish population of 23,272.

As for the population of Scotland as a whole, the first census of 1801 showed a population of 1,608,420. This exceeded 2,000,000 in 1921, 3,000,000 in 1861 and 4,000,000 for the first time in 1891.

Ross and Cromarty, where the Mackenzies come from, was under 80,000 around the 1840s. Most of the population spoke Gaelic and English. Some 12,000 spoke Gaelic only. From 1851 to 1881 the population of Ross and Cromarty declined from 82,707 to 78,547, a decrease of 4,160. This decline was partly due to the Highland clearances when sheep displaced the people.

There was also persistent emigration due to the famines and desperate poverty of the Highlands. Scots emigrated all over the world. A large number found their way to Canada.

Canada's early history is prominent with Scottish names, not least Mackenzie, which provided the first man to cross Canada by land, Sir Alexander Mackenzie, the second Prime Minister, Alexander Mackenzie and Toronto's first and revolutionary mayor, William Lyon Mackenzie. Sir William Mackenzie, 'the Railway King of Canada,' became one of Canada's most successful entrepreneurs. He founded companies which became Canadian National Railways, Toronto Transit Commission, Brazilian Traction Light and Power, (or Brascan, as it is known today) and Ontario Hydro.

In the region of Caribou Harbour near Pictou, Nova Scotia in 1861, no less than forty five farms were owned by separate McKenzie families.

In one famous instance almost the entire population of the Macdonells of Glengarry emigrated to Canada as a consequence of the Highland clearances to Glengarry, Ontario which was, of course, named after them. In the census for Glengarry, Ontario of 1852 there are shown to be no less than 3,228 persons named MacDonald or Macdonell, 545 MacMillans, 541 Macdougalls, 456 Macraes, 437 Macleods, 322 Macleonnans etc. There are also, incidentally, 99 Mackenzies included in this region which is interesting since the Mackenzies and Macdonalds/Macdonells of Glengarry had a long history of clan rivalry as will be shown later.

Finally a comment about the spelling of the name Mackenzie; numerous people have the belief that if the name is spelled McKenzie then it comes from Ireland. This is not the case. Spelling of names was frequently arbitrary 200 years ago. Reference can be made to Black's, *The Surnames of Scotland* to show an almost inexhaustible list of ways the name has been spelled by people over the centuries including M'Cenzie, Makkanehy, M'Kynich etc. I suspect that the common use of Mc as apposed to Mac was originally M'. The backwards shaped apostrophe used by Scots as an abbreviation looks much like a small letter c and probably became read as a c over time. The rationale for my belief is that if it was originally intended to be a letter c, why did it not sit low down instead of being raised above the other lower-case letters.

Another interesting fact about the name is that the Scots pronounced the z as a g and the common pronunciation of Mackenzie was "Mackengyie" or "Mackingyie". This pronunciation accounts for the name McKinney which is just another form of McKenzie. Sir George Mackenzie of Rosehaugh, who was the king's advocate during the period of persecution of the Scottish Covenanters in the seventeenth century was known as "Bluidy Mackingyie". The English way of pronouncing the z came into fashion later. The famous American consulting firm of McKinsey & Co. derives from the name Mackenzie.

The name, MacWhinney or MacWhinnie, is yet another variation of Mackenzie. The name was written as pronounced in Galloway. One of the many spellings of the name was Macquhenzie, which was nevertheless pronounced MacWhinney.

Another interesting point is that if a Highlander moved to England, he would frequently drop the Mac from his name as it identified him as one of those terrible barbarians from the north of Scotland. Hence the name Rae is derived from McRae. Presumably the Beatle, John Lennon had Highland ancestors named MacLennan. The British Labour party leader, Neil Kinnock claims Scottish ancestry and this is not surprising since his names originates from McKynich, another variation of the name Mackenzie!

What is the correct way of spelling the name? One theory is that if a Highland surname commencing with Mac is followed by a modern Christian name such as Donald then the first letter should be capitalized thus: MacDonald. If on the other hand the name is a translation of a

Gaelic name which has lost its origin then it is not capitalized, hence: Mackenzie. These rules are so frequently not followed that it is not very helpful. The Toronto telephone directory lists 800 MacKenzies as follows:

360 MacKenzies

300 McKenzies

140 Mackenzies

The variations of spelling should not detract from the fact that all of these people's ancestors came from Ross and Cromarty at some time in the past and any detailed genealogical search will frequently show variations in the spelling of the name between generations. Since the Chief and the major landed families spell their name *Mackenzie*, we may safely assume that is the "correct" version, and leave it at that.