

CHAPTER 2

THE RISE OF THE CLAN MACKENZIE

The Mackenzie clan rose to power in Ross and Cromarty in the 15th century and yet there are no written records of them before then. In fact the earliest contemporary references to Mackenzies are when Alexander Mackenzie of Kintail (Alexandro McKenye de Kintail) appears as a witness to a charter granted by John Earl of Ross and Lord of the Isles on 4th November 1471. There is a further reference to the name Mackenzie in the Exchequer Rolls for 31 August 1480. Their extraordinarily rapid growth and influence eventually made them the most numerous and powerful of the Ross-shire clans. Even as early as 1427 the chief of the clan was said to have had a following of 2,000 men. Curiously enough the Mathesons, close kin of the Mackenzies, were also capable of raising the same number of men. Skene refers to this in his *Highlanders of Scotland*.

This circumstance affords a most striking instance of the rise and fall of different families; for while the Mathison appear at that early period as the leader of 2,000 men, the Mackenzie had the same number only, and we now see the clan of Mackenzie extending their numberless branches over an extent of territory of which few families can exhibit a parallel, while the once powerful clan of the Mathisons has disappeared, and their name become nearly forgotten.

The Mackenzies, as with the Mathesons, held their lands under the medieval earls of Ross. In fact most modern genealogists claim that the Mackenzies descend from Gilleoin Og who in turn was a younger son of Gilleoin of the Aird, the ancestor of Gilleanrias, progenitor of the O'Beolans, the old earls of Ross. Hence the Mackenzies are of Celtic stock unlike some of their near neighbours, the Gordons, the Frasers and the Chisholms who claim Norman origins.

At one time it was believed that the Mackenzies also descended from a Norman family, Fitzgerald, in Ireland. Full details of this family are given in a book, *The Genealogie of The Mackenzies Preceeding ye Year 1661*. This book which was written in 1669 was anonymous. The author, who somewhat modestly refers to himself as a "Persone of Qualitie", was in fact either Mackenzie of Applecross, or as others believe, George Mackenzie, 1st Earl of Cromartie. The Fitzgerald origins are not generally accepted today by modern historians, but we shall examine that subject in the next chapter. Suffice it to say that it was based entirely upon a supposed charter of the lands of Kintail granted by King Alexander III to Colin Fitzgerald, who is supposed to be the same Colin of Kintail from whom the Mackenzies descend. Skene, the eminent 19th century historian, examined this charter or at least a copy of it and concluded "it bears the most palpable marks of having been a forgery of later date, and one by no means happy in its execution."

An ancient Gaelic manuscript, the MacVuirich Manuscript of 1450, otherwise known as the Clan Anrias Manuscript of 1467, gives accounts of the genealogy of the Highland clans. This document is of particular importance because it demonstrates a very early tradition that the clans have the same origins. If this manuscript is to be believed, then Gilleoin of the Aird is the progenitor not only of the first Mackenzie chiefs but also of the earls of Ross. This manuscript goes back further

in time than any other available genealogical records of the clans.

See the next page for the chart of the origins of the Clan Anrias (Ross) and the Clan Mackenzie.

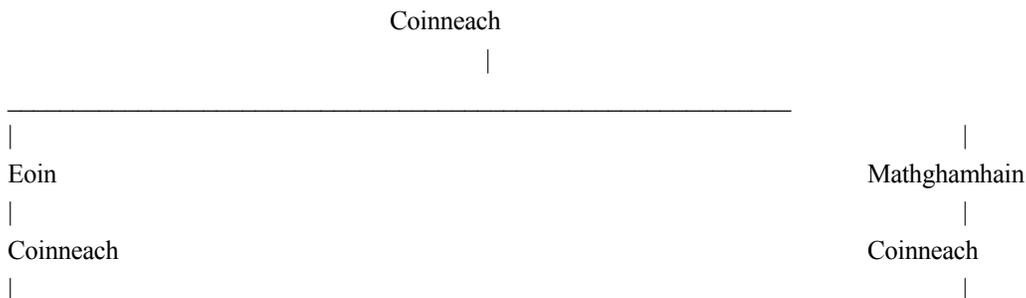
There are a number of missing generations, probably about twelve if the arithmetic is to add up. The Earl of Cromartie in his book, *A Highland History*, shows the same tree for Anrias, but the line after Gilleoin (or Colin) of the Aird for the Mackenzies has a number of differences and shows the gap of some missing generations. These genealogical tables of 1450 take us back to the year 660 or thereabouts and we are clearly relying on people's memories of reciting their family trees, handed down from generation to generation. Such records fall into the area of legend and tradition rather than historical fact. But we can never know for sure.

Duncan Warrand's book, *Some Mackenzie Pedigrees*, published posthumously in 1965, is emphatic about such early pedigrees. He believed that histories compiled for the most part in the "dangerous 17th century" were wholly unreliable, at all events prior to 1745. He goes on to say:

The absence of record evidence in these early times may not in itself be conclusive proof of a fabulous genealogy, but it is at least highly suspicious, the more so that the early charters, once cited in histories, not only do not now exist, but if they did, are almost certainly spurious. Even possession of Ellandonan [Eilean Donan], prior to the latter part of the 15th century, must be a matter of conjecture. Sheriff Macphail [of the Scottish History Society] was of opinion that Kenneth-a-bhlair [one of the earliest Mackenzie chiefs] was a native, not of Kintail, but of Easter Ross, and a Gaelic manuscript, cited in the article upon Seaforth in *The Scots Peerage*, traces the origin of the clan to the Aird, in the neighbourhood of Beaully, a district intimately associated with the Frasers of Lovat.

Nevertheless even these early traditions may have substantial elements of truth and it would be a pity to discount them entirely, not least because they add colour to what was an extraordinary rise in the power and growth of the Mackenzie clan in those early days.

There are so many disputes about the early Mackenzie pedigrees that one could write a book on that subject alone. Without contemporary written records specific to the Mackenzies, however, the examination of these conflicting traditions can become a somewhat unsatisfactory exercise. But it is worthwhile to mention the unchallenged tradition of the association between the Mathesons and the Mackenzies. The MS of 1467 also shows this relationship:



Murchadh

Murchadh

|

Donnchadh

|

Murchadh

|

Donnchadh

|

Murchadh

(Mackenzies)

(Mathesons)

The Matheson pedigree does hold up against contemporary written records and Coinneach mac Mathghamhna appears on record for his exploits against the Norsemen of Skye in the summer of 1262 in the saga of King Haco. The Mackenzie side, however, is very short of generations compared to the Matheson line which finishes up around 1400. William Matheson writing in 1949 on *The Traditions of the Mackenzies* (Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness, Volume 39/40 - 1942/50) examines this close relationship between the Mackenzies and Mathesons and refers to this generation difference and concludes that the scribes who wrote the MS1467 made a mistake in placing the Mackenzie side of the genealogy and that the last name Murchadh was in the wrong spot. If this was so then the genealogy should have read:

Coinneach

|



|

Mathghamhain

|

Coinneach

|

Murchadh

|

Donnchadh

|

Murchadh

|

Donnchadh

|

Murchadh

|

his sons (1415)

|

(Mathesons)

Coinneach

|

Eoin

|

Coinneach

|

Murchadh

|

|

|

(Mackenzies)

Without going into William Matheson's study further at this stage, it does appear that this interpretation fits in very well with the origins of the Mackenzies on page shown in the genealogy earlier in this paragraph. The four Mackenzies listed above: Coinneach, Eoin, Coinneach and Murchadh fit with Kenneth (died 1304), Ian Murdoch (died 1338), Kenneth of the Nose (executed 1350), and Murdoch of the Cave (died 1375).

Let us then commence our history of the clan chiefs. We start with Colin of Kintail, otherwise Colin Fitzgerald. The man remains the most controversial to historians, most of whom claim he was a pure invention of the first earl of Cromartie in order to add political substance to his pedigree. Nevertheless, we shall start with Colin and devote the second part of this chapter entirely to the study made on whether Colin existed or not.

Colin of Kintail. Chief to 1274.

Around the year 1266, King Alexander III is supposed to have granted by royal charter to Colin of Kintail lands in Kintail and the castle of Eilean Donan. This charter does not now exist and is believed by some authorities to have been fabulous. Many clans started producing genealogies proving they were descended from powerful and foreign families. As mentioned earlier, part of the "proof" in the case of the Mackenzies relied upon the charter of the lands of Kintail to Colin Fitzgerald which was interpreted as being the same Colin of Kintail. If, in fact, the historians are correct and the charter never existed, then it then becomes doubtful that Colin held the lands of Kintail. We know that the Mackenzies did eventually become masters of Kintail but probably not as early as 1266. This Colin was one of the earliest of the Mackenzie chiefs and had supposedly been awarded these lands as a recognition of his distinguished service at the Battle of Largs. This battle was fought in 1263 between the Scots and the Norwegians under King Haakon. The valuable service provided by Colin to Alexander at the Battle of Largs resulted in the succeeding Mackenzie chiefs claiming the right to form part of the king's bodyguard. Colin had previously prevented injury to Alexander II during a hunt in the forest of Mar by intercepting a charging stag with full antlers. As a result he was granted a stag's head as his coat of arms. This stag's head, or *caber feidh*, has formed part of the coat of arms of the earls of Seaforth and the earls of Cromartie.

Colin married the daughter of the chief of the Mathesons in 1263 and was eventually killed by a member of the Matheson clan in 1274.

Kenneth. Chief 1274—1304.

Colin's eldest son was another Colin, who was killed at Glais Challean. The next son, Kenneth, married the daughter of Alexander, Lord of Lorn who was a direct descendant of Donald Bane, King of Scotland 1093-97. Donald Bane's brother was King Malcolm III who became King of Scotland after killing Macbeth (immortalised by Shakespeare) in a battle. Malcolm subsequently slaughtered Macbeth's entire family. This is the Kenneth from whom the name Mackenzie is derived (son of Kenneth). He successfully challenged the power and authority of

William, 1st Earl of Ross.

Ian Murdoch. Chief 1304—1338.

Kenneth died in 1304 and was succeeded by Ian Murdoch, who married Margaret, a daughter of David of Strathbogie, Earl of Atholl. The earl was a direct descendant of England's King John through the king's natural son, Richard Fitzroy de Chilham. Ian is the first to bear the name Mackenzie. Tradition has it that Ian Murdoch sheltered King Robert the Bruce in Eilean Donan castle in 1306 while he was on the run from the then powerful Comyn family and the English. Ian further assisted his king by fighting with his clan at the Battle of Inverury in 1308, when Bruce defeated Mowbray and the Comyn.

There is no doubt that Robert the Bruce relied very much on the support of the Highland clans in his struggle to wrest Scotland from the grasp of the English. All of Scotland remembers the date of 24th June 1314 as the day when the decisive blow was struck and the independence of Scotland was finally established. Robert the Bruce led thirty thousand warriors against the power of the English on the field of Bannockburn and smashed a much larger army under King Edward II who was driven from the field.

The Scottish army which secured the liberty of Scotland at Bannockburn included ten thousand Western Highlanders and men of the Isles under Angus Og of the Isles. Ian Mackenzie of Kintail led five hundred of his clan and he and the other chieftains "made an incredible slaughter of their enemies, slaying heaps of them around wherever they went, and running upon them with their broadswords and daggers like wild bears without any regard for their own lives. (Major.)

General Stewart of Garth in his *Sketches of the Highlanders*, states that there were eighteen Highland chiefs who fought at the Battle of Bannockburn. They were Mackay, Mackintosh, Macpherson, Cameron, Sinclair, Campbell, Menzies, Maclean, Sutherland, Robertson, Grant, Fraser, Macfarlane, Ross, Macgregor, Munro, Mackenzie and Macquarrie. Those chiefs who did not support Robert the Bruce were to suffer accordingly and they included the Comyns (or Cummings), Macdougall of Lorn and Macnab.