

MURDER AMONG THE CLAN CHATTAN: A CENTURY OF ASSASSINATIONS AND REVENGE KILLINGS

by Alan G. Macpherson

The sixteenth century was a dangerous time for leading men among the Clanchattan. On the 22nd May 1515 William Mackintosh of Dunachtan, the 13th Laird of Mackintosh, was murdered “as he lay in his bed, sleeping securely without retainers or servants” in his house in Inverness. Two years earlier he had turned over the command of the Clanchattan to his older and elderly cousin, Ferquhard Mackintosh, the 12th Laird, when the latter was released from eighteen years of imprisonment in the royal castles at Edinburgh and Dunbar. He had succeeded Ferquhard the year before when the latter died in Inverness on the 8th October 1514, probably as a result of his long incarceration. The assassin was William's cousin John Roy Mackintosh, patronymically known as *Iain ruadh macLauchlan vic Allan*. The motive was John Roy's “grieving that William should possess the whole heritage”, William's refusal to give him possession of Meikle Geddes, John's threat to burn the place down, and William's order that John be ostracized by the clan.

Retribution for William's murder came in dramatic form. Lauchlan *óg* Mackintosh, William's brother and heir, ordered their cousin Dougal McGillicallum Mackintosh, son of their uncle Malcolm, and Dougal's son Ferquhard with ten men to pursue John *ruadh* and his band of twelve supporters. The pursuit was a protracted one, both in distance and in time: far north into Caithness, west into Strathnaver, south through Assynt to Lochalsh, thence to Abertarf in the Great Glen, through Strathspey to Strathdee, and finally south to Glenesk where they were brought to bay, captured and summarily beheaded. Their heads were brought to Lauchlan, the 14th Laird, who ordered them placed on spikes to signal that justice had been done, the price of murder exacted. The year was 1516.

On the 25th March 1524, while hunting alone at Breravock near Loindvulgie (Lynwilg) in Badenoch, Lauchlan *óg* Mackintosh was ambushed and stabbed to death by his cousin, John Malcolmson Mackintosh of Connage, the illegitimate son of an illegitimate father who was an older half-brother of William and Lauchlan *óg* - all of them sons of Lauchlan 'Badenoch' of Gallovie. His accomplices were Milmor *mac Dai*, a disgruntled foster-brother of Lauchlan *óg*; Milmor's brother William *mac Dai*, and three others. The motive, again, was “ambition to bear rule” over the Clanchattan, egged on by Milmor. Retribution for the crime was exacted by the murdered man's nephew, Donald *glas* Mackintosh of Strone in Badenoch, an illegitimate son of Laird William, and their cousin Donald *mac William mór vic Allan*, another member of the *Sliochd* Alain Mackintoshes. They were assisted by William and Lauchlan's brother-in-law, the Laird of MacGregor who was married to their sister Morag. The pursuit, this time, ended at Anakelt [Anaheilt near Strontian on Loch Sunart?] where John Malcolmson and his accomplices were captured; Milmor and William *mac Dai* were executed and their hands were exhibited at the place of the murder, while John was held in chains on the island of Rothiemurchus, presumably in Lochan Eilean, till the 1st May 1531. On that day, in the presence of James Stuart, Earl of Moray, Regent of Scotland and uterine brother of the murdered Lauchlan's wife, Jean Gordon, John Malcolmson was beheaded for his crime.

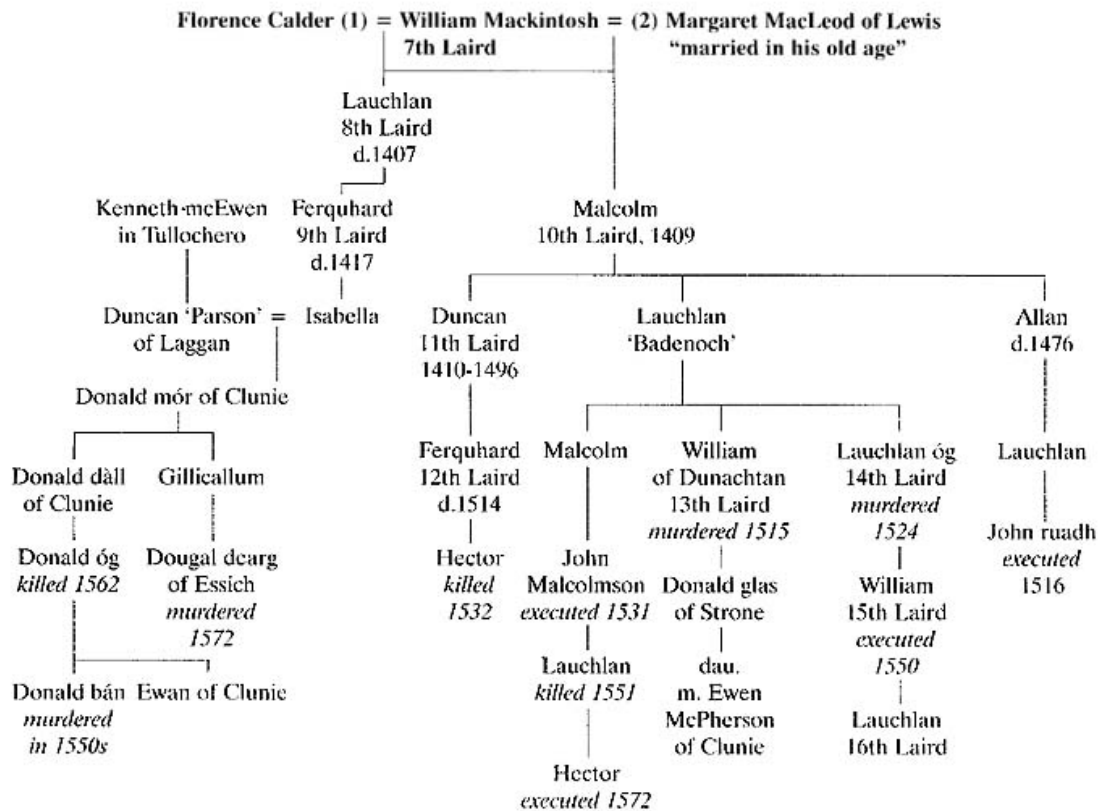
Lauchlan *og's* son and heir, William, the 15th Laird of Mackintosh, was three years old when his father was murdered. His uncle, James Stuart, placed him with his mother's kinsman, Ogilvie, the Earl of Finlathour, and later with Gilbert, the Earl of Cassilis, till he reached his majority. In the meantime Hector Mackintosh, the illegitimate son of Ferquhard, the 12th Laird, “was by common consent elected chief” of the Clanchattan, acting as tutor for his young second cousin William. He

held the role for five years “with singular prudence”, during which he formed alliances with several of the neighbouring barons and chiefs and with Colin Campbell, Earl of Argyle. Resentment at the actions of the Earl of Moray, and a suspected ambition to usurp young William's inheritance, however, led to hostilities with Moray and to his taking protection with King James V; Hector was eventually murdered at St Andrews by Father James Spens on the 25th January 1532. It should be noted that illegitimacy was often the result of handfast marriages, and more particularly by the practice of concubinage prior to marriage, which frequently led to rivalry between the older illegitimate son and the younger heir from a legitimate marriage sanctioned by the Church [Alan G. Macpherson, *An Old Highland Parish Register, II, Scottish Studies Vol. 12 (1968)*, pp. 102-108].

William, the 15th Laird, “began to administer his own affairs and to exercise the rule of the Clanchattans” in 1540, and became much involved with the affairs of George Gordon, Earl of Huntly. In 1548 he “received into favour” Lauchlan Mackintosh, the eldest son of John Malcolmson, and granted him possession of Connage under bond of fidelity and good behaviour, thus setting the stage for the next event in the ongoing feud among the closely-related lineages of the Mackintoshes. In 1549 William broke off his engagement in Huntly's affairs and incurred his enmity, which was fuelled by insidious calumnies insinuated by Lauchlan of Connage. On the 2nd August 1550 he was accused of treachery to Huntly before a court held in the Tolbooth of Aberdeen. The witnesses were Lauchlan of Connage and Donald McWilliam vic Dai dui, erstwhile servant of the late John Malcolmson. With a rigged jury, the judgement went against William and the sentence was immediate beheading on the Woman Hill of Aberdeen. This was prevented by the Provost and good citizens of Aberdeen, and William was taken back to Huntly Castle in Strathbogie a prisoner. On the 23rd August, while Huntly was on his way to France with Mary de Guise, the Queen Regent, Elizabeth Keith, the Countess of Huntly, had William Mackintosh beheaded “in the 29th year of his age”.

Lauchlan Mackintosh of Connage, the instigator of this quasijudicial execution, had received two days earlier the lifetime possession of Connage from Huntly - now also Earl of Moray following the death of James Stuart, William Mackintosh's maternal uncle. Connage had also been appointed chamberlain and collector of rents on parts of the Mackintosh estates, and on the 31st August was made sheriff-depute of Inverness and took up residence in the Castle of Petty. A month later, on the 30th September 1551, “the Clanchattan . . . having by stratagem gained entrance to the Castle of Petty, seized Lauchlan, son of John Malcolmson, and slew him as confessedly the betrayer of their chief”.

So far, this account of the killings of three successive Lairds of Mackintosh has been taken from Lachlan Mackintosh of Kinrara's Latin treatise or epitome *Of the Origin and Increase of the Mackintoshes*, translated by the Reverend Walter Macleod for the Scottish History Society (1900); its ultimate sources, according to Kinrara, were Father Andrew Weaver's genealogy of the Mackintoshes and George Munro of Davochgarty and Connage's history of the 12th, 13th and 14th Lairds, with occasional corroborations from John Leslie, Bishop of Ross's *Historie of Scotland*, written in Latin and translated into Scots in 1596 by Father James Dalrymple of the Scottish Cloister of Regensburg, duly referenced by Kinrara. How much Kinrara edited, interpreted and embellished these earlier accounts is unknown, but it should be noted that his version of events is inevitably partisan; we have no source giving the other side of the story. Nor is Kinrara's account complete: it fails to identify who was responsible for the retributive killing of Lauchlan of Connage.



The missing part of the story, and the next murderous episode among the Clanchattan, are recounted in a hitherto unpublished passage in the introductory notes that preface Sir Aeneas Macpherson of Invereshie's manuscript *The Genealogies of the McPhersons since the Three Bretherine* from whom the family is called *Sliochd an triùir Bhrà:threan*; it refers to Donald bán Macpherson, Younger of Clunie, and his brother Ewan:

"Donald *oig* of Clunie had ane son elder than Evan [Ewan] called Donald, who, with Evan and ane uncle's son of theirs went to a smith's house in the raith of Kinguissie called . . . (who is reported to have been a foster brother of Connadge's whom Duncan McPherson killed at the Castle of Dalziell & who was married to a foster sister of theirs) to dress & clear up arrowheads, & being benighted there the smith's wife (their foster sister) would by no means allow them to go away that night, so they stayed & were exceedingly welcomed by the poor woman & seemingly so by her husband, but it was but seemingly, for he (in revenge of Connadge's death) designed their ruin & to that purpose put a great furme [form] under their heads in their bed where they three lay together, & as they were fast asleep entered the room with a twohanded sword at one blow struck off[f] Donald & his uncle's son's heads; but Providence did rule it so that Evan, being the youngest of the three, fell[l] down to the foot of the bed which providentially saved his life and when the assasine gave the blow Evan awakened by the leaping & struggle of his bed fellows' headless bodies at which he suddenly arose & taking in his hand a danish ax was in the house, struck therewith the fellow as he was going out of the house in the heel; but the night being dark, he was not taken till the morrow; he was followed by his track of blood & apprehended in a barn in the parioch of Alvie; he was taken back immediately & without doom or sentence burnt to death. And these two hopeful young men were the first of their family buried in Kinguissie, their predecessors formerly burying in Laggan Kirk [Lagganchynich at Kinlochlaggan]."

Some explanations are in order. Donald, Younger of Clunie, appears later in Sir Aeneas Macpherson's manuscript genealogy, and in Murdoch MacKenzie of Ardross's genealogy of the Clan Chattan with his identifying descriptive attached - Donald bán. Duncan McPherson, the man

responsible for the revenge killing of Lauchlan Mackintosh of Connage, is not identified, but he may have been Donald bán's uncle, a younger brother of Donald and Ewan's father, Donald óg Macpherson of Clunie, chief of the clan. As all known agnatic nephews of Donald óg lived to father families, the unnamed nephew who died with Donald ban may have been the son of Duncan McPherson, who appears in Sir Aeneas Macpherson's manuscript without family; he may therefore have been the prime target of the crime. Dalziell Castle is identical with Kinrara's Castle of Petty. The perpetrator of the crime was identified by Murdoch MacKenzie of Ardross, where he states that "Donald Bain and his brother [sic] were killed in Kingussie-begg by a vassal called MacKindoè" a patronymic which may mean Maclain *dhuibh*. The clan affiliation of the smith at the Rath of Kingussie remains unknown, as does that of his wife. Fosterage was a tradition in Highland society that had the reputation of producing strong bonding, such as that evinced by both the smith and his wife with disastrous consequences.

The murders by decapitation at the Rath of Kingussie, and the summary execution by burning which followed, must have occurred between the killing of Lauchlan Mackintosh by Duncan McPherson on the 30th September 1551 and the death of Donald óg McPherson of Clunie at the Battle of Corrichie, in Aberdeenshire on the 28th October 1562, and probably closer to the earlier date. Ironically, the Macpherson chief died under the banner of George Gordon, Earl of Huntly, in rebellion against the government of Mary Queen of Scots, and who also died in the battle - the same earl who was responsible for the execution of William Mackintosh, the 15th Laird, and so indirectly for the murder of Donald óg's son and nephew. He was succeeded as chief of his clan by his surviving son Ewan, married to a daughter of Donald *glas* Mackintosh of Strone, an ancestor of all subsequent chiefs of the Clan Macpherson.

The final act in this sequence of murders and executions came on the 7th September 1572 when Hector Mackintosh, son of Lauchlan of Connage and grandson of John Malcolmson, murdered Dougal Macpherson of Essich in a surprise attack near Dingwall to revenge the killing of his father at the hands of Duncan McPherson in the Castle of Petty twenty-one years earlier. Dougal of Essich was not only a cousin of Donald óg of Clunie and his brother Duncan, but was also married to Marjory Mackintosh, a daughter of Lauchlan 'Badenoch' [Invereshie] or of Lauchlan of Dunachtan, the 14th Laird [Kinrara], and a man prominent in the affairs of successive Mackintosh chiefs. According to Kinrara, "the same Hector was by the command of the laird of Mackintosh [Lauchlan, 16th Laird] taken and beheaded the same year in the town of Dunisostray". In the Mackintosh Muniments, however, No.103 is a copy of King James VI's commission, with the consent of James, Earl of Morton, Regent, "to hold courts of justice and try Hector M'Intoscheocht, who has been apprehended for the manslaughter of Dougald MPhersoun", dated Edinburgh, 12th December 1572. His execution by decapitation appears to have brought this protracted family feud to an end.