

FRAOCH EILEAN AND DUBH LOCH

By Ken McNaughton

The Macnachten Clan, one of the most ancient in the Scottish Highlands, is thought to be descended from Pictish kings called Nechtan and their followers (hence Mac-Nechtán). The Picts were a Celtic-speaking race that ruled large portions of the northeastern Scottish Highlands from 448-847 AD. They did not leave extensive records but did leave a list of their kings and they erected standing stones, some of which survive today. One such is on the grounds of Inveraray Castle and is called by some the MacVicar stone (Fig. 1). Kenneth mac Alpin arrived from Ireland with his Scoti in 847, settled in Argyll, married a Pictish princess, and is thought to be the first king of what we now call Scotland.

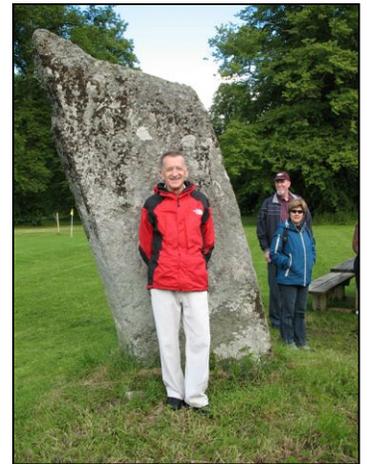


Figure 1. The author by the standing stone at Inveraray Castle



The history of the Scottish monarchy is filled with conflict with their southern neighbors, the English, and with clashes between the older established catholic faith and the protestant religion that followed the Reformation. James Stuart became James VI of Scotland (1567-1625) and also James I of England and Ireland from 1603. This was the peak of Scottish power, when James ruled England, Scotland and Ireland. People who supported James and the Stuarts (or earlier Stewarts) were known as Jacobites, from the Latin *Jacobus*, meaning James. In 1707, the Scottish throne was replaced with that of the Kingdom of Great Britain.

Figure 2. Crannog in Loch Awe

Many of those who wanted to restore the throne of Scotland put their faith in Bonnie Prince Charlie (the “Young Pretender” to his opponents) who had a colorful and romantic career but suffered a tragic defeat by the British Government army at Culloden in 1746. His escape from the Scottish mainland is immortalized in the Skye Boat Song—“Carry the lad that’s born to be king, over the sea to Skye” (<http://www.contemplator.com/scotland/skyboat.html>).



Figure 3. Inishail, Isle of the Dead, Loch Awe

The Clan MacNaghten fought in the Jacobite army supporting Charles and the Stuarts in this climactic battle; the Campbells supported the British government. Jacobites who were not killed in the battle were executed, imprisoned, transported to the colonies and banished. The clan system was destroyed, the clans were disarmed, and the kilt and the tartans were banned. Those who supported the British army were rewarded with titles and given confiscated lands.

Figure 4. Inveraray Castle



The Clan system flourished in the Scottish Highlands between the 12th and 18th centuries. It was based on strong leaders who provided protection for their followers in exchange for fierce loyalty. All around the world Scots keep clan traditions by wearing the kilt and, for formal occasions, a Bonnie Prince Charlie outfit.

Ironically, after the kingdoms of England and Scotland were united in 1707 and tensions were eased, came the Scottish Enlightenment (1730-1800), which produced a disproportionate number of intellectuals and new ideas. Key figures were James Boswell, author of “Life of Johnson”; Robert Burns, poet; David Hume, philosopher; Henry Raeburn, portrait painter; Sir Walter Scott, novelist and poet; Adam Smith, author of “The Wealth of Nations”; and James Watt, inventor.

At their peak, the Macnachtan clan owned much of the land between Loch Fyne and Loch Awe in Argyll. This area is about 35 miles northwest of modern-day Glasgow and is sheltered from the Atlantic Ocean by some of the western islands, including Mull. A loch can be either a lake, or an inlet from the sea such as a firth, fiord, estuary or bay. The western highlands get about 120 inches of rain a year, which accounts for the many waterways and lush green pastures. Loch Fyne is the closer to Glasgow, and at 40 miles is the longest sea loch in Scotland. It runs predominantly from the northeast to the southwest, draining eventually into the Firth of Clyde. Loch Awe runs roughly parallel, shifted northwest about six miles, and at 22 miles is the longest fresh water loch in Scotland, with an average width just over half a mile. Between these two lochs the Macnachtans ruled and maintained their castles at strategic locations.

FRAOCH EILEAN



On 12th February 1267, King Alexander III of Scotland granted a charter to Gillechrist MacNachdan and his heirs for the keeping of his castle and island of Frachelan so that they should cause it to be built and repaired at the King's expense and keep it safely for the king's necessity. Fraoch Eilean, the "Heathery Isle," is one of four small islands at the northern end of Loch Awe, the first three of which are (north to south) Innischonain, Fraoch Eilean, and Inishail.

Figure 6. Path to the castle on Fraoch Eilean

North of these there is also a crannog, or artificial island (Fig. 2). Crannogs were built by ferrying materials from the shore in boats, presumably to create fortifications or residences at key points, and have been dated from as early as 3000 BC, through the Iron Age to the early medieval period. Inishail is an "isle of the dead" that was used as a burial ground [Fig 3].

The last five Dukes of Argyll are all buried there. The current Duke of Argyll, Torquhil Ian Campbell, is the Chief of the Campbell Clan and Scotland's most senior peer. In 2002, he married Eleanor Cadbury. They both work in London and spend their personal time in upstairs apartments at Inveraray Castle (Fig. 4). Argyll has traditionally been a stronghold of the Campbells and the history of the Macnachtan Clan is filled with conflicts and alliances with their more powerful neighbors.

Hugo Millar's description of Fraoch Eilean [Ref. 1] still holds true today: "Foundations of stone walling appear here and there about the island but the main building still bulks largely on the landscape. It consists of a substantial stone hall, now very ruinous, and measuring some eighty feet by thirty and having at its east end a tower-house [Fig. 5] in what appears to be sixteenth century style, erected on the older hall masonry."

Figure 7. Niche inside castle



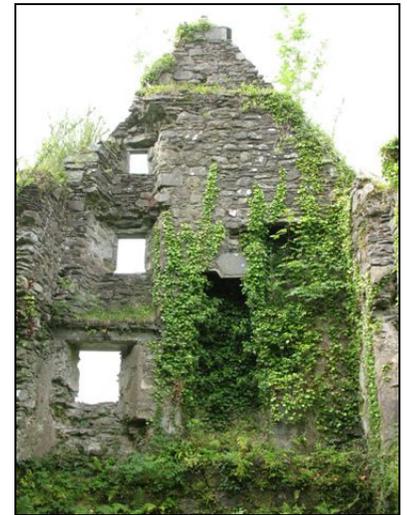
"Free-standing halls of these dimensions are usually of early date, so that it is a fair assumption that this one may well represent the castle of 1267, and indeed may be earlier still, if one is warranted in reading such likelihood into this charter. The word 'built' need not necessarily mean erected for the first time, but more probably 'added to' or 'improved.' Thanks to time itself and [Robert] Bruce's policy of castle destruction during the Wars of Independence, castles of the thirteenth century are few and far between, and those dateable by charter to that period fewer still."



Figure 8. Marya Dull and Jim Washington bound for Fraoch Eilean

"The thirteenth century has been described as the Golden Age of Scottish architecture, as after the war, the greater landowners, and even the monarchy itself, could no longer afford to build castles on the grand scale ... and the castle degenerated into a simple tower, which, as time progressed, grew more lavish and less simple, but which never quite achieved the earlier magnificence of its predecessors."

Figure 5. Tower House at Fraoch Eilean



Angus Macnaghten [Ref. 2] adds a description of Fraoch Eilean by Mr. and Mrs. William Douglas, who visited around 1913: “The castle on the north end of the island is indistinctly seen through the covering screen of ivy and intervening foliage. A little winding pathway [Fig. 6] leads up a steep slope to its entrance. The tottering walls are still covered with many years’ growth of ivy; the floors are thickly matted with roots of old trees, ivy and huzula grass; and healthy old ash trees flourish in the interior and rise high above its walls.”



Figure 9. Brander Pass from Fraoch Eilean

“The ground plan extends to some 63 by 29 feet inside measurement, and the walls still reach considerable elevation; indeed at the south-east corner they seem almost to stand at their original height. They are not all of equal thickness, some being only three, and others as much as six-and-a-half feet deep.”

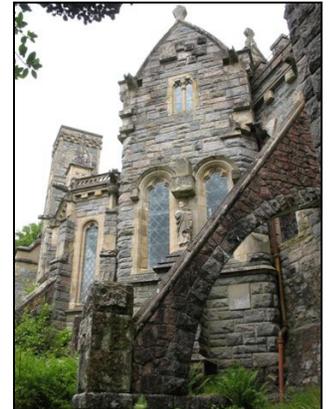


Figure 10. Clan Macnaghtan Association members in the castle of Fraoch Eilean

“The interior is divided by a wall extending across the building somewhat nearer its eastern end. In the smaller enclosure there are still visible the remains of chimneys, curious niches [Fig. 7] and windows, but all is covered with ivy and ferns . . . on the south side of the castle are the foundations of a massive wall extending right across its front, but for what purpose it was built we do not know.”

Macnaghten adds “In common with all the Highland clans the Macnaghtans had their battle cry. What could be more natural than the cry ‘Fraoch Eilean,’ commemorating the royal favor of the thirteenth century?”

Figure 11. St. Conan's Kirk on the shores of Loch Awe



On Saturday 30 June 2007 members of the Clan Macnaghtan Association Worldwide took a bus to Loch Awe. We stopped at the charming Loch Awe Hotel built in 1871, climbed down to the Loch Awe railway station and boarded a little steam boat that was built in 1927, with an engine not much younger. On board, everyone was very excited and snapped pictures, asked questions, walked around, and tried to relax [Fig. 8]. The island of Fraoch Eilean is strategically placed with a view west up the Brander Pass [Fig. 9] and north up Loch Awe. We had no guarantee of landing and the skipper began to make pessimistic noises, but some of the passengers would have killed to get ashore, so we made it by sheer will. We filed up the path and entered the hallowed halls of our ancestors, at least the ruined remains thereof (Fig. 10). It was an exhilarating experience. We explored the nooks and crannies, took photos, and even circumnavigated the perilous north wall. After about half an hour, the nervous skipper blew his horn, ostensibly concerned about being able to get the boat off its rough mooring.



We returned to the shore of Loch Awe and explored the lovely St. Conan’s Kirk [Fig. 11], where a prominent seat has been dedicated to Macnaughten of Fraoch Eilan [Fig. 12]. We also did a side tour to an innovative hydroelectric project that in off-peak hours pumps water from Loch Awe into a man-made loch up Cruachan Mountain to power generators during peak demand.

Figure 12. Macnaughten seat in St. Conan's Kirk

In 1292, just 25 years after the King of Scotland granted Fraoch Eilean to the Macnaghtans, King Edward I of England (who turns out to be my 22nd great grandfather [Refs. 3, 4]) claimed superiority over Scotland and set up John Balliol as a puppet Scottish king. William Wallace led a band of Scottish rebels and on 11 September 1297 defeated a larger English army at Stirling Bridge, just below Stirling Castle, home of the Stuart monarchy. Donald Macnaughtan, probably Gillechrist’s grandson, fought against Robert Bruce, supporting his rival, Balliol and, being on the losing side, lost some of his lands.

But in 1306, at the Battle of Dalree, near the Brander Pass, Donald was so struck by Bruce’s extraordinary courage that he subsequently joined him and remained faithful to the end of his days. Bruce was crowned King of the Scots in 1310 and defeated a large English army at Bannockburn, just south of Stirling Castle, in 1314.

Figure 13. The River Shira flows from Dubh Loch into Loch Fyne

The Macnachtan fortunes waned in favor the Campbells, who built the castle of Kilchurn further north up Loch Awe in 1440, which suggests that Fraoch Eilean must have fallen into a minor role by this time. However, Macnaghten [2] claims that the castle appears to have been habitable as late as 1745. There are records of Macnachtans in various other locations. Macnaghten says the main branch flourished over the upper part of Loch Awe, Glen Shira, Glen Aray and Loch Fyne. A glen is a valley, typically long, deep and often glacially U-shaped; or one with a watercourse running through it. Glen Shira houses a system of waterways that feed into the northern tip of Loch Fyne—(north to south) Loch Shira, the River Shira, and Dubh Loch—which meets Loch Fyne just north of Inveraray.



DUBH LOCH



There was a Macnachtan castle on the south end of Dubh Loch at the foot of Glen Shira that is supposed to have been built in the 1300s and which was abandoned in the 1500s. Millar [1] describes it thus: “The location of the castle lies east of the river’s exit from the loch (Fig. 13), and is on the point of a low, triangular-shaped green promontory.”

Figure 14. Solitary tree grows on the south side of the castle site at Dubh Loch

“The site, for it is no more than that today, consists of a grass-covered mound and what may be associated walling, the whole being oval in form and measuring some seventy feet by fifty, with its long axis oriented roughly NW and SE. The mound itself is no more than about six to seven feet high, and has a solitary tree growing on its south side (Fig. 14). The site is heavily overgrown with turf, and has the appearance of having been in

that condition for a very long time. Odd stones, singly and in groups, outcrop here and there above the turf, or [are] embedded in it (Fig. 15), and can be felt everywhere underneath with a probe. No built faces of masonry are visible, and such stones as do appear bear no traces of mortar. The mound lies more to the SE side of the complex, and one has the impression that the whole may consist of a main building and courtyard; the entire mound, in fact, could be nothing more than collapsed stonework. Under the surrounding turf of the remainder of the promontory, stone can also be felt with a probe, and there is the possibility of a causeway, or paved area here, but the site may have been at least partially surrounded with water when the buildings were in occupation.” This must have been a minor castle.

Figure 15. Odd stones outcrop here and there above the turf.

The chief seat of the Macnachtan clan in the 17th century was Dunderave Castle on Loch Fyne, which is described in Part Two: “Dunderave and the New Chiefs” [5].



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