

## **‘Macdonald had the victory but the governor had the printer’:**

### **Harlaw and the lordship of the Isles<sup>1</sup>**

Iain G. MacDonald

In beginning this article it seems necessary to reaffirm the truths which William Mackay made in his landmark speech at the last centennial of Harlaw in 1911. Back then, MacKay was challenging the prevailing discourse which presented the clash between the Celtic ‘barbarity’ of the ‘Highlands’ and the Saxon ‘civility’ of the ‘Lowlands’. By sacrificing their lives to halt Donald of the Isles’ Attila-like march into Aberdeenshire, the noble knights of the North-East not only prevented the sack of their burgh, but actually preserved Scottish civilisation from savage yet ‘unknown’ Highland ‘terrors’ which threatened to envelop the nation in darkness. Indeed, for some writers Harlaw was even more important event in Scotland’s destiny than Bannockburn.<sup>2</sup> MacKay was thus swimming decidedly upstream against the popular ethnological and racist tide of historical thinking when he delivered his message.<sup>3</sup> Scholars today enjoy no such problem, and recent advances in historical research into Harlaw are rendering such attitudes obsolete. Yet it is also evident from the recent anniversary of 2011 that vestiges of this thinking retain popularity within Aberdeen and the wider non-academic community, which makes it all the more urgent to transmit the major points of scholarly consensus on the context of the battle, its outcome and its participation.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘History of the MacDonalds’, in *Highland Papers*, ed. by J.R.N. MacPhail, Series: Scottish History Society, 4 vols. [HP] (Edinburgh: T. and A. Constable, 1914), i, pp. 5-72 (p. 31).

As MacKay argued, Donald, Lord of the Isles, and Alexander Stewart, Earl of Mar, were not leaders in the 'struggle' for Scottish civilisation. Both men were Gaels of royal blood, nephews of the governor, Robert Stewart, Duke of Albany, and grandsons of King Robert II. However, young Alexander lacked his cousin's title and status, for Donald was the legitimate, eldest son of John, Lord of the Isles and of Robert II's daughter Margaret, whereas Mar was only one of several of bastard sons born to Alexander Stewart, Earl of Buchan, the so-called Wolf of Badenoch. As the offspring of his father's long-term, concubinous relationship with one 'Mairead daughter of Eachainn' of the diocese of Ross -- doubtless a woman of Gaelic origin -- Mar's upbringing is likely to have been thoroughly Gaelic.<sup>4</sup> Throughout his youth Mar was a notorious figure, chiefly known for his participation in cateran Lowland raiding with his father and brothers. Later writers (and doubtless the man himself) sought to airbrush this aspect out of Mar's life, and to promote the icon of the virtuous champion for the crown and the Lowlands, stemming the tide of the barbaric Highland horde. Yet in reality Mar owed much of his power and success to his father's high position in the Gaelic world. Here the 'Wolf' was known as *Alasdair Mòr mac an Rìgh* -- 'Great Alexander the King's son', a byname of the 'wood-dwelling Scots' (*Scotis silvestribus*) which contrasted sharply with his Lowland reputation, and conveys some of the natural authority which kinship with the blood royal bestowed, as well as the profound respect which Gaelic society attached to the king of Scots.<sup>5</sup> Through his father young Mar inherited the command and support of the Stewarts of Badenoch, Strathavon, and Atholl as well as other militarily powerful kindreds such as the Clann Donnchaidh (or Robertsons) in Atholl, and segments of Clan Chattan. It was precisely because of his ability to marshal and control these formidable

groupings in the upland lordships to the west of Mar that prominent Aberdonian and Mar families, such as the Forbesees and the Irvines of Drum, were prepared to support Mar's accession to that earldom.<sup>6</sup> It seems therefore unlikely that Mar would wish to spurn his own Gaelic upbringing and, indeed, Gaelic kinsmen probably formed the backbone of his personal following at Harlaw and in later campaigning. Some of them, notably his brothers, were rewarded with offices in the Garioch and Aberdeen.<sup>7</sup>

Respect for Mar appears widespread throughout Gaelic Scotland, and transcended political rivalries. The *Sleat History* describes a tale of how the 'generous' and 'noble' Mar escaped from defeat at Inverlochy in 1431 and recounts the hospitable treatment he received from a poor Irishman in Lochaber, even providing some accompanying Gaelic verse which Mar allegedly composed about the affair.<sup>8</sup> This was a man who was by all accounts deeply embedded within and at ease with his own Gaelic identity, and with the wider 'barbaric' customs and culture of Gaelic Scotland.

So much for Mar. But the Highland/Lowland misnomer is not the focus of this article. Here we will offer some thoughts on the motives and objectives which prompted Donald of the Isles' spectacular venture -- leading a massive army of anything between 6000 and 10000 men and invading north-east Scotland to fight the Battle of Harlaw (Gaelic *Cath Gairbheach*). As the outcome is generally viewed as indecisive historians have been unsure how to judge Donald's motives. It is generally recognised today that the catalyst was the fate of the earldom of Ross, although it is less certain whether this was Donald's sole objective, or if he was challenging the wider Stewart hegemony over the mainland Highlands.<sup>9</sup> Some have argued that his ambitions were greater than this, and

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<sup>8</sup> *HP*, i, 41-3. For Mar's poem, see *Duanaire na sracaire*=*Songbook of the Pillagers: anthology of Scotland's Gaelic verse to 1600*, ed. by Wilson McLeod and Meg Bateman (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2007), pp. 448-53.

that Donald was actually challenging the Governor, Albany, for control of Scotland itself, perhaps with the connivance of the adolescent King James I, who was growing frustrated with his lengthy imprisonment in England.<sup>10</sup> Following this approach some have argued that the destiny of Scotland was at stake, and that had Donald won a decisive victory he would have sought the crown himself,<sup>11</sup> while others at the furthest extreme have theorised that he would have split Scotland in two by establishing an independent Gaelic-speaking kingdom.<sup>12</sup> We will address each of these in turn.

The claim to the earldom of Ross.

This is traditionally regarded as the prime cause of the battle, and it is also the motive given by the only surviving narrative account which survives from the western Gàidhealtachd – a MacDonald genealogical history known today as the *Sleat History*. This was committed to paper by a seannachie in the later seventeenth century, probably Captain Uisdean MacDonald of Paiblesgarry in North Uist, who explicitly acknowledged his intention to refute Boece and George Buchanan (‘partial pickers of Scottish chronology and history . . . [who] never spoke a favourable word of the Highlanders’) and is thus not immune from their accounts.<sup>13</sup> However, the *history* draws heavily from the Classical Gaelic tradition of the learned orders, the *aos dána* or (‘folk of gifts) and its perspective on Harlaw probably derives from oral traditions which were circulating among the late medieval aristocratic Gaelic elite.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> A. and A. MacDonald, *The Clan Donald*, 3 vols. (Inverness: Northern Counties Publishing, 1896-1904) i, pp. 150-1, 166; Ranald Nicholson, *Scotland: The Later Middle Ages*, Series: Edinburgh History of Scotland (Edinburgh: Mercat, 1974; repr. Edinburgh: Mercat, 1993), pp. 236-7; Alexander Grant, *Independence and Nationhood: Scotland 1306-1469*, Series: New History of Scotland (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984; repr. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University, 2003), p. 217.

<sup>13</sup> *HP*, i, 10; Martin MacGregor, ‘The genealogical histories of Gaelic Scotland’, in *The Spoken Word: Oral culture in Britain 1500–1850*, ed. by Adam Fox and Daniel Woolf (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 196-239 (p. 212).

The claim to Ross was straightforward: Donald had a wholly legitimate claim to the earldom by right of his wife Mary Leslie, who was successor to her niece the infant heiress Euphemia. However, the Governor of Scotland, Albany, was grandfather to the heiress Euphemia, and in 1402 had assumed wardship of her until she came of age.<sup>15</sup> The great fear was that in the interim Albany would conspire to ensure that the earldom of Ross, like other Highland earldoms, would be swallowed up in the ongoing Stewartisation of Scotland and that Mary's (and therefore Donald's) claim would be ignored. The *Sleat History* alleges that Albany persuaded Euphemia by 'flattery and threats' to resign her rights to the earldom of Ross to Albany's son John, and that Donald, frustrated by Albany's refusal to even hear his claim, was finally provoked into taking action.<sup>16</sup> However, there are, as Karen Hunt has pointed out, major chronological problems with this, for Euphemia's resignation of Ross -- which was a clear violation of the rights of Donald's wife -- did not take place until 1415, a full four years after Harlaw.<sup>17</sup> It is more likely that Donald's petitions to Governor Albany were not about Ross itself, but the lands which pertained to its patrimony, namely the lucrative barony of Kingedward in Buchan.

Kingedward was one of the most significant assets in the Ross patrimony, not only because of its profitability but also because it was the property most closely associated with the old dismembered earldom of Buchan. The holder of it could reasonably expect to be bestowed with the comital title and the honour and status which went with it, and, indeed, in 1382 the Wolf of Badenoch received the title of earl of Buchan upon his marriage to a previous countess of Ross by virtue of this very barony.<sup>18</sup> It was the Wolf's death in 1405 which left the title vacant and presented Donald with his

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<sup>14</sup> MacGregor, 'Genealogical histories', 201, 212, 226.

first genuine opportunity to press for some recognition of his wife's rights as next of kin to the Ross inheritance.<sup>19</sup> However, within a year Albany had dashed his hopes, conferring the Buchan title instead upon his own son John, which he then illegally ratified in his capacity of Governor. Although Kingedward was not included in this grant, given past precedent Donald surely perceived the potential danger that it would be detached from the Ross patrimony altogether, particularly after Albany installed his own brother-in-law as baillie.<sup>20</sup> That this was the immediate cause of the battle is further suggested by John Stewart's infrequent usage of the comital title. He never consistently employed the title until after Harlaw, instead limiting himself to 'lord' (*dominus*) rather than 'earl' (*comes*) of Buchan.<sup>21</sup> The crucial phase seems to have been in the months between July 1410 and March 1411. In July at a General-Council at Perth John Stewart appeared using the full title 'earl of Bouchane', which underlined Donald's urgent need to press his case at the next gathering of the General-Council the following March. Yet while lands in Buchan were under discussion at this latter meeting, Donald still failed to get a hearing from the Governor of his wife's rights.<sup>22</sup>

### Challenging the Stewart hegemony

The Ross inheritance in Buchan was the immediate reason for the battle, and it is likely that, at one level, the eastward drive was a determined attempt to seize these Buchan lands, or at least secure local recognition of Clan Donald's right to them. However, the target at Harlaw was not the largely absentee John Stewart but Alexander, Earl of Mar. Alexander was the objective because not only because he was *de facto* ruler in Buchan, but because he was the man physically present in the region and actively contesting Clan

Donald for control over the lordships in and around the Great Glen. Harlaw was in reality the culmination of a 30-year-long rivalry with the growing Stewart hegemony in the central Highlands. In this contention, the Stewarts were able to draw upon the support of a Scottish political community who were anxious to marginalise Clan Donald lordship and keep the military muscle of the 'Islesmen' at arm's length.<sup>23</sup>

This agenda worked directly in opposition to the continuing efforts of Clan Donald's leaders to accommodate their emerging cadet and client lineages by making inroads into mainland Scotland. One popular method was through strategic marriage alliance, and Donald's father John had pursued closer ties by marrying into the Stewart family in 1350. Though junior to his half-brother Ranald (the eponym of Clan Ranald), Donald succeeded (probably *c.* 1387 x 1388) his father as Lord of the Isles this strategy in mind. Clan Donald may have envisaged that having a leader who was the king's grandson could only be beneficial to their interests, although this was no doubt eased by the fact that royal charters issued in 1376 granting the lands of Lochaber, Kintyre and Knapdale to John specifically tied them to the heirs of his marriage with Margaret Stewart.<sup>24</sup> These grants were probably intended to prevent an escalation in MacDonald/Stewart tensions, for there are signs that the relationship was crumbling by the 1360s. The clearest warning was in the lordship of Lochaber where John, Lord of the Isles -- despite being supposedly 'at peace with the king always' was forced to maintain a 'strong party of standing forces' for 'defending Lochaber and the frontiers of the country from robbery and incursions of the rest of the Scots'.<sup>25</sup> The threat was almost certainly from the neighbouring Badenoch Stewarts under Alexander the Wolf.

<sup>24</sup> 'The Book of Clanranald' in *Reliquae Celticae*, ed. by Alexander MacBain and John Kennedy, 2 vols. (Inverness: Northern Counties Newspaper, 1892-94), ii, 138-309 (pp.160-1). See also Bannerman, 'Lordship', 225-6; *ALI*, pp. 209, 299.

<sup>25</sup> *HP*, i, 25.

While Clan Donald struggled to accrue further concessions or benefits from marital kinship with the new royal family, some lesser west-highland clans allied to the Stewarts were enjoying unparalleled growth and active promotion with new offices and lands. For example, in 1382 the Campbells of Lochawe, who were the *de facto* lords of Argyll, were rewarded with a royal lieutenancy in Cowal and Knapdale.<sup>26</sup> However, the lords of the Isles were not only snubbed of such offices, but found themselves fighting for recognition of the lands that had been previously given to them. In 1382 the Stewarts attempted to bring the earldom of Ross into their own family by marrying the heiress off to Alexander Stewart, the Wolf of Badenoch, and in the process overrode the growing ties which Clan Donald were cultivating with the Earl's family. Parachuting in the man who had been menacing them in Lochaber for over a decade would have left Clan Donald and the rest of Scottish political community in little doubt as to the hostility of the Stewart regime to further MacDonald expansion. The Ross marriage settlement also included a grant of Lewis, and thus appears to have deliberately ignored the reality that the island had been a possession of the lordship of the Isles for over 40 years.<sup>27</sup> Given this context, it seems quite surprising that Clan Donald still adhered to a pro-Stewart agenda by accepting the succession of Donald six years later.

Yet Ross was just one part of the Stewartisation of the Highlands which threatened to envelop the Clan Donald lordship along its northern, eastern and southern frontiers. Even before their accession to the throne members had obtained earldoms in Atholl in 1342, Strathearn in 1357, Menteith in *c.* 1361 and Caithness in *c.* 1375, and numerous lordships in the central Highlands (Badenoch, Appin of Dull, Glen Dochart, Loch Tay) were acquired by them during the course of the later fourteenth century.<sup>28</sup> To

the west the Stewarts, who had enjoyed the overlordship of Cowal since the thirteenth century, were closely allied with the Lennox family and with Clan Campbell, the greatest power in Mid-Argyll, and by 1388 they won landed power in Argyll themselves when the ancient MacDougall lordship of Lorn passed to the Stewarts of Innermeath. Thus, within six years of their capture of Ross, Stewart lordship had reached the shores of Loch Linnhe and was occupying the southern end of the Great Glen -- strategically the most important route in Highland Scotland and an increasingly important artery in Clan Donald lordship.

As royalty, the Stewarts pressed their governmental advantage to staff royal offices with kinsmen and to interfere, destabilise and make territorial advances at the expense of Clan Donald. We can see this at work in the Scottish parliament of March 1389, when the Earl of Carrick (the future Robert III) presented an allegation on behalf of his sister Margaret Stewart, Lady of Islay and Donald's mother, accusing her sons and their adherents (i.e. Clan Donald) of unspecified 'grave injuries, numerous harms and unjust burdens'.<sup>29</sup> This affair doubtless concerned lands in Kintyre and Knapdale which the recently widowed Margaret held in jointure with her husband John, Lord of the Isles. Clan Donald fear for their lordship in Kintyre would have resurfaced when a general council at Perth gave approval for a punitive military expedition led by the newly created Dukes of Albany and Rothesay against Donald and his brothers from Dumbarton in 1398.<sup>30</sup> In 1404 the Stewarts' control over their ancestral territories in the south-west was also reaffirmed with the creation of a vast regality of the Stewartry for the heir to the throne, encompassing not only Ayrshire and Carrick, but the Argyllshire territories of Cowal, Knapdale, Arran and Bute which neighboured the MacDonald lordship and

controlled the seaways of the Firth of Clyde.<sup>31</sup> Throughout this time, there was good reason to fear the threat of Stewart expansion in Kintyre itself.

To the north, the increasing friction with Mar was accentuated by the governor's decision to grant Mar governmental powers and funds from the royal coffers: he appears to have been appointed the Governor's deputy in the Highlands in *c.* 1406 and began to receive a stream of payments from the Scottish exchequer under Albany's orders out of the customs of various east coast burghs.<sup>32</sup> Thus, not only were the legal rights of the legitimate heirs to Ross being ignored by the very man who was charged with upholding the laws of the kingdom, but Donald's rival was being actively favoured, rewarded and strengthened by the state. It is worth stressing that the Stewarts did not themselves necessarily pull together or function as a single political grouping, and there are signs of cooperation between the Lord of the Isles and Albany during the 1390s, but there are doubts as to whether these were genuine relaxation in hostilities or strategic expediency on the part of the Governor during his own troubles with his brother the Wolf of Badenoch.<sup>33</sup> Long term engagement in friendlier relations would, in any case, risk the wrath of a political community which supported any policy that excluded Clan Donald from both Ross and Buchan, regardless of whether it was unconstitutional to do so. None of this should obscure us to the wider fact that over the course of the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries Clan Donald's perception of events was chiefly shaped by a disintegrating relationship with an increasingly provocative and threatening Stewart kindred who were intent on using the levers of power to intrude into the internal affairs of

Clan Donald whilst also denying them their rightful inheritance. Given this context it is surprising Clan Donald were so patient before finally resolving upon a military course of action.

#### Challenging for Scotland?

Given the souring of relations it is possible that Donald had any national ambitions to challenge for the governorship of Scotland? This suspicion largely based upon a safe conduct for his nephew and trusted lieutenant-general Hector MacLean of Duart to 'speak with his liege lord' the captive James, King of Scotland in the Tower of London in August 1407.<sup>34</sup> This was followed by subsequent emissaries which passed back and forth between the Lord of the Isles, James I and Henry IV of England in the years leading up to Harlaw.

All of this invites understandable speculation that the Donald was attempting win the support of James I or even conspiring with the King of England. This was doubtless partly the intention -- Donald wanted to publicly demonstrate that he could simply bypass Albany by going to the king directly, all in order to place more pressure on the Governor to listen to his pleas.<sup>35</sup> However, while the governance of the Highlands and the Ross inheritance were surely the subject under discussion in the mission of Hector MacLean, the contents of the later commissions from England were specifically concerned about negotiating a peace between England, Ireland and the Isles, and chiefly the activities of Donald's younger brother John Mòr. He had become lord of the Glens of Antrim in Ulster and was then playing a prominent role in the Irish rebellions which were draining the resources of the English exchequer.<sup>36</sup> It is plausible that Henry IV hoped to

take advantage of the situation -- by using the captive James to favour Donald with the intention of curbing his younger brother John – but there is no solid foundation for this supposition. Indeed, the notion that Harlaw was some coordinated, treasonable offensive against the Scottish kingdom is baseless, and smacks of revisionism and projecting future events back onto 1411.<sup>37</sup>

Donald's target at Harlaw was the Earl of Mar, not the Governor of Scotland. He had ample opportunity and warning to fight Albany if he wished - firstly when the Governor retook Dingwall Castle in late summer of 1411, and later when Albany led a royal army into Argyll in 1412. Yet Donald refused to engage him. Indeed, the Lord of the Isles never once challenged Governor Albany militarily at any time.

By extension, this behaviour also precludes the suggestion that Donald may have aspired to the kingship. James I was of course still uncrowned, and John Bannerman speculated that in terms of kin-based succession his youth as a minor and his English imprisonment ruled him out as a contender. Bannerman noted that at this, and other times of Clan Donald insurrection or scheming (in 1462 and 1545), the Stewart incumbents were all either incapacitated, minor or female -- circumstances which would rule them out as contenders according to the kin-based system of succession. Thus according to the principles of Gaelic society, Donald, as the grandson of Robert II, possessed a tenable claim to the kingship of Scots, providing he could gather sufficient support in the country.<sup>38</sup>

How important kin-based succession actually was Scots Gaelic society at this time is a matter of debate, with primogeniture increasingly appearing to be the norm.<sup>39</sup> Yet even leaving this aside, the kin principle -- if indeed it was applicable -- would

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<sup>38</sup> Bannerman, 'Lordship', 214.

certainly have also be valid for Governor Albany, who was by any criteria --blood, political leadership, or seniority -- the obvious contender for the kingship. Again, the fact that Donald never once engaged Albany in battle is surely decisive here. Equally, one might also consider the minority of James II in the late 1430s and 1440s when Alexander, Lord of the Isles was Justiciar of Scotland north of the Forth, and one of the few leading nobles in the kingdom.<sup>40</sup> Clan Donald lordship was then reaching its apogee and its chief was at the top tier of Scottish society, yet there is no suggestion he sought the throne.

What about the theory that had Donald won Harlaw comprehensively, he would have established a separate Gaelic kingdom stretching from Ross along the Great Glen to Islay? This notion appears to have its origins (in the historiography at least) in Walter Bower's account in the 1440s that Donald's aim was to sack Aberdeen and then 'to subject to his authority the country down to the river Tay'.<sup>41</sup> One Clan Donald history does suggest Donald's army actually indulged in some wider spoliation beyond the Mounth in the Mearns, although one wonders by 'country' whether Bower intended the origins of individual nobles from 'beyond the Tay' who convened to oppose Donald rather than the land itself.<sup>42</sup> There is, in any case, no firm evidence to support a separatist agenda. Indeed, the very concept of separation was alien to the kin-based society of the Western Gàidhealtachd. Chiefs were deeply conscious of their Scottish identity and their adherence to the king of Scots as their patriarchal head, stretching all the way back to the ancient Scots kings of Dál Riata and to the mythological kings of Ireland.<sup>43</sup> A contemporary witness for this occurs in a Clan Donald genealogy compiled in c. 1400 which lists all the clans which recognised the authority of the lords of the Isles at that

time. Not only does it place the royal genealogies of the king of Scots first, but many of the clan chiefs actually claimed descent from the royal line.<sup>44</sup>

Loyalty to the king of Scots was also a recurrent theme in Gaelic literature, and there was never any implication that the Gaels did not owe their allegiance to the royal line, regardless of how much their loyalty could be tested by the hostile policies of an individual monarch residing in the Lowlands. This quality was recognized in the otherwise unsympathetic description in Fordun's chronicle, which assured readers that the Scots Gaels were 'loyal and obedient to the king and kingdom' and 'easily made to submit to the laws, if rule is exerted over them'.<sup>45</sup> Yet there was sophistication in the Gaelic position, and they would appear to have carefully delineated between the king and the state, claiming that their enmity was directed against the latter, not at the person of the king of Scots. This is plain from the *Sleat History's* account of James I's royal campaigns against Donald's son, Alexander, Lord of the Isles during the 1420s and 1430s. The writer was at pains to avoid attacking James I, and instead attacks the royal courtiers for briefing against Alexander:

The courtiers about King James, and especially the offspring of Robert the Second, who were defeated by his father Donald at Harlaw, and disappointed in their designs, became his [Alexander, Lord of the Isles] mortal enemies. These being always in the king's ears, made him believe that MacDonald's power was so extensive, that he ought to be crushed in time.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *HP*, i, 35.

West-highland kindreds were also expected to respond to national hostings, and there were significant Gaelic presences in various royal armies during the later middle ages.<sup>47</sup> This was the ultimate and most visible demonstration of commitment to king and kingdom that a Scotsman could make, and in turn recognition of royal lordship over the Gàidhealtachd.

#### The western perspective

Apart from the *Sleat History*, we have little indication of how Gaelic contemporaries in the west understood and regarded the battle. The *Harlaw Brosnachadh* was allegedly composed to stir the spirits of Donald's host before battle, but it provides no clues about Clan Donald intentions, and there are continuing doubts as to its date of composition.<sup>48</sup>

The nearest contemporary record is found in the Irish Annals of Connacht, where under the year 1411 it is stated 'Mac Domnaill of Scotland won a great victory over the Galls of Scotland. Mac Gilla Eoin [i.e. Hector MacLean], one of Mac Domnaill's followers, was killed in the resistance of the vanquished'.<sup>49</sup> This presents Harlaw as a clear-cut, ethno-linguistic struggle of the Gael, represented by Clan Donald, against the *Gall*, or foreigner non-Gaels of Scotland, and parallels the view given by Lowland writers of a Highland/Lowland contest. Gaels were of course actually present on both sides, although this error is more forgivable in a non-Scottish source with only a basic understanding of events in the kingdom. Alternatively, could it be deliberate? Steve Boardman has recently speculated that this line was fed from Clan Donald themselves; they were developing increasingly close ties with Ulster in this period, and may well reflect their own perspective on Harlaw.<sup>50</sup> This is again plausible, but even if this was Clan Donald

propaganda, the dates of these annals are uncertain, for they derive from a compilation made in the mid-fifteenth century at the earliest, and which only survive in a sixteenth-century manuscript.<sup>51</sup> It is impossible to know whether this was genuinely contemporaneous view or a later insertion made in hindsight and representing a later party-line.

Later Gaelic poetry shows that by the seventeenth century Harlaw was cemented in tradition as a great victory for Clan Donald, and as an aggressive campaign for control of the Highlands. In a verse of c. 1678 to Sir Donald MacDonald of Sleat, Iain Lom, the bard of Keppoch, praised Clan Donald's past exploits and described Harlaw as 'a famous expedition and that more than half of Alba was under your sway'.<sup>52</sup> The eighteenth-century poet John MacCodrum from Uist refers to Harlaw in a similar fashion in his *Praise of Clan Donald (Moladh Chlann Domhnaill)*:

Bhuinnig iad baile 's leth Alba:

'S e 'n claidheamh a shealbhaich còir dhaibh;

Bhuinnig iad latha Chath Gairbheach:

Rinn iad an argmaid a chomhdach.

They won half of Alba and a homestead to boot, tis the sword that earned their right for them; they won the day of Garioch's fight, they succeeded in proving the argument.<sup>53</sup>

However, another eighteenth-century poem by Archibald Grant of Glenmoriston refers to 'Donald Balloch of the Rough Bounds, who made a boundary of the House of the

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<sup>53</sup> *The Songs of John MacCodrum: Bard to Sir James MacDonald of Sleat*, ed. by William Matheson, Series: Scottish Gaelic Texts Society (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1938), pp. 124-31 (pp. 130-1).

Harpstrings at the half-way point of Alba'.<sup>54</sup> This identifies the homestead/house as *Tigh nan Teud* at the Pass of Killiecrankie in Atholl, known in local tradition as marking the exact centre of Scotland.<sup>55</sup> In this instance, however, the proof for the claim was Clan Donald's decisive victory over Mar and royal forces at Inverlochy in 1431, a triumph which effectively saved their lordship from oblivion when under the thumb of the belligerent James I.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, similar phraseology was employed in the context of other celebrated examples of Clan Donald's martial prowess, such as a classical Gaelic poem in praise of Alasdair MacColla in c. 1645 where it was also tied with the payment of taxation

Cīos is cāna ar úrleith Alban  
 aimsir oile,  
 biaidh sin ag an droing mur dhlighe  
 nō an roinn roimhe

Tax and tribute over Alba's greater half once again those folk shall have as right,  
 or else the old division.<sup>57</sup>

What should we make of this? John MacInnes tells us that these phrases 'half of Alba', referred to a specific claim which Clan Donald made to a 'House and Half of Scotland', and that its association with Harlaw suggests that later Gaelic tradition looked back to it as a victory by which Clan Donald had proved their claim to control the greater part of Alba.<sup>58</sup> The association of division, house and taxation could recall the practice of levying

<sup>57</sup> W.J. Watson, 'Unpublished Gaelic Poetry', *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, 2 (1927), pp. 75-91 (pp.76-7).

rents in the guise of customary hospitality, extracted by chiefs at source as they circuted their lordships with their retinues.<sup>59</sup> Yet Clan Donald never appear as immediate lords in Atholl.<sup>60</sup> It is probably more sensible to interpret it as a symbolic reference to the expansion of the Clan Donald power in the fifteenth century, and to the swathe of territories over which Alexander, Lord of the Isles wielded authority as Royal Justiciar of north of the Forth in the 1430s and 1440s.<sup>61</sup> In origin known as Justiciar of *Scotia*, the actual scope of this office was less impressive than the title implies, being diminished by numerous regalities found throughout late medieval Scotland and from which crown officers were excluded.<sup>62</sup> We do not know how regularly Alexander carried out justice ayres, or whether he even officiated personally, but it is worth stressing that the chief of Clan Donald was deemed fit and able by minority government to uphold Scots common law north of the Forth - there is no hint of 'unknown terrors' here.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, it could be the origin of the assertion in Ramsay's Harlaw Ballad that the Lord of the Isles intended to subjugate all the counties as far as the Forth.<sup>64</sup> It was in any case natural that later poets seeking to praise the MacDonalds would nostalgically focus their attention on the golden period of *Linn an Áigh* ('the happy age') when their power and authority were at their most glorious, and particularly upon the military victories by which their ancestors had secured it.

Another major aspect of all this poetry is the strident emphasis upon Clan Donald earning their 'right' and 'proving the argument', a theme which chimes with the stress upon entitlement and perceived injustice found in many of the traditional historical accounts of the battle. As Martin MacGregor argues, the pursuit of right -- whether it be right to land, chiefship, or lordship -- was a predominant theme of most instances of

warfare in Gaelic Scotland throughout the later middle ages, where there are numerous instances of disputed succession where an exiled lord set out to reclaim his rightful inheritance.<sup>65</sup> This conviction seems deep-rooted, and may help explain not only the widespread popular support for Donald's pursuit of the claim to the earldom, but also the enthusiastic response of Scots Gaels to the Jacobite cause in the late 1600s and early 1700s.

Yet it was not just the rights of Clan Donald that were being ignored, but also those of the kindreds of Ross, such as the Rosses of Balnagown, the Munros, the MacKenzies and the Mathesons. The precise origins of some of these kindreds are murky, yet what evidence exists indicates widespread native unhappiness with the repeated imposition by the crown throughout the later fourteenth century of outsiders into the earldom over their heads and at the expense of their own local wishes and without any consultation.<sup>66</sup> One may envisage that the grievances of the Ross kindreds coalesced with those of Clan Donald around a mutual antipathy towards encroaching Stewartisation, which would largely explain the ready welcome of Donald's army into Ross. The seventeenth-century chronicle of the Frasers, written near Inverness Donald seized Ross easily, because the 'whole country' was 'willing to return to the subjection of their own just master'.<sup>67</sup> According to the *Sleat History* the MacKenzies were placed in the reserve of Donald's army, while two or three Munroes were killed in the battle itself. Although not mentioned in this account Walter Ross of Balnagowan was presumably also involved in some capacity, as he was charged by Governor Albany in 1412 with 'offending him and the state'. Gaining the support of the chief of the Rosses of Balnagown was doubtless pivotal in persuading other kindreds to commit themselves to Donald's cause.

Balnagowan possessed great influence in Ross as the male heir of the last native earl, and his support must have augmented the size of Donald's forces on the field in 1411 and eased the latter's takeover of the earldom.<sup>68</sup>

The composition of the army also shows that contesting control over the Moray Highlands was central to Donald's fight with Mar, and is demonstrated by the presence of the chief of the Mackintoshes of Badenoch in the army. Both the *Sleat History* and the *Genealogical History of the Mackintoshes* (written in 1679, but incorporating sixteenth and fifteenth century antecedents) describe how Donald granted lands in Lochaber to Mackintosh as a reward for yielding his place on the right wing of the army to MacLean, but it was probably a bribe to pull this kindred away from their traditional Stewart overlords.<sup>69</sup> The switch was a crippling loss for Mar, not only because of the Mackintoshes' military prowess, but regionally also, for their chief (who did not die at Harlaw)<sup>70</sup> was captain of the Clan Chattan confederacy which dominated clan politics in the central and eastern Highlands throughout the late medieval and early modern era. From a regional perspective this apparent volte-face was a more potent statement of Clan Donald influence than winning the support of the Ross kindreds, for raising Clan Chattan underlined Donald's ability to exercise effective lordship within recognised Stewart territory.

Nevertheless, the decision to pursue a military course of action was probably the last thing that Donald wanted to happen. His succession as chief was predicated upon his ties with the royal Stewarts and he had openly advertised the kin connection by displaying the royal tressure on his seal.<sup>71</sup> Yet his own position was not entirely secure, for there had been opposition to his succession from within Clan Donald, and within a

year of becoming lord he faced rebellion from a faction anxious to win more territory, led by his younger brother John Mòr.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, this instability doubtless alerted the predatory Stewarts to the vulnerability of Clan Donald leadership and was probably the occasion for the parliamentary complaint on behalf of Margaret Stewart in 1389. To the north east, the efforts his other brother Alexander, Lord of Lochaber to expand his own powerbase along the Great Glen in the 1390s (culminating in the burning of Elgin in 1402), similarly damaged Donald's reputation in parliament. Not only did it result in punitive campaigning against Clan Donald itself, but it would ultimately help to further justify Albany's northern alliance with Mar after 1404 to the political community. For Donald, the huge Ross inheritance was a precious opportunity to expand Clan Donald power and wealth to relieve these internal pressures, but the refusal of Governor Albany even to acknowledge his entitlement to Ross demonstrated the impotence of the pro-Stewart strategy. This surely placed great strain on Donald personally, for policy's failure to bear fruit was the failure of Donald's lordship and undermined his own tenability as leader. With no tangible benefits forthcoming, choosing to give battle could be seen as the last option left open to him. The successful prosecution of warfare always enhances a ruler's honour and legitimacy, and for Donald it offered a fast track to inject some much-needed credibility amongst his own adherents. The willingness of the western and northern clans to rise on Donald's behalf in 1411 helped to reaffirm his power and authority as leader of Clan Donald, but probably also relieved building pressure on him from within his own kindred.

Clan Donald's Greatest Defeat?

Donald's campaign is depicted in west-highland literature as an unequivocal success, principally because he was able to call out the native kindreds of Ross. Being able to do so was a visible and unequivocal demonstration of his lordship over the earldom to Albany's regime. The resignation of the earldom of Ross by the heiress Euphemia to Albany's son John Stewart in June 1415 may appear to have dashed any hopes that Donald and his wife had of winning 'official' recognition of their rightful inheritance, and it provoked another major, but largely unrecorded, military engagement between Donald and Mar the following year.<sup>73</sup> The outcome of this confrontation is unknown, but there are further signs that Clan Donald continued to make progress in Ross. Most notable in this regard are the terms of the 1415 resignation itself, which now excluded significant lands of the Ross patrimony -- Skye and Lewis most obviously, but also the thanage of Dingwall and estates in Sutherland -- the latter of which Donald was simultaneously granting to his brother-in-law.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, within two years John Stewart had stopped styling himself the title Earl of Ross (it was a dead letter, which had only been used sparingly in any case), and by August 1420 at Rosemarkie -- the very heartland of eastern Ross -- the major clergy and nobility of Ross and Moray were openly acknowledging Donald's wife as 'Dame Mary of the Ile lady of the Ylis and of Ross'.<sup>75</sup> Donald himself appears as 'Lord of the Isles and of Ross' in a papal dispensation of February 1420 granted for the marriage of his daughter to a grandson of none other than Governor Albany.<sup>76</sup> These documents indicate that Albany had finally acknowledged the inevitable -- that Donald had shown himself a far more successful in gaining acceptance within Ross than any of the other recent lords of the earldom, and that Clan Donald had 'succeeded in proving the argument'.<sup>77</sup> The lands of Buchan lay beyond their reach for

now, but by 1437 these too had fallen to Donald's son Alexander when he formally succeeded to the earldom of Ross.

As far as regional supremacy is concerned, it is much harder to say. The relative positions regionally between 1411 and 1420 are uncertain; funds allocated to Mar for the refortification of Inverness Castle merely highlight the sustained military threat which the Lord of the Isles continued pose, while other unspecified payments made between 1412 and 1422 were probably bribes to compromise local clan chiefs. Even Walter Bower's

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Bain, *History of the Ancient Province of Ross* (Dingwall: Pefferside Press, 1899) 79; John Hill Burton, *History of Scotland*, 8 vols. new edn. (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1901) ii, 394.

<sup>3</sup> William MacKay, *The Battle of Harlaw: its true place in history* (Inverness: Northern Chronicle Office, 1922). For more on this theme, see Ian A. Olson, 'The Battle of Harlaw, its Lowland Histories and their Balladry: Historical confirmation or confabulation?', *Review of Scottish Culture*, 24 (2012), pp. 1-33 (pp. 19-22).

<sup>4</sup> *Calendar of Papal Letters to Scotland of Clement VII of Avignon, 1378-1394*, ed. by Charles Burns, Series: Scottish History Society (Edinburgh: T. and A. Constable, 1976), p. 181 (2); *Registrum Episcopatus Moraviensis* (Edinburgh: Bannatyne Club, 1837), p. 353. For her identity, see Mary Beith, 'Fearchar Lighiche and the Traditional Medicines of the North', in *The Province of Strathnaver*, ed. by John R. Baldwin (Edinburgh: Scottish Society for Northern Studies, 2000), pp.101-115 (pp. 104-05, 114); Elizabeth Sutherland, *The Five Euphemias: Women in Medieval Scotland, 1200-1420* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1999), pp. 200-01; Steve Boardman, 'Lordship in the North-East: The Badenoch Stewarts I: Alexander Stewart, Earl of Buchan, Lord of Badenoch', *Northern Scotland*, 16 (1996), 1-29 (p. 9); G.W.S. Barrow, 'The Sources for the History of the Highlands in the Middle Ages', in *The Middle Ages in the Highlands*, ed. by Loraine Maclean (Inverness: Inverness Field Club, 1981), pp. 11-22 (pp. 16-17); Angus MacKay, *The Book of Mackay* (Edinburgh: Norman MacLeod, 1906), pp. 48-9.

<sup>5</sup> *Liber Pluscardensis*, ed. F.J.H. Skene, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: William Paterson, 1877-80) i, 329, ii, 252; Boardman, 'Lordship in the North-East', 10, 20, 22; Michael Brown, 'Regional Lordship in North-East Scotland: The Badenoch Stewarts II: Alexander Stewart Earl of Mar', *Northern Scotland*, 16 (1996), 31-53 (pp. 42-7).

<sup>6</sup> Brown, 'Regional Lordship', 31, 33, 45; Steve Boardman, *The Early Stewart Kings: Robert II and Robert III, 1371-1406*, Series: The Stewart Dynasty in Scotland (East Linton: Tuckwell, 1996), p. 265.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, 'Regional Lordship', 42-3.

<sup>10</sup> Nicholson, *Later Middle Ages*, 234; Jean Munro, 'The Lordship of the Isles', in *Middle Ages in the Highlands*, ed. by Maclean, pp. 23-37 (p. 26, 28); *Acts of the Lords of the Isles, 1336-1493*, ed. by Jean Munro and R.W. Munro, Series: Scottish History Society [ALI], (Edinburgh: Blackwood, Pillans & Wilson, 1986), pp. lxx-lxxvi; Jean Munro, 'The Earldom of Ross and the Lordship of the Isles', in *Firthlands of Ross and Sutherland*, ed. by John R. Baldwin (Edinburgh: Scottish Society for Northern Studies, 1986), pp. 59-67.

<sup>11</sup> J.W.M. Bannerman, 'The Lordship of the Isles', in *Scottish Society in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Jennifer M. Brown (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), pp. 209-40 (p. 214); Colin M. MacDonald, *The history of Argyll up to the beginning of the sixteenth century* (Glasgow: W. & R. Holmes, n.d.), p. 188.

<sup>12</sup> Colin MacDonald, *Argyll*, 188, favours this as a secondary objective, but it is rejected by John Bannerman ('Lordship', 215).

<sup>15</sup> Karen J. Hunt, 'The Governorship of the First Duke of Albany, 1406-1420' (unpublished doctoral thesis (University of Edinburgh, 1998), p. 251. I would like to acknowledge the heavy debt this article owes to Hunt's substantial work.

later propagandist piece written in the afterglow of Mar's later career conceded that he held no exclusive power (he 'ruled with acceptance, *nearly* all the north of the country beyond the Mounth').<sup>78</sup> During the 1420s Mar does appear to have been on the offensive again in the Great Glen; in January 1420 he was already interfering in church politics of Lochaber by supporting two clerical supplicants who sought appointment to Kilmonivaig, a church in Clan Donald patronage. One he directly sponsored, while the other

<sup>16</sup> *HP*, i, 28.

<sup>17</sup> Hunt, 'The Governorship', 205-06, 260, 261-2. See also Karen Hunt, 'The Governorship of Robert Duke of Albany (1406-1420)', in *Scottish Kingship, 1306-1542, Essays in Honour of Norman MacDougall*, ed. by Michael Brown and Roland Tanner (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2008), pp. 126-54 (p.144). MacKay (*Battle of Harlaw*, 16, 22-3) had previously highlighted the potential importance of the earldom of Buchan, although Ranald Nicholson (*Later Middle Ages*, 233-4) also alludes to it.

<sup>18</sup> *Registrum Magni Sigilli Regum Scotorum*, ed. by J.M. Thomson and others, 11 vols. [*RMS*] (Edinburgh, H.M. General Register House, 1882-1914), i, no. 737; Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 77, 101, n. 40, 199; Hunt, 'The Governorship', 224. For the dismemberment of the earldom of Buchan, see G.W.S. Barrow, *Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland*, fourth edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp. 353-4; *ALI*, pp. xxxv, xxxvi-xxxvii; and more especially Hunt, 'Governorship', 206-224.

<sup>19</sup> Following the 1382 precedent, Donald probably envisaged that he would receive the comital title by virtue of his wife's possession of the earldom of Ross.

<sup>20</sup> Hunt, 'Governorship', 52, 251, 256.

<sup>21</sup> See *RMS*, i, nos. 877-882; Hunt, 'Governorship', 52, 206, 262, 279.

<sup>22</sup> *Illustrations of the Topography and Antiquities of the Shires of Aberdeen and Banff*, 4 vols. (Aberdeen: Spalding Club, 1847-69), ii, 314; iii, 95-6; Hunt, 'Governorship', 262; Hunt, 'Governorship of Robert', 153, n.149.

<sup>23</sup> Steve Boardman, 'Harlaw: Albany and the defence of the 'patria'', Bannerman History of Gaelic Scotland Lecture Series, University of Edinburgh, 9 February 2012. For further discussion, see Hunt, 'Governorship', 254-5; Alexander Grant, 'Scotland's 'Celtic Fringe' in the late middle ages: the MacDonald Lords of the Isles and the Kingdom of Scotland', in *The British Isles, 1100-1500: Comparisons, Contrasts and Connections*, ed. Robert Rees Davies (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1988), pp.118-41.

<sup>24</sup> *RMS*, ii, no. 1431; Stephen I. Boardman, *The Campbells, 1250-1513* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2006), pp. 99, 101-02.

<sup>25</sup> Hunt, 'Governorship', 225-6; *ALI*, pp. xxix-xxx.

<sup>26</sup> Nicholson, *Later Middle Ages*, 232; Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 11-12, 183, 257-8.

<sup>27</sup> *The Records of the Parliaments of Scotland to 1707*, ed. by K.M. Brown and others, www.rps.ac.uk (St Andrews: University of St Andrews, 2007-2011), 1389/3/17 [accessed 13 April 2011].

<sup>28</sup> Hunt, 'Governorship', 234; Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 206-13 for this campaign and the significant propaganda value of these titles.

<sup>29</sup> Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 281-2.

<sup>30</sup> Hunt, 'Governorship', 257-8; *The Exchequer Rolls of Scotland*, ed. by J. Stuart and others, 23 vols. [*ER*] (Edinburgh: H.M. General Register House, 1878-1908), iv, 16, 47, 82, 106 (Dundee); 86 (Aberdeen); 49 (Montrose); 43 (Edinburgh). During the countess' lifetime he also drew a pension from the customs of Aberdeen granted to her murdered first husband, in 1406 and 1407. *ER*, iv, 14, 51.

<sup>31</sup> Boardman, 'Lordship in the North-East', 18-19; Hunt, 'Governorship', 241-2.

<sup>32</sup> *Calendar of Documents relating to Scotland*, ed. J. Bain 4 vols. [*CDS*] (Edinburgh: H.M. General Register House, 1881-88), iv, no. 698.

<sup>33</sup> Boardman, 'Harlaw: Albany and the defence of the 'patria''. My thanks to Steve Boardman for discussing this point with me.

supplicant, ‘Symon de Grenlau’ from St Andrews diocese, was doubtless a kinsmen of the celebrated knight Gilbert de Greenlaw of Harlaw.<sup>79</sup> Mar’s illegitimate son Thomas was also emerging as a regional lord in his own right by 1421.<sup>80</sup> However, the re-growth of Badenoch Stewart power was probably due to some extent to the power vacuum which engulfed the central Highlands following the deaths of Albany (September 1420) and Donald (1420 x 1423) around this time.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>36</sup> CDS, iv, no. 806; *Calendar of the Patent Rolls preserved in the Public Record Office*, ed. by J.G. Black and others, 46 vols. [CPR] (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1901-), *Henry IV 1405-1408*, pp. 361, 487; *CPR: Henry IV 1408-1413*, 183, 190; *Foedera, Conventiones Litterae et Cuiuscunque Generis Acta Publica*, ed. by T. Rymer (London: Record Commission, 1816-69), iv, 131. Munro, ‘Lordship’, 27-8; Hunt, ‘Governorship’, 260; Simon Kingston, *Ulster and the Isles in the Fifteenth Century: The lordship of the Clann Domhnaill of Antrim* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2004), pp. 49-53.

<sup>37</sup> It is too easy to interpret these negotiations the light of the Westminster-Ardtornish treaty signed between Clan Donald and the King of England fifty years later.

<sup>39</sup> My thanks to Aonghas MacCoinnich for discussing this point.

<sup>40</sup> *ALL*, p. lxxvii. Alexander is named here as Justiciar at least eight times between 1439 and 1447.

<sup>41</sup> Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon*, ed. D.E.R. Watt and others, 9 vols. (Aberdeen and Edinburgh: Aberdeen University Press, 1989-98), viii, 74-5.

<sup>42</sup> ‘Book of Clanranald’, 196-9; Olson, ‘Battle of Harlaw’, 5, 6.

<sup>43</sup> Bannerman, ‘Lordship’, 214-15.

<sup>44</sup> Bannerman, ‘Lordship’, 215. See also Martin MacGregor, ‘Genealogies of the clans: contributions to the study of MS 1467’, *Innes Review*, 51:2 (2000), 131-46; David Sellar, ‘Highland Family Origin -- Pedigree Making and Pedigree Faking’, in *Middle Ages in the Highlands*, ed. by Maclean, pp. 103-116.

<sup>45</sup> Bower, *Scotichronicon*, i, 184-85.

<sup>47</sup> Martin MacGregor, ‘Warfare in Gaelic Scotland in the Later Middle Ages’, in *A Military History of Scotland*, ed. by J.A. Crang, E.M. Spiers and M. Strickland (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 209-31.

<sup>48</sup> McLeod and Bateman, *Duanaire na sracaire*, 228-33; Derick S. Thomson, ‘The Harlaw Brosnachadh: An early fifteenth-century literary curio’, in *Celtic Studies: Essays in memory of Angus Matheson, 1912-1962*, ed. by James Carney and David Greene (London: [n.pub.], 1968), pp. 147-69.

<sup>49</sup> ‘Maidm mor le Mac Domhnaill na hAlpan for Gallaib Alpan, | & Mac Gilla Eoin do | muintir Meic Domnaill do marbad hi | frithguin in madma-sin’. *Annals of Connacht*, 1411.15, CELT: Corpus of Electronic Texts: a project of University College Cork, www.ucc.ie/celt [accessed 26 October 2012]. A similar entry is found in the Annals of Loch Cé, for which see *Annals of Loch Cé*, LC1411.14, CELT [accessed 26 October 2012].

<sup>50</sup> Boardman, ‘Harlaw: Albany and the defence of the *patria*’.

<sup>51</sup> This is also true of the near identical entry in the Annals of Loch Cé. See Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘Annals, Irish’, in *Celtic Culture: An Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. by John T. Koch (Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2006), pp. 69-75 (p. 73).

<sup>52</sup> ‘Fhuair mi uiread dh’ur seachas -- |Gu robh ’n turus ud ainmeil,| Gu robh taigh is leth Alba fo’r cis’. *Orain Iain Luim: Songs of John MacDonald, Bard of Keppoch*, ed. by Annie M. MacKenzie, Series: Scottish Gaelic Texts Society (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1964), pp. 148-9.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Domhnall Ballach nan Garbh Chrìoch,| Rinn Tigh nan Teud aig leth Alba ’na chrich’. *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig: Specimens of Gaelic Poetry*, ed. by W.J. Watson, second edition (Stirling: A. Learmonth & Son, 1932) 281.

<sup>55</sup> MacInnes, ‘Gaelic Poetry’, 154.

<sup>56</sup> See Michael Brown, *James I*, Series: The Stewart Dynasty in Scotland (East Linton: Tuckwell, 1994), pp. 138-40, 146.

## Conclusion

The basis of the conflict was the tenable claim to the Ross inheritance, and as such, it was a conflict whose origins were rooted in the failure of the governing Stewart regime to recognise that right and apply the law fairly. Belatedly realising that their hopes were

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<sup>58</sup> John MacInnes, 'Gaelic Poetry and Historical Tradition', in *Middle Ages in the Highlands*, ed. by Maclean, pp. 142-63 (p.154).

<sup>59</sup> Or it may apply to an extraordinary levy of taxation, at 150% rather than 100%. My thanks to Aonghas MacCoinnich for this suggestion.

<sup>60</sup> However, Ewen MacRuairi -- probably a brother of Amy MacRuairi, first wife of John, Lord of the Isles -- became thane of Glentilt in 1346, which his descendents still held in the sixteenth century. William F. Skene, *Celtic Scotland: A History of Ancient Alban*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1876-80), iii, 272-3; Boardman, 'Lordship in the North-East', 9, and 26, n.46.

<sup>61</sup> *ALI*, p. lxxvii.

<sup>62</sup> G.W.S. Barrow, *The Kingdom of the Scots*, second edn. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003) 68-109; Alexander Grant, 'Franchises north of the border : Baronies and regalities in medieval Scotland', in [Liberties and identities in later medieval Britain, ed. by Michael Prestwich, \(Regions and regionalism in history, 10\) \(Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2008\), pp. 155-99.](#)

<sup>63</sup> The northern ayre encompassed Inverness, Banff, Aberdeen, Inverbervie, Forfar, Perth and Cupar, to be performed twice a year. See Hector L. MacQueen, *Common Law and Feudal Society in Medieval Scotland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), pp. 54-65.

<sup>64</sup> Olson, 'Battle of Harlaw', 8, 9.

<sup>65</sup> MacGregor, 'Warfare in Gaelic Scotland', 216-17.

<sup>66</sup> *HP*, i, 29, 30; Hunt, 'Governorship', 215-16, 240-1, 264; Aonghas MacCoinnich, 'Kingis rabellis' to 'Cuidich 'n Righ'? Clann Choinnich -- the emergence of a kindred, c. 1475- c. 1514', in *The exercise of power in medieval Scotland, c. 1200-1500*, ed. by Steve Boardman and Alasdair Ross (Dublin: Four Courts, 2003), pp. 175-200 (pp. 180-1); William Matheson, 'Traditions of the Mathesons', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 42 (1953-1959), 153-81 (p. 159).

<sup>67</sup> James Fraser, *The Chronicles of the Frasers: The Wardlaw Manuscript*, ed. by William MacKay, Series: Scottish History Society, (Edinburgh, T. and A. Constable, 1905), p. 95. He probably followed the earlier accounts of Boece and George Buchanan, for which see Olson, 'Battle of Harlaw', 4-6.

<sup>68</sup> NAS GD297/195. Another Clan Donald history, the *Book of Clanranald*, asserts that one Gilpatrick Roy, son of Rory 'whose surname was of the Rosses', was killed when leading an advance party in the Garioch. The *Sleat History* identifies him as 'Patrick Obeolan, surnamed the Red', whose daughter Alexander, lord of the Isles would take as his concubine. Hunt, 'Governorship', 221, 264; *HP*, i, 29, 34-5; 'The Book of Clanranald, 212-13; *ALI*, 307.

<sup>69</sup> *HP*, i, 29; Brown, 'Regional Lordship', 44; Hunt, 'Governorship', 263; MacGregor, 'genealogical histories', 209; *Genealogical Collections concerning Families in Scotland made by Walter MacFarlane, 1750-1751*, ed. by James Tosach Clark, Series: Scottish History Society, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. and A. Constable, 1900), i, 147, 184.

<sup>70</sup> *Genealogical Collections*, i, 149-50, where the writer attacks Boece's error, and cites the writings of three earlier 'amanuenses' on the Mackintosh genealogy who testify that the chief lived (corroborated by contemporary charter evidence), and that it was Mackintosh of Rothiemurchus who fell at Harlaw: 'in this matter the amaneunses are to be preferred, because [they were] more ancient and nearer in point of time to the period in which these things happened'.

<sup>71</sup> *ALI*, 317-18.

<sup>72</sup> *HP*, i, 32-3; K.A. Steer and J.W. M. Bannerman, *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture in the West Highlands*, The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (Edinburgh:

unrecognised, Clan Donald finally gave up on any diplomatic solution to Ross and gave a visible demonstration of their power by raising the Ross kindreds and attacking the chief Stewart rival in the north upon his home turf. However, it was the values and expectations within Gaelic society itself which played the key role in shaping this drama. Cultural pressures of the pursuit of right and political rivalries within the lordship of the Isles coalesced to push Donald towards a military solution, but were balanced by the strong ethos of Gaelic loyalty to the king and kingdom. It was this trait which, in the aftermath of Harlaw, prevented Donald from ever considering staking a claim for control of Scotland and helped ensure the continued stability of Scotland's kingless realm.<sup>82</sup>

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H.M.S.O. Press, 1977), p. 101. Simon Kingston, (*Ulster and the Isles*, 138) dismisses the suggested insurrection as apocryphal, but notes that the acquisition of the lordship of the Glens of Antrim by John Mór would have helped to relieve political tensions in the Isles. The *Sleat History* suggests that even at this point the men of Ross -- the MacLeods of Lewis and the MacKenzies, as well as the Mackintoshes and Camerons of Clan Chattan -- were fighting on Donald's behalf to put down the rebellion. *HP*, i, 33.

<sup>73</sup> In June 1416 a twenty pound payment to Mar is recorded for a naval campaign in the northern parts against islanders for the defence of the realm. It appears that nine prisoners were subsequently incarcerated in Inverness Castle for 16 weeks before the 1416 audit. This suggests a date of early March 1416 for this second confrontation. *ER*, iv, 255, 265; Hunt, 'Governorship', 275, 276.

<sup>74</sup> Hunt, 'Governorship', 279-80; *ALI*, 30. Donald's grant is dated in October 1415.

<sup>75</sup> Hunt, 'Governorship', 53; *ALI*, 31-33.

<sup>76</sup> *Calendar of the Scottish Supplications to Rome 1418-1422*, ed. by E.R. Lindsay and A.I. Cameron [*CSSR 1418-1422*], Series: Scottish History Society (Edinburgh: T. and A. Constable, 1934), pp. 172-3.

<sup>77</sup> Hunt 'Governorship', 281, 282.

<sup>78</sup> Bower, *Scotichronicon*, viii, 292-3; Hunt 'Governorship', 271; Brown, 'Regional Lordship', 39.

<sup>79</sup> *CSSR 1418-1422*, 143, 147, 157; Iain G. MacDonald, *Clerics and Clansmen: the diocese of Argyll between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries*, Series: Northern World Series (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 341, 342.

<sup>80</sup> Brown, 'Regional Lordship', 44.

<sup>81</sup> Nicholson, *Later Middle Ages*, 252; *ALI*, 299-300.

<sup>82</sup> I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer, Aonghas MacCoinnich, Martin MacGregor, David Cochrane Yu and other members of the Highland History Reading Group for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.