

The Last Laird of Morar

by Alasdair Roberts

Eneas MacDonnell fulfilled a dream when he acquired the estate where he was born and, for a while lived the life of a Highland Laird. His life is retraced and his associations with Morar, where reminders of him can be seen today with his headstone in the Kilmory Churchyard proclaiming him to be "Eneas Ranald MacDonell of Morar" and his striking portrait in Highland Dress painted by Robert Herdman in the Mallaig Heritage Centre.

Eneas MacDonell was born at Morar House in 1821 but only acquired the Morar Estate in 1856

Eneas Ranald MacDonell (1821-98) was the last laird 'of Morar'. He sold most of the estate to Francis Astley of Arisaig House twenty years before his death, retaining 70 acres of Camusdarach. At that point the property (most of South Morar between the Caimbe and Meoble rivers, formerly held by a cadet branch of the MacDonalds of Clanranald) ceased to exist. Earlier 'Morar' had included land in Eigg and South Uist. Eneas bought Morar from a Canadian MacDonald who established his right in dubious circumstances and quickly sold on. However he had been born at Morar House, Traigh, and came from the MacDonells of Scotus (Knoydart). On his mother's side he was linked to the MacDonalds of Rhu (Arisaig) and Lochshiel. Although not in the direct line of the Morar MacDonalds, in other words, Eneas must have felt a sense of destiny when the estate came on the market in 1856.

After the death in 1800 of Simon MacDonald, the estate stayed within the family before passing on through two severely mentally handicapped inheritors and eventually being acquired by some Canadian MacDonalds

Inside the ruined chapel of Kilmory in Arisaig are two memorial stones which touch on the end of the old Morar line. A large flat stone records the death in 1800 at Morar House (which he built) of Major Simon MacDonald. Above it a plaque speaks of his widow Amelia MacDonell of Glenmeddle (Knoydart) and 'the sorrows of a mother, borne with patience truly Christian, and the sad fate of her family'. Two adult sons and two daughters died before her own death in middle age - the second son while shooting at Irin (Roshven). Her only surviving child John (formally laird of Morar) had sunk into 'idiocy' following a childhood accident. He was cared for in the old Morar house of Cross. On his death in 1835 the title went to a MacDonald of Gaodeal in Arisaig. Also severely mentally handicapped, this James MacDonald lived with a curator at Gaskan, Loch Shiel. Later the Crofters' Commission heard of the estate's decline under an da amadan - the two fools.

Eneas's father married after military service in India. He rented Morar House along with the farm of Traigh, and Eneas grew up there with his brother and two sisters. As a Roman Catholic, Lt. Col. MacDonell had been educated by Jesuits at St Omer near Calais, and Eneas was sent from age 12 to 19 to the successor school of Stonyhurst in Lancashire. Through a school friend he met his future wife Catherine, the only child of James Sidgreaves of Inglewhite Hall. After Stonyhurst Eneas studied law in Edinburgh and practised as an advocate for some years. He was present in court when the Canadian MacDonalds (formerly of Gerinish, South Uist) were confirmed in their right to the Morar estate.

Eneas MacDonell bought from the Canadians in 1856

Already tenant of Meoble, and paying rent to his uncle for fishing rights on the Shiel River, Eneas bought Morar for £11,000 in 1856: Eilean Shona had just changed hands for £6,500.

Some years later the new Laird of Morar sold the sheep grazings closest to Meoble for £10,000. Together with his wife's inheritance (they married in 1859) this may explain his wealth. The larger than life-size portrait in Mallaig Heritage Centre was painted by Robert Herdman and hung in the Scottish National Gallery. Two years before this Eneas enlarged Morar House, as recorded by the 1867 date stone. He built houses to let at Cross, Garramore and Rhubana - a fishing lodge for Loch Morar. In 1868 an expensive advocate upheld Eneas's rights against Lord Lovat, who owned North Morar, to fish the Morar river. These included the 'Monks Wall' trap (used for 'net and coble' fish-killing with tridents - or 'leisters') on the north side of the estuary.

After purchasing Morar and, although not being an "absentee" landlord, he continued to live for substantial periods of time in Edinburgh

Although by no means an absentee landowner (he was Deputy Lieutenant for Inverness-shire and a J.P.) Eneas lived in Edinburgh for part of the year. At the 1861 census he was head of a large household at 37 York Place, a

four- Inside the ruined chapel of Kilmory in Arisaig are two memorial stones which touch on the end of the old Morar line. A large flat stone records the death in 1800 at Morar House (which he built) of Major Simon MacDonald. Above it a storey apartment with ten rooms, as an 'Advocate (not in practice) and Landholder'. Also in residence were his wife, baby son, Lancashire wet nurse, mother, unmarried sister and (for his other sister, in India with her husband) baby niece. The family was looked after by five servants, mostly MacDonalds. The house was convenient for Edinburgh's fashionable Catholic church (now St Mary's Cathedral) at the top of Leith Walk. Eneas played a leading role in the city's Catholic life, and his hospitality to councillors and others helped win acceptance in this centre of Calvinism. He was also a founder member of the Clan Donald Society of Edinburgh. By the time of the 1871 census the MacDonells had moved to the West End at 7 Coates Crescent.

Eneas always acted the Highland gentleman, but found his financial position more and more precarious until he was forced to sell the Morar estate in 1878, retaining only Camusdarach House and 70 acres

According to Tearlach MacFarlane, Glenfinnan, Eneas acted the Highland gentleman with regard to whisky. When word came that his regular supply had reached Arisaig, he would set out from Traigh in a rowing boat with a platform on which a piper played. A large jar inscribed with his name and that of the Glen Nevis Distillery bears testimony to this. The story provides support for the idea that Eneas ran out of money - see below. The laird announced that he was no longer able to pay his men's wages, but if any were prepared to work on he would pay them in whisky. Some agreed to do so.

Morar tradition says that Eneas bankrupted himself trying to drain the Moss of Keppoch. The present owner of Camusdarach Andrew Simpson has a slightly different version, believing that the last straw was the laird of Morar's inability to pay a bill for iron fences. This forced him to reach a gentleman's agreement with the Astley family, making his poverty respectable: there is no record of legal bankruptcy.

In 1883 he appeared before the Crofters Commission and described the clearances at Rhu many years before

In the 1883 Report of the Crofters' Commission Eneas Ranald MacDonald of Camusdarach (no longer of Morar) presented himself as a friend to Highlanders whose attempt to provide work and wages through peat production (as well as improved houses) had been abandoned when 'circumstances occurred by which I was obliged to part with the estate.' He continued: 'In Lord Cranstoun's time the first [Rhu] clearances commenced in this country, and I was then a young boy almost; but I shall never forget the feelings of awe and fear that came over the people of the country when the last occurred. All parties felt it, and my mother, who then had the farm of Traigh on South Morar, in her commiseration for some of the families, gave up Traigh for a year or two until they could get an opening.' When Charles Fraser-Mackintosh (the future 'Highlanders' M.P.) visited Morar as a young man he 'saw there the small tenants of Rhu Arisaig camping around Traigh House.' Eneas gave a fuller account to the 1892 Deer Forest Commission when he argued that the Astleys should bring crofters back to Rhu. His relations had been involved in the earlier clearance:

'In Lord Cranston's time my uncle, Gregor Macdonald, who then occupied Rudha, had to give a large increase of rent, or be quit of it. Well, he could not under the old system on which he held it afford to give more rent; the consequence was that the farm was taken over him; and the cruel thing was, that he was obliged to remove all the subtenants upon it who had been there for generations before him or his ancestors. The only thing that he could do was to get his brother Macdonald of Loch Shiel to take the people over to Loch Shiel in Moidart.'

He said that many moving from Rhu were transferred onto lands owned by MacDonald of Lochshiel at Eilean Shona and Dorlinn

The names of some of the 37 heads of household in twelve 18th-century Rhu townships can be traced to Eilean Shona and Dorlinn in the 1851 census. Overcrowding in Moidart, together with potato blight, led to an exodus. Eneas arranged that the priest should be allowed to leave with his people: 'So many of them went to Australia and a few to America. . . It is a source of grief to me that I had anything to do with that emigration, although at the same time God knows I cannot understand how it could have been averted.'

In 1888, ten years after being reduced to 'MacDonell of Camusdarach', Eneas took a leading part in the Loch Morar Rights of Way case. Three MacDonalds, 'Angus the piper, Duncan the fisherman, and Ronald the crofter' (at Bunna-caimbe) opened the locked gate of Rhubana Lodge so as to reclaim the old road to the ford. The three put a boat on the loch and fished, recording their action in a legal document. This was a formal challenge to the rights of the five riparian owners who, for the sake of their fishing, were trying to control the boat journeys of local people in terms of named landing places.

Relevant to the 'last laird of Morar' theme, Lord Young's court in Edinburgh heard that 'Mr MacDonell was not a wealthy man.' It has to be said, however, that no expense was spared on the house Eneas built at Camusdarach after he gave up control of Morar: the billiard room has a Victorian version of air-conditioning. His experimental farming methods included the introduction of silage to the area. Eneas and Catherine had three sons and one daughter who survived to adulthood. She inherited Camusdarach, and about 1915 died on the kitchen table during an operation for appendicitis. This story came from the Bowmans who bought Camusdarach after renting Garramore. William Bowman was a London eye surgeon who first visited Morar in the 1860s.

Two years after he had sold out, Eneas was in Canada finding out more about the MacDonalds who had sold him Morar back in 1856; what he heard may have surprised him

There is more to Eneas selling Morar than meets the eye. Two years after the 1878 sale he was in Montreal - presumably checking on the Gerinish Mac-Donalds further up the St Lawrence who took his £11,000. There he met a Jesuit, the Rev. Ronald Bernard MacDonald, who was a Rhetland MacDonald from Prince Edward Island. Rhetland is a forgotten township on Loch Morar which was deserted in 1790, but the name also applied to 17,000 acres of valuable pasture, on Eneas's testimony, amounting to most of South Morar:

'Aeneas MacDonald of Morar told me in Montreal in 1880 that he was present when it was sworn to in court in Scotland that the Rhetland branch of Morar were all extinct. . . Whilst Aeneas was telling the Rev. R. B. MacDonald of Bedeque all about the manner in which Guernish got possession, he was not aware that there were Rhetlands living, and when he was informed by Father MacDonald of the fact, he seemed for a while dumbfounded and then added after a while, "He hoped we would not disturb him."' Eneas must have been very familiar with Rhetland family history in Scotland, but said nothing about them to Charles Fraser-Mackintosh for his published account of Morar. It looks as if Eneas heard that Rhetland MacDonalds in PEI and Cape Breton were planning to make a late claim to Morar, and sold most of it to Astley.

Eneas must have known there were Rhetlands in Canada and was 'dumb-founded' only at the news they were mounting a case. This was never pressed, and he was not disturbed during a partly deaf old age as a widower at Camusdarach and Randolph Cliff beside the Dean Bridge in Edinburgh.

He died in 1898 and is buried at Kilmory

He is buried beside his father at Kilmory in a grave clearly marked (on his instructions, no doubt) Eneas Ranald MacDonell 'of Morar'.

Alasdair Roberts, 6 April 2002.

(From an illustrated talk to Moidart Local History Group, 11 February 2002. Thanks to Tim Robertson whose notes prompted this version.)