

The History of the  
Clan Neish or MacNish  
of Perthshire and Galloway

BY

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FOREWORD.

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THE records of the Highland clans, and septs of clans, are the tributaries of the main streams of Highland history. The preservation of these records has been achieved largely by the process of "handing down," which is connoted by the word "tradition." Supplemented, sifted, and sometimes corrected, by documented history, the traditions of the Highlands truthfully convey the atmosphere of the past, and they cannot be safely ignored by the historian. The institution of the *seanachies* as an integral part of the clan system, served a useful function in the preservation alike of clan genealogies and domestic history. The *seanachies* were the repositories

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of accumulated knowledge concerning family affairs, as the bards were the channels through which poetic expression was given to family pride. Stripped of their petals, the fine flowers of bardic imagery are unattractive stalks ; but the *seanachies* have provided material of solid use, if discriminately employed, for their successors, the clan historians of the present day. And the tenacious memory of segregated communities, like those of the Highlands, with limited interests, and an inherited attachment to the past, has been a helpful factor in the retention of family records that would otherwise have been lost.

It is in these circumstances that the history of a Highland clan acquires a significance that, in this country, is peculiar to it. For it is the history of a compact unit, not a series of unrelated biographies. A clan connoted more than an aggregation of individuals of the same name, dwelling in the same district. It represented a community of ancestry, language, customs, and traditions that formed a unifying

bond of enduring strength. We do not find analogous conditions in Anglo-Saxon communities. The compilation of a history of the Clan Smith (for example) offers such difficulties as would daunt the boldest Smith from making the attempt, though the biographies of individual Smiths are not rare. But the compilation of a history of the Clan (or sept) Gow, which is the Gaelic equivalent of Smith, would present none of the difficulties that exist when the cohesive qualities inherent in the clan system are lacking. The Highlander is naturally endowed (or burdened) with the genealogical sense. "Are you of the Johnstons of Glencro or of Ardnurchan," bawled MacLean of Lochbuy in Dr Johnson's totally unresponsive and completely scandalised ear. What did the sage of Fleet Street, with all his learning, know or care for the fine distinctions between Highland families, or what did Boswell (a Lowland Scot) know or care when he confused Johnstons with MacIans (John's sons), and Glencroe with Glencoe? But Lochbuy knew and cared, and

so, according to the Highland enthusiast, does every Highlander worth his salt.

Clan and kindred societies flourish at the present day in the great centres of population, and by maintaining the sentiment of race and of local patriotism, serve a laudable purpose when a sense of proportion is rigorously maintained. But the objects of these 'societies do not permit of any really serious exertion on their part—though there are instances to the contrary—to preserve fast-dying traditions, or promote the study of Highland history. These contributions must be left to individual initiative.

The book now before me is, therefore, a welcome addition to the essays on Highland clans. The 'History of the Clan Neish or MacNish' is a careful compilation from sources of unimpeachable authority, tradition being tapped in a minor degree only. Charters and sasines and other official records may be "lawyers' lumber." They may not be wildly exhilarating in their stimulus, but they are remarkably fortifying in their effects. They

are to the Scots historian what porridge is (or was) to the Scots artisan—"verra sustaining."

The joint authors may not be able to carry with them all their Highland readers—formidable critics where clan history is concerned—in their conclusions about the origin of the clan name and the alleged identity between the MacNishes and the MacNechts. Nor will some of those readers, perhaps, be willing to grant the status of a clan, as distinct from the sept of a clan, to the MacNishes. But all readers, however critical, must needs agree that the authors have stated their case with complete fairness and—once more may one emphasise the fact—with a wealth of reliable evidence that is highly commendable. I must confess that my previous knowledge of the clan's history was confined to the well-authenticated tradition of their feud with their neighbours, the MacNabs, and the ultimate triumph of the latter, the "Abbot's" clan. The last Chief of the MacNishes was, in the sixteenth century, struck down in a Perthshire glen; the descendant of the

MacNab who conquered him, is famous to-day as the subject of one of Raeburn's finest portraits.

Every MacNish, or Neish, or Ness, in this or other lands, should be grateful to the authors of this book for the thoroughness of their research. By their industry and care they have elucidated what is probably all that can be known on an obscure and hitherto untouched subject.

W. C. MACKENZIE.

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