

What were the Politics that led to the End of the House of Alister MacMurchy? (Part 1)

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PART I – The Downfall of Alister MacMurchy

1. Medieval Scotland

Before we look more closely at the life and times of Alister MacMurchy (*Alasdair mac Mhurchaidh*, Alister son of Murdoch), the chief of Clan Matheson in the first half of the 15th century, we will make a start by summarising the organisation of the Scottish state in the Middle Ages.

At the top of the body politic was the Crown, the head of the independent kingdom. Below that were the great nobles who held large territorial lordships where they were responsible for law and order. In the fractured mountainous and sea-torn topography of the Highlands there was a kin-based Gaelic society where local justice was provided by the chief of the occupying clan in districts often remote from the main centres of population. This was the case for Lochalsh which was separated from Dingwall in Easter Ross by the Northwest Highlands though the peninsula lay on the coast bordering a major western sea-lane in the Middle Ages between the Baltic and the Irish Sea. However disputes between different kindreds could all too frequently get out of hand so causing feuds which could continue for generations.

There was another important factor in Scottish history, the division of the country between the Scots-speaking Lowlands in the south and east and the Gaelic Highlands in the north and west. The royal court, and seat of government, was located in the Lowlands.

Scottish politics of the time were dominated by clashes between a centralising monarchy and its most powerful nobles, by rivalries between competing nobles and by inter-clan feuding. In addition antagonism between Lowlander and Highlander with their differences in language and culture would become an increasing feature in the 14th and 15th centuries. And, of course, Scotland's often difficult relationship with its more powerful neighbour to the south, England, was always on the mind of the country's rulers.

We will now aim to navigate the situation facing the Matheson chief in the first half of the 15th century which led to the catastrophe at Poul an Tarie.

2. The Situation at the Beginning of the 14th Century

Before looking at Alister's career, we go back one century to set the scene. In 1296 the English king, Edward I, set the heather alight by invading Scotland and so causing massive political upheaval across the whole country. Lochalsh was then part of the earldom of Ross, held by the Gaelic Mactaggart family. The founders of the Matheson clan were settled throughout the peninsula under their overlord, the earl of Ross. At this time Ross included Easter Ross with its main settlement and castle at Dingwall, and Wester Ross on the west coast across the mountainous spine of Drumalban (now usually referred to as the Northwest Highlands). The earldom also included the Isle of Skye. However the neighbouring district of Kintail appears to have been held directly from the Crown by the founders of Clan MacKenzie who were also hereditary constables of the royal castle of Eilean Donan, the most powerful fortress on the northwest coast. At the time of the English

invasion, King John (Balliol) was on the Scottish throne and Kenneth na Sroine (Big-nosed Kenneth) MacKenzie was the constable who held the castle in his name.

Edward I's aggression was all about who, if anyone, should occupy the Scottish throne. It caused civil war between two competing families, the Balliols and the Bruces, both of whom had a legal claim. To cut a long story short, Kenneth na Sroine continued to back the Balliols while the Earl of Ross eventually threw his support behind the rival Robert the Bruce. The Mathesons, tenants of the earl in Lochalsh, also supported the Bruce cause meaning that they were now on the opposite side to that of their cousin clan, the MacKenzies!

In 1331 matters came to a head in Wester Ross when the Earl of Ross and the Mathesons besieged Eilean Donan Castle on behalf of the Scottish boy king, David II (Bruce). When the castle fell to the royal forces, Kenneth was in serious trouble. He fled to lead a precarious existence on the run. And the outcome was a long-lasting and vicious feud between the embittered MacKenzies and both the Mactaggarts and the Mathesons. This enmity would impact on Alister MacMurchy in the times to come.

3. The End of the House of Mactaggart of Ross

In 1372 the last male Mactaggart earl of Ross died and the earldom passed to his daughter, Euphemia. This caused instability in Ross when she married twice to husbands who were both Lowlanders with interests outside the region. As far as the Mathesons were concerned these changes in landlord must have caused concern. But their vendetta with the MacKenzies continued unabated. And furthermore the latter clan's position was much improved following the end of the Mactaggarts of Ross. The new lord of Ross resettled them on land near modern Strathpeffer in Easter Ross far from the troubles to come on the west coast. From this base this clan would prosper and increase its power and land holdings in the future.

Sadly the ongoing bitter quarrel between the two cousin clans, Matheson and MacKenzie, would cause Alister MacMurchy much grief in the times to come.

4. The Rise of the MacDonald Lords of the Isles

By the end of the 14th century, in Alister MacMurchy's time, the Gaelic MacDonald family had expanded their lands from their base in the Isle of Islay to include all of the Hebrides (except Skye) and substantial holdings on the western mainland including Lochaber (at the southwestern end of the Great Glen) and parts of Argyll and Wester Ross. Their chief now styled himself as Lord of the Isles. And in addition they had a strong legal claim to the earldom of Ross should it fall vacant. This became likely in the first decade of the 15th century when the title was inherited by a girl with severe disability issues. She would eventually opt to resign her rights and enter a nunnery. But a Lowland noble family, the Stewarts of Albany with close connections to the royal dynasty, were plotting to gain Ross for themselves. This fluid situation would soon erupt into armed conflict and Alister Matheson would need to pick a side.

5. Ross becomes a battleground

In 1411 angry at the Stewart power play over Ross, Donald 2nd Lord of the Isles decided to raise an army and fight for his rights in this large mainland territory. Alister now had to decide whether to support the Gaelic Lord, already powerful in the northwest and with the best legal claim, or the Lowland government, more remote and Scots speaking. When the Island army disembarked at Castle Bay, Strorne, on the northern side of the narrows of Loch Carron, Alister in nearby Lochalsh made his decision and called out his clan to join it.

Meanwhile his enemies, the MacKenzies, chose the opposite side and formed part of a government force led by Black Angus Mackay which attempted to block the advance of Donald's army. However it was swept aside and the Islanders headed for Aberdeen. The Stewart earl of Mar raised Lowland troops to defend the town and the two armies clashed at the Battle of Harlaw. This turned out to be a particularly violent and

bloody confrontation between Lowlander and Highlander but it ended in a draw. However the MacDonalds returned to their western heartland without achieving their objective of Ross while Aberdeen was saved.

And Alister MacMurchy was now in the government's bad books!

6. The Earldom of Ross is gained by Alexander of the Isles

In 1428 there was an important event in Highland history. A new and forceful king, James I, was determined to make his presence felt in the Gaelic part of his kingdom and deal with the causes of unrest there. He summoned Alexander 3rd Lord of the Isles and leading northern chiefs to attend a "parliament" at Inverness Castle. Both the Matheson and MacKenzie chiefs attended. The Court's intelligence for the strength of northern clans was 2000 men apiece for the Mathesons and MacKenzies in Ross and 4000 for the Mackays in Strathnaver in the far north. James was also informed about the constant feuding between the two Ross clans which continued to disturb the king's peace in the north.

The event turned out not to be a talking shop but an act of punishment! Alexander and all the chiefs were promptly thrown into prison for a period. This humiliation aggravated the tension between the MacDonalds and the Stewart government and served to raise the ante. After some military clashes in the north the king gained the upper hand and the Lord of the Isles was imprisoned in the Lowlands. And Alister MacMurchy was again a wanted man after his part in this rebellious activity by the Islanders.

However James's hard-line approach towards his nobles eventually bore bitter fruit. Some resentful Lowland lords assassinated the king in 1437. Alexander of the Isles was a big winner after James's murder. He was released, granted the earldom of Ross (at last) and promoted to the role of the government's representative in the North.

As far as the Mathesons were concerned Lochalsh and Lochcarron now formed part of the domains of Alexander, Earl of Ross and Lord of the Isles. Alexander granted these districts to his oldest, though illegitimate, son Celestine, who founded the MacDonalds of Lochalsh. But if Alister MacMurchy thought that things would now calm down he was soon be disappointed!

7. Avengers from the North.

We have seen how the Mathesons faced turbulent times during the prolonged changeover in Ross from Mactaggarts of Ross to MacDonald Lords of the Isles. But soon Alister was to face danger from a completely different direction!

To understand this we need to go back to the early 1430's. King James was continuing his aggressive policy towards the most powerful nobles in the Gaelic North. He authorised two military expeditions against them led by Lowland lords. Both would end in failure. In the northwest the government's force was defeated by Clan Donald at Inverlochy, near modern Fort William, despite Alexander of the Isles's absence in prison. But of more relevance to Alister MacMurchy's story was another victory by a Gaelic leader, Black Angus Mackay, over government troops, this time at the Battle of Drumnacoub (*Drum na Coup*) in the far north. One of the men called up for the government's attacking force was one Ivor Matheson – how come?

The Matheson clan had succeeded in expanding north-eastwards into Sutherland, probably towards the end of the 14th century. This new branch was established at Shinness beside Loch Shin, near the modern village of Lairg. But this growth of the clan beyond its homeland (*duthchas*) of Lochalsh was to have disastrous consequences!

According to Mackay sources, Ivor Matheson arrived late after the fighting had ended and the attackers had fled the field. The Mackay high chief, Black Angus, was surveying the scene when Ivor loosed an arrow at him so killing him. This murder, as the Mackays saw it, had to be avenged. While Ivor was soon hunted

down and dispatched, only the death of the chief of his Matheson kindred would fully compensate for his deed. In the unstable period after the assassination of the king the Mackays saw an opportunity to gain their revenge on the Mathesons. Accordingly a war band set off for Lochalsh.

So what was the situation for Alister MacMurchy? He still led a large clan in Lochalsh but was in the government's bad books, meaning that he could expect no aid from that quarter. To his east his enemies, the MacKenzies, no doubt supported the advance of the Mackays through their territory. Alister's overlord, the MacDonald earl of Ross, was closely allied with the Mackays of Strathnaver against royal aggression, an alliance strengthened by family connections. It seems that they preferred to let matters take their course in this private blood feud between kindreds. The old saying "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" had been invoked by the aggrieved Mackays and Alister was on his own!

The Mackay fighters entered eastern Lochalsh by Glen Ling, ambushed the Matheson defenders at Poul an Tarie (*Poll an Tairbh*) and slew not only the Matheson chief but also four of his sons. It was an unmitigated disaster which, at a stroke, reduced the clan to minor status – and in no position to continue the blood feud with the Mackays!

In the second part to this article, we shall look at the background to the fate of Alister MacMurchy's descendants, Matheson South.