

INTRODUCTION to the MATHESON TIMELINE

By: Dr Alister Farquhar Matheson

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This timeline covers the period from the founding of Clan Matheson in medieval Scotland up to 1607. This latter date marks the end of a time of violent feuding between rival clans over the clan's homeland of Lochalsh. Where possible the date years are historically correct but this information is not always available, especially in some events relating to the clan. Here I have fallen back on my "best guess". I hope that this makes an interesting summary of the Mathesons' story through time.

TIMELINE FOR CLAN MATHESON – 1200-1607

1200's, first half

Mathan, name founder of Clan Matheson, is lord of Kintail.

1262

Savage raids on Norwegian Skye by the Earl of Ross and Kenneth MacMathan, lord of Kintail.

1263

Royal naval expedition by the powerful Norwegian king, Haakon Haakonsson, to the Hebrides. The fleet anchors on the coast of Skye, at the entrance to Kyle Rhea in Loch Alsh, before pressing on south. Defeated by the Scots and stormy weather at Battle of Largs, the old king dies in Orkney. His name is remembered in Kyle Akin, the Straits of Haakon, between Kyle of Lochalsh and Skye.

1266

The Treaty of Perth. Norway withdraws from the Hebrides which are ceded to Scotland.

1260's

Kenneth MacMathan is promoted to Constable of the royal castle of Eilean Donan. Now in addition to Kintail, he also moves into Lochalsh, under the overlordship of the MacTaggart earl of Ross, the most powerful noble north of the Great Glen.

1296

Edward I of England turns his attention to conquering Scotland following his success in Wales. A large army crosses the Border. The Wars of Scottish Independence also give rise to civil war between rival claimants for the throne of Scotland, John Balliol and Robert Bruce.

1304

Kenneth MacMathan dies and is buried in Iona. Kintail and the Constablenesship of Eilean Donan passes to his oldest grandson, Kenneth na Sroine who is the chief of Clan MacKenzie.

His younger grandson, Duncan, becomes tenant of Lochalsh, under the MacTaggart earl of Ross, and chief of Clan Matheson. He moves into the fort on Sean-chreag above Loch Achnahinich (*Achaidh na h-Inich*).

1331

Civil war between Balliol and Bruce had returned following the death of Robert I (aka Robert the Bruce) and accession of his son to the throne of Scotland at a young age. The Earl of Ross, supported by Duncan Matheson, besieges Eilean Donan Castle which is held by Kenneth na Sroine MacKenzie on behalf of the Balliol faction. The castle is taken and Kenneth flees.

1372

William Earl of Ross dies. He is the last male earl of the Mactaggart family and the earldom passes to his daughter, Euphemia. The earldom of Ross now becomes unstable and, unfortunately for the Mathesons of Lochalsh, goes into decline. On the other hand, their rivals, the MacKenzies, profit from this change in the politics of the north. Meanwhile the might of the MacDonald Lords of the Isles is growing in the northwest, Argyll, Lochaber and the Western Isles (aka the Hebrides).

1411

Battle of Harlaw is fought between Donald MacDonald Lord of the Isles and Alexander Stewart Earl of Mar, who represented the government (then headed by a regent, Robert Stewart Duke of Albany). This bloody clash, a draw, is between two rivals, Donald and Albany, who are both claiming the earldom of Ross. Alister MacMurchy Matheson is one of the rebels supporting Donald and he is subsequently outlawed for his part in the battle.

after 1411

Alexander MacDonald, heir to the Lordship of the Isles, gains parts of Wester Ross.

1415

The Earl of Mar, now the government's strongman north of the Great Glen, jails two leading Mathesons, the chief Alister MacMurchy and his brother Ruarie, in Inverness Castle for the clan's part in the rebellion of 1411. There is a strong suspicion that the MacKenzies, still bitter about the Mathesons' part in the defeat of Kenneth na Sroine at Eilean Donan (in 1331), had seized them and handed them over to the authorities.

1428

King James I summons the Lord of the Isles and leading northern chiefs to Inverness. Alister MacMurchy attends. The king imprisons all the Gaelic lords to demonstrate that his power extends into the north and west of the Scottish kingdom.

1429

After this humiliation and to show his continuing claim for the earldom of Ross against the Stewart king, Alexander Lord of the Isles sacks Inverness.

The king, James I, responds quickly by attacking and defeating the MacDonald forces in the Braes of Lochaber. Alister MacMurchy is one of the rebels.

1431

The Stewart earl of Mar is still the king's representative in the north and he mounts a major offensive on the northern Gaels on three fronts:-

1st – the MacKenzies are given a commission to bring Alister MacMurchy Matheson to justice. This does not appear to have been carried out successfully.

2nd – A government force which includes Ivor Matheson of Shinness (in Sutherland) attacks the Mackays in the far north but is defeated at the Battle of Drumnacoub (*Drum na Coup*). Ivor kills the Mackay high chief with an arrow after the fighting has ended so starting a blood feud between the Mathesons and the Mackays.

3rd – Moray himself leads an army into the lands of the Lordship of the Isles. However the government force is defeated at Inverlochy (near modern Fort William), this time by the MacDonalds.

1437

James I is assassinated by rebellious nobles. Alexander Lord of the Isles is finally confirmed as Earl of Ross and is appointed as the government's representative north of the Great Glen replacing the deceased Earl of Mar. This is a big turnaround in the fortunes of the MacDonalds.

c1438

The Battle of Poul an Tarie (*Poll an Tairbh*). A raiding party of Mackays, bent on revenge, makes its way into eastern Lochalsh via Glen Ling and ambushes the Mathesons. Alister MacMurchy and four of his sons are slain. The clan is devastated and splits into two in Lochalsh, a northern and a southern branch.

In the north Ruarie, perhaps MacMurchy's brother or maybe his son, continues in Fernaig or Strath Askaig, under his overlords, the MacDonalds of Lochalsh. In the south the MacDonalds of Lochalsh move into MacMurchy's centre at Achnahinich and grant tenancies of Balmacara and Glen Udalán to a son of MacLeod of Lewis. The latter marries Matheson's widow.

1450's

Iain Dubh (pronounced doo & means black), a surviving son of Alister MacMurchy, returns from Badenoch, with men supplied by his Macintosh grandfather, to recover Matheson farms in southern Lochalsh. He succeeds in driving MacLeod out of Lochalsh. He then occupies Glen Udalán in a village on the slopes above modern Auchtertyre and gives the tenancy of Balmacara to the leader of his supporters from Badenoch, Ara or perhaps MacAra.

1491

Battle of Park (near modern Strathpeffer in Easter Ross). Sir Alexander MacDonald of Lochalsh claims leadership of Clan Donald and attacks Easter Ross in attempt to recover the lost earldom of Ross (in 1476). Men from Matheson North would have been in his army.

Kenneth of the Battle (*Coinneach a' Blair*), the MacKenzie chief, raises a force, which includes Iain Dubh Matheson and four of his sons (John, Alexander, Dugald and Donald) from Matheson South, and wins a famous victory.

In the aftermath of the battle Iain and his sons are in trouble with the authorities for joining the victorious MacKenzies in damaging raids on MacDonald allies in the Black Isle.

1501-1506

First rising of Donald Dubh, last male descendant of MacDonald of the Isles, in attempt to regain the Lordship of the Isles (lost in 1494).

c1505

Battle of Achnashellach. Government force led by the Munro chief, Munro of Foulis, is intercepted by defenders under Ewen Cameron, Constable of Strome Castle for MacDonald of Lochalsh. In his army is Alasdair MacRuarie with his men from Matheson North. Munro is defeated and killed.

1506

The Earl of Huntly brings a larger government army into Wester Ross to put down the rebels in the northwest. He succeeds in this mission and captures both Eilean Donan and Strome Castles. Alasdair MacRuarie Matheson is taken prisoner and hanged in Edinburgh.

1519

The last MacDonald of Lochalsh dies following a campaign in Ardnamurchan to avenge the murder of his father. Unmarried, his land in Lochalsh is divided between his two sisters. One is married to MacDonell of Glengarry, chief of another branch of Clan Donald, who is based in Invergarry in the Great Glen. The other married Dingwall of Kildun in Easter Ross, far from Lochalsh. Glengarry gains northern Lochalsh, home of Matheson North, and Kildun, southern Lochalsh, base of Matheson South.

1520's

Murdoch Buidhe is recognised by Glengarry as leader of Matheson North (in Fernaig and Strath Askaig). He is the ancestor of many Mathesons today.

1539

Another Clan Donald rebellion, this time led by Donald Gorm, chief of MacDonald of Sleat (in Skye), seeking return of the Lordship.

The islanders mount seaborne attack on Eilean Donan Castle, owned by MacKenzie of Kintail, the government's supporter in the northwest. In Donald Gorm's war fleet is Murdoch Buidhe and men of Matheson North.

The Castle's small garrison is commanded by its constable, John Matheson from Matheson South, Chief of the Clan. During the siege John is hit by an arrow and mortally wounded. Then Duncan MacGilchrist Macrae strikes the MacDonald rebel leader with his arrow causing his withdrawal to the nearby rocky islet of Larach Tigh Mhic Dhomhnuill where he dies. The siege is lifted and the rebellion collapses.

1539 (?)

Battle of the Arrow (*Blar na Saighde*). MacLeods of Lewis and Raasay attack southern Lochalsh from the bay below Kirkton. Iain Ciar of Balmacara leads the defending Mathesons. The raiders are driven off and "Church" Duncan (*Donnachadh an Teampuill*) sets fire to the church to drive out those MacLeods seeking sanctuary there.

1540's

Iain Ciar obtains large stone from the braes above Kirkton. On it an effigy of the fallen chief, John the Constable, is carved, most likely funded by a grateful MacKenzie of Kintail, the owner of Eilean Donan. This memorial is still in Kirkton churchyard, much worn by time and weather.

1547

Battle of Pinkie. MacKenzie of Kintail brings his clansmen to join the Scottish Army mustered to defend Edinburgh. It is likely that men from Matheson South are in Kintail's force.

An invading English army defeats the Scottish defenders at Pinkie and Kintail is captured. He is only freed after payment of a ransom.

later 1540's

MacDonells of Glengarry, landowners in northern Lochalsh, seize Dugald Roy Matheson, the next chief (following the death of his brother, John the Constable), and he dies a prisoner in Invergarry in the Great Glen. The Clan's chieftaincy passes to Murdoch Buidhe, the Matheson leader in the north. This brings to an end the family descended from Alister MacMurchy (Matheson South).

1554

MacKenzie of Kintail makes his first move into southern Lochalsh by taking out a mortgage from the current owners, Dingwall of Kildun.

1571

MacKenzie of Kintail completes purchase of land in south Lochalsh.

1574

MacDonell of Glengarry secures legal reconfirmation for his estates in north Lochalsh and in neighbouring Lochcarron.

early 1580's

Roderick of Fernaig succeeds his father, Murdoch Buidhe, as clan chief.

MacKenzie of Redcastle (in the Black Isle) and his brother, Dougal, launch savage attack on the MacDonells in Lochalsh and Lochcarron. Glengarry himself is captured and imprisoned for forty days.

Donald Matheson, brother of the clan chief, is brutally slain by these raiders. The Mathesons get their revenge by killing Dougal MacKenzie at Sanachan (at the head of Loch Kishorn).

1583

In such dangerous times, Glengarry again confirms legal ownership of his holdings in Lochalsh and Lochcarron.

late 1580's

As the vicious war over territory in Lochalsh and neighbouring Lochcarron continues and MacKenzie of Kintail begins to gain the upper hand over Glengarry, Roderick of Fernaig and his brothers change sides. This switches their allegiance from the Mathesons' traditional support for the MacDonald interest to that of the MacKenzies (their action may well have saved the clan from eventual extinction in Lochalsh). Some of the clan, however, do not follow this lead – perhaps out of loyalty, perhaps because of fear of reprisals from Glengarry.

1591/2

MacKenzie of Kintail receives a crown charter for the church lands of Lochalsh, so adding another jigsaw piece in the peninsula.

late 1590's

Glengarry's oldest son, Angus Og, raids into MacKenzie territory at the head of Loch Carron. Driven off, the MacDonell "birlinns" (small galleys) head for Sleat in Skye. Angus Og's boat becomes separated and is attacked by a larger MacKenzie birlinn at the mouth of Kyle Rhea (between Skye and Glenelg). The MacDonells are driven onto the rocks of Sgeir na Caillich and Angus is mortally wounded. Two Mathesons birlinns under Dugald an Oir Matheson arrive as reinforcement from Balmacara.

1596

Glengarry is declared an outlaw by King James VI.

1601

Kintail is granted a Commission of Fire and Sword against Glengarry.

1603

Kintail mounts his final assault on Glengarry's estates in north Lochalsh and in Lochcarron. Roderick of Fernaig's young son, John, acts as guide for the MacKenzie force. Strome Castle is besieged and finally falls to the MacKenzies.

1607

Glengarry resigns his estates in Lochalsh and Lochcarron, and Kintail is given a crown charter for these lands. It is total victory for MacKenzie. The Mathesons at last have stability again for their tenancies throughout Lochalsh.