

After the Battle of Poul an Tarie [Part I]

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1. The Aftermath.

Poul an Tarie was the site of the Mathesons' greatest defeat – but what happened afterwards? The histories and legends of the clan have only patchy information on this long-ago period (in the 15th and early 16th centuries). In the 1430's Alister MacMurchy and four of his sons had all perished in a devastating ambush by a Mackay war-band from the far north bent on revenge. Their high chief had been shot dead with an arrow loosed by a Sutherland Matheson a few years earlier thus initiating a blood feud between clans.

At a stroke the death of these leading Mathesons left vacant their tenancies in the farming townships of Achnahinich/Achnandarach (in central Lochalsh), and Balmacara/Reraig and Glen Udalain (both in the south of the peninsula) – [see Map 1 for township locations in Lochalsh¹]. Others were now encouraged to seize this opportunity to fill the vacuum left by their departure!

Loch Achnahinich (Gaelic: Loch Achaidh na h-Inich) is overlooked by an ancient fort on Carn na Sean-chreag which had been the clan's centre and HQ for over a century. Now a new tenant seized the opportunity to move in – one of the senior members of the warlike and rebellious MacDonalds of Lochalsh whose chief was then the landowner of northern Lochalsh. It may well have been this family that built a defensive stone building on an artificial island in the loch (known as a "crannog") as their base to replace the old hill fort once occupied by the Matheson chief. The remains of both the crannog in the loch and the fort above it can still be seen today. Later, in the 1500's, after the death of the last of the MacDonalds of Lochalsh (in 1519), the township of Achnahinich/Achnandarach passed into the hands of another turbulent branch of Clan Donald, the MacDonells of Glengarry.

Hence the disaster at Poul an Tarie resulted in the exit of the Mathesons from central Lochalsh and they would not return until well after the Clan Age had passed into history. It was long afterwards, in a surprising turn of events, that Sir Alexander Matheson, 1st Baronet of Lochalsh, purchased the entire district in Victorian times, so making a Matheson the landowner (not just the tenant) of all Lochalsh, the cradle of the clan, in 1851!

2. Arrival of the Usurper.

If the MacDonalds had taken up residence at Achnahinich what happened in the southern districts of Balmacara/Reraig and Glen Udalain? It is likely that the tenancies here had been held by sons of Alister MacMurchy, the Matheson chief, who had also fallen at the Battle of Poul an Tarie. A member of Clan MacLeod (pronounced macloud) of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides (Note: a different clan from the MacLeods of Dunvegan in Skye) was quick to step in, no doubt with the approval of the mighty MacDonald Lord of the Isles, then the leader of Scottish Gaeldom in the Islands and western coastlands of the country. In the 15th century this clan was expanding its territory aggressively beyond Lewis into the Isle of Raasay next to Skye and across the Inner Sound from Kyle of Lochalsh, Assynt on the northwest coast, and Gairloch in Wester Ross, some 30 miles north of Lochalsh as the crow flies. Some of these districts were uncomfortably close to the Mathesons' homeland!

MacLeod married Alister MacMurchy's widow and then claimed southern Lochalsh for himself. Clan legend has it that he built a house on one of the knolls opposite the church in Kirkton, the village which was the

centre of Lochalsh at this time. At one and the same time he had placed himself at the heart of the land he had usurped and chosen a strong defensive position in case of trouble. And indeed the Mathesons and their supporters were far from happy with this arrangement! They named the hillock where MacLeod and his wife had set up home as Torr an t-Slachdaire, the Hill of the Tyrant.

But this was not the end of the story, far from it. Another of Alister MacMurchy's sons, too young to have taken part in the battle at Poul an Tarie, was smuggled out of Lochalsh and sent to live with relatives in Clan Mackintosh country (perhaps in the district of Badenoch, south of Inverness?) which was safely distant from the west coast. His name was Iain Dubh (pronounced doo and meaning Black). And as soon as he came of age he determined to return to Lochalsh and reclaim his birthright.

3. The Return

So who was MacLeod, the usurper? He would probably have been a younger son of a leading family in the Lewis clan who was seeking his own farming township in an age where alternative career opportunities for Highland gentry were very limited. Matheson traditions are uncertain about him. One source names him as Angus MacLeod of Assynt who married Margaret, the widow of the slain Matheson chief, while another one suggests that he was a son of the clan chief in Lewis². Be that as it may the evidence points to him being a member of the powerful Island clan, MacLeod of Lewis.

Seizing the opportunity offered by the upheaval in Lochalsh, MacLeod succeeded in marrying Alister MacMurchy's widow and claimed through this the tenancies of the southern townships in Lochalsh. However he appears to have been well aware that a Matheson heir was still at large! He billeted a mercenary soldier in each farm occupied by a Matheson to warn him of any impending trouble.

Meanwhile that heir, Iain Dubh, was sent to live with a grandfather, said to be a Mackintosh chieftain who was the father of his mother. As soon as he reached manhood he raised a band of warriors with the aid of his relatives who were prepared to try their luck in his venture. Iain led his men towards the west coast and slipped covertly into the Lochalsh peninsula.

The armed band remained undiscovered and were able to mount a successful night attack on the house on Torr an t-Slachdair in Kirkton and set it alight. In the ensuing confusion, and with the help of his wife (and Iain's mother), MacLeod managed to escape. He fled to MacDonald territory in northern Lochalsh and took ship for Lewis. However in the years to come he was a constant thorn in Iain's flesh as he sought to make a comeback. The Mathesons were back but they were living in mighty dangerous times!

4. Balmacara.

Now that Iain was back in southern Lochalsh, what next for him and his supporters? In this Part we shall concentrate on the farmstead of Balmacara. Its name, which first appears in writing in the mid-16th century, is derived from Gaelic, and provides a valuable clue as to who first occupied it. The word appears to mean "the township of MacAra". Some have suggested that the name may be a distortion of Macrae but this is most unlikely since this clan was based in neighbouring Kintail in this period and only appears in eastern Lochalsh later, at Conchra on the Lochalsh side of Loch Long, across from the modern village of Dornie. W.J. Watson, in his book entitled the "Placenames of Ross and Cromarty"³ says that the name means township of the son or sons of Ara (or Carra). This is interesting since Ara is not a west coast name, and Watson comments that it is a Perthshire name i.e. it hails far from Lochalsh. So who then was MacAra?

A likely possibility is that MacAra was Iain's trusty lieutenant and leader of the warriors who had helped him to win back his inheritance. The Matheson chief would have needed to reward him and his followers for their part in the successful campaign, and, in dangerous times, he would also have been anxious to shore up his

defences along the southern shores facing Loch Alsh. In short these men would have added much needed manpower to Clan Matheson after its devastation at Poul an Tarie.

We might also be able to make an informed guess at this MacAra's first name. There is an interesting paragraph in the Iomaire MS which is quoted as a footnote in the History of the Mathesons⁴. It refers to the Battle of the Arrow (Gaelic: Blar na Saighde) fought by the Mathesons against MacLeod raiders at Kirkton (probably in the late 1530's). In summary one of the Mathesons, Iain Ciar (Dark Iain), was leader of the archers who played a leading role in defeating the MacLeods. Roderick of Iomair, author of the MS⁵, gives his full Gaelic name as – Iain Ciar mac Mhurchaidh mhic Thomais i.e. Iain Ciar, son of Murdoch, son of Thomas. Thus his grandfather was called Thomas which again was not a name in use in Lochalsh at this period. This fact suggests that Iain Ciar was a member of the family living at Balmacara.

From the foregoing then it may be that Iain Dubh's commander when the Mathesons entered Lochalsh to regain their birthright by force was called either Murdoch or, possibly, Thomas MacAra. And this is as far as we can take it. Following the success of the mission, I believe that this was the MacAra that was granted the township which still bears his name today, Balmacara, by the grateful Matheson chief.

Before ending Part 1, we shall return to Iain Ciar. He was famed in the story of the Mathesons not only for his military skill and bravery but also for his great physical strength. He is reputed to have quarried a large stone on the brae above Kirkton and carried it down on his back, single-handed (perhaps obtained from the remnants of Kirkton Dun, an ancient small stone fort above the village). On this stone was later carved the effigy of John, Constable of Eilean Donan Castle, who was Iain Dubh's son and successor as the next Matheson chief. He was slain in the great siege of 1539 by the Island clans led by Donald Gorm MacDonald of Sleat (in Skye). This gravestone can still be seen in the burial ground in Kirkton behind the former church (deconsecrated in 2015). It lies, face up, near the north-eastern end of the cemetery, much worn by the passage of time and exposure to the elements.

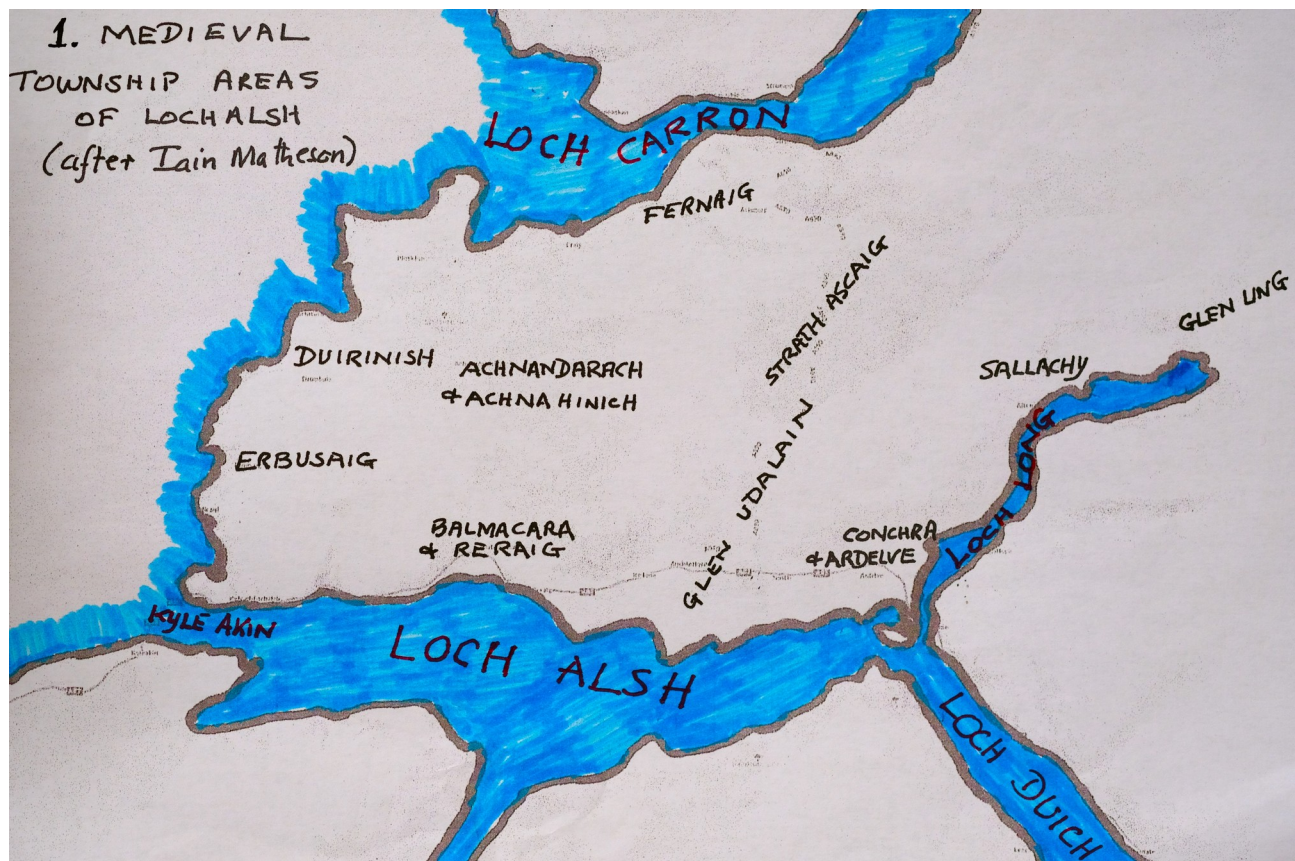
In Part 2, we shall investigate the possible location of Iain Dubh's base in southern Lochalsh after his return from exile.

4. References.

1. A Short History of the Mathesons and of Lochalsh, Iain Matheson, Plockton, 2006, page 25.
2. History of the Mathesons, Alexander MacKenzie and Alexander MacBain, 2nd edition, 1900, pages 14 & 15.
3. Place-Names of Ross and Cromarty, William J. Watson, 1904 (Nabu Public Domain Reprint), page 185.
4. History of the Mathesons, footnote below page 18.
5. Iomaire MS, Genealogical Description of the Mathesons, Roderick Matheson of Iomair, c.1824 (now archived in the National Library of Scotland, deposit number 347).

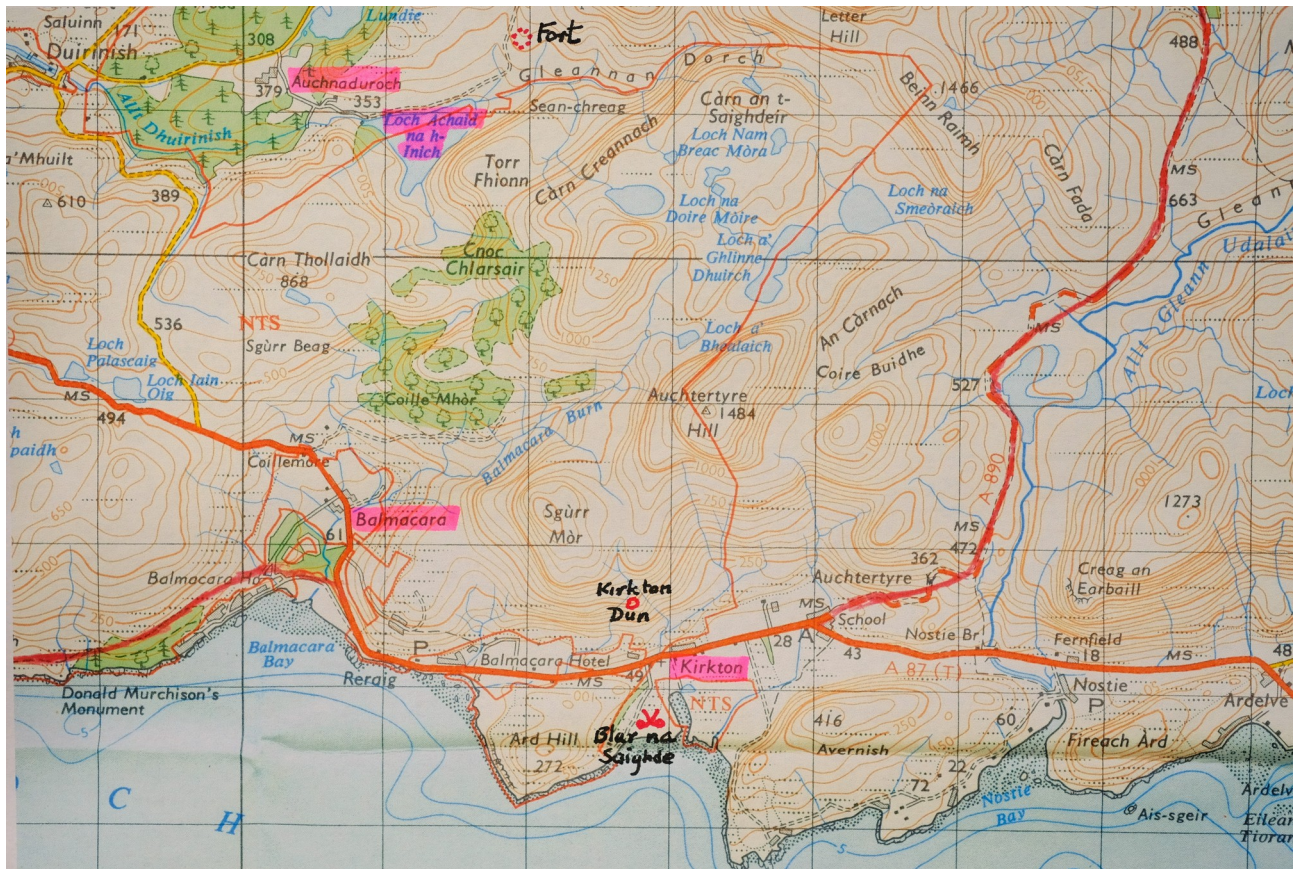
5. Illustrations

1. Diagram showing medieval township districts in Lochalsh (after Iain Matheson, Plockton).



2. Southern Lochalsh with places of Matheson interest marked (OS map, One Inch to the Mile. Latest revision, 1955; Major roads updated to 1964).

Note: some road alignments have changed since 1964 and the village of Achnandarach (Oak Field) is spelt here as Auchnadurach, a phonetic English interpretation of the correct Gaelic spelling now used in modern maps.



3. Poul an Tarie (Gaelic, Poll an Tairbh, Bull's Pool) beside the River Ling, site of the Mathesons' greatest defeat



4. In the foreground is the Fort on Carn na Sean-chreag, home of the early Matheson chiefs. In the background is Loch Achaidh na h-Inich (English version, Achnahinich. The Gaelic name means Loch with the Field at Its Tip).



5. The crannog in Loch Achaidh na h-Inich. These are the surviving remnants of an artificial island where the MacDonells of Glengarry once had their stronghold in Lochalsh.



6. Balmacara Bay from the east. Inland from here is the township which was given by Iain Dubh Matheson to the leader of the warriors who helped him win back southern Lochalsh.

