

**STORIES
OF
THE FIRST MATHESONS**

by

Serena Matheson of Matheson



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COINNEACH MAC MATHGHAMHNA
who conquered the Norseman in Skye and built
Eilean Donan Castle.

NOTE

The Seannachies told the old stories to successive generations of the Clan. Sometimes they varied in the telling and, by the time they were written down, there were many versions. I have strung together some of the tales about Coinneach and his descendants so that the Matheson children of today might be able to enjoy them. As far as possible I have added dates and facts where they can be tied in.

Coinneach mac Mathghamhna was an ancestor common to both Mathesons and MacKenzies, and much of the information for this story can be found in the Rev. William Matheson's "Traditions of the MacKenzies".

These stories first appeared in the Clan Matheson Newsletters.

Coinneach must have been born about 1234, and he is the earliest of our ancestors that we know quite a lot about. Coinneach is called Kenneth in English, so that is what I shall call him.

Kenneth's father and mother lived at Totaig, in a very well-built broch called Caistal Gnugaig, whose ruins are still standing. He was their only son. When Kenneth was born his mother must have been very ill, and every one was at their wit's end to think how he was to get any milk, as feeding bottles had not yet been invented. At last someone had a brilliant idea, and they took the skull of a raven that had been killed, and gave Kenneth his first drink from that. Now, because of this, all his life he could understand the language of birds, as well as many of the foreign languages of men.

His father often used to ask him what the birds were saying. One day, in 1248, when he was about 14 or 15, two big black ravens were squawking away in the walls of the castle.

"What are those birds talking about, son?", asked his father.

"They are saying", replied Kenneth, "that one day, you will wait upon me as my servant."

Kenneth's father was furious. He gave the boy a good thrashing and locked him up in a little prison cell inside the walls of the castle. But Kenneth knew every inch of that broch, and he had friends, anyway, among the servants. So, next morning, when the big stone was rolled back from the door, he was able to dash through, run up the steep burn behind, and disappear into the hills.

When he felt he was safe, Kenneth sat down behind a rock and thought and thought. I expect that he was really a bit

frightened and lonely, and rather wished that he had not run away. But he was proud, too, and decided that he was jolly well not going to go back and say he was sorry, when he had only told the truth. So he got up and walked on, right up over Mam Ratigan, where the road goes now, and on over the pass into Glen Affric, until he eventually reached Inverness.

Inverness was bubbling with excitement. A very grand French nobleman called Hugh de Chatillon, Count de St. Pol, had ordered a ship to be built to carry soldiers to the Holy Land for a Crusade, and it was very nearly ready. Now, the Count had connections with Clann Ghille Annrais, who some people say, are related to the Mathesons. So Kenneth went straight up to him and asked to be allowed to come with him on the ship. The Count de St. Pol agreed to take him, and off they all went.

Kenneth grew up fast, and made his mark at once, as he could understand what people said in any language. Unfortunately, the Count died the following year (1249), but Kenneth stayed until the Crusade ended in 1250. He saw a lot of fighting and learnt to be a great commander of men. He was noticed by King Louis IX who asked Kenneth to come back to France with him. The King was forming the Scotsmen among his followers into a personal body-guard which came to be called The Scots Archer Guard of France.

When Kenneth was in France, King Louis sent for him one day, because he was getting fed up with the endless chirping of birds about his palace. This was no problem to Kenneth as he could talk to the birds, and he asked them to go away, which they did at once. King Louis was so grateful that he gave him a fully manned ship as a present.

So Kenneth set off again. He sailed all about the known world, and with his great gift for languages, made himself a huge fortune.

After several more years, Kenneth became homesick for Lochalsh and decided to go home to see how his father was. He

sailed his magnificent ship up the Sound of Sleat and through the narrow waters of Kylerhea, turned right when he came to Lochalsh, and dropped anchor off Totaig. Caisteal Grugaig looked just the same, and he could see his father looking out at the strange ship.

Kenneth put on his grandest clothes (which were probably much grander than anything else that had ever been seen in Lochalsh) and had himself rowed ashore. His father was very impressed with this magnificent stranger, and invited him up to the broch for a meal. He had ordered the very best food that he had to be prepared. When it was ready and they were all sitting down, the old man knelt down and offered the dish to Kenneth.

Kenneth just burst out laughing.

"Oh father! Don't you recognise me? Look, here is my birthmark! How right those old ravens were when they foretold this day. I was only speaking the truth when I told you what they said."

Of course, his father had to laugh too. They had a lovely ceilidh, and stayed up nearly all that night telling stories and hearing all the news.

While Kenneth was staying with his father, he heard a lot of complaints about the Vikings in Skye. There had been a Viking Princess called Saucy Mary that had ruled there, who had been very fair with the local people. She had ordered a long chain to be made and stretched between Castle Moil, where she lived, and Kyle of Lochalsh. Unless she was paid a toll, strangers were not allowed to pass through! She had died by the time Kenneth came home, and her successors were very cruel. So Kenneth decided that he would stop trading, and use his experience as a soldier to get rid of the Norsemen from Skye.

This was not nearly as easy as he had hoped. He fought them for many years, and there were many battles, and a lot of cruelty on both sides. One of the Vikings who was there wrote an account of these wars called the Hakonar Saga, so we know a

lot about them. In the end, Kenneth was successful, and managed to make the enemy leave Skye. After another big battle at Largs, where their leader was very badly wounded, they all decided to go home to Orkney.

King Alexander III was ruling Scotland then, and he was very pleased indeed with Kenneth. It seemed to the King that Kenneth would be the ideal person to keep order in that part of Scotland, and he told him to build a modern castle to defend it. Kenneth decided that the tiny Island of Eilean Donan would be the ideal place, and that is where he built the first Eilean Donan Castle.

Kenneth had married a daughter of Iomhar Crom MacIver from Glassery in Argyll. She had brought several men of her clan with her in her retinue, and many of their descendants are still living in Ross-shire.

When the Castle was finished they moved in and Kenneth lived there until he died in 1304. He was considered to be such an important person that his body was taken all the way to Iona to be buried alongside the Kings of Scotland and the Chiefs of the most important clans. His grave stone could still be identified and the inscription was quite readable at the end of the 1600s.



ALISTER MacRUARI AND HIS GREY DOG.

About the beginning of the fifteenth century the Chief of the Mathesons was Alister MacRuari. His wife was the daughter of the Chief of the MacIntoshes and the two families were great friends. They had two little boys called John and Donald and a big grey dog called Broddam Glas. He was a famous deer hound, and the Earl of Sutherland asked if he could borrow him. Alister agreed at once. But Broddam Glas had always been trained to come home to Lochalsh, and he didn't want to work for anyone else. He soon managed to get away, and took himself right back home.

The Earl of Sutherland sent a man to look for him. When this man got to Lochalsh and found Alister, there was Broddam Glas lying at his master's feet. The messenger wanted to take him back, but Alister said:

"I would have given the Earl a loan of the Broddam Glas, but I would not part with him. He has returned of his own free will, and he had better stay".

The Earl was a proud man. He was very angry with this message, and he took armed followers to harrass the Matheson lands as a punishment. When Alister heard that they were on the way, he sent an urgent message to his Father-in-law and gathered as many of the Clan together as he could at Dail Achaid da Thearnaidh (The Field of Two Descents) where the Mathesons always assembled when going to battle. There weren't as many of them as he would have liked, but they marched up Glen Udalain till they came in sight of the Sutherland men who were encamped on a hill in the Braes of Poll n'Tairib (Braes of the Bull's Pool) above Glen Ling. This hill is still called Cnoc nan Cattach, or The Sutherland Hill. Alister slipped out of sight behind the opposite hill, and this one is called Cnoc MhicRuari. He was able to surprise the enemy next morning, and there was a

great battle in the low ground between the hills. Both sides fought bravely and the battle might have gone either way. Alister had begun to be a bit worried when suddenly something caught his attention, and over the hill more men appeared. It was his father-in-law, the MacIntosh chief, with reinforcements. He had arrived in the nick of time, and the Sutherlands turned and fled. A lot of them were killed when they started to run away, and among the casualties was the Earl himself. Those that did escape were in such a hurry that they threw their big two-handed swords and knives and their targes and their plaids into a nearby loch so that they could run faster. I expect they are still there. Certainly the loch is still called Lochan-na-h-Ullaidh or the Loch of the Treasure.

After it was all over, they buried the Earl of Sutherland beside the river at a place called Lub-a-Mhorair (the Earl's Curve). Alister was really sorry that he had been killed in the battle, and very worried that there would be big trouble about it. There was!

A few years later, in 1427, King James I of Scotland came to Inverness and asked all the most important chiefs (including Alister MacRuari) to come and meet him. There had been a lot of fighting in the North about the succession of the Earl of Ross, whose sister was married to Kenneth MacKenzie of Kintail, and Alister had probably been involved in it. King James thought so, anyway. Now that Alister was responsible for the death of the Earl of Sutherland, as well, he was accused before the King of being a man of the worst character! I am sorry to say that poor Alister MacRuari was taken prisoner and marched off to Edinburgh where he had his head cut off.



**THE STORY OF JOHN AND DONALD,
sons of Alistair MacRuari,
who was beheaded by King James I in 1427.**

It is terrible to lose a father. It was even worse in those days, because everyone else would try to get hold of your lands. John and Donald's mother was appointed 'tutrix' to the estate, and did her best to hold onto it. But it was difficult for a woman on her own, and she agreed to marry a son of MacLeod of Lewis called Angus, who she thought would help her and keep it going for the boys. This was a big mistake, as he turned out to be a very wicked man who only wanted to get hold of Lochalsh for himself.

The boys soon realised that he meant to get rid of them, probably by murdering them secretly. So they planned to go away and return again when they were grown up. They decided it was better to go to different people in case MacLeod followed them. John went to his Grandfather MacIntosh and Donald to the Earl of Caithness, whose family had always hated the Earls of Sutherland, and was pleased that Donald's father had won the battle against him. They were both made very welcome and brought up and educated as one of the family.

I will tell you about Donald first, although he was younger than John. The Earl of Caithness had a daughter who was a splendid girl, very pretty and with real guts. She and Donald fell in love. Her parents were not at all pleased, as I expect they wanted her to marry someone much grander, and Donald had to go away. But the girl, whose name we don't know, was expecting his baby. So she set off, all alone, to walk to Lochalsh. To avoid anyone stopping her she went all along the north and down the west coast. It must have been a great ordeal, but she did arrive in Lochalsh in time for the baby to be born there. It was a son, and they called him Ian after Donald's

brother John. He was always known as Ian Gallach which means Ian of Caithness. We know exactly where he was born, beside the road between Balmacara and Erbusaig near a small loch called Loch an Ian Og after him. Ian had a lot of descendants, many of which went back to Sutherland and became the Mathesons of Shiness.

Now we will go back to John. When he grew up, he had a talk with his Grandfather MacIntosh about getting back his lands in Lochalsh. His grandfather promised to help, but told John that he had better go there first to find out what the people of Lochalsh felt about it. So he went there secretly and contacted all his most loyal followers and friends who were, of course, delighted to see him. Then he dressed up as a travelling salesman and went to the house where his Mother and her MacLeod husband were living. He told the servants that he had some lovely red wool for sale. When his Mother heard this, she sent for him and recognised him at once. John asked her if she would like to see Lochalsh returned to him and if she would help him. She said yes, definitely, to both and they made a plan.

But MacLeod had always been suspicious that something like this would happen. So he had taken all the drifters and bad men in the area onto his payroll and put one to live in each household at the people's expense. These were his spies and had to be got rid of first of all. They were known as Buthanach. It all took very careful planning and very exact timing.

John brought some MacIntosh supporters and hid them in a hollow between Reraig and Kirkton still called Glaic na Fear. That night each family fell on the spy that was billeted on them and killed him. One spy escaped, a man called MacKecharna, or MacEachern, who slipped out of the house and ran to try to warn MacLeod. Luckily someone noticed him crawling along and he was surrounded and caught.

John and his followers then went to MacLeod's house, surrounded it and set it on fire. John himself stood at the door to

make sure that his mother got out safely. In those days women wore long, very full, usually yellow, dresses, made of a lot of heavy home-spun material, pinned on the shoulder and gathered into a beautiful silver belt. This garment was called an arisaid. John's mother was a tall woman and Angus MacLeod was a short little man and she hid him under her arisaid when she left the house, and nobody noticed. She couldn't bear to think of his being burnt alive even though she knew what a wicked man he was. MacLeod stayed hidden until they were clear of John's men, then he got out and ran all the way to a place called Doire Damph near Duirinish. There was a man living there with a boat but no land. MacLeod promised that if he would take him all the way to the Island of Lewis in his boat, he would give him some land of his own. They got there safely but, when they landed, MacLeod's father was so angry that his son had been turned out of Lochalsh, that he made a gallows from the oars and hung the boatman from it. They joked cruelly that, when he was buried at the foot of the gallows, Angus' promise would have been kept and he would have land of his own for ever more.

MacLeod of Lewis then fitted his son out with boats and a strong party of men, and encouraged him to go back and recapture Lochalsh. They landed at Ardhill. John was quite prepared for this and they fought a battle at Kirkton which John won decisively. One of his followers was a very good shot with a bow and arrow and famous for his strength and valour. His name was Ian Ciar MacMhuichidh mhic Tomais. He quickly organised the Mathesons to get between the defeated MacLeods and their boats to prevent their escape. The MacLeods all took refuge in the Church, where they thought they would be safe. They weren't, though, because one of the Mathesons, Donald, set fire to it and most of the MacLeods were burnt alive. He was ever afterwards nicknamed Donnachadh an Teampuill, and so were some of his descendants, several of whom became Ministers!

Unfortunately, Angus MacLeod himself had managed to escape again and he, with a few followers reached the boats and got away back to Lewis. There he raised yet another army and returned with it, this time landing at Fernaig. There was another battle and in it Angus MacLeod was killed. He and some of his followers are buried under the stones that you can see in a field near the present road. And that was the end of him!

John took over all the Matheson lands in Lochalsh. He became very respectable and MacKenzie of Kintail made him Constable of Eilean Donan Castle.



DUGALD ROY

or why Mathesons still won't eat goat.

There is a tradition that Mathesons never eat goat meat. I don't know how it all started, but it was a very long time ago, and this is the sad story of the trouble that it caused poor Dugald Roy.

Dugald Roy was born when his father, John Dhu, was Constable of Eilean Donan Castle. There had been a cattle raid led by the great Donald Gruamach MacDonald of Sleat. They were driven off, but not before the raiders had killed a lot of people in Lochalsh, including Sir Dugald Mackenzie, the Priest of Kintail. After a time John married his widow and they called their eldest son Dugald after him. He probably had red hair because he was always called Dugald Roy.

Donald Gruamach returned some years later (in 1539) to attack Eilean Donan Castle itself, because he had been told that it wasn't very strongly guarded. He came with seven or eight big boats called birlinns. The sentries saw them coming up the loch, and were suspicious enough to send for everyone to come to defend the castle. Unfortunately it took a long time for the message to get there because the people were away to the hill with the cattle, and the MacDonalds had landed before they arrived.

Eilean Donan was a strong castle and it had an iron gate which the MacDonalds could not break down. The garrison threw stones, and anything else they could get hold of, on to the attackers' heads so that they had to stand quite far back to shoot their arrows at the defenders. Even so, tragically, one of these arrows hit John Dhu, the Constable, and he was killed. But the Mathesons would not give in, and still Donald Gruamach couldn't capture the castle. He took the birlinns over to the Point of Aird, where he thought he would land. The

reinforcements had arrived by now, and he was met with a shower of arrows. One of them hit him in the foot. This hurt so much that, even though he knew that it was a barbed arrow, he insisted on pulling it out. He should have known better! The arrow had pierced an artery, and no-one could stop it bleeding, and Donald Gruamach bled to death on Aird Point, opposite Eilean Donan Castle.

John Dhu's son, Dugald Roy, was still a boy when his father died. Before he grew up the Mackenzies of Kintail had managed to get control over a large part of Lochalsh, and the MacDonalds of Glengarry a lot more. He was left with the right to the rents of only about one third of Lochalsh, and the Matheson and MacDonald ground officers were in the habit of collecting them together and dividing them up. In those days there was very little money about and the rents were paid in kind - a day's labour, cheese, butter and so on. When they were dividing it up one year, there was a cabog of butter over. The MacDonald man wanted to take it all, but the Matheson ground officer cut it clean in half with his big knife.

When Glengarry heard about this, he was furious and swore to be revenged on Dugald Roy. He knew that Mathesons never eat goat, and that gave him an idea. Next Spring he had a lamb taken from its mother and fed entirely on goat's milk. When it was fattened and ready to be eaten, he invited Dugald Roy to a banquet in his castle on the cranog in Loch Acha-na-hinich. In those days a Highland Chief never went anywhere without a retinue of about twelve men and his Gille Mor or Champion. But, because Dugald thought that he was visiting a friend, he only took his Gille Mor with him. The meal was served up and the lamb was set before them on the table among other dishes. Dugald tasted it, and it tasted of goat, so he pushed it to the side of his wooden plate.

"Why are you not eating your lamb?" asked Glengarry.

"You know very well that I do not eat goat's flesh".

"That is as true mutton as ever you tasted".

"No - let me tell you, that beast never tasted sheep's milk in all its life" said Dugald.

The argument got fiercer and fiercer, and neither man would give in. At last it came to blows as Glengarry had always meant it to. With only his Gillie Mor, Dugald Roy hadn't a chance, and he was tied up with ropes and dragged off as a prisoner to Invergarry Castle. There, he was so badly treated, and made so unhappy, that he died.

Dugald Roy left a son who was always called Murdo Buie because he had fair hair. He was so angry at what had happened to his father that he went straight to see Mackenzie of Kintail to ask for his help to punish Glengarry. In exchange, he promised to give Mackenzie all the rest of his lands except the tacks of Balmacara and Fernaig. Of course Mackenzie accepted at once. But he never fulfilled his side of the bargain.

This has been a sad story, and the Mathesons were left with much less land than the MacKenzies or the MacDonalds, who were busy fighting each other!



JOHN OF FERNAIG AND HIS DREAM

John was born at Fernaig in 1696. His grandmother was there at the time and when she held him in her arms, she burst into tears and said that there would never be another Matheson as important or successful as he would be, or more respected.

He was a clever boy and was sent to the Academy at Fortrose on the Black Isle. It seemed a long way from home but he did really well.

One holidays, just before he left for school, he had an extraordinary dream. There were three beautiful girls up in a tree sitting on separate branches that came out of the same trunk. Then, there they all were, sitting at his father's fireside. Two of them fell over and one stood up. He went to the byre to see the old man who looked after the cattle, as he had a great reputation as a seer and could interpret dreams. The bodach told John that the three girls all came from the same clan, and that he would marry them all in turn. Two of them would die before him and the third would outlive him.

When he got back to school he found three very pretty girls there, all called MacKenzie, but from different families. They were Annabella MacKenzie of Achilty, Margaret MacKenzie of Balmaduthy and Elizabeth MacKenzie of Allangrange. He thought they were all marvellous, and he flirted with each in turn, and even talked about marrying them!

John came home to Fernaig when he left school, but then a very sad thing happened. His father, Farquhar, was a very important person who had made a lot of money dealing in cattle, and there was no one whose opinion Lord Seaforth valued more. One day Farquhar was asked to come to Brahan urgently to give his advice on a boundary dispute. He set off at once, and walked as fast as he could even though it was a very hot day, and he got quite exhausted. He stopped for a long drink of water

from a well, Tobair Degain, in the pass of Strath Conan. The water was icy cold, and it gave him such a shock that he died. He was still quite a young man.

Lord Seaforth thought a lot of young John too, and he made him his factor in Lochalsh straight away. He fulfilled this trust completely and carried out his duties very fairly. He also made quite a lot of money grazing cattle in Skye and droving them to the southern markets. But John thought a lot about Annabella and Margaret and Elizabeth, too. Most of all he thought about Annabella.

Now Annabella's grandfather was a famous poet called Murdoch MacKenzie of Achilty (which had been bought for them by the Marquis of Breadalbain, his father-in-law). He was living in the Island of Lewis at this time and Annabella and her mother were with him. There was a very eligible young man there, and Murdoch thought she should marry him. But Annabella had fallen in love with John Matheson of Fernaig when she had met him in Fortrose and she was very unhappy about this proposed marriage. She managed to get off an urgent letter to John.

John was certainly not a person to let things slide. When he got Annabella's letter, he contacted twelve of his friends and asked them to come on a journey with him in their best highland dress. Among them were the Rev. Alexander MacLennan the young minister, MacCrimmon the piper from Glenelg and Murdoch Matheson, Seaforth's bard. They all set off at once in a long rowing boat (called a birlinn) for Stornaway in the Isle of Lewis. The wind was blowing and it was very rough that day, as it often is in the Minch, and poor Murdoch the bard was sea-sick. He was so ill that they had to land him on the Island of Crowlin. Then they pushed on as fast as they could. But the weather got worse and the wind blew up against them and they had to waste two days sheltering in Skye.

Meanwhile Murdoch felt better as soon as he got onto dry land and he even composed a beautiful song for the occasion. He managed to get a boat across to Gairloch where he caught the packet for Stornaway and arrived there before John and the others. To their astonishment, there he was on the quay to meet them! They sent someone off at once with a message to Annabella's house, and made themselves look as smart as possible. Then they set off with MacCrimmon the piper leading the procession.

Annabella was very excited when she got their message. She went to the parlour window to watch for them with her mother, who had never met John. When they came in sight, she asked Annabella which one he was. Annabella pointed out John and her mother said:

"I do not wonder at you at all, to be in love with such a handsome gentleman!"

After they had arrived and had had a meal, Annabella's grandfather said that he would give a party for John and his friends and the rival suitor from Lewis. He said that they were both such gallant young gentlemen that he could not decide who should claim Annabella, so whoever could get hold of a Minister first should marry her. I expect he thought the Lewisman would have the advantage! But Alexander MacLennan had gone next door to change, and he came back dressed as a Minister. There he was, on the spot, to perform the Ceremony.

Everybody was very happy and they had a wonderful wedding and danced and feasted for three days. Then they just waited for a favourable wind and set off back to Fernaig where I am sure they had another party!

