

(From Clan Donnachaidh Society in Scotland)

Origins of Clan Donnachaidh

Abbot Crinan of Dunkeld, descended from the kindred of St. Columba, was father of Duncan, King of Scots. He was killed by MacBeth but his descendants held the throne for two and a half centuries. The king had a younger son Maelmare who became Earl of Atholl and was the ancestor of the Chiefs of Clan Donnachaidh.

The chiefs are numbered from **Duncan the Stout** (stout in battle rather than in belly) who lived in the 1300s. He held lands in Rannoch and around Glen Errochty and took his followers to fight at Bannockburn in 1314 in support of his friend, King Robert The Bruce. His son Robert (perhaps called after Bruce) inherited land from his own mother and his estate ran from the edge of the Grampians to the gates of Perth.

Origin of the Name Robertson

In 1437 the chief **Robert Riach** (grizzled) captured Sir Robert Graham who, with others, had just murdered the King James I at Perth. In reward James II gave Robert a charter in which all of his lands were made into a feudal barony giving him administrative control over them.

The barony was called Struan and the chief was henceforth known as **Robertson (from this Robert) of Struan**

In Support of the Stuart Kings

Successive chiefs led the clan through the intermittent turmoil of 15th and 16th century Atholl. In the 17th century the Highlands were drawn into national history in support of the Stuart Kings. In 1644 the Clan fought with Montrose and never lost a battle. The clan regiment was in evidence again in 1653, 1689, 1715, and 1745. The last three dates mark the Jacobite risings, in all of which **Alexander Robertson of Struan**, the Poet Chief, took part.

The Breakdown of the Clan System

After the Battle of Culloden, estates owned by Jacobites were forfeited and run by the government until 1784 when they were returned -- along with the old debts. But the clan system had been destroyed and chiefs found it increasingly difficult to make a living. Our chiefs did not evict clansmen and no clearances took place on their estate, but in 1853 our chief sold Struan and Dunalastair, leaving only Rannoch. He moved to a new house at Dall but sold that in 1861. In 1926 the last land in Rannoch was sold. By then the chiefship had passed to a branch of the family who, about 1800, had emigrated to make a living in Jamaica.

Now the chief is back, and the clan once more owns land in Atholl.

In 730 AD Angus McFergus, King of the Picts, ousted the Moraemar or petty king of Atholl and took it over as a royal possession. It must have been one of the first Pictish kingdoms to be infiltrated by the Scots for the name itself derives from Flota, meaning New Ireland, first appearing in the Annals of Ulster in 739. A century later, in 848 the Scot Kenneth MacAlpine was able to claim the crown of both peoples, forming the nucleus of modern Scotland and he set up his capital at Dunkeld to which he moved the 200 year-old college of Dull.



Dated as 9th century, this silver brooch was Found at the Pictish Palace, near Aldclune during the building of the A9.

Malcolm II who died in 1034 was the last of the direct male line from Kenneth. His daughter married Crinan, lay abbot of Dunkeld and male heir to the Celtic earls of Atholl. Their son was king Duncan, famously murdered by Macbeth who was in turn killed by Malcolm Canmore. The latter's second son Malcolm fathered the 2nd Earl of Atholl. The 3rd earl's eldest son predeceased his father and his granddaughters carried the earldom out of the old royal line but his second son was Conan whose name appears on charters soon after 1200 receiving grants of land in Glen Errochty. And he passed his Highland Perthshire lands to his descendants.

Duncan de Atholia is considered the first chief of Clan Donnachaidh and confusion has attached itself to his ancestry. Up until the 19th century the Clan and everyone else knew that he was descended in the male line from the Lords of the Isles, progenitors of Clan Donald. This is stated in the oldest sources of both Clan Donald and Clan Donnachaidh. Then, in the 1830s, the Historiographer Royal for Scotland, William Skene, came to the conclusion that Duncan was descended in the male line from Conan, male descendant of the last Celtic Earl of Atholl, and not from Somerled, and so inherited his estates directly rather than through marriage. Skene had found a charter mentioning Andrew de Atholia as father of Duncan who was not mentioned in the traditional pedigrees and from this and the absence of reference to the Island kindred in Duncan's coat of arms, he decided that the accepted lineage was wrong.

But Duncan the 14th chief, wrote on this subject a good sixty years before Skene and he pointed out that the old oral 'genealogies may be and actually are very much abridged.' He did not know of Andrew de Atholia but would have found nothing unusual about his omission from the traditional pedigree. The chief's coat of arms incorporates three wolf's heads.



Arms of Duncan, the first chief

However on an early seal St Columba is enthroned on a couple of wolves and the supporters of the chief's arms are a serpent and dove which again suggests descent from the Kindred of St Columba. And it has been speculated that wolves featured on the arms of the old earls of Atholl.

But the kindred of the Columba also married into the kindred of the Isles, so the wolf, the dove and serpent could have come through this route. It looked unlikely that Duncan's descent could ever be proved. But a new clue came with the arrival of DNA testing which showed that the chief's line shared a strong similarity to the DNA of those who descend from Niall of the Nine Hostages, a High King of Ireland who died about 405. This would indicate a descent from the old Celtic earls of Atholl, who were descendants of the kings of Dalriada, Scotti from Ireland, and not from Somerled.

Then, in 2006, the researcher Gordon MacGregor was asked to take a look at the origins of the clan and his examination of previously unconsidered charters turned up the vital evidence which he reported in the 2007 Clan Donnachaidh Annual. He discovered that the lands of Struan, the Clan Donnachaidh chiefs' lands and barony in Atholl, had originally been carved out of the earldom of Atholl and bundled with the Lude estate as Clunes. And that these lands could only descend in the male line. The likely line of ancestral ownership, for good if complex reasons, went Duncan – Andrew – Madach of Clunes – Duncan – Malcolm, 2nd Earl of Atholl.

Andrew of Atholl was a comparatively junior member of the family but he had a son, Duncan. A charter showed that Ewan of Glenerochie, the holder of that part of the estate, had only daughters. On Ewan's death, they were able to inherit some of his lands, but Struan could only be passed to the heir-male and went to Duncan. It seems probable that Conan, Ewan's father was a cousin of Madach. Ewan was the last male descendant of Henry, the 3rd Earl of Atholl. Henry had two brothers – Malcolm and Duncan – and it is most likely that Duncan was Madach's father.

Although the precise descent of the Clan has still to be confirmed. it is certain that the chiefs were the male heirs to the old Celtic earls of Atholl and thus have the oldest certifiable ancestry of any family in Scotland.

This new information has created complications. In the 19th and 20th centuries, history was subordinated to clan pride. This was not an exclusive problem for the Clan Donnachaidh but

in most cases it did not matter. So foggy are the origins of many of the clans that there is only the very faintest likelihood of real history rising up to contradict the fanciful stories of times of yore. So the Clan Donnachaidh is both fortunate in discovering the reality of its foundations, and unfortunate because these demonstrate that some of the tales circulated for centuries about our earliest heroes cannot be true.

Perhaps the prime loser in this is Stout Duncan – Duncan de Atholia – who has been considered the founder of the clan and close friend of King Robert Bruce. However it now seems more probable that the Dunchad or Duncan who founded the clan was the brother of Earl Henry and great-grandfather of Stout Duncan. By claiming descent from him, the clan would be demonstrating their descent from the Earls of Atholl and thus proving their potent local origins to incoming Menzies and Stewart landowners. It would also make some sense of the old story that the chief of the clan turned down the offer of the earldom of Atholl in preference for a charter of Struan in 1451. The offer would not have been made but it might show a long-standing boast of the clan's descent and position as recognised heirs-male of the Earls and therefore their rightful heirs.

In the following chapter some of these old stories concerning Stout Duncan are re-told. Since it is now known that his date of birth was not 1275 as has been claimed, but much more likely to have been around 1305, it cannot have been Duncan who was involved with King Robert Bruce. It may have been his father Andrew, a shadowy figure. As a younger son and not a landholder in his own right, he only appears in history named in a single charter, but he was a contemporary with Bruce and, as part of the kinship group that controlled Atholl, it is very likely that he and his relatives played a part in the Wars of Independence. However Duncan has been allowed to remain as centre of the Clan's Bannockburn tradition. But a pinch of salt should be added to the mix, at least until the tales of his skirmishes with the Macdougalls and the discovery of the charm stone. These probably belong to history rather than legend.

According to previous legend, Duncan was said to have been born in the year 1275, just in time to take part in the opening rounds of the War of Independence against the English. Traditionally William Wallace sought refuge in Atholl after his defeat at Falkirk in 1297. John Baliol was installed as Edward of England's puppet king in 1292 but his master removed him four years later for 'contumacy' leaving the country without a monarch. Bruce and the Red Comyn were rival claimants for the throne. At a meeting in the Franciscan priory at Dumfries in 1306, Bruce slew his opponent in front of the high altar. Alastair Macdougall, Lord of Lorne, was married to the dead man's aunt and therefore now had a blood-feud with Bruce.

In 1306 Bruce was crowned at Scone and soon after was routed at the battle of Methven. He, his queen, and a few followers escaped into Atholl and, again according to legend, was received by Duncan. Duncan was thought to have had his stronghold in a castle on the island in Loch Tummel, which was submerged in 1950 when the loch was raised by five metres by a hydro-electric dam, and Bruce took refuge in the the Wood of Kynachan just a couple of miles to the west. A ford on the Tummel, now beneath Dunalastair Water, was the King's ford. The King's Hall was in the woods to the south and the Queen's Pool was a little further downstream. Strong tradition tells of an unrecorded battle between Lochs Tummel and Rannoch at this time. Innerhadden was where the battle started, Dalchosnie next door means field of fighting; Glen

Sassunn is the glen of the southerners, the route taken by the enemy troops. The result was a victory thanks to the women of the Clan who supported their menfolk by filling stockings with stones and using them as clubs to devastating effect.

With Clan Donnachaidh by his side, the king ventured west and was defeated at Dalrigh (the field of the king) near Tyndrum by the Macdougalls of Lorne and retired back to Strathtummel. In this battle the king lost the brooch with which he pinned his cloak and this is still in the possession of the victor's descendants. Eight years later the Clan went down to Bannockburn to fight alongside Bruce to defeat the English and make him undisputed king of Scots.

Bannockburn, of course, is the seminal battle in the fight for Scots independence from England. As a result every clan wishes to claim that it was part of Bruce's army. The earliest written reference to the participation of the clans seems not come until 1822, when the historian David Stewart of Garth listed twenty one Highland chiefs that were there, but he gives no source for the information.

There is strong logic that Clan Donnachaidh would have been at Bannockburn. As well as logic, there is tradition that supports this. Clan Donnachaidh is said to have been a little late for the conflict, and were part of the contingent that came down from Gillies Hill at the decisive moment of the battle and these reinforcements tipped the balance in Bruce's favour.

On the bare framework of this tradition an elaborate account of the Clan's involvement in the battle has been constructed which ends with the victorious king declaring 'Hitherto ye have been called the sons of Duncan, but henceforth ye shall be called my children.' This explanation of the origin of Robert-son as the Clan's primary surname actually predates its first use by well over a century.



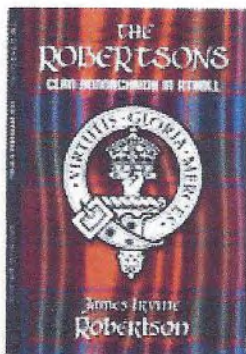
The Brooch of Lorne, snatched from King Robert Bruce at the Battle of Dalrigh 1306 when he and Clan Donnachaidh lost to the Lords of Lorne. It is still in the possession of the Macdougalls of Dunollie

The Clan had several more encounters with the Macdougalls. The only record of one was written down by Ewen Macdougall, Clerk to the Earl of Breadalbane at Taymouth, in the 1820s and describes the aftermath of a cattle raid or *creach* against Clan Donnachaidh. The Macdougalls were tracked west and the two forces met in Glen Orchy 'where they fought bitterly, the Rannoch men were slain and their Chief fled with difficulty. The slain were buried and the cairns are still called Cairn nan Rannoch, or Rannoch Men's Cairns, and their arms cast into a small Loch near the Cairns called Lochan nan Arn.' It seems likely that this is a traditional local interpretation of Bruce's defeat at Tyndrum after

which the losers' weapons were also said to have been thrown into the loch. If so, it would indicate that the bulk of Bruce's army were Clan Donnachaidh men, and that the ordinary Macdougall warriors were more pleased to have defeated them than the king. The monarch must have been a remote figure to most people, intent on consolidating his national position. Duncan's followers were local rivals against whom clashes must have been frequent.

However with Duncan at its head the Clan was usually on the winning side. It is possible that his most famous meeting with the Macdougalls is an amalgam of several skirmishes, particularly since the date given by one source of 1338 would make him past his prime for legendary feats of agility. They sent an army into Atholl and Duncan, disguised as a beggar, entered the enemy camp to scout it out. His cover was penetrated and he had to flee for his life. He chopped down one of his pursuers and then jumped across the chasm of the river Errochty to escape. The spot is now beneath the dammed Loch Errochty so the distance, variously reported between 11 and 16 feet, cannot be confirmed. His Gaelic name Donnachd Reamhar (pronounced 'rav-ar') means literally Fat Duncan, but a gravitationally-challenged warrior in his mid-fifties is unlikely to have managed such a leap. 'Robust' or 'stout' would surely be a more accurate translation. Another of his sobriquets was Gaisgeach Mor Fea-Chorie - the great hero of Fea Corrie. The corrie, a remote cleft in the hills west of Trinafour, was the muster point for Duncan's warriors before any campaign. It, too, is submerged beneath Loch Errochty

The battle was the following day. At first light, the chief's standard was pulled from the ground and with it came the Clach na Bratach - the Stone of the Standard. This snooker ball-sized globe of rock crystal is one of several charm stones to have survived. The Clach na Bratach is on display in the Museum at Bruar. That of the Stewarts of Ardvorlich is the Clach Dearig - the red stone. The Campbells of Glenlyon had one but theirs was given to them by a visiting 'wizard' in the 16th century, presumably part of his stock in trade. Such stones have been made and venerated in all cultures for millennia. They are to be occasionally found as grave goods in pagan Saxon burials and would have had religious or mystical significance in pre-Christian religion. But how one came to be in the wilds of Atholl can only be guessed at.



The above is excerpted from "The Robertsons, Clan Donnachaidh in Atholl" by James Irvine Robertson.